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Circus

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## NOT JUST CLOWNING AROUND

**Media consultancy Circus has an office designed to match its philosophy-radical, transparent, informal and open.**

Along a side street in trendy south Islington, just north of the City of London, a newly fitted-out office lies open to the gaze of passers-by through a clear-glazed window wall. On view is an open-plan space encircled by a continuous curving bench at which people are busy working. Two comfortable sofas face each other across a coffee table, providing a soft centre to the circle. The building's 80-year-old structural frame of riveted steel columns and beams has been left exposed and painted grey, and industrial pendant lights hang from the ceiling.

It is an open, loose, informal-though far from haphazard-scene. All the clues are there to suggest that the occupant is in the creative design business. Circus is, in fact, one of a new breed of media company: more management consultancy than design agency. "Circus is about being busy, more radical than normal, and transparent in how we work," confirms Circus associate Emma Atkinson. "The firm is more of a family than a group of individuals." Its new fit-out has been designed by one of its subtenants, and-associates, set up two years ago by David Jenkin and Geoff Strange, two senior architects from DEGW.

As well as its informality, the open-plan office is notable for its lack of clutter. Slimline computer screens are serviced by terminals tucked below the bench, and standard desktop phones are replaced by office mobiles, which are all networked to the central switchboard. All the firm's filing cabinets have been neatly amalgamated beyond the communal workbench and open on to a narrow service space, containing office equipment and two banks of staff pigeon-holes. The open-plan ground floor is where the firm's 30 staff carry out their day-to-day work, allowing them to interact easily with colleagues. The networked mobile phones allow them to sit anywhere in the building while remaining on call, and the continuous workbench encourages them to squeeze close together or spread out at will.

The basement is devoted to more formal meeting spaces for group sessions and presentations. Instead of workbenches, there is a large table on which presentation material can be spread out and a spacious presentation room with a sophisticated back projection screen. Beyond a sculptural room-divider of suspended V-shaped magazine racks can be found a staff kitchen and lounge, which Atkinson dubs "the heart of the home". The basement also contains four carrels where individuals can closet themselves for concentrated work sessions, and various ancillary spaces.

The basic industrial character of the existing building has been retained in the fit-out. Electric conduit is surface-mounted on the steel columns and beams, and IT and telecoms cabling is routed overhead in exposed cable trays.

In the same spirit, several fixtures have been neatly and simply purpose-designed for the new fit-out-although made out of cheap, everyday materials. Most notable are the lacquered mdf workbenches, which have tactile half-rounded front edges. The reception desk is made of the same material, and can be swung round on casters to create a presentation space in the foyer. Various translucent screens are made of double sheets of cellular polycarbonate.

The main open-plan office is separated from the passageway to the basement stairs by a screen of perforated steel, which slides on overhead industrial track fixed to a steel I-beam. While admitting ample daylight into the office space, the perforated screen doubles as an exhibition wall, another necessity for the media practice.

"We've tried to do things as simply as possible-but creatively too," says Jenkin. "The layout has to be versatile, because the organisation is always changing and growing."

As for Atkinson, she comments: "There's more traffic through the building than before, and I find that I interact a lot more with other people than I used to."