



Art works: Workspace's The Frames in Shoreditch features a large work by local artist Mr Jago to reflect the culture of the area

## The outside is in for modern office design

Workplace interior design is increasingly taking cues from the surrounding area as well as the occupier's character. Adam Branson reports

When tp bennett was hired to redesign the interior of PayPal's office in San Jose, California, the designers knew they had a major job on their hands. The building was an anonymous 1980s Silicon Valley office block lacking the dynamism and local character of many other tech giants' homes in the area.

To give the place some personality, tp bennet looked to the surrounding area. "People are very proud of the redwood forests, the San Francisco Bay, the mountain range within close reach and so on," says Cristiano Testi, principal director at tp bennett. "At the same time, northern California

is synonymous with science and technology. We looked to marry these two things."

PayPal's office is representative of a wider trend of trying to bring outside elements into the design of the interior evident not just in the US but in the UK.

According to Testi, context should always be at the heart of good interior design, although adherence to the philosophy has traditionally been patchy. What has prompted the recent renewed interest in respecting local character, he adds, has been the change in the way people work.

"The use of and need for office

space has changed dramatically," says Testi. "We had the industrial revolution where people worked in factories and then, when work started becoming less manual, offices were designed like factories for intellectual and administrative work. But effectively you were still in a production line."

### The human touch

Today, the situation has changed again, at least in major urban centres. "With the untethering of technology, the need to be fixed to one location has changed – people aren't being paid for data processing; they are being paid for analysis, client relationships and strategic human advice," says Testi.

"The reason people come from all over the world to work for employers in London is because of the companies but also to work in a thriving neighbourhood. In that sense, reminding people that you work for a company is important, but so too is reminding people of the area – and that needs to be

reflected in interior design. It's all about creating a curated experience that attracts the right talent."

Angus Boag, development director at flexible office group Workspace, agrees with Testi's analysis. "All businesses need to attract top talent in today's competitive environment, particularly those that are small and wish to grow fast," he says.

"Our buildings are all different and reflect the local neighbourhood, which we feel is important to build a vibrant community. We work with local manufacturers, artists and caterers to ensure this."

For instance, at its Brickfields development in Hoxton – one of Workspace's newest sites – the onsite café is provided by The Kiln, a coffee house well known to those who live and work in east London. At The Frames in Shoreditch, meanwhile, the company employed local artist Mr Jago to create a large-scale artwork to reflect the area's street art culture.

"Artwork is another way of

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Architectural features: the interior of 2 St James's Market incorporates elements from the 1930s-style facade

reflecting a building's surroundings and something we spend a lot of time thinking about," says Boag.

Reflecting the character of the local neighbourhood is only one factor that interior designers consider - but it is increasingly recognised as essential. Karolina Adamczyk, chief visionary officer at London-based design consultancy Ademchic, says the look and feel of her company's schemes is typically born out of four variables, including the area and expectations of the target market.

"The area often dictates expectations of the target market, so these two points are heavily interlinked," says Adamczyk. "A buyer or tenant will often move to the neighbourhood because they like its vibe, so not incorporating influences from the area in the interior would be missing a trick."

"The mix we've found to be most successful is to create an interior identity that plays on the best features of the surrounding area while adding elements that are unexpected and unique."

Of course, neighbourhoods' characters evolve over time and interior designs need to reflect that, says Adamczyk. "Tastes and design limits are forever changing and it's only a matter of time until the neighbourhood evolves and

interiors will have to evolve as well," she says.

Adamczyk cites a recent Ademchic project to reinvent the reception space in a client's office near London's Borough Market.

"The market's vibrant and hip neighbourhood inspired a bold colour scheme and the space was transformed from a cold, all-white box into a striking, bright interior," she says. "While the previous look worked perfectly fine for the type of tenant the building had expected to host 10 years ago, today's trendy area attracts hip businesses that have new expectations of their working environments."

### Respecting history

That does not mean that an area's past should be forgotten entirely. Rather, interior design should both respect a place's history and reflect its modern character. It is an approach that interior designer and TV presenter Naomi Cleaver adopted when working on Moda Living's Angel Gardens BTR scheme in central Manchester.

"Taking inspiration from a neighbourhood's architecture or heritage and bringing the essence of that into the interior design plays an essential part in creating a sense of place for people," she says, adding that providing a sense

of place is particularly important for BTR developers, given that they need to build a long-term relationship with tenants.

"Angel Gardens is a fascinating site," says Cleaver. "It was once home to Shudehill Mill, Manchester's first steam-powered cotton mill built by inventor Sir Richard Arkwright. We referenced this history by taking inspiration from textile manufacturing to influence the materials we used and the bespoke pieces we designed."

However, Ann MacDonald, senior designer at KKS Savills, warns that interior designers should not get too carried away with trying to emulate the surrounding area. Occupiers will still want their offices to reflect their own corporate identity, she says.

"If it's a really prestigious building like a museum or something, normally you would take those

elements inside," she says. "But if it's an office for a company and we are trying to reflect its brand identity, we would take elements of the architecture, but we would probably simplify them or make them more minimal."

MacDonald's work on 2 St James's Market is a case in point. "It's a 1930s-style building, so we decided to replicate some of the detail internally. We took the horizontal bands of the building's exterior and made them vertical. So we use architectural features from outside, but they have to really work - they can't just be stuck on the wall."

### Getting the balance right

Cleaver also believes caution is needed when taking interior design cues from the history of an area. With Angel Gardens, she says it was essential to recognise that the area was no longer industrial.

"Most importantly, I wanted to get the right balance of elements that portray how much the city has transformed to become the place it is today," she says. "By blending the industrial grit of the city's heritage and architecture with contemporary Mancunian glamour, while also retaining a cosy, welcoming feeling associated with northern hospitality, I feel we have created spaces where people can feel at home."

Cleaver adds that ensuring a building respects both an area's history and its modern-day character can help prevent it from being regarded as just gentrification.

"By tying the interiors of a new development to the culture and character of the existing area, it can make a building feel far less alien and more welcoming to the communities who already live and work there," she says.

So, while an interior that fails to recognise its surroundings can seem out of place, one that relies too heavily on it can end up looking like a pale imitation, stuck in the past.

Local history and architecture can be a great jumping-off point for interior design, but the message from interior design experts is that it is best to exercise restraint. ■



Ann MacDonald  
KKS Savills

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