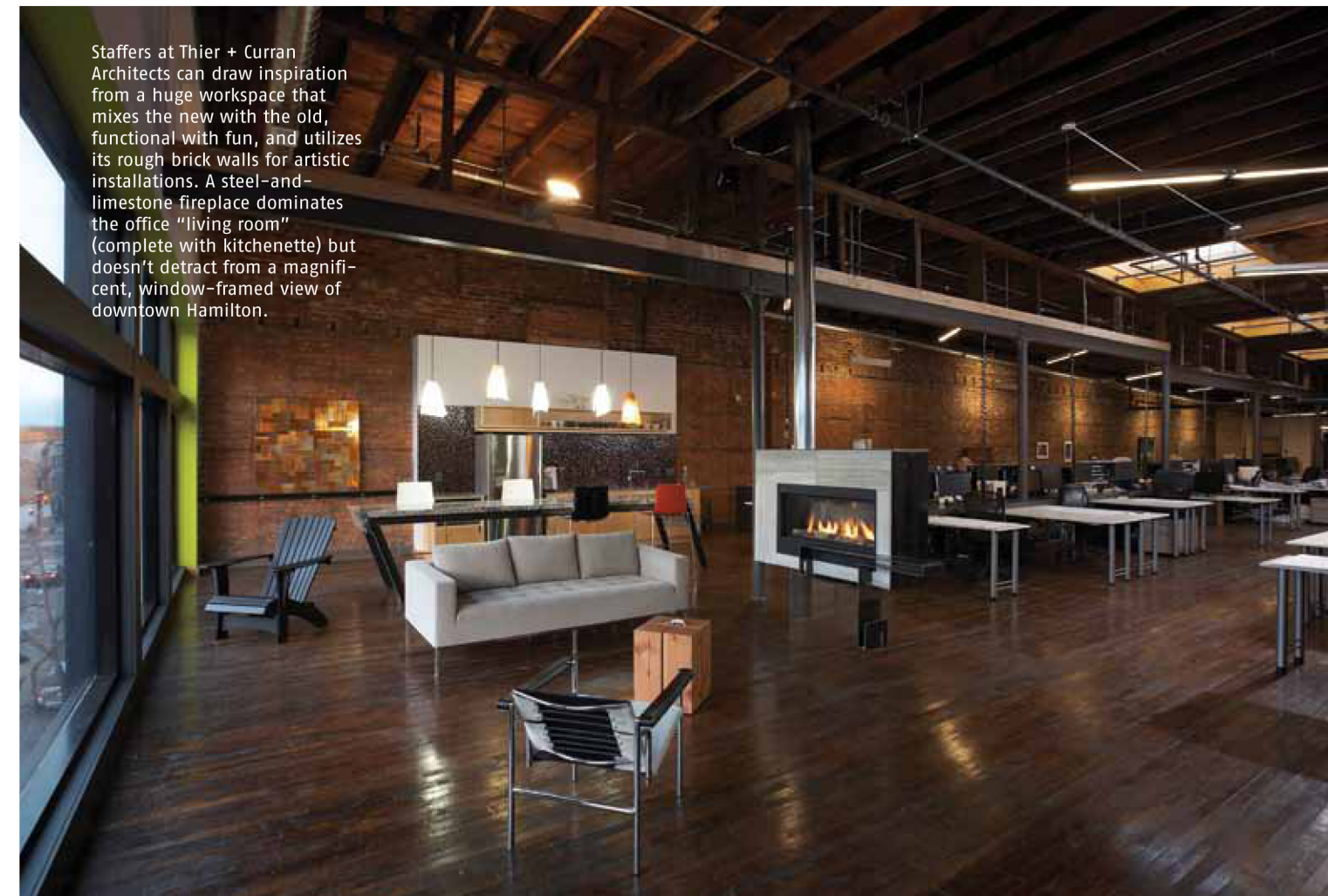
