

ON THE *rise*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JASON KEESE

THE O'KEEFE ELEVATOR CO. BUILDING IS A STRUCTURE ARCHITECTS AND ART LOVERS CAN APPRECIATE

When the O'Keefe Elevator Company moved from its cramped, windowless building into its new offices in an Old Market warehouse in May 2002, its employees were floored by what greeted them.

On the first floor, there was an art gallery. An eye-catching staircase, constructed of steel, aircraft cable and maple, led visitors upstairs. A towering curved metal wall announced the company's name - O'Keefe Elevator Co. - in bright red lettering. Office space on the second floor featured glass walls, rose-red chairs in the conference rooms, and a mixture of exposed brick, concrete and carpet on the walls and floors.

The third floor boasted a spacious eating area and kitchen, with refurbished hardwood floors. The third floor also contained an exercise area with treadmills, weight machines and shower facilities. The building's roof served as an observation deck, with a postcard-worthy view of downtown Omaha. Buried beneath the first floor was an underground parking garage.

The building was a clear reflection of its owner, Skip O'Keefe, who calls it his "pride and joy."

"I'm a dreamer, I'm a gadget person, I'm a technology junkie," O'Keefe says. "I like to have fun and it's a fun building."

It's also a building that's drawing praise from architects locally and nationally.

The Nebraska chapter of the American Institute of Architects and interior design and the architecture magazine *Contract* have bestowed honors upon the project. A national business magazine is also considering the building for an award.

A major reason the structure at 14th and Jones Streets has drawn such attention is the 3,000-square-foot art gallery that first greets visitors as they walk through the door. The gallery is free and open to the public during regular business hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Lights kick on inside the gallery at about 6:30 every night. Until a timer turns off the lights six hours later, unsuspecting pedestrians have the pleasure of stumbling upon an art exhibit.

"It's more than a building sitting on the corner," says the project's architect, Larry Smith of Avant Architects. "It interacts with the space around it."

Most of all, its admirers say, the building is a wonderful blend of the old and the new, much like the owner himself.

Denis J. "Skip" O'Keefe III was born three months premature on Oct. 1st, 1947. He weighed only three pounds. Staring through the nursery glass at this tiny baby, O'Keefe's grand-



Clockwise from top: 1) The O'Keefe Elevator Co. building situated at 14th and Jones Streets in the Old Market. 2) Owner Skip O'Keefe in front of a view of the downtown skyline from the top of his building.

mother commented, "We almost skipped him." People have called him Skip ever since.

He graduated from Creighton Prep High School in 1965. Four years later, he left the University of Notre Dame with degrees in finance and management.

When he wasn't in school, he worked for his father and uncle at O'Keefe Elevator. He logged time as a secretary during high school and a maintenance worker during college breaks. After college, he worked as an engineer and a salesman before taking over as president in 1982, following his father's death.

O'Keefe's career goals never drifted far from the family business.

"I had no choice," he says, "and I loved it."

Though he's the third-generation owner of an elevator company, a line of work that's a throwback to the days of flappers and Model Ts, O'Keefe has pushed his elevator company to the cutting edge of technology by sending his mechanics into the field with laptops and teleconferencing with branch offices via high-speed Internet connections.

In 2001, a dilemma put O'Keefe on a path to have a building as progressive as his thinking. Creighton University bought the O'Keefe Elevator office building on north 20th Street, part of the school's long-term expansion plans. O'Keefe faced a decision: Move to west Omaha, move near Eppley Airfield, or - just maybe - move into a warehouse the company already owned, at 14th and Jones streets.

Pittsburgh Plate and Glass Company built the warehouse in 1920.

O'Keefe Elevator bought the property in 1978 and for the next 23 years rented part of it and used the rest for storage.

By April 2001, however, the warehouse sat mostly empty. Not happy with other sites they were considering, O'Keefe invited his architect, Smith, to size up the 77,000-square-foot warehouse as a potential office building.

After an hour-and-a-half tour, Smith's head was swimming with ideas. He envisioned a workspace that mixed modern luxuries with historical reverence.

"Ya' know when people start going into a trance, a creative trance? And you just go with the flow?" O'Keefe says. "He was in that trance."

The decision to renovate the building says a lot about O'Keefe: He didn't choose between form and function; he chose both.

The 80-year-old warehouse was a fashionable choice because it's a stone's throw from Old Market and, once renovated, it offered a charming mix of contemporary and historical design.

The warehouse also was the sensible choice because many of O'Keefe's biggest clients - First National Bank, Modern Woodmen of America, Union Pacific - are located downtown. Plus, a combination of tax-increment financing from the city and historical tax credits from the federal government paid about one-third of the renovation costs. That dropped the price tag to under \$2 million, whereas it would have cost four times that to construct a new building.

"I tell people the cost and it blows their minds," O'Keefe says. "I have to tell people that because I'm sure if our customers walk in here they go, 'Oh, they have a really nice building.' Well, we did it very economically."

It's also a far cry from the building on north 20th Street, which had no windows and was about one-fourth the size.

"The natural sunlight is great," says Kari Tanner, who has worked at O'Keefe for 17 years. "That and we're not stepping on each other now."

Ironically, the art gallery was practically an afterthought. O'Keefe erected a wall to conceal shelving in one part of the ground floor. When he eyed the remaining



space, he saw an art gallery.

Since the building opened a year ago, the gallery has hosted three exhibits: a collection of Native American photographs from the Douglas County Historical Society; a collection of art from Ireland, a country near and dear to O'Keefe's Irish heart; and, from May 3 until June 30, a collection of paintings by Iowa artist Bobbette Theroux.

Most galleries take a 20 percent cut of any artist's sales. O'Keefe earns no money from his gallery. Rather, he requires the artists put that money toward a charitable cause.

"As long as there's some kind of connection to a charitable organization, that a charitable organization can benefit a little, the artists can use the space for free. No cost," O'Keefe says.

Such a policy is no surprise from a man whose community service resume reads like a who's who of Omaha institutions: Creighton University President's Council; Joslyn Museum trustee; United Way of the Midlands Executive Committee; Boys Town Booster president; Opera Omaha Executive Committee; Girls Club of Omaha Executive Committee; Ak-Sar-Ben ambassador.

He frequently allows local charity groups to use a spacious banquet room located on his building's third floor. After dining in the banquet room, these charitable functions can adjourn to the observation deck for cocktails.

Again, O'Keefe doesn't charge a cent for the building's use.

He credits men such as Leo A. Daly and Peter Kiewit, prominent Omaha businessmen from the turn of the 20th century, for leaving a legacy of charitable giving.

"They gave back to Omaha, and then the generation after that saw what they did and they tutored the next generation. Well, that generation tutored me," O'Keefe says.

"That's needed, because you wonder about the next generation. Who's going to teach them?"

One such teacher wouldn't be hard to find. There's plenty to learn from Skip O'Keefe. ☐

