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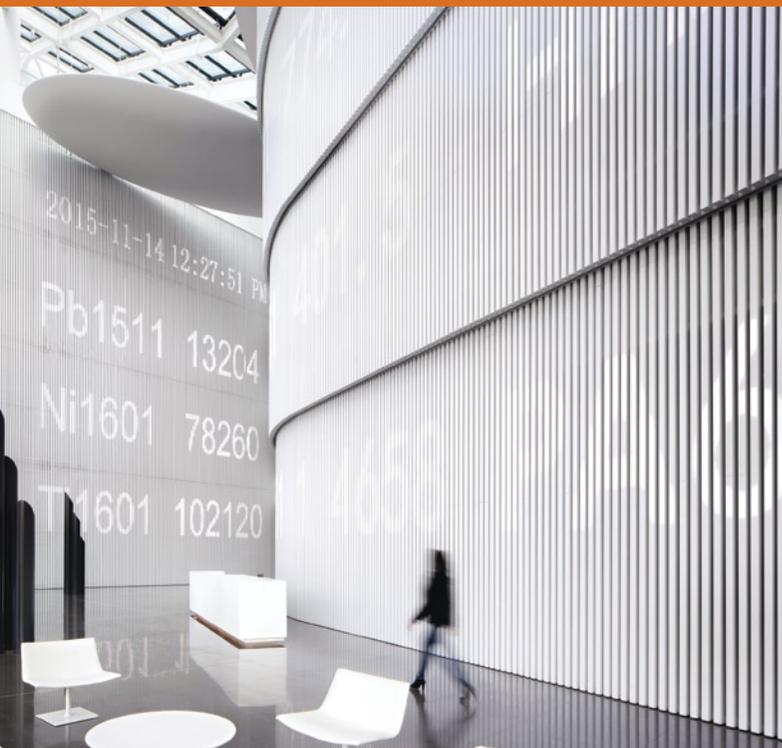
# WORKING IT NEW OFFICE DESIGN

As recently as a few years ago, it might have been said that most of the world's white-collar workers spent a third of their days in an office environment. And blue-collar workers usually had at least some physical experience with offices on a regular basis. 'The office' was an expression that made sense to most everyone; it meant 'where we go to work', even when it wasn't actually a conventional office space. "I gave at the office" meant "where I work". There was even a very successful television comedy called *The Office* that appeared first in the UK and then in an American version. For the record, both versions chronicled the banal goings-on of a group of middle-class people who spent their days in a blindingly unattractive office space that was, nonetheless, frighteningly familiar to viewers everywhere.

Nowadays, the term 'office' connotes something just a little bit different, at least for some lucky souls. Sure, there are still hundreds of thousands of dull, uninviting, prosaic spaces the world over in which the business of 'work' is accommodated. But, increasingly, the way we work together in many fields – some of them new, many of them evolved – is open for more original interpretation. It will probably be decades before we see the end of small conference rooms, whiteboards, cubicles, pantries, copier rooms, and so on. But even the way many companies are using these time-worn facilities is changing. Shared officing and desking is a trend showing endurance. Mobile workplaces are real. Distance employment makes sense for many more categories of work than we thought possible. Digital attendance has provided more flexibility for many types of companies and personnel. The analogue world still dominates, absolutely, and maybe always will. But the virtual inter relationships that now define growing sectors of work are influencing the spaces we use to get our jobs done. Or the spaces we use only occasionally. Or the 'spaces' we occupy digitally. The decision-makers at all sorts of companies are questioning the old assumption that all their workers need to physically walk in the door every morning at 9 a.m. And the potential economies of 'outsourcing' some of the space required to perform a task are becoming obvious.

That is not to say that all, or even most, jobs can be done from home in one's pyjamas (though writing is one that can). There are thousands of job types that really do require their participants to leave the house and commute to an 'office', usually in order to engage in teamwork with fellow workers. It made considerable news a couple of years ago when Marissa Mayer, the CEO of Internet giant Yahoo, actually insisted that some staff come back to work physically, reversing the assumed trend of forward-thinking companies to let staff work remotely. She made the argument for the irreplaceable benefits of putting smart people in rooms or spaces together and, perhaps ironically for a digital company, also made the case that Internet connectivity was simply not an equivalent substitute. She was after the unpredictable intellectual electricity sparked by random and accidental meetings of minds that simply don't occur as easily via email or Facebook. Skype meetings are a brilliant 'second best', but cannot seem to replicate the spontaneous chitchat that takes place as people are getting up to leave a meeting, or breaking for coffee refills in the pantry. And though most of that chitchat is about last night's episode of *Game of Thrones*, or gossip about the new receptionist, sometimes it stumbles upon things of far greater impact for the company... ideas and concepts that later filter into the business at hand (though we concede it is hard to imagine anything of greater impact than *G.O.T.*). Yes, it's still good to have smart people share rooms while they work.

