

# THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

06.02.2010

## Get the Message

Whether East Coast or West, design companies are stripping down their offices to show off their core values. **Jennifer K. Gorsche** takes a master class in creatively collaborative office design.



NINE-FOOT-HIGH GLASS WALLS SEPARATE OFFICES AND MEETING ROOMS AT SPRINGS GLOBAL IN NEW YORK. THE MEETING TABLE IS BY FANTONI; CONFERENCE CHAIRS ARE EAMES ALUMINUM MANAGEMENT CHAIRS, AND GLASS PARTITIONS ARE CUSTOM DESIGNS BY MKDA WITH DORMA HARDWARE.

COURTESY MKDA

Office spaces have long been a showcase for creative expression. Take the tragic shambles of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the fluorescent yet comedic glare of *The Office*'s Dunder Mifflin, the gilt lair of *Wall Street*'s arbitrageur Gordon Gekko—each an extension of its occupants' standards and a company's ethos. Real-world offices make a statement, too.

And for two new offices—one on the East Coast and one on the West—breaking away from design clichés became an opportunity to announce their credo to both employees and clients alike. For textile company Springs Global in New York, it meant breaking their 1970s-style office model and creating a blank slate for new design work; for established San Francisco industrial designers One & Co, it meant clearing away creative clutter to create a scene that would welcome and inspire clients.

Moving beyond default design styles presents an interesting challenge for design-oriented companies who see their offices as their single greatest marketing device. Established New York firms, for instance, are fighting the stereotype of appearing too buttoned-up, aiming to evoke a blend of energetic creativity and business acumen. When U.S.-owned Spring's Industries and Brazil's Coteminas merged two-and-a-half years ago, they formed Springs Global, one of the world's largest branded home furnishings companies. With the new name came a new mission to create designs connected with beauty and fashion trends, trying to win consumers' attention, even though the company sells its products through retailers. "The home industry has gotten into a rut," said Springs' chief global creative officer Edward Cardimona. "Many retailers and brands are cranking out vanilla. It's the white sale, it's the price point—it's all these things that are irrelevant to the way people live."



KRON LO SWIVEL LOUNGE CHAIRS, UPHOLSTERED IN KVADRAT FABRIC, SURROUND SAARINEN COFFEE TABLES IN THE RECEPTION AREA. CONFERENCE ROOM LIGHTING IS BY LUMENART.



MODULAR OFFICE DESKS ARE BY FANTONI, WITH STEELCASE DESK CHAIRS.

Wanting to be near fashion-oriented neighbors, one of the company's first orders of business was to move its U.S. flagship office from a low-ceilinged, ill-lit Midtown office building to the fourth and fifth floors of the McKim, Mead & White–designed 110 5th Avenue. They hired New York firm Milo Kleinberg Design Associates (MKDA) to design the space in a white palette that would be a backdrop against which their fabrics and other products would stand out. The space is both showroom and design studio, but visitors never see the offices occupied by about 40 employees. Clients do see the end product of the collaborative workspace, a view that Cardimona said also attracts the right kind of employee. “We’re looking for people who are telling stories rather than selling goods,” he said.

The interiors are the company's blank slate, literally and figuratively. Whitewashed wood floors and exposed ceilings add contrasting texture to high-gloss lacquer cabinetry and vast glass dividers that separate private offices, workrooms, and meeting rooms, admitting sunlight but not noise. With little visual separation, office hierarchies are stripped away. “It’s not a modern way of working to shut yourself behind a door and still expect your team to work collaboratively,” said Cardimona.

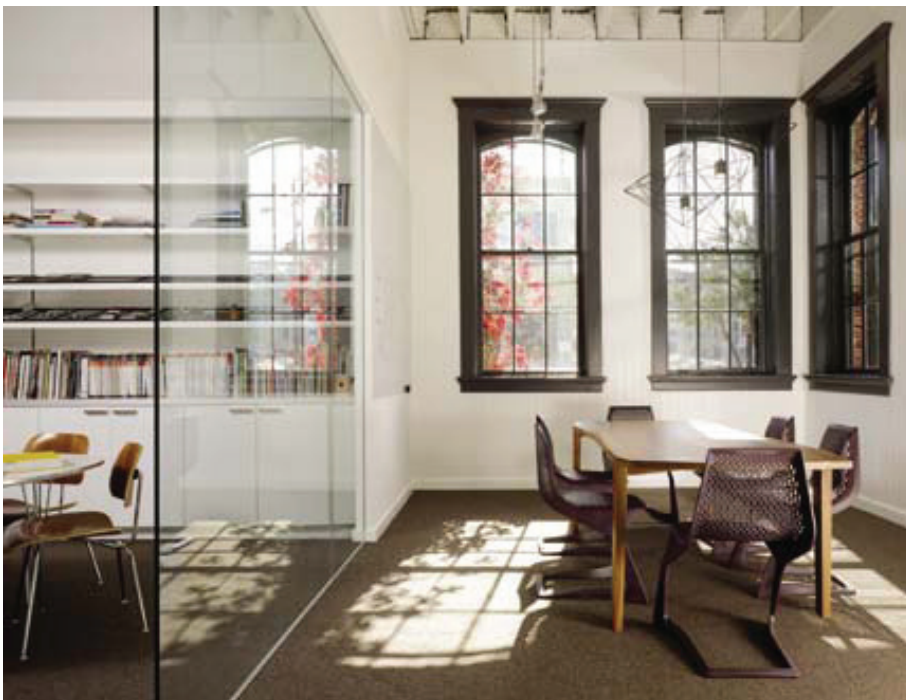


STELTER PARTNERS FILING CABINETS HAVE CUSTOM BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD COVERS BY ARNOLD, WHICH ALSO MADE A BOARDROOM TABLE AND CREDENZA OF THE SAME MATERIAL; INDUSTRIAL LIGHTING THROUGHOUT THE SPACE IS BY LIGHTOLIER.

