INTERIORS

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In office buildings around Hong Kong, something odd is going on: the firms moving in are specifying interior design far removed from the styles their clients—and staff—are accustomed to.

Office design is being disrupted. No longer are indoor slides and foosball tables a measure of workplace attractiveness—now, it’s all about quiet sophistication.

Take the new One Taikoo Place, Quarry Bay office of global law firm Eversheds Sutherland. Stephen Kitts, managing partner for Asia, wanted something edgier than a usual law office, so he hired to design firm Spatial Concept was to “do something awesome.”

Gary Lai, founder and design director at Spatial Concept, took inspiration from the hospitality sector. “We’re seeing a lot of offices looking more like a luxury hotel, and vice versa, hotel-looking offices becoming work environments enabled by mobile technology,” he says.

The first sign of this trend is evident in Eversheds Sutherland’s 37th-floor foyer, modelled after a first-class airline lounge where resectionists stand at pods and greet each visitor on arrival. Behind are harbour views hotels would bow down to. Instead of walls, partners’ offices are sectioned by custom cabinetry, high-end Swiss brand Dm, which functions both as privacy screens and storage. Both designer and client view this non-fixed modular system, though expensive, as an investment in “future-proofing” the office, as it allows the spaces to be reconfigured at any time. It also saves the cost of building walls and moving utilities such as air conditioning, which would be necessary with compartmentalised offices.

For times when client confidentiality is required, partners can choose private booths accommodating two to four people.

In the various meeting rooms, gallery-quality artwork and sculptural lighting by brands such as Flos and Tom Dixon create the relaxing ambience of a hotel lounge, diffusing light, doubling as elegant venues for entertaining clients. Smart features, such as glass walls that switch from transparent to opaque, help address the business sensitivities of a law firm while retaining an open-plan feeling. Back of house, a wellness room with massage chairs provides a place for staff to refresh.

Completed in July, Eversheds Sutherland’s 222,000 sqft office occupies for about 150 staff. “If we’d gone down the cellular office route, we’d have had the same spend: a budget version ‘cheap and cheerful’, Kitts says. “We’ve finished with investment-grade open-plan in the best building in Hong Kong.”

Across town, in Causeway Bay, One Space was tasked with bringing together on one large floorplate two sister companies: RGH Specialty (formerly known as FP Marine Risks) and Howden Insurance Brokers—from under the Hyperion Insurance Group, the world’s largest employee-owned insurance business.

Architect Gerg Peere, co-founder of OneSpace, says that although these teams had largely worked together in the same premises for a few years, “this relocation project would present an unprecedented opportunity to tailor—make a home that would support a more integrated business operation and strategic synergies previously unexplored.”

He describes the 9,700 sq ft floorplate in the Citicorp Centre (“a project completed in November last year), as a large “square doughnut” with mill lobby access delivering guests to the side overlooking Victoria Harbour.

Breakout spaces, brainstorm areas and a secondary wet pantry anchor each corner of the design, aiding navigation by creating destinations.

Because the client had specified no enclosed offices, the design team created focus rooms and sharded settings for confidentiality when needed.

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WORK, REST AND PLAY: FRESH LOOKS FOR MODERN OFFICES

As workplaces evolve, it is out with cubicle-style uniformity, and in with open-plan versatility. The layout provides 96 desks plus an additional 34 “agile work points.” Collaborative areas of about 22 per cent of the total, which Peere says allows for a diverse range of opportunities previously unrealised in old-fashioned cubicle-style offices.

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According to Kenny Kingusa-Tsui and Louise Faure, founding directors of architectural and interior company Bean Buro, this nascent crossover of hospitality qualities into workplace design is driven by the increasing trend of employees working from home, attending to personal matters in the office.

Health and lifestyle are growing priorities, especially for the millennial generation, says Kingusa-Tsui. “According to our research, employee engagement is the greatest concern for most employers, and also an opportun-

ity to create an environment where employees feel good about coming to work, can be productive and also sociable, thereby accelerating the development of the company and its culture.”

He adds that qualities such as well-being, ergonomics, comfort and flexibility, as well as materials, mood and feel, are all necessary considerations in designing a workspace that succeeds in engaging with its users. “Every detail—which it’s a curve, a material choice, light, sound, aroma or tactility—all affect the user’s experience,” he says.

For the 1,660 sq ft IFC Two office of Sapientia Investment Consulting, completed in 2016, Bean Buro aimed to create a tranquil and sociable workspace for a small workforce of six to eight people. “When we first visited the site, we were intrigued by how calming the atmosphere is high up in the busy district of Central,” Faure says.

The designers created a hotel-like lounge room—with art, sofa and bookshelves—that doubles as an ab evacuation route. “All the furniture has a ‘non-office aesthetic,” Kingusa-Tsui says. “The Frame TV screen is the latest from Samsung that displays art when not in use.”

“We also encouraged the company to display oriental plants and cultural objects as identity for the CEO’s Chinese roots—so for us this is ‘branding’ done in a natural, non-corporate way,” he says.

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