And hence this piece: our annual roundup of new office spaces, culled from across the globe. As with every year, it's both a feast of difference, and a proof of commonalities. In fact, it is interesting to examine these work environments from the perspective of the above theme: what is changing about how we use space to work in, and what is remaining the same. Another way to put it might be: why are some characteristics of offices stubbornly enduring, regardless of significant alterations to the way work is performed? Let's go see.



# MIDWEST INLAND PORT FINANCIAL TOWN

## XI'AN, CHINA HALLUCINATE DESIGN OFFICE

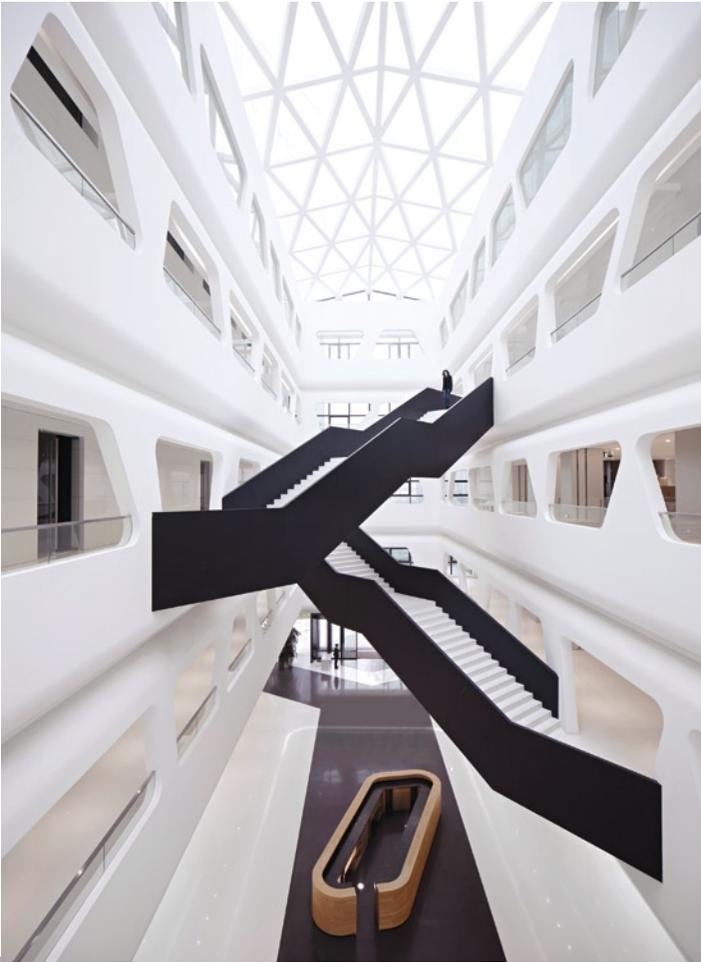
Photography by Javier Callejas Sevilla

As everyone knows, the 'office' space starts in the building lobby, not at one's desk. For the giant Chinese commodities trader Maicke Metals Group, the designers have fashioned an intentionally non-contextual approach to the building's public spaces, with a view to conveying the future-oriented modernity of the client's field of operations, which includes logistics, transportation, and information services throughout Asia. Copper and other metals may be 'old school', but the way they are sourced, sold and delivered is keeping up with the times, and these interiors make sure everyone knows it.

The expansive lobby feeds into a five-storey atrium capped by a glazed roof. The balconies of the atrium space 'striate' the levels by accenting openings in almost nautical apertures, rather than with open balustrades. A dramatic black-and-white staircase crisscrosses the space in deliberate contrast to the all-white atmosphere.

