

and

Lobby Culture

FX October 2001 By Sharon McFarlane

Advertising agency Publicis has a reception area like a hotel lobby, complete with art gallery,

First impressions count, as the saying goes. Publicis, one of the biggest advertising agencies in Europe, kept this firmly in its mind when it decided that its London Baker Street headquarters needed a new reception area.

Welcome to the office reception designed to look like a hotel lobby. As Grant Duncan, Publicis's managing director, says: 'I was thinking along the lines of a Sanderson - that kind of hotel. I didn't want it to feel like an advertising agency.' Steering away from an overtly fashionable look that would inevitably date was a definite must, but Duncan was also keen that the space 'didn't end up being too austere'. Instead, the idea was to reflect Publicis's French roots-it has been established in France for some 70 years and in the UK for 20 - with a cool interior that has certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Previously, the ground floor comprised two receptions and an office for Comma, Publicis's design and production studio. Consequently, Duncan says, 'there were lots of people working on Macs and a lot of paper. It was a rabbit warren to be honest. As the area was split into individual buildings, we needed two separate reception desks and that was becoming a logistical nightmare'.

And-associates was the architectural practice charged with creating the new reception. But rather than just redesigning the space, the project also afforded the chance to rationalise the area. It proposed a number of changes - the main one was to create one large, voluminous space by knocking out dividing walls and uniting the three buildings on the ground floor (82, 84 and 86 Baker Street).

And-associates suggested that the conference rooms, then located on the third floor, be moved down to the ground to make, as Duncan explains, 'more of a public space for everyone - clients and staff alike'. Publicis also required additional meeting space for its 350 staff. It made sense to put this alongside the conference rooms, relocating Comma to another floor so almost the entire space (bar, obviously, the reception desk) could be given over to meeting areas.

Seven meeting rooms are now available. The main conference room at the front of the building has natural light which floods through large arched windows facing directly onto the busy street, with a second conference facility alongside. Each accommodates 22 people. A sliding acoustic wall by London Wall Design separates the two and can be retracted to create one large room (ideal for major presentations and pitches). The wall separating the conference rooms from the main lobby space is also composed of sliding acoustic panels, so that the entire space can be opened out - ideal for larger events and parties.

The additional meeting rooms, including one with a dedicated video conferencing facility, cater for between six and eight people. Throughout, and-associates has used Wilkhahn Confair 440 folding tables and Eames chairs from ICF Aluminium Group. Each meeting space pays homage to Baker Street's most famous (if fictitious) resident - Sherlock Holmes. The main conference room is named after the man himself, next door is Watson. Elsewhere, there's Moriarty and 221b. You get the idea.

Duncan also wanted informal meeting areas as 'people don't always have to conduct meetings behind closed doors.' Pierre Paulin's Orange Slice seats, manufactured by Artifort and covered in Kvadrat fabric - placed at the front of the reception - allow just this. As Duncan points out, 'this ties into the hotel lobby idea. Many people have meetings in hotel lobbies. It provides a liberal, relaxed atmosphere.'

The display of art also gives a 'hotel feel' to the area. 'Initially we wanted a space where we could display some of our ad work and then it sort of evolved from there,' explains Duncan. 'We picked up the Hayward [Gallery] account about six months ago and we talked to them about displaying some of their artwork.' The art gallery, effectively a large wall displaying numerous pieces isn't just for staff and clients. The public are encouraged to visit too, adding to the open feel of the space. The gallery doubles up as another area for informal meetings, thanks to a galvanised steel and oak timber bench by Terence Woodgate (supplied by SCP) and a Mies van Der Rohe daybed and Barcelona footstool.

And-associates came up with a simple way of covering the entire Baker Street interior façade to reinforce the hotel lobby model-4m high sheer drapes. These block out the busy road and create a sense of privacy, while still allowing natural light to flood in.

When it came to flooring, the main choice for and-associates' Geoff Strange was a fumigated end grain oak floor from Heritage Woodcraft. As he says 'we took a long time to source the floor because there was a specific requirement. We didn't want to use something that would get dirty quickly and wouldn't last.' Approximately 375 sq m of the timber flooring was installed, but Strange did have to use some carpeting. Tiles from Interface's Tatami range lead through the art gallery and on to the back meeting rooms.

For an area in constant use - couriers, visitors and staff constantly flowing in and out of the building - and-associates has managed to create a reception area which conversely emanates a sense of calm. The lighting used is neither too harsh nor soft - the designer opting for track mounted Zeno fittings from Zumtobel and Jasper Morrison's Flos global lamp in brushed metal finish.

While the company has applied colour to some walls, which works with the overall design scheme rather than creating areas which stand out. By using an eclectic range of furniture, including a reception desk designed by and-associates itself and made by Burton Joinery, the scheme encourages visitors' eyes to wander around the space, picking out its various elements.

It was important to Publicis that the new reception was kept under wraps until completed. So much so that Strange recalls that 'over one weekend, they had started to paint the walls and I came in on Monday and told them to paint them back white.' The grand unveiling, 22 weeks after work started on site, was received positively. As Duncan proudly reports: 'They were blown away by it and we haven't had one negative word. Which is quite unusual with a building full of creative people!'