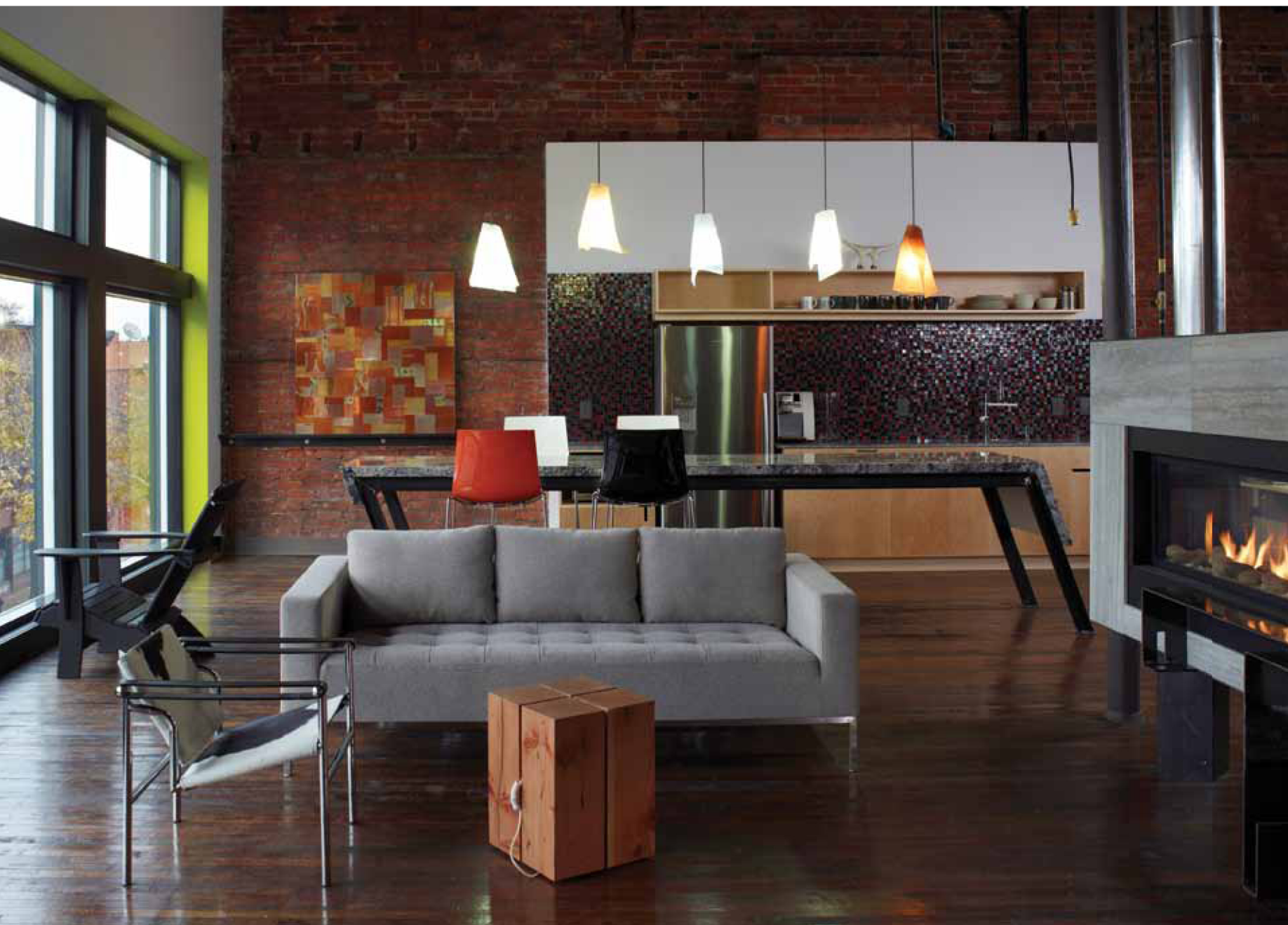