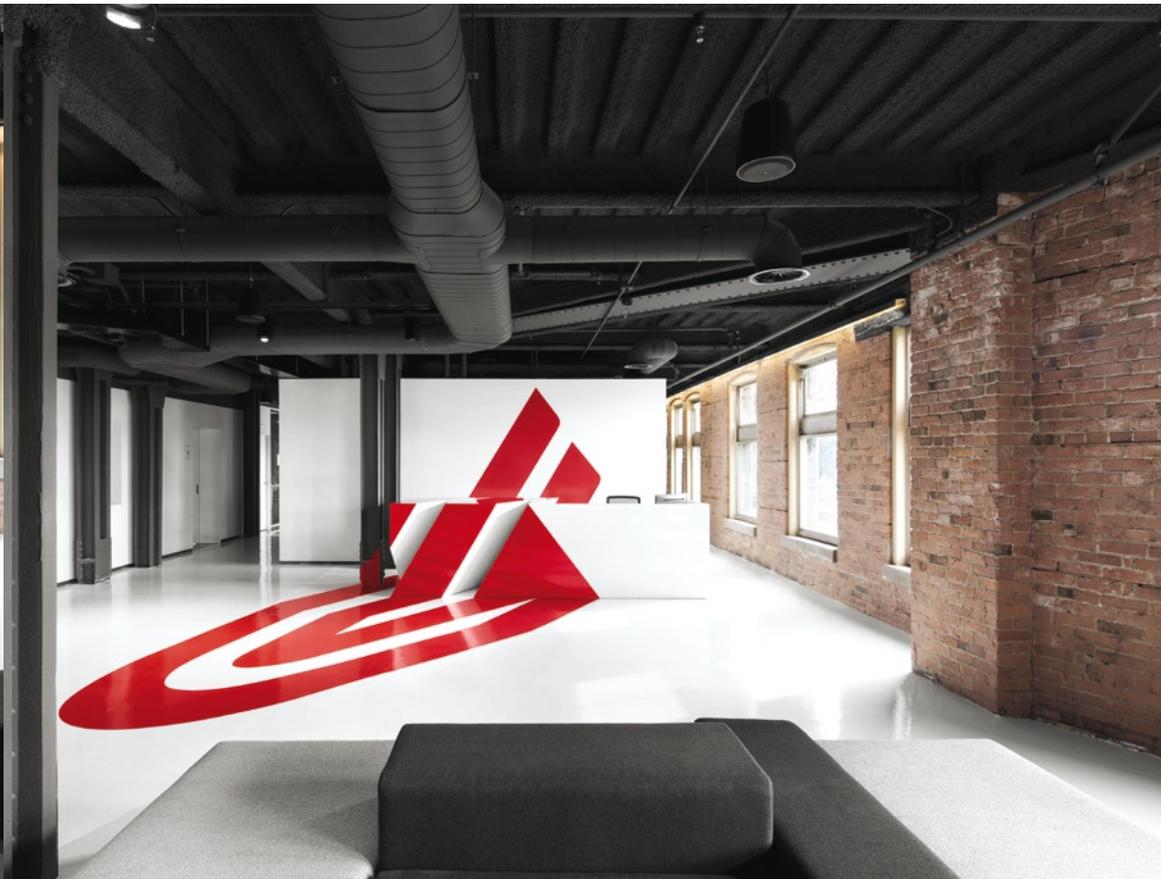


At the bottom is a wood-veneer-clad reception desk, set like an island in the lobby. The other dominant design feature of the huge space is a series of stepped white walls of vertical fins of extruded aluminium that project digital numerals across them, rendering them information panels on a gargantuan scale. The trick here – and it's achieved with gusto – is that everything remains in white, so that even the numbers or letters take on a slightly immaterial aspect, like information 'ghosts'. The walls tread the line between stable architectural elements defining the space, and luminous, almost amorphous, digital screens. A black floor adds a sharp base to the effect, and clusters of sculptural black totems conceal uplighting fixtures. Loose seating in strict white completes the scene. In fact, all lighting sources have been expertly concealed, the better to advance the futuristic, seamless character of the space. It is stridently modern, vast and clinical at the same time, as if begging to appear in a few near-futuristic science fiction films.



Other spaces in the project include a lecture hall lined in timber struts that bend over the raked seating in a wave pattern, and a meeting room that uses a simple overlapping wall pattern with concealed lighting to continue the 'attractive future' ambience. In all spaces, the usual visual detritus of outlets and light switches, fixtures and plug-ins and machinery is all kept under strict, minimalist control. Ultimately it is this rigour that elevates Maike above the standard. If this is tomorrow, lead on.





