

Spotlight

As seen in February 2009

TwinCities
BUSINESS

Green in the City

Engineering firm Dunham Associates moved from the suburbs to downtown Minneapolis as part of its LEED office makeover.

Engineering firm Dunham Associates helps clients come up with some high-tech solutions for improving environmental sustainability. A much simpler answer—moving to Minneapolis’s central business district—helped the firm, which specializes in mechanical and electrical engineering projects, reduce its own carbon footprint and re-energize itself at the same time.

Dunham Associates’ 32,000- square-foot office space on the 11th floor of the 50 South Sixth Street building on Nicollet Mall is a showroom for the kind of energy-efficient technologies that the employee-owned engineering firm designs for its clients, which are primarily in the aviation, education, retail, and health care industries. In fact, it’s the city’s first office space to earn the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for commercial interiors (LEED-CI) certification. The firm, which originally occupied 26,000 square feet, expanded its space by 6,000 square feet in May 2008.

Dunham staff designed the mechanical and electrical systems. These include a lighting control system with sensors that dim the perimeter ceiling lights when sufficient daylight is available, turning them off when an area is unoccupied. The heating and cooling system utilizes Dunham’s expertise in thermal displacement ventilation, a highly efficient way to move air only where it’s needed. Interior walls are constructed primarily of glass, to maximize natural light.

Other features in the space include office furniture incorporating recycled materials, as well as carpet systems and paints with a low emission of potentially harmful gases.



Dunham Associates executives Jay Rohkohl, Katy Kolbeck, and Steve Gentilini put their firm’s green expertise to work in designing its office space.

Founded in 1960, Dunham Associates moved to its current digs in November 2006 from a freeway-ring office in the southwest suburbs. A big reason for the move was to be located closer to clients and to be within easy access of public transit and the downtown skyway system.

CEO Katy Kolbeck says that in moving to the new location, Dunham Associates wanted to design its office space to reflect its commitment to green values. “It really didn’t seem prudent anymore to consider a location where employees didn’t have mass transit options,” she says.

One concern that Dunham had was whether some employees’ anxieties about downtown crime, traffic, or density would cause them to leave instead of making the move. The opposite turned out to be true. The shops, restaurants, and other amenities within walking distance of the office became a boon to retaining and recruiting employees. The firm has grown

from 75 to 92 employees since the move.

Dunham Associates’ move and the design of its green space has attracted both potential employees and potential clients. “All of a sudden, when we moved downtown, the phone started ringing,” recalls Jay Rohkohl, Dunham’s executive vice president and an electrical engineer.

The energy efficiencies that Dunham Associates has put in place are mostly invisible to untrained eyes. One thing that’s impossible to miss is the view, which is smack in the middle of an ecosystem of towering glass, crawling traffic, and bustling sidewalks.

“There’s a pulse and an energy downtown that you don’t get in the suburbs,” says Steve Gentilini, the firm’s vice president and a mechanical engineer. Sometimes, green flourishes best amid concrete.

—Dan Haugen