

Parallel universe

Primary colours and clean lines differentiate IonDesign's office for an outdoor advertising firm in central Berlin, creating an intimate enclave that is a world apart from the traditional office building it occupies

Words by Jenny Brewer

Photography by Asaf Oren

This single-floor office in Berlin is a small part of a large, nine-storey corporate headquarters, but exists in a little world of its own. As a base for 16-20 staff on the digital creative team of Wall AG, an outdoor advertising company owned by JCDecaux, the so-called SmartDigital office required a much more contemporary and collaborative type of workspace than other departments. So German architecture and design studio IonDesign used it as a chance to push the boundaries of the company's interior style.

This begins right from the building's main entrance. Visitors and staff move through a fairly standard corporate lobby to a vivid red-painted stairwell dotted with huge white globe lights. It visually separates the department and transports people to an entirely different place, showing just what can be achieved with a lick of paint. "We wanted to change the experience for people," says IonDesign's managing partner Christoph Fleckenstein, "to show: there is the black and white old office, and this is the new office."

Primary colours pepper the rest of the space as a reminder of this dramatic entrance, but also act to highlight important parts of the office. Essentially it is one big open room, which is neatly divided into three sections: a day-to-day work area with individual desks; a large lounge and kitchen area for meetings; and a separate space housing two private offices, a meeting booth and a few more individual desks.

It's the very definition of simple yet clever, with one particularly nifty detail being the hidden wall storage in the work area, highlighted in that same vivid red. Tucked away behind writable "working" walls – where staff can sketch and note down new ideas – are slim, vertical drawer units that provide plenty of storage without interrupting the clean aesthetic. With the team here working mainly in digital format, responsible for thinking ahead to innovative solutions for future cities, it was vital that storage – and all it entails – was concealed.

"It was important not to show paper because it looks traditional," says Fleckenstein. "They don't need much anyway, and someday they won't use it at all. Also, people there are thinking about new things – they shouldn't be surrounded by paper from old projects, so we decided to hide all that and give space to new ideas on the white walls."

The rest of the desk area is pared back, with blended silver Bolon floors, oak desks and ceiling rafts for lighting and acoustics. Running across this and the lounge area is a walkway ☺



← A wall of CP30 acoustic panels shelters the kitchenette area

↓ A vivid red highlights hidden storage areas behind writable walls

“It looks very different to the rest of the building”

of black rubber flooring, inspired by streets, to relate to the urban environment within which the company’s adverts are shown; the rubber is also soft and quiet underfoot. It is also decorated with bright yellow measure markings, which are used to sight-test adverts on a screen at the end, viewed from different distances.

Breaking the space in two is a semi-transparent wall, made of Rossoacoustic’s CP30 system, a honeycomb plastic structure that provides an acoustic barrier without blocking light and views. On the other side is a kitchenette, with high tables and Tolix bar stools, all in black, livened up by yellow Muuto lampshades. Beyond is the lounge, where big blue Hay sofas, little yellow Hem stools create a large casual meeting area where the team can brainstorm and socialise.

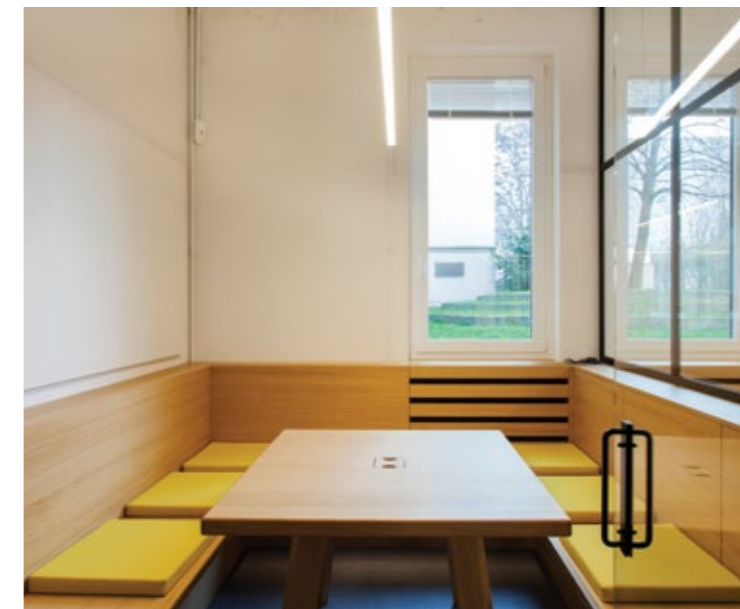
“It looks very different to the rest of the building,” describes Fleckenstein. “When they started it was all chrome furniture systems, like a conservative lawyer’s office. That’s not the impression a modern company wants to give. In the finance department they still have private offices, but here teamwork is a big part of their day, so we’ve designed for that here. We’re developing other areas for the company, but of course the finance department won’t look like this.” ☺