## LIGHTSPEED

### MONTREAL, CANADA ACDF ARCHITECTURE

Photography by Adrien Williams

The style category one might term 'industrial chic' has been running its course for some years now, but it seems to keep finding new life. After all, it's proven incredibly popular among proprietors of restaurants and bars, and office spaces, all over the place, not just in revitalised sections of urban cores. This space was designed for a young company that develops software, and is housed in three floors of a historical building in Montreal. Formerly a Viger train station and hotel, and overlooking an important square, the chateau-style building is one of many that lend the city its unique, European tinge. As befits this genre of design, and certainly a 'found' building of this material pedigree, the design celebrates the existing character of the raw spaces, inserting atop this a layer of hyper-contemporary elements and features to play against it. The once-abandoned building offered luscious masonry walls, a robust steel-and-timber structure and facades of regular, vertical operable windows.

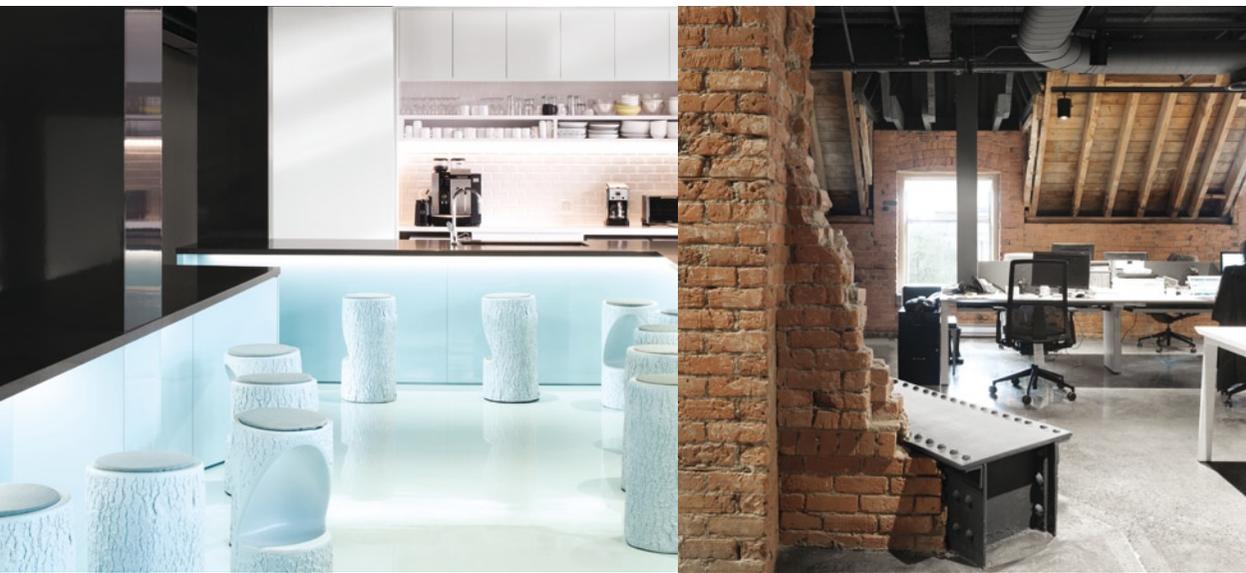
Lightspeed is only ten years old, but is experiencing rapid success, and the growth that accompanies it. For its HQ it needed space to anticipate future staff numbers, without losing its essential 'startup' vibe... an ambition shared by plenty of tech companies today. In other words, the space had to be highly practical but also exciting. The tech-





oriented workers who navigate this field have a lot of attractive options, and the kinds of spaces they work in matter. ACDF supplied a set of spaces that look both forward and backward, connecting the cutting-edge intellectual work taking place here every day with the visible evidence of relatively 'ancient' history embodied in old bricks, concrete, steel and wood. The building was built in 1898 as a gently decorated landmark for travellers. The current renovation stripped the spaces back to their unclothed beauty and strength. Steel girders and timber beams and even double-height spaces were revealed in their full glory from behind various ill-considered 'renovations' from preceding eras.

