

Schenkel Shultz's Desai wins UF alumni architecture award for firm's office design



The Schenkel Shultz office features a front gallery the firm calls a living room that's adorned with classic midcentury pieces. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)

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PUBLISHED: December 22, 2025 at 4:00 PM EST | UPDATED: December 22, 2025 at 5:44 PM EST

Last fall, [Schenkel Shultz](#) moved into its new office in Winter Park. After 30 years in the Fifth Third Bank building in downtown Orlando, the design firm had grown out of its existing office.

The design and architecture firm's new space — an open concept in a 22,000-square-foot historic midcentury building — represented new beginnings. Celebrating its 40th anniversary, Schenkel Shultz had done a brand refresh in 2023 and announced it was launching into new markets. They wanted a headquarters that increased their visibility in the community and inspired teamwork and design excellence.

The project won Ekta Desai, a firm partner and its design lead, an Alumni Design Award from the University of Florida School of Architecture.

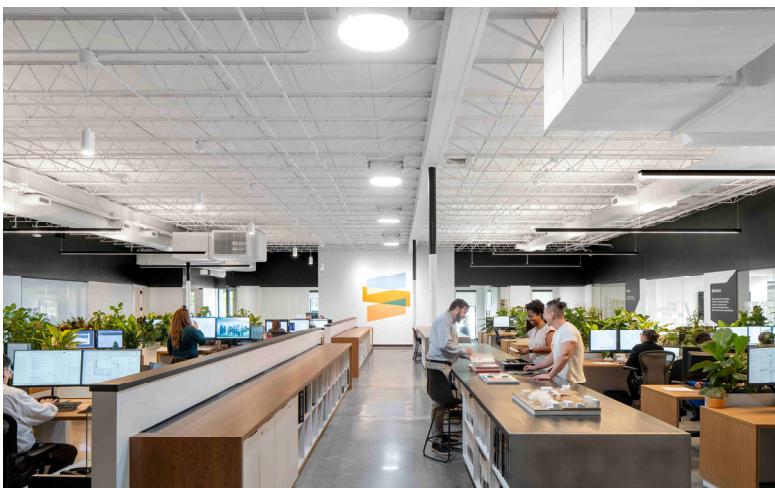


Ekta Desai, Design Lead and Partner of Schenkel Shultz, won a prestigious alumni award at the University of Florida School of Architecture's Centennial Gala. Also pictured are Zoran Lozanovski, Nathalie White, and UF Dean Chimay Anumba. (Courtesy of Schenkel Shultz)

"Pushing this new office through at that time was a great way to punctuate that we're putting a lot of investment behind what we're saying," Desai told GrowthSpotter. "It's not just that we're saying and looking different. We're actually working different, or giving different. We're thinking different."

Today, Schenkel Shultz has been in its new home for 15 months. Construction on the space began in January 2024 and was completed in September 2024. The building sits along Orange Avenue, facing north, inviting in natural light from floor-to-ceiling windows that literally give the community a look into the firm's daily happenings.

The office features a front gallery the firm calls a living room. It's adorned with classic midcentury pieces — a molded plywood Eames chair, a Noguchi table, the classic Louis Poulsen lamp — as well as several pieces made by local fabricators.



The main studio in Schenkel Shultz's Winter Park headquarters utilizes an open plan with work stations separated by planters filled with monstera varietals, fiddle leaf fig trees and other indoor plants. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)



The main work area of Winter Park architecture and design firm Schenkel Shultz during construction. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)



The side alley presented an opportunity to create a chic outdoor space. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)



The new courtyard of Winter Park architecture and design firm Schenkel Shultz was styled by the company's Design Lead and Partner Ekta Desai. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)



The wall facing the parking lot was a blank canvas for Schenkel Shultz Partner Ekta Desai. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)



The side of the building housing Schenkel Shultz's Winter Park studio is adorned with bold graphic mural capturing and repeating the company's "S" logo. (Photo provided by Schenkel Shultz)

Work stations aren't distinguished by cubicle separators, but by planters filled with monstera varietals, fiddle leaf fig trees and other indoor plants.

"So instead of having a modular wall behind you, you have these real, living, green walls," Desai said. "They're a great acoustical barrier between workstations... And they're such beautiful backdrops for calls, because now we live in the Zoom era."

Another feature of Schenkel Shultz's new office is its 2,000-square-foot studio that doubles as a community space. The firm has hosted cocktail parties and open houses with spoken word performers. Recently, it played host to a sketch club. And they're looking for more opportunities to bring creatives together. The goal, Desai said, is to make the Schenkel Shultz office more of a "community armature."

"We are encouraged by the fact that we can be inspired as architects through other mediums of art, just like, hopefully, we inspire other people," Desai said. "We're really thinking of this as more of a creative design studio, and so trying to nurture co-creativity is really important to us."

The UF Alumni Design Awards were new this year, the 100th anniversary of the school of architecture's founding, so Desai is among the inaugural winners. She won in the historic preservation and adaptive reuse category, which "celebrates design excellence and commitment to preservation, restoration, and adaptation of existing buildings and structures," according to the [awards webpage](#).

Schenkel Shultz's building was built in 1955. In its previous lives, it had been home to a plant nursery and also a woodworking shop. Its history has been a talking point for many visitors and onlookers.

"It's been great to hear stories of what other people remember this building to be, and for them to be able to see the transformation," Desai said.

As for Desai, she said winning an award from her alma mater is an honor.

"I look back on when I was deciding to go to UF and to the School of Architecture at UF, and it was some of the most intense years of my life," she said. "But the reward that I've gotten, just as a person and as a professional in the industry, it has honestly been gift enough. But then to be acknowledged by the School of Architecture at their centennial celebration... and seeing the sea of talent that has come out of the program and to be selected... I was so honored."