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Design Perspectives: A center for design that's fitting for a 'design city'

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)
Special to the Journal

Ric Peterson pushes design — with ease. He's justifiably proud of the fact that he can move interior walls almost two stories high at the Center for Architecture & Design, with his index finger. His firm, Suyama Peterson Deguchi, designed the pivoting walls along with the rest of the storefront project.

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The moving walls make the center easily adaptable to different uses. You can open up a central conference area to the surrounding storefront space, and to natural light and the views of passers-by on Western Avenue. The walls also can be closed to hold a large private meeting in the middle of the center. One wall is even fitted with tackable panels.

These are hard-working walls. In the open position, the movable walls nest with the immovable ones like three-dimensional puzzle pieces. Somewhere in those walls there are regular-sized door panels, ready to let people in and out.

The center opened at the beginning of last year, housing four formally separate nonprofits in one place. AIA Seattle, the local chapter of the professional organization for architects, moved from its long-time home on First Avenue to the Western Avenue location, between Spring and Madison streets.



Photos by Trevor Dykstra [\[enlarge\]](#)

Four organizations that promote architecture and design awareness share the space at 1010 Western Ave.

The large storefront space is actually a tight fit for AIA Seattle, along with the AIA Washington Council (which lobbies at the state level), the Seattle Architecture Foundation, and Design in Public.

In addition to the “cube” — the conference and event space in the center — there is an open entry that also serves as a gallery. A reception desk and smaller conference room are along one side. An un-movable gallery wall separates the galleries and meeting areas from the office areas in the back. It's an open office for the staff of all four organizations, with interior and exterior windows looking out on Post Alley.

For AIA Seattle, moving from its long-time home on First Avenue was a risk, but it also had a kind of inevitability, according to AIA Seattle Director Lisa Richmond. The lease on the small space was up, the board was keen to take advantage of the chance to consolidate with sister

organizations in a larger space. At the new location, the staff looks forward to the redevelopment of the nearby Seattle waterfront, after the Alaskan Way Viaduct is removed.

Does it all work? Better than anyone expected, said Richmond. Hundreds of people come here for openings and other special events, some with colorful, interactive displays designed for young people.

“The space contributes to everything,” she said. “There’s so much interaction.”

Richmond wants the rest of the world to know that Seattle is a “design city,” on par with other international places, and the new center is meant to foster that. In the year since it has opened, education and public programs have thrived, she said.

The design firm, Suyama Peterson Deguchi, is best known for poetically modern houses in beautiful, natural settings. It also specializes in art galleries, office space, restaurants and retail. In the last two decades, it has garnered top honors in many award programs.

Peterson is heroic, not so much for moving walls with his finger, as for guiding the ultimate design process: a large tenant improvement project with hundreds of architects as clients. “Doctors are the worst patients,” said Peterson. “Architects are the worst clients.”

A working committee was created with representatives for each organization, Peterson said. But the design team still faced the big challenges familiar to most architects: Fitting many functions and users into a tight space without chopping it up too much, and resolving differing views and ideas into a unified, intentional design.

And, as always, there was the problem of accommodating lofty desires on a tight budget. The architects faced the same challenge on their project as every design client today: a market where contractors have all the work they want. The contractor was brought into the design process early, and the cost stabilized.

“As architects we tend to be optimists, based on past projects,” said Peterson, “but contractors base their estimated on forecasting.”

A gallery

The center, like most good design projects, is supremely functional and deceptively simple. It looks like a gallery space, because it is. There is always an exhibit on some of the walls.

The massive timber structure was built before 1900, and the architects were delighted to find more recently added poured concrete floor under layers of material.



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Large events can be held in the center’s gallery-like spaces. Some of the interior walls pivot to help make the space more functional.



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Fixtures are not fixed. Major cabinets can glide on wheels into position, and double as sideboards.

The tall

**Center for
Architecture &
Design
1010 Western**

Architect:
Suyama Peterson Deguchi

General contractor:
Krekow Jennings

Completion:
March 2016

Size:
4,424 square feet

Major subconsultants:
Swenson Say Faget
(structural)

OAC Services
(construction
management)

Stantec
(acoustical and electrical)

MacDonald-Miller
Facility Solutions
(mechanical)

Coffman Engineers
(commissioning)

Pacific Lighting Systems
(lighting)

McKinstry Consulting
(sprinkler)

Mahlum Architects
(LEED consulting)

The Portico Group
(signage)



Photo by Clair Enlow [\[enlarge\]](#)

Ric Peterson can move the interior walls with his index finger. They were designed by Suyama Peterson Deguchi, and built by Krekow Jennings.

storefront space is stripped down to the bones and left exposed everywhere, above the new interior walls.

Thanks to a bit of architectural sleight-of-hand, there seem to be no hallways and no conventional enclosed rooms. In no place do the interior walls connect to the ceiling, and visually they are mostly separate from each other.

Even the ubiquitous phone room, a place where staff members can close the door to have private telephone conversations, does not seem completely closed off from the light because of a full-height strip of glass placed so that the walls don't quite seem to meet.

Throughout the center, privacy and quiet are assured — where needed — by tall walls clad with

sound-absorbing Homasote panels. Homasote is a brand name for cellulose fiber wallboard, made from recycled paper. The sound panels are the wall finish, placed on partitions for precise effect.

The other two major materials in the interior are the poured concrete floor and blackened steel. The floor is ground down to a beautiful sheen, with the aggregate exposed. This makes a great base for the moving parts. Steel is used in the reception desk and in a large pivoting door for a small conference room. It's also the main material in the large custom cabinets that glide on wheels, ready to double as sideboards for gatherings and events.

In the back are bright rows of staff desks assembled from a custom wood kit of parts. They make the usual office clutter look like part of the design — another bit of architectural sleight-of-hand.

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