# Steeltown boy makes good

How Bill Curran, principal of Thier + Curran Architects, came up with "the coolest office in Hamilton."

—By Leslie C. Smith

Staffers at Thier + Curran Architects can draw inspiration from a huge workspace that mixes the new with the old, functional with fun, and utilizes its rough brick walls for artistic installations. A steel-and-limestone fireplace dominates the office "living room" (complete with kitchenette) but doesn't detract from a magnificent, window-framed view of downtown Hamilton.





Other areas of Canada may be booming, but Hamilton, Ontario – a.k.a. Steeltown or The Hammer – faces an iffy future. Although it remains the country’s largest steel-production centre, this city of more than half-million people located an hour’s drive from Toronto has seen its manufacturing fortunes slip drastically in recent years. As it fights to regain its feet and launch a smart, diversified industry counter-punch, local champions have begun to help out – men like Bill Curran, principal of Thier + Curran Architects, whose new-old workspace on James Street North has been labelled on blogs as “the coolest office in Hamilton.”

After establishing his street creds in both the Big Smoke and the Big Apple, Curran returned to his hometown, setting up his own firm there in 2005. In 2010, he and two silent partners purchased a huge, 8,000-square-foot, three-storey building on a major downtown street, if not quite for a song then at least for the kind of price a modest home in Toronto would fetch. The 120-year-old building, a former furniture factory, had been lately occupied by a small gift shop run by a Vietnamese couple, who had been living in a sectioned-off area of the main floor. Thier + Curran’s new office space, comprising 5,000 square feet of the immense third-floor loft, was Mrs. Quanh’s quiet place, used for daily meditation and bicycle exercise.

As is typical with most historic buildings, the interior and exterior had

been altered and adapted by successive owners over time, creating what Bill Curran calls “all kinds of unanticipated, eccentric and sculptural attributes.” One such attribute was the Buddhist sutra covering a plastered portion of the chimney: Mrs. Quanh’s addition to the artistic mix that Curran decided to leave untouched. Also gratefully accepted were the exposed brickwork walls, thick wooden ceiling joists and pull-down gate elevator (now stabilized for use as a small library) – as well as the original oak floor, which was not stripped and varnished as it would be in so many other places but simply buffed and sealed with Danish wood oil, allowing its rich patina and more than a century’s worth of “character scratches” to remain.

New components added by Curran include three large, motorized Belgium dome skylights; a steel-and-limestone stand-alone fireplace (practical in the wintertime and a constant reminder of the firm’s Steeltown roots); LEED-CI-approved high-efficiency HVAC systems, energy-recovery ventilators, low-flow toilets and waterless urinals; plus tankless hot-water heaters for low-energy shower facilities, available to staffers who wish to bike or jog to work.

The entire office is open concept – no imposing reception desk or grand lobby but rather conjoined workstations, fluid meeting areas, and a windowed front “living room” complete with kitchenette meant for everyone’s enjoyment.

“The studio is the first impression upon arriving, and the most dynamic space in the office,” says Curran. “We sought to reconceptualize the modern creative office – with a design that gave precedence to the staff, a design that supports collaboration, communication and sustainability while creating a high-quality workplace that showcases our firm’s capabilities.”

Its location on the cusp of an emerging artists’ enclave made it part of “an edgy, vibrant neighbourhood with a strong arts culture that as architects we relate to.” Curran has consciously played up this aesthetic factor by filling his office with regional artwork, opening it up to host a series of arts-related events, and renting out the beautifully restored main floor (complete with curved leaded glass windows and what must be the largest tin ceiling in existence) to the Art Gallery of Hamilton for its new gift shop and art-rental facility. As one local has already commented, for Hamilton, “Art is the new steel.”

Says Curran, “We very much wanted to do our part to help revitalize downtown, which we firmly believe is being turned around by small groups of social entrepreneurs like us, each contributing a small incremental civic improvement that cumulatively are transformative. Rather than awaiting a ‘white knight’ or mega-project, we need a hundred small successes like this. We see this as the best prospect for downtown Hamilton’s return to vitality.”

Whether arts-based, connected to old steel or the new health-sciences industry that is now the city’s major income generator, Hamilton is undergoing a repurposing. And Bill Curran has got himself a front-row seat. □



**Opposite** The meeting room’s zany chandelier, by Vancouver art collective Propeller Design, is made from 125 pieces of vintage gas-station glassware. **Left** The previous owner’s hand-lettered Buddhist sutra remains as is on a section of the chimney plaster. The original oak floor displays a century’s worth of “character scratches.”