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Delta Dental opens up

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Main Street Photography

OPN Architects

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Abstract

When Delta Dental of Iowa decided to enlarge its corporate offices in Johnston, Iowa, there was little need to repeat the exhaustive search that had gone into finding an architect five years earlier. At that time, a competitive selection process and a great deal of research resulted in OPN Architects being commissioned. Delta Dental, a national insurance company, was delighted with the building OPN designed and thoroughly enjoyed working with the regional architecture firm. This made obvious the selection of an architect for the addition: No one knew the clients, the situation, or the existing building better than OPN.

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DELTA DENTAL OPENS UP



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Cheryl Harding, Delta Dental’s chief operating officer, notes that when planning the initial building, Delta had considered downtown sites, but decided on the sprawling site along Interstate-80 for its spacious size allowing for an anticipated future horizontal expansion of the building. Its location was easily accessed by car, and both proximity and ease of access were important for recruitment. Additionally, the Interstate site offered the possibility of high visibility: Half a million eyes, moving at 70 miles per hour, would pass by the site each week.

The expansion, completed in May this year, doubled the facility’s square footage. Despite having designed the original building, OPN needed to work closely with Delta Dental stakeholders to “achieve consistency” between the new and original, Harding says. The final product needed to act, and appear, as one. The design team operated under three primary criteria for the addition: It was to be an exceptional house for the company’s employees, an environment that was open and encouraged interaction; it should be recognized as a sustainable building, designed to achieve LEED Silver certification; and it should employ its interstate-edge location and substantial size to give presence to the rapidly growing company.

“Delta Dental used a design-build process working with OPN and the Ryan Companies for our original building and expansion space,” said Jeff Russell, president and CEO of Delta Dental of Iowa. “This highly collaborative process helped the architects and builders understand the needs of our organization and stayed true to our original vision to create an open and transparent environment for our employees that fosters our core value of working as one team.”

OPN responded by designing an addition that is both planar and volumetric. Whereas the original single-story building is set a bit back from expressway traffic, OPN placed the two-story expansion up close to the Interstate. Of red terracotta, earthen yet sophisticated in its rainscreen assembly, this rear south elevation is expressed as a plane and carries the company’s name and logo. These modest raised-metal letters serve as a type of billboard advertising to the passersby on Interstate-80. Ground-to-sky glass windows offer views of the interior white-painted steel structure that supports the building, bringing depth to the planar statement and, at certain hours, permitting a glimpse of the illuminated interior space. This planar south elevation is the aesthetic essence of the building’s exterior. From it, the east and west sides

Left to right: An elegant terrazzo staircase is the focal point of the connection between the original building and expansion. A conference room looks out to the open, two-story high collaboration spaces that flank the open floor plan of the addition. The western staircase leads to an informal collaboration space. A sophisticated sun-shading system adds dimension to the east and west facades while minimizing glare and regulating temperature.



of the addition extend to the north. Both feature continuous two-story perforated planes suspended some 10 feet from the building’s glass walls to protect it from the harsh early morning and evening sunlight.

Delta Dental wanted an “open, transparent interior,” Harding says, an environment in which “100% of Delta’s employees have access to daylight.” The design created openness and light by manipulating the traditional box building form to provide openness and daylight simultaneously. The transverse placement of the addition created a defined landscaped exterior space, leading to the existing canopied entry. Taking cue from the revolutionary long-span, open-box architecture of the mid-1950s, the original building is a single-volume space that elegantly exposes its steel frame and environmental control system. Workspaces are not closed offices, but rather are freestanding stations defined by low partitions that provide a degree of privacy yet allow for collaboration. As a growing company, it was important for the interior design to be adaptable to changing demand, thus flexible and easily reconfigurable furniture was used.

These principles were carried over to the addition, but on a two-story scale. To mitigate the original building’s over-story ceiling height, two-story-high spaces line

the east and west glass walls of the first floor. Open collaboration seating along the exterior allows employees to interact in a comfortable, conversational space. These collaboration areas flank the single-story workspaces of the first floor. Mechanical spaces wrapped in wood and capped with back-painted glass panels bookend the north and south ends.

Light-steel stairs sit atop a terrazzo plinthe in the west stair lobby, which serves as the connection between the original building and the addition. Standing at the bottom of these stairs, one can view the length of the original building through an opening framed by the original terracotta exterior. Informal gathering spaces are strategically sprinkled throughout the workstations of the second floor.

Perforated metal screens float outside the building envelope, protecting it from the often-harsh low light of the rising and setting sun, while allowing views of the surrounding natural prairie. A paved courtyard is enveloped by the screens, and provides comfortable space for outdoor seating.

Remotely related to the Eames Case Study houses of 70 years earlier, the overall design is reminiscent of modern history, yet logical and technologically up-to-date. Technology is evident everywhere: In the

more efficient terracotta rainscreen system that decreased the construction schedule; in the flexibility of the work environment, which allows for reconfiguration and updates with ease; in the triple-pane glass that increases energy efficiency and diminishes the sounds of the nearby Interstate. In the hands of OPN, the building technology is not rendered harsh or relentless. Obvious but not insistent, it never roars—or even whispers loudly—but is silent, elegantly ordered, both foreground and background at one and the same time.

“Based on the success of the previous building, we already had a level of trust and a good relationship with Delta Dental,” says Isaac Bracher, AIA, project architect for both the original and addition. “The existing building provided guiding principles that we used in the design of the addition. We met weekly to review design elements, gather feedback, and collaborate with the owners.”

Apparent yet never overwhelming, sparse yet not cheap, sophisticated and orderly, OPN’s design solution is precisely what the client desired. Well-insulated, well-built, and intelligently placed, the expansion is a source of tremendous pride to Delta Dental.