

ADDING A DIMENSION

Sister-sister team creates true-to-life architectural illustrations

BY MOLLY LOOMIS



Kathleen Hanson (left) and Meghan Hanson Powers bring two-dimensional architectural plans to life by introducing depth, environment, lighting, and more.



“Growing up, our parents were so into creative arts. It was crazy!” recalls Meghan Hanson Powers, laughing. “They refused to buy us coloring books or Hallmark cards. We had to make everything ourselves.”

But considering that Powers and her younger sister, Kathleen Hanson, are now professional artists and co-proprietors of Hanson Architectural Illustration in Victor, Idaho, it would seem that their parents weren't so crazy after all.

Born and raised in Victor, Montana, Hanson and Powers grew up spending

long hours at the kitchen table, drawing—a passion instilled in the girls by their parents and high school art teacher. “When we were little, we would spend the entire year getting our artworks ready for the county fair,” Powers says. “It was basically, ‘Well, I’ve already done a landscape drawing to enter, so now I have to do a person.’”

“That was like a full-time job from the age of five to seventeen,” adds Hanson. It was a pragmatic approach to finding inspiration that also provided the budding artists with practice at a variety

of drawing techniques.

Separated by two years, on graduation from high school each girl was awarded a Charles M. Russell Memorial Scholarship to the University of Montana in Missoula, for excellence in fine arts. After studying art for two years, Powers transferred to Montana State University in Bozeman to pursue a degree in architecture. Hanson switched from art to forest resource management, remaining in Missoula.

After a stint working in the field for

the Montana Department of Natural Resources, Hanson decided it was time for a change. She began brainstorming with her sister about jobs that might combine their passions for art, architecture, and the natural world. It was Hanson's boyfriend who suggested architectural rendering, aka architectural illustration.

Most commonly used by developers, marketing firms, architects, and landscape architects, renderings are illustrations that transform the two-dimensional bluelines of architectural plans into virtual three-dimensional drawings that not only allow viewers to get an accurate sense of what a building will look like, but also get a feel for its colors, the different textures of materials used, shadow lines, landscaping, and surroundings.

Many developers find rendering an invaluable tool in helping clients visualize a project's end result. "It's one of those things that's of immeasurable value," says Meagan Hill, development manager for Teton Land and Development Group, which utilized Hanson Architectural Illustration's services for a recent project. "Most people can't visualize what a project is going to look like just based on the plans. That includes the city, county—whoever is looking at [them]. It's really imperative in the overall process."

Having worked on both sides of the process, as an illustrator and architect, Powers agrees. "When something goes 3-D, it's entirely different," she says. "People are able to understand the building much better. They get really excited about it then."

At the end of 2006, the sisters officially launched Hanson Rendering. Hanson dove into the business, working out of a silo artfully converted into an office by Powers and her husband, contractor Aaron Powers. Powers worked with her sister on the side, as her full-time career as an architect allowed. The two renamed the business Hanson Architectural Illustration (website: www.hansonillustration.com) in 2007, after getting grief from friends and family about including the word "rendering" in their title. While rendering is the correct technical terminology for the type of drawings Hanson and Powers produce, it is also the word used to describe the

process of recycling dead animals and slaughterhouse waste.

"The minute we'd mention 'rendering' we would end up explaining more about what we didn't do than what we did do," Hanson says. "We decided it would be best to just try and distance ourselves from that."

of their project made, and also the season and time of day the drawings should convey. Based on their choices, Hanson and Powers go to work at their light tables, adding to the first draft texture, landscaping, shadows, people, and furnishings (if it's an interior illustration). Then they meet with their



The under-construction Colter Building stands even higher than the iconic town bison at the corner of Main Street and Ski Hill Road in Driggs.

In early 2008, Powers began working full-time with her sister, leaving a local architectural firm that focuses on green building. She anticipates eventually returning to architecture in some capacity, but for the time being the opportunity to work with her sister was one she felt she couldn't pass up.

While Hanson and Powers love illustrating simply for the pleasure of putting pencil (or pen) to paper, rendering goes far beyond creating pretty pictures of buildings. It is a multi-step process that not only gives clients a better sense of their project, but also can help catch errors and facilitate desirable changes—ranging from the slope of a roofline to the types of plants used in landscaping.

The first step in the process is creating a three-dimensional computer model based upon the architectural plans. "That allows us to go over it as a model with the architects and developers," explains Powers, who acknowledges that her architectural background provides a distinct advantage in reading, translating, and understanding plans that look like jumbles of blue lines to most people.

"Meg really understands what will work and what won't," Hanson says. "She has knowledge and training that we draw on every time we do a project."

Clients then specify the perspectives from which they would like drawings

clients for a second go-round, prepared with color samples in the chosen medium. Powers says this part of the process is typically where the majority of changes are generated, as clients begin to get a much more complete sense of what their project will look like. Once colors are selected, the two begin the final drafts using any combination of pencil, pen, watercolor, or markers that the client opts for. (On a recent job for a developer in Bali, they even used bleach on colored paper.)

In addition to the building and landscaping knowledge gained from their respective backgrounds in architecture and forestry, Powers and Hanson have the asset of sisterhood working in their favor. "We know each other so well, including each other's strong points, and that really helps on projects," Powers says. "Plus, we can meld styles and nobody knows it. In every rendering we've done in the past year, there's a part of Kathleen and there's a part of me."

Hanson and Powers hope that eventually the business will evolve to include more fine art projects. For now, however, they are happy to have the opportunity to work together on something they love, while helping one another build a future. Not bad for two sisters who started out drawing together as kids at the kitchen table. ■