The new overlay is visible as soon as one exits the lift and encounters the main lobby area. A bright red 3D graphic combines the company logo with a reception desk. The piece acts as a kind of abstract optical game: the logo rests on the floor, then turns up to 'slice' through the desk, and continues onto the wall behind. As through much of the design, colour contrast plays an important role. Black, white and grey are the predominant tones of the office, but splashes of vibrant red, yellow and turquoise are dropped in here and there to punch up the senses. To the right of the desk is a cluster of three angular 'cabanas' containing small benches for spontaneous conversations, meetings or solitary work. The designers added a nice touch here: painted



'shadows' on the floor, conceptually cast by the pods themselves, as if an architectural study drawing had come to life. The ceiling overhead is painted out charcoal. Nearby is the 'pool', a common area near the kitchen that is shaped and painted to evoke a backyard swimming pool that actually existed in the company's previous office. With the house-shaped cabanas, it's like a tongue-in-cheek play about suburbia. The pool zone is painted in an aqua tone, down to the stools and floor. With under-lighting setting up a glow, the concept is clearly expressed, yet it's also a compelling place in its own right, perfect for coffee chats, lunch meetings or simply to take the mind away for a few moments during the day. It's remarkable what a little paint can do.



In the actual work areas, as the architects put it, "Stark white systems furniture streaks past the preserved ruins of industrial-age relics, soaring timber ceilings, garret-like nooks and elegantly frayed brick walls." Yeah, like they said. The idea is efficient modern desking and machines within the embrace of highly inviting rustic walls and ceilings. Contemporary art pieces at large scale interject occasionally for a dollop of high culture balancing all those gigabytes. Planned for the next expansion in the not-too-distant future: a patio near the 'pool' with hot tubs and a BBQ, a lounge inspired by smoking rooms from long ago, and an amphitheatre paying homage to clouds. We cannot wait.





Khroma - Aqua Collection



Tres Tintas - Mediterraneo Collection



HW - Mixed Moods Collection



Arte - Alchemy Collection



Eijffinger - Un Bisou II Collection



Omexco - Nomad Collection



Elitis - Nomades Collection



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# LA PARISIENNE HQ

## PARIS, FRANCE STUDIO RAZAVI ARCHITECTURE

Photography by Olivier-Martin Gambier

Sometimes you start with a compelling, or even monumental original space. Other times, you are given a bland, cookie-cutter floorplate in a generic office tower. In either situation, you can opt to use the method of contrast for the formal juice of the thing. The client was the oldest insurance company in France – which in itself says something. In spite of that – or perhaps exactly because of it – it wanted a new space that would be “peaceful, see-through and fresh”. Hmm. The basic idea was to help attract and retain the kind of bright, innovative people who normally head in the opposite direction from businesses such as, well, insurance.

Fortunately, there was an added consultant on the project, called The Boson Project, which focuses on helping ‘established’ corporations step into the modern world, including the newer ways of work environments and habits. In other words, helping ‘old’ companies recapture their youth (or at least, youthful personnel). These guys helped push the project forward quickly.





The basic spatial concept here was to provide on a single floor a number of 'nodes' for work in various manifestations. The staff here work in different team sizes and configurations, and often deal with information that is very confidential. Within a modest overall size of 700sq m, there was a need to accommodate groups of varying numbers as well as solitary work, meetings that were fairly open, and others that were almost secret. The solution involved a number of 'programme islands' set into the centre of the L-shaped floorplan, which is otherwise straightforward office layout boilerplate. The islands provide intimate meeting rooms, a small reception desk, standup meeting nooks, storage space and the like. These are expressed as explicit inserts, not reaching the ceiling, and clad in vertical pine wood slats against a grey felt surface, the latter continuing inside them for the wall surfaces. The timber slats also jump onto a few glass-enclosed spaces in the office, such as more conventional conference rooms. The islands favour rounded corners, and revealed bases, to further distinguish them from the 'field' they join. Wherever possible, perimeter glazing accessing natural light is not blocked from deeper into the plan, so that through glass partitions, staff have a visual connection to the outside light and weather. The designers say they chose the economical timber because they desired its inherent imperfections to help make the office space more casual and warm. The rest of the space is quiet white and grey. It all projects an image of sensible, unpretentious, almost deliberately prosaic functionality. For clients of the client, who may be more used to this sector occupying spaces of either blinding banality or dated formality, the new office will come as a bit of a surprise. Some might even misinterpret the wood slats as part of ongoing construction work. Hmmm.