Custom-made modular desks by Fantoni can be reconfigured, along with fabric-covered dividers, whenever more showroom space is needed. The space is branded with the Springs logo (it is used as a visibility marker on glass walls) but the only true signage is the company's name engraved in the gypsum ceiling above the reception desk.

In New York, according to Edin Rudic, MKDA's senior interior designer, "We still have a tendency to go with something we're comfortable with. It's, 'Deliver on time and I don't want anything that's risky.'" In his view, the space can thus be counted a revolutionary one for a corporate company in the city.

Though it symbolizes a cultural leap forward for the company, executives do not envision redesigning the flagship again even ten or 20 years in the future. They will rely on the company's ever-changing products to update the space, while highlighting the firm's origins in Brazil by featuring Brazilian hardwood conference tables and detailing silhouetted against an all-white—never vanilla—background.



AT ONE & CO'S SAN FRANCISCO OFFICE, MYOTO CHAIRS BY KONSTANTIN GRČIĆ FOR PLANK AND THE GEO TABLE BY ARIK LEVY FOR COUNCIL OUTFIT A SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM. LIGHTING IS BY ARTEMIDE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CESAR RUBIO





AT THE ENTRANCE, THE COMPANY'S JUST-A-BENCH DESIGN FOR ORANGE22 SITS IN THE FOYER, AND THEIR CREASE TILE BACKS THE CORIAN RECEPTION DESK AREA.

On the West Coast, many firms are tackling the opposite stereotype, trading do-it-yourself interiors for a more polished corporate presence as tech-boom startups begin to grow up. Architect Cary Bernstein's recent design for ten-year-old industrial design firm One & Co is part of this next generation of California office design. One & Co, whose clients run the gamut from Apple and Nike to manufacturers of furniture and ceramics, hired Bernstein when the other half of their floor in a turn-of-the-century brick warehouse in San Francisco's Mission District became available. Her job was to renovate 6,500 square feet of uninspiring rabbit-warren offices left in sad repair by previous occupants.

"San Francisco is starting to understand that you don't have to imitate the old, or obliterate it," said Bernstein. Her task became reconciling the company's rigorous minimal aesthetic with "a very wonky structure," allowing the building's wooden beams and bricks to complement sleek white and neutral surfaces. The space retains the Californian emphasis on collaboration and improvisation, but now always keeps the presence of clients in mind. The entryway is carefully conceived to give visitors a sunlit space in which to first see some of the firm's furniture and product designs. As clients circulate through, they will see 20 or so employees sitting in Aeron chairs at Council desks; in the conference room they will sit in Arpa chairs at a Vitra table and be inspired by accents of pink paint and upholstery, and glimpses of creativity.

Mess can be part of the message: Contained, catalogued, and organized, it turns the creative process into a design element in and of itself. A Konstantin Grcic plastic chair

and touches of mod might be just around the corner. "There's more confidence in the space and working with clients in the space," said Jonah Becker, one of three One & Co principals. "It's increased a notch in its refinement and sensibility." Instead of holding a meeting, the firm can host clients for several days, inviting them into the collaborative process while still drawing the curtains (literally) on the team's working "war rooms" to conceal confidential ideas. In an industry that is, in Bernstein's words, "all about boys and their toys," the space is youthful but not juvenile.



IN THE WORKSPACE, DESKS ARE FROM COUNCIL, WITH CHAIRS BY HERMAN MILLER.



CAPPELLINI GREEN LOUNGE CHAIRS BY JASPER MORRISON AND CUSTOM CABINETRY IN THE LIBRARY.



IN THE CURTAINED "WAR ROOM," ONE & CO'S CHRYSALIS STOOL, DESIGNED FOR COUNCIL, IS UPHOLSTERED IN PINK MAHARAM FABRIC WITH ROOM & BOARD TABLES.



THE FIRM DESIGNED THE AURA CREDENZA FOR COUNCIL.

Bernstein, who practiced in New York for six years before establishing her San Francisco office in 1995, said that in her experience, even similar office designs are perceived in entirely different ways depending on their location. "Something may be seen as 'rigorous and precise' in New York but considered 'tight and restrictive' in California. Something may be 'funky and playful' in California but just 'sloppy' in New York," she said. "There are plenty of structured places in California and an increasing number of looser spaces in New York," she added, "but the sensibility of each is still identified with a specific region and its culture." In other words, architectural typecasting can still speak volumes.

Jennifer K. Gorsche

**Jennifer K. Gorsche is special projects editor at AN.**