

Friday, March 21, 2008

AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL

WHERE CENTRAL TEXAS CAPITALIZES ON BUSINESS

Reprint of March 21, 2008 of Austin Business Journal

Design redo

Say goodbye to the traditional cubicle-intensive office

Austin Business Journal - by [Mary Hooper](#) Staff Writer



Brett Buchanan

Joe Gowing, principal of Lauckgroup, designed Avenue A | Razorfish's Austin offices with a non-corporate vibe in mind.

When it came to designing the Austin office for Avenue A | Razorfish, a digital marketing firm, the key design point was "non-corporate," says Joe Gowing, principal at Lauckgroup.

The space had to appear as creative as the company. One red-laquered wall in the reception area is set off from the neutral palette -- a key design element, allowing the group to fill in the space with their own branding. Unfinished touches, such as exposed concrete and metal ductwork, make for a natural aesthetic. Natural light floods the low-profile workstations and glass offices, showing off a great view and underscores a culture of transparency and openness throughout the space, Gowing says.

These same features are being seen in other offices, as well. For many companies, it is design driven by functionality, promoting teamwork and creative collaboration.

Julie Zitter, project manager and senior interior designer at Graeber Simmons & Cowan Inc., says companies are embracing open plan designs, or rather a layout that allows everyone to have the same-sized workspace. Along with that open design, offices are also dedicating more group areas for conferencing and meeting.

"It doesn't set up a hierarchy," Zitter says. "Coupled with these shared environments, everybody feels more motivated because you're on the same plane. It elicits the opportunity for everybody to be more participant."

Avenue A | Razorfish's offices reflect an open concept, with enclosed glass offices on the interior of the space. Just as Avenue A | Razorfish, dismissed the traditional cube farm for their office, companies are bringing down the walls in their offices, providing employees with access to daylight and a view -- a quality-of-life addition, as well as a green aspect.

This more-fluid workspace reflects a shift in the concept of company hierarchy, says Mary Bledsoe, associate vice president at Lauckgroup, especially with creative and collaborative companies like many in Austin.

Rather than being set according to a person's hierarchy, workspaces are being determined by an individual's workflow. The latest setups in interior office design eliminate traditional hardwall offices, replacing them workstations or moveable walls.

These changes to "cubicle culture" are being included in furniture design, as well. Gone is of the typical four-wall cube; walls are being lowered and there is more emphasis on designing a functional space that is also comfortable for employees, says Marcy Edwards, who manages business development for Furniture for Business.

Edwards has also noticed a significantly decreased emphasis on storage as many companies move toward a paperless environment. Instead, the focus is on incorporating technology into workspaces.

"We tend to see a lot of requests for modern, straight-lined furniture in Austin," Edwards adds.

But by using elements like wood-tone laminate, employers are making an effort to put aesthetic into the office as well.

"Our clients also want to make employees feel at home and make the space more personal," she says.

Along with these design trends, companies are being practical because of the tight economy, says Tommy Burt, president at Burt-Watts Industries. The economy is pushing some businesses to scale back on traditionally ornate design, he says.

The new trends in office design are also being propelled by companies continuing to go green. Edwards says manufacturers are using more environmentally friendly materials and reducing waste in the manufacturing process.

"For large-scaled businesses, there's definitely more savviness toward environmental policy and sensitivity in the selection of finishes and materials," says Zitter.

As sustainable design becomes more standard, a new aesthetic is emerging in office design. Some changes are driven by the requirements of LEED certification.

LEED certification verifies that a building has been constructed as an environmentally responsible and healthy place to work. The city of Austin now requires public works projects over 5,000 square feet to be LEED-certified. Other projects, such as the office space at Whole Foods, have also become certified.

Unusual materials, like Biofiber wheat-straw surfaces or concrete flooring, often come into play. Designers look for reusable materials, as well as elements that do not require the use of toxic chemicals to maintain their cleanliness.

Going green within an office space promotes a stripped-down aesthetic, says Bledsoe, eliminating embellishments and replacing them with functional design.

"Austin is a bit of a mecca for green design and a sustainable approach to architecture," says Bledsoe. "The outgrowth of that is an aesthetic that has evolved. There is a look and feel to that type of project."