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What Microsoft and other corporates can teach us about office design and branding

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Selling luxury is no longer about simply talking up the product or service on offer. As marketing expert Nigel Hollis, chief global analyst at Millward Brown, says, there are mechanisms for building credibility around a brand's premium positioning, making it easier for consumers to justify paying a higher price.

For companies where a sale is pitched within their office premises, design is one of the tools. For instance, UK headquartered Jacada Travel wants to sell holidays to clients in Hong Kong. Founder Alex Malcolm reasoned that "the experience should start at first contact", so he



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visualised an immersive space where people could surround themselves in the sights, sounds and smells of, say, an African safari, without leaving Central.



When they walk in the door of the company's Explorer Lounge on Lyndhurst Terrace, "guests can make themselves comfortable over a coffee, tea, or glass of wine," Malcom said. Staff then regale them with tales of their own travel to impressive destinations, aided by maps and mementos.

Candace Campos, from ID-entity Design, a Hong Kong-based design practice, took care of the interior creative planning and execution, decking out the space with vintage maps and trinkets gathered from around the world, such as traditional Khmer scarves from Cambodia, hand-carved Maasai statues from Tanzania, Turkish rugs, a shadow puppet from Vietnam, African artefacts, and more. For a luxury feel, Campos topped the lot with hand-woven tapestries, French lighting fixtures by Serge Mouille and a pair of leather sling-back armchairs by the late Brazilian architect and designer Sergio Rodrigues.

Campos sees investing in high-end commercial premises as an emerging trend. "With so much competition design has become another element that gives businesses an edge," she said. "For Jacada Travel that was creating a space you want to explore. It becomes the first step in your journey."

To celebrate its first 25 years in Hong Kong, Microsoft opened a new concept office and "experience zone" several months ago. Situated at Cyberport, the office is more like a laboratory than a traditional workplace, while the Experience Zone is designed to nurture collaboration with commercial customers and partners. M Moser Associates was responsible for the design for both, led by associates Yvonne Chow Ngai-hung and Johan Cammareri.



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Tech giants are renowned for providing cutting-edge work environments for their staff, but Microsoft's new Hong Kong premises also act as a showroom. To individualise the spaces, which span three floors, the design team chose different interiors themes, each with a local flavour. The Experience Zone on the 15th floor is Cityscape, its monotone, slightly industrial vibe reminiscent of the Hong Kong urban jungle. The brightly decorated 13th and 14th floors are Landscape, representing the city's natural environment, and Culturescape, which captures traditional Hong Kong elements, such as wet markets, dai pai dong and an old-style mail box.

Chow, who has designed for Microsoft in the mainland as well, says it's important for the American company to have a local signature in each location. "The company wants local people to be proud of their culture," she said.

Hong Kong design studio Bean Buro tapped a well of local culture for the new Kwun Tong workspace of creative agency Leo Burnett.



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Its design, say Lorène Faure and Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui, co-founders of Bean Buro, was inspired by the “the local hipster culture of the post-industrial Kwun Tong”, but begins a lot earlier than that. The factory-themed entrance is a nod to the area’s industrial heritage, while a set of sculptural meeting rooms beyond delves further into Kwun Tong’s ship-building past.

Walls clad in curved ribs and plywood are reminiscent of a hull’s interior, and appear to “float” above the floor due to an inward curve at the floor junction. The meeting tables, named Bean Belly, were uniquely designed as CNC (computer-aided) layers of plywood and Corian, creating an underbelly shape that conceals the integrated AV and IT equipment.

The collaborative nature of the 35,000 sq ft premises (including terrace) is highlighted by three brightly tiled long bars that layer the central space. One of them forms the café area, where staff can have lunch, hold informal meetings, or throw parties; another on the terrace incorporates a barbecue and outdoor furniture.

Yvonne Chow says that for any progressive business today, the work space needs to be more like a social hub than an office. Though technology and creative companies are adapting to this new design model the fastest, the trend is catching on, says Chow, citing the new offices of Citi Group, Thomson-Reuters, Nike and AT&T.

Johan Cammareri agrees. “Rarely would we do an office design today which has fixed desks or cubicles: the modern workplace is activity-based, and more collaborative,” he said.

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