

HOLISTIC OFFICE

15 COLMORE ROW, BIRMINGHAM

for

Cundall

designed by

STUDIO BEN ALLEN

Following the design of their London offices for global engineering firm Cundall, Studio Ben Allen have once again been commissioned by Cundall, this time to design the extension of their office in central Birmingham. Using the London office as the departure point, the Birmingham workplace has a number of innovative approaches to create a healthy and engaging working environment. The project is also seeking to be one of the first Platinum accredited WELL standard projects in Europe. Studio Ben Allen are very keen to widen the debate on the working and office environment. They view their work in this area as a key component of their practice beside residential and cultural / arts projects. Sharing ideas between these areas of work has enabled the practice to, for example, bring a more tactile palette of materials more commonly found in the home and to provide a variety of work spaces in the homes they design, providing for more flexible lifestyles where the barriers between work and home lives are being broken down.

The innovative use of natural materials is used to reinforce the strong focus on health and wellbeing. Studio Ben Allen have designed bespoke high desks, shelving, standing meeting and team discussion break out spaces and quiet working booths. Working closely with these local fabricators helped ensure that the project was almost VOC (volatile organic compound) free. By offering the users of the office a wide range of types of working space, these elements are also intended to encourage "active working" (as opposed to static or sitting working). Materials are typically solid woods or plywood and are robust and designed to improve with age.

The helical "trestle" stair as a central signifier that connects the newly occupied floor to the existing, intended as a visually engaging centre piece of the workplace which also promotes physical activity by its use. It is designed as a lattice structure, made of thin plywood struts, allowing views and light from floor to floor. The structure also creates a visual moiré effect as users pass up and down the stair. It was proposed as a structural engineering challenge from us (the architects) to the engineer client - which they happily embraced! It is set to be the first WELL standard compliant project in the UK outside of London - our London office for Cundall was the first in Europe and 7th globally.

Other features in brief

- Felt lattice acoustic ceiling
- Standing meeting spaces (as well as high working) spaces
- Bespoke lattice shelving made of solid Douglas fir elements.
- The shelving is also a planted space divider designed to respond to the common complaint that open plan environments are agoraphobia inducing.
- A bespoke modular desk system that can be adapted to high working (as seen here)
- Focus or quiet working booths made of wood and acoustic felt.
- A reception artwork which is a material sample board reflecting the materials used in the project framed in a pentagonal tiling pattern.

Biophilia

The Colmore Row office design integrates planting with the structural aspects of the space where it helps create areas of “refuge” and gives identity to the spaces. The diversity of planting has been expanded compared to the palette typically found in working environments; in the café area, planters contain a mix of high and low level planting (small trees under-planted with shrubs) evoking the forest edge. Plants have been chosen to grow well in their allotted place and natural light level, for example creepers have been chosen for higher level planting, to grow down and around the shelving units.

Above the staircase there are twelve spotlights tracing the perimeter of the stair. The lighting is programmed to follow the path of the sun so that the shadows are cast onto different areas of the floor and creating patterns through the woodwork, gradually changing throughout the course of the day.

Artwork

Studio Ben Allen was commissioned to create a large scale reception artwork. The artwork is a sample board for the project - using the same palette of materials and textiles that are used throughout. The geometry through which it is pixilated is called Durer's pentagonal tiling. Concludes Ben Allen: “I think the consideration of art, science, geometry, architecture and engineering is a very appropriate lens through which to consider a space that we hope is inspirational, experimental and ultimately human-centric.”

The 16th century German painter Albrecht Durer was, as many renaissance men were, a man of science as well as art. The second of his Four Books on Measurement talks about two dimensional geometry, i.e. the construction of regular polygons, and the third applies these principles of geometry to architecture and engineering.

Credits

Architects: Studio Ben Allen

Client: Cundall
Structural Engineer + MEP: Cundall
Contractor: Paragon
Staircase: Meer End Joinery
Joinery: Top Notch Joinery
Bespoke desks: Creative base

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A little about Studio Ben Allen's approach to design for the modern workplace

We see the free exchange of ideas between our workplace, residential and cultural projects as key to our approach. For too long the workplace has been considered as an “other” space existing in its own cultural space. In the way that the factory, by the early 20th century, had become a typology in its own right so the workplace has become a specific typology driven by its own internal markets and cultures. Whilst this specialisation has helped produce an efficient and streamlined delivery process we feel that the theoretical and design approach has become dominated by the specification of furniture items and high impact front of house spaces at the expense of a more three dimensional spatial approach to the workspace itself.

We strive to provide relief and respite from the otherwise overtly horizontal, open plan environment that dominated typical offices which can invoke a feeling of agoraphobia. Creating an internal architecture of rooms within rooms, which spatially divide the workplace whilst still keeping a sense of openness and view lines is key.

We have built on the practice's art world experience of producing complex and visually engaging objects and installations, whilst working to tight budgets and time frames, to design and produce bespoke furniture and items such as filigree timber shelving room divider structures and staircases. These objects, often combined with internal planting and when lit with natural and artificial light, change throughout the course of the day and provide contrast with the light and temperature controlled environment of the modern workplace.

Ideas also disseminate in the other direction. A number of the ideas that we had been considering in terms of how we design and occupy interior spaces, in particular our workplace projects, fed into the installation project “The Clearing” that we completed last year for the Folkestone Triennial.

As a studio we started the practice in one of our flats. We think that there is a lot to be learned from bringing the home into the workplace. Peoples aspirations for their homes has been informed and developed by the popularisation of high quality contemporary design. With the exception of a few high quality examples, in many ways the workplace has been left behind in terms of peoples aspirations for what they might expect of their working environment.

The use of solid materials that people understand, as opposed to veneers, laminates and composites a central to our approach. We find that these solid materials are more versatile and interesting to work with as designers and age better. For example, the solid softwood doors on our shelving units,

may not have the short term durability of melamine that is almost ubiquitous in offices, but ages better over the medium to long term where small imperfections and changes of colour become part of the appeal of the material. In this respect we want the elements that we design for offices to get better with use and age and to challenge the short 5-7 year refit cycle. Designing our own furniture (a little like home cooking), also helps us to be clear what products are used in their fabrication. In order to obtain WELL Standard certification workplaces, have to have ultra low or zero VOC's.

Another practice we have adopted from working in the artworld is having background research in our studio that ties out projects together over a longer timeframe. Our workplace furniture falls into this category, spanning across multiple projects we are refining and developing a kit of parts. We are also currently working on with Autex designing a range of acoustic furniture items that can be rearranged as space dividers.

We favour a holistic approach to wellbeing with focus on spaces that people find interesting to move around and explore, encouraging physical movement, creating tactile spaces using materials that people understand and identify with, creating visually stimulating and engaging spaces and material durability and longevity are all central.