

BY CARMEN WALSH



West Coast Hip

A New York City music label shows off its L.A. connections with a redesign

A recording company's office shouldn't feel like an insurance group's, should it? Ron Goldstein, president and CEO of Verve Music Group, doesn't think so. So when he oversaw the design of one of Verve's New York City offices, Goldstein was determined to create a space that would inspire his employees' sense of creativity, not deaden it. There was something else he wanted, too.

"I wanted a bit of L.A. in New York," he says. So Goldstein called his friend, Los Angeles-based architect Josh Schweitzer. "He does fabulous soffits, with different heights and corner effects. And I always liked his color schemes."

Green ended up being the color of choice for this office; in common spaces, the green shades are complemented by one strong blue. Concrete floors, painted pipework, clear-coated steel furniture legs and suspended cylindrical light fixtures give the office an industrial edge. That edge is balanced by warm, rounded work surfaces. To achieve this unique look, Schweitzer enlisted the help of dTank, a custom furniture company also based in L.A.



In common areas like this conference room, shades of green and blue conjure a sense of the opposite coast. Custom furnishings lend an industrial edge to the design.

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“Creative companies often ask for custom designs,” says dTank president Henner Jahns. “They want to attract — and keep — talent. A unique interior space communicates the corporate culture.

“The designs favored by today’s creative companies, such as advertising firms, are open. Not only does the open space look differently than the private offices of the past, it also enables teamwork, with shorter communication. It can also help increase productivity by ensuring that employees have a workspace they like, including the right light and sound conditions,” Jahns says.

For Verve, dTank made some custom pieces and created combinations of open shelves and lateral files. The company also manufactured Schweitzer’s “signature piece” for the office: the table for the large conference room. With a soft shape and an ergonomic edge, the table is both eye-catching and functional.

dTank also provided a special something for Verve’s high-energy employees. The promotions group, whose members Goldstein lovingly refers to as “wild and boisterous,” has its work area near the kitchen. To help maintain these employees’ excitement, dTank surrounded a table with special stools that bounce up and down like Pogo sticks.

How did the West Coast–inspired redesign live up to Goldstein’s expectations?

“Everyone thinks the office is pretty cool; it’s a fun place,” says Goldstein. “And employees have a certain amount of pride, because visitors do make comments. In addition, the open atmosphere makes it easy for people to visit each other and work together. The design has worked out very well for communication.” 021

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A mix of materials merge warmth with modern functionality.

Embrace Music, Embrace Productivity?

How does music in the workplace affect employees?

In an office, "music is often used as white noise, a background noise to replace the awkwardness of silence and to mask surrounding noises, such as others' conversations," says Meredith Hayes, CID, ASID, of Creative Office Environments, a commercial design firm in Richmond, Va. "This strategy is used to improve employees' ability to concentrate on their own tasks. In offices where employees are sitting at their desks all day, music can come to the foreground a bit more, making the environment more fun."

Hayes urges a conservative approach to piped in music, saying that while many businesses aim for continuity, using a centralized speaker system to deliver the same music to all common areas, some go a step further and pipe the same music into employees' workspaces, even linking into the hold function of their telephones. "You need to make sure it's only in the open areas. Make sure you can escape it," she says.

Ira Kaplan, director of the Ph.D. program in applied organizational psychology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., agrees that centralized music should not be used in main working spaces. Two variables influence the potential benefit of music on productivity: the nature of the job and musical preferences, says Kaplan. "Employees performing simple tasks benefit from listening to music more than employees performing complex tasks," he says. In addition, people have strong musical preferences, so what is invigorating for one employee may be distracting for another. For both of these reasons, Kaplan believes that music played over a centralized loudspeaker system doesn't benefit a company's productivity; however, if an employee who is doing a simple task has control over his or her music selections and volume, including an on/off switch, then there may be some benefit.

So how does the Verve Music Group handle music in its office space? Does it advertise its labels' artists by piping their music throughout the entire office? The answer is a resounding "No."

The only areas at Verve that have built-in speaker systems are the lobby and the two conference rooms, with the lobby the only area that continually plays the jazz, blues and world music artists from the company's labels. Conference rooms have their own audio systems, so meeting attendees can listen to their current projects.

Throughout the office, individuality is expected and encouraged.

"All the employees have their own music," says Goldstein. With sufficient insulation between the executive offices, overhearing others' musical choices usually isn't a problem, he says.

Cube walls generally have acoustic properties that prevent one employee's music from disturbing other employees, says Hayes, notwithstanding someone who turns the volume all the way up. Of course, if an employee's music volume is too high, his co-workers will let him know.

The effects of music and sound in modern offices are amplified by today's more streamlined furnishings, which often feature less fabric to absorb sound, which then bounces off everything, says Hayes. The solution? Carpet and acoustical ceiling tile help, as do fabric-wrapped insulation panels that can be hung from the ceiling. "They're beautiful, and they help absorb sound," says Hayes.

Verve's large conference room is a good example of applying this knowledge in a sophisticated and practical manner. Padded benches along the walls provide additional, comfortable seating and help the room's acoustics.

—Carmen Walsh



Individual music choices are encouraged at Verve Music Group's New York office.