

BLUEPRINTS

Inside an Office, Reflections of a City



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Stephen Yablon, left, and Andrew Miller, an associate, designed the new office space for Enterprise New York to reflect the communities the agency helps to build.

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FOR a long time, the offices of Enterprise New York, part of a national nonprofit agency that helps build affordable housing, were a far cry from the bright new residential communities it puts up around the city. Windows leaked, the elevators were slow, and the organization had long since outgrown the 16,000-square-foot space, at Fifth Avenue and 14th Street in Manhattan, that it had occupied for 10 years.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Bold primary colors are part of the design, which also aims to maximize natural light.

The space, on the 11th floor of the 23-story building, uses sustainable products almost exclusively, as does much of the housing developed in New York by Enterprise Community Partners, the parent agency based in Columbia, Md..

“What we are most proud of is that we have a real reflection of New York or any other city,” said Victoria Shire, the deputy director of Enterprise New York, which is one of 22 offices in its parent’s network around the country.

So, five months ago, Enterprise New York moved to 20,000 square feet of office space that is a much more accurate reflection of the communities it helps to create. Designed by Stephen Yablon Architect, this space at One Whitehall Street is a near microcosm of a city. It has busy thoroughfares and intersections, open spaces that enhance personal interaction and a sun-filled layout that allows views into different parts of the office as well as its Lower Manhattan environs.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Enterprise New York provides expertise and financing for affordable housing through the nonprofit Enterprise Community Partners and its for-profit subsidiary, Enterprise Community Investments, according to Ms. Shire; the office also offers consulting for housing-related social services in its communities.

It has worked with public and private groups to generate the funds for projects like the 63-unit Jacob's Place, a collaboration with the Fordham Bedford Housing Corporation, that opened recently in the Bronx.

Enterprise Community Partners was started in 1982 by the developer James Rouse of the Rouse Company (now part of General Growth Properties Inc.) and his wife, Patty.

The layout and décor of the Manhattan space offer a primary theme of collaboration, not only among the 65 staff members but also among the groups they work with on the outside.

No one has a private office, not even the top executives. Each of the 75 workstations is part of a quad, with four staff members from any given department. The move from traditional offices to a completely open plan was bold, according to Mr. Yablon, the principal in Stephen Yablon Architect, which is based in Manhattan. "But it means better collaboration, more teamwork and less hierarchy," he said.

The so-called commercial area of the space is at the heart, with a sprawl of smaller units around the fringes, like the lower edges of the city or suburbia. Here, the small units are the workstations scattered around three sides of the footprint, allowing the maximum natural light to flow around the work area and filter through glass walls in the multiple conference rooms clustered around the core.

Every workstation has a view, according to Andrew Miller, an associate with Stephen Yablon Architect who worked on the project. River views, as well as views of downtown buildings like the former United States Custom House, now the National Museum of the American Indian, reinforce Enterprise New York's connection to the city.

The center of the layout is made up of 14 conference rooms of varying sizes. They can accommodate anywhere from 2 to about 30 people, although the biggest can be configured for an even larger group or a weekly yoga class. Smaller rooms provide privacy or quiet when needed, while larger ones are open for meetings and conference calls. A small room is set aside for nursing mothers.

The space's urban references are most literal in the entry and reception area. A floor-to-ceiling wooden grid on the right and left sides of the area is meant to depict the scaffolding on projects that Enterprise New York has helped to build or restore. Beyond that is a confluence of hallways that delineate the conference rooms but lead off in three ways, to where the workstations are placed.

"This is the urban core, like a busy street intersection that everyone has to pass through to get anywhere else," Mr. Yablon said.

He used lighting to further delineate different parts of the office, and to help turn variations in ceiling heights to an advantage. Big conference spaces have large, round, ceiling-mounted fixtures, with smaller versions in smaller spaces. Fixtures along "streets" are meant to evoke street lights, while recessed rectangular fixtures are used in work areas on the periphery.

Conference rooms are equipped with motion sensors to save power, and all furniture and textiles, like the carpeting, are made of sustainable materials. The main reception desk is built from particle board covered with renewable bamboo veneer, and acoustical ceiling tiles are made from recycled materials.

WORKSTATIONS are white, to enhance overall brightness around window walls, but bold primary colors are a major part of the core's design. Mr. Yablon chose colors from the urban landscape — taxi cab yellow, the green of Central Park, the blue of the sky and the bright red of a stop sign — to add visual interest without adding too much in the way of cost.

"One challenge was finding furniture that would go with all the bright colors," he said.

Patterns on wall covering in the core area are pixilated photographs from the Enterprise New York archives. Mr. Yablon and Mr. Miller worked with a company called Designtex to create an environmentally friendly wallpaper on which the photos could be printed.

The resulting wallpaper is as strong as vinyl, he said, but made from recycled waste paper and recycled pulp, and "green" in keeping with the group's philosophy.

The pixilated photos, all scenes of ribbon-cuttings, award ceremonies, groundbreakings and happy families in their new homes, seem to change as you move around them.

But the message remains. "They are a symbol of working in the community to solve problems and address poverty in New York," Ms. Shire said.