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Branch design sets banks apart

Memphis Business Journal - by [Christopher Sheffield](#)

Charles Shipp spends most of his days creating custom homes and vacation getaways for the wealthy.

He may agonize over creating the perfect living space that captures a soothing ocean view. Or designing a library or den that creates warmth and makes you want to sit down and stay awhile.

So when Commercial Bank & Trust wanted to build a branch at Mendenhall and Sanderlin in 2000 to anchor the \$8 million mixed-use Sanderlin Place development, it was Shipp who got the nod. A year earlier he had designed the bank's smaller Downtown Memphis location in Morgan Keegan Tower.

He tackles few commercial projects, but designing a bank, at least this one, wasn't a stretch, Shipp says.

"What I think they are trying to do is emphasize the personal service side of (banking)," Shipp says. "By designing branch interiors like a living room it emphasizes that aspect of their marketing or branding."

His firm, Charles Shipp Architect, has since helped with a redesign of the bank's Union Avenue location earlier this year and designed a new branch that opened in Jackson, Tenn., in December 2006.

The Mendenhall and Jackson branches feature a fireplace that immediately sets the tone, says Shipp. At the Union and Downtown branches, the feel is achieved through the use of rich colors, sofas, accessories, art and lighting.

"We lean toward antiques, more the look of an established sort of living room feel than cutting edge furniture," he says. "Art is a significant part of the atmosphere."

Mott Ford, vice chairman and CEO for Commercial Bank & Trust, says the bank's interior design choices are as much a reflection of his father's taste as they are a conscious way to set the bank apart.

Ford's father, R. Molitor Ford, chairman of Commercial Bank & Trust, personally picks out much of the art.

In addition to Shipp, the bank relies on interior designer Gail Wood, who does primarily residential work, to bring it all together.

"We spend a lot of time, effort and money making a nice place to do business," Ford says.

Banks and credit unions constantly look for ways to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Some do it with products, some with a niche group of customers and some with locations.

Increasingly, the design of bank branches -- which just a decade ago were projected to be obsolete thanks to the Internet -- has become a branding bonanza.

"Branches are being built," says Chris Anschutz, group vice president in charge of real estate resources for Memphis-based banking consulting firm NCBS, Inc.

"We're seeing a slowdown in new projects but a reinvigoration of remodels," Anschutz says. "Through that, banks have taken the approach that 'we have to do something' " to set themselves apart.

What's largely driving that is the access consumers have to information. No longer do they have to go to a bank, much less step inside one, to learn about CD rates, get a credit card or apply for a home loan.

And while banks and credit unions have helped propagate this flood of information, many still understand the value that face-to-face meetings provide.

"They have found it's much easier to sell in person and not on the Internet," says Tony Pellicciotti, senior associate with Looney Ricks Kiss Architects, Inc. "One basic element is trust and it's hard to trust someone over a keyboard."

There is a strong indication of a movement toward a design economy and design culture, Pellicciotti says, as evidenced by someone asking if "you have an iPod or some brand X," he says.

Where people bank is an extension of that.

LRK architect Jason Weeks says the key in designing a bank or credit union is making employees feel safe and comfortable while at the same time conveying the brand.

"You want to make the space feel secure but inviting," Weeks says. "You have to balance the two."

LRK has designed branches for several financial institutions, including Independent Bank and **Memphis Area Teachers' Credit Union**, the largest credit union in the Memphis area with 54,000 members.

Dwight Burgess, MATCU's vice president over facilities and maintenance, says the credit union

tries to be mindful that it has a diverse customer base when designing its branches.

"We try to find balance between what we perceive members want. . . and give it a look or feel you want to go into," Burgess says.

That philosophy is best demonstrated by its most recent branches. The recently opened 3,200-square-foot branch on White Station in the heart of a residential area has a more homey look and feel.

The 2,600-square-foot branch on Union set to open Dec. 1 is glass and steel with extreme angles and will feature a 46-inch plasma television.

While MATCU has chosen generally to let location dictate design, Independent has largely stuck with a more contemporary, open and airy feel.

"You know you are in (an Independent) branch," Pellicciotti says.

LRK interior designer Ann Parker says that is done by carrying the same color pallet, color progression and furniture look through each interior.

"They are all variations of each other -- things you reuse but look at differently," she says.

Pellicciotti says to answer the question of whether design makes a difference in attracting business, look no farther than the success of Starbucks.

"Is coffee that much different, or is it the atmosphere, culture?" he says. "That's the magic, when you've created a special place."

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