

1. Cabana styling defines the entrance to this office space, one of only two enclosed offices in the 12-person firm. **2.** Angles, industrial materials, warm woods and retro-modern styling give visual form to a business philosophy that values innovation and unexpected solutions. **3.** Most conference rooms don't sport trophy fish, but then this isn't most conference rooms.



PUBLIC SPACES

Open-Minded for Business

Retro-modern offices of downtown Norfolk architectural firm reflect an innovative approach to creative problem-solving

The office of Via Design Architects elevates American architect Louis Sullivan's famous phrase, "form follows function," to "form follows philosophy."

The side street in downtown Norfolk on which Donna Phaneuf's 15-year-old firm is tucked away may seem non-descript, but the interior is anything but. Here, business plan and floor plan are seamlessly integrated.

"Our projects push the edge of what's acceptable," she explains. "We are known for our innovative approaches and unexpected solutions...we don't provide the obvious. And this sense of freshness is suggested in the spirit of the office."

Located for the past 12 years in what was the Grand Lobby of the old Fairfax Hotel, the office space pays homage to its past while embracing a forward-thinking present. Describing the original gutted shell as "early Beirut" when she moved in — a result of damage, disrepair and pillaging — Phaneuf preserved much of that look, choosing only to "build back planes and components that support what we do."

And what they do is design and develop waterfront property with an unmistakable European vibe.

Throughout its more than 3,500 square feet, the office boasts huge beautiful windows, fluted pilasters, exposed ducts and other original architectural features. These are offset by contemporary materials and styling with industrial and retro-modern hipness.

Simple bold shapes, acute angles, soffits, platforms and floating

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4. Open work spaces flooded with natural light facilitate collaboration and lend a feeling more akin to studio loft than office. 5. The employee “Innovator of the Month” wall is one aspect of the firm’s internal *Best Way* program. 6. Floating planes and soffits provide a sense of dynamism throughout the office. 7. Via Design Architects president, Donna Phaneuf, is an aesthetic visionary and astute business-woman.



planes define the space which feels more like a loft studio than an office. Lime green and cobalt blue accent walls punctuate the otherwise white interior. Vintage tile — left just as it was found — and floors covered in sealed OSB (“odd strand board”) provide a feeling of warmth.

Stairs clad in checker plate steel decking swoop visitors up from the angled front entrance and mini-gallery at street level to a mezzanine. Here they are greeted by Phaneuf’s nod to a waiting area: a classic Wassily Chair, the first piece of furniture she purchased fresh out of architecture school. With its chrome-finished bent tubular steel frame and black cowhide slings, the chair is considered to be an icon of early 20th century industrial optimism. Behind the chair, an interior wall with arched window frames — the glass removed — provides visitors with, as Phaneuf describes, “a sense of what’s beyond...the activity, the chatter.”

Elsewhere on the mezzanine is the office manager’s work station; a mini-conference area flanked by the only two enclosed work spaces in the office, each with a cabana style entrance; a couple of additional work/storage areas; and a hallway that leads to a light, bright corner conference room.

Natural light is maximized by glass walls, skylights and the placement of floating planes and openings that allow sunlight to penetrate all corners of the office. Supplemental artificial light takes the form of playful cable and industrial fixtures.

Throughout, models, drawings and blueprints from past projects, casually pinned to the wall, function as art, as do employee photographs mounted in frames suspended by cables from metal rods. This “Innovator of the Month” wall is just one aspect of Via Design’s

internal *Best Way* program, which hints at their corporate culture and values.

Standing on the mezzanine, at the head of a short flight of stairs, and looking towards the rear of the suite, one can see through the central studio work spaces, much like looking through a tunnel book. This central bank is surrounded by a continuous aisle that opens onto additional open work spaces and a storage area. “We are all about collaboration,” asserts Phaneuf. And the open design of the office space facilitates the kind of information sharing she nurtures in her 12-member team.

In every way, as Phaneuf reflects, the design of the office “speaks to the creative spirit...two what we stand for and represent.” ●

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