“It also needed to be a cosy, private space for employees”

↑ Black-framed glass gives an industrial feel to the two private rooms



↑ An intimate meeting room is a counterpart to the large, open lounge

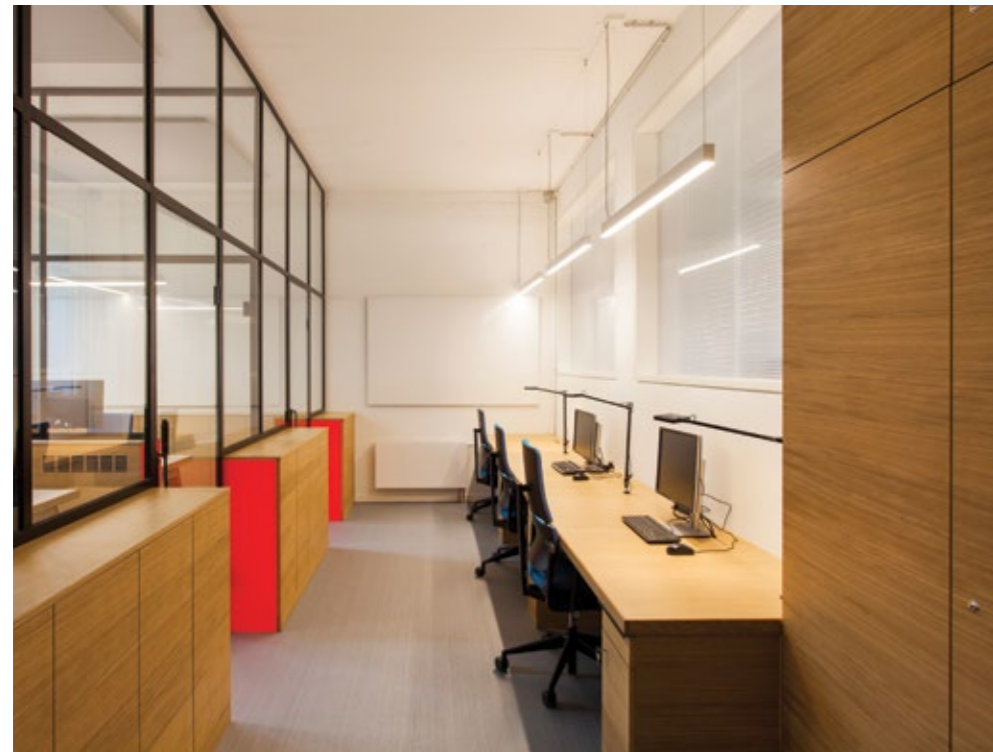
The designers also had to consider this room’s position on the street level of one of Berlin’s busiest boulevards, Friedrichstrasse. With its huge windows – though these have been partially frosted – this space has become a kind of display for the company’s forward-thinking approach. “It’s like a show workspace, so it was a chance for us to think about how the company should be working. At the same time, it also needed to be a cosy, private space for employees,” says Fleckenstein.

Away from the main room is an adjacent space, up a step towards the back of the building. Here are the only two private rooms for executives, which Fleckenstein says rarely have their doors shut. This space features more of the same silver floors, neon secret storage units, and oak cladding, with the rooms given an industrial feel using black-framed glass panels. Next to these, IonDesign has squeezed in a more private meeting booth for six people, which Fleckenstein likens to an Alpine chalet. “This is something in between a traditional conference room and the lounge,” he explains, saying that a smaller, more intimate meeting space like this encourages different behaviour from staff, compared with the lounge. ©



↑ The lounge is used for casual meetings and evening socialising

“This project was like the playground to try out those ideas”



↑ A pared-back look mixes oak-topped desks and a silver Bolon floor

On the whole, this floor has been an experiment for both the company and design firm. IonDesign has worked with Wall AG for 16 years as creative adviser on its products, architecture and interiors, so understands its working culture intricately. “It was interesting to think about how their workplace should be,” says Fleckenstein. Hot-desking was considered but decided against, he adds, because “people need some privacy and their stuff around them, especially in an open space like this that can be seen from the street”.

Largely, though, new ideas have been adopted to push the company into a new era. Fleckenstein says that when they first started collaborating, everyone at Wall AG was wearing ties and now they all wear T-shirts. Similarly, their offices were enclosed and traditional, while now even the boss comes to have meetings in the lounge, and joins the staff for beers there in the evening. “With this project, they wanted to show that the company is moving on,” he concludes, “and this project was like the playground to try out those ideas.” ■

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In the next issue

Next month we take a look at a new scheme for Astra Zeneca by Space Invader