

TAKING CARE



OF BUSINESS

The Steelcase

WorkLife Center

in Toronto is a

combined

showroom and

office that supports

the work and

workers within it.

Welcome
Bienvenue
Bienvenido
Willkommen
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usiness should come before pleasure, but all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy—so Steelcase has combined the two in this new facility. The WorkLife

Center is designed as an open office for mobile working with no distinction between workspace and sales floor, freeing employees to tinker with whatever new offerings the company is crafting while simultaneously demonstrating them to prospective clients.

But creating this space was no simple to-do. Steelcase located a residual space on the top floor of a commercial high-rise building in Toronto's financial district that was previously used for storage. Although spanning 10,000 square feet, the space had drawbacks: it was long, narrow, and featured 24-foot high ceilings. Designing it was both challenging and exciting, said Meg Graham, principal at superkül, architect of the project.

"The space had never been leased. It was empty for 30 years," she said.

"It also kinks and bends at each end, so the proportions are unconventional. The challenge was because it's so large, you don't want to lose its rhythm—or the people in it."

The firm's primary objective was to mediate the space's scale to allow Steelcase to organize its offerings there. The solution? "The playful—and very architectural—use of three rhombus-shaped pods," said Graham.

PODS THAT SUPPORT PERFORMANCE

The pods strategy allowed superkül to frame the environment by creating endpoints and viewpoints within it, explained Graham. "The first thing you see off the elevator is the entry and oasis space, and the curtainwall beyond," she said, adding that the fully glazed southwest wall lets in abundant natural light and breathtaking views of Toronto's downtown business district, which Steelcase seeks to outfit.

The elevator acts as the layout's core with the first pod located in the



LEFT + ABOVE Designed to accommodate mobile workers and appeal to potential clients, the three pods offer a variety of functions and services.

center, flanked by two others on each end. The entry and oasis area acts as an open working environment and teleconferencing area, and it's also where visitors come to see furniture or sit down for a presentation. "Steelcase lays out coffee and snacks there as well," Graham added. "It's very much multipurpose, hosting and serving several functions."

At the east end, an angular white entrance shelters the customer-focused lounge. The original intent for this pod was to serve as an area for employees to mock up customized workspaces and show them to clients, explained Graham. "What it's turned into is more of a meeting space—somewhere they can host a dinner or larger meeting," she said. "That speaks to the beauty of the space. As their needs evolved, it adapted too."

At the west end, glass doors lead to a flexible classroom and training pod. Although being the most acoustically separated of the large spaces, the learning center is not a static layout. The seating is movable and reconfigurable, and the area is equipped for teleconferencing and digital presentation, enabling it to function as a normative educational environment.

The design balances the narrow footprint of the facility with the high volume of people and activity inside it, explained David O'Connor, manager of Steelcase's global WorkLife experience.

"The pods provide a sense of relief versus traditional architecture and allow a transition from one experience to another," he said. "One of our goals was to create a sense of anticipation for staff and guests as they move between spaces. The variety keeps with that theme but supports the surrounding elements and desired result."

The variety is also simply a means for shaking up the status quo. Different people need different spaces in order to be at their most productive, added Graham.

"You're not set in stone in one



The classroom pod is the most acoustically separated of the three spaces. Its seating, technology, and low-profile floors allow for multiple layouts and configurations.



spot the whole day. People can decide where to be based on what the weather is like, or if they want to stay moving," she said. "It sounds so basic—like, 'Oh, that's not rocket science.'—but it has such a profound impact on what people are doing for 8 hours a day."

A FUSION OF FUNCTION AND EXHIBITION

Most of what Steelcase employees do for several hours per day involves toying, testing, selling, and servicing their products. The company's WorkLife Centers act as an ecosystem of interconnected spaces that support the physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being of people—staff and clients alike, said O'Connor.

"We do that by providing our users choice and control over where and how they work," he explained. "We feel that demonstrating this authenticity creates the best experiences for both our internal users and outside guests."

Throughout the Toronto center, open workstations, flexible vignettes, and a small bank of enclosed work and meeting areas display various systems for the collaborative workplaces of the future. Steelcase's own low-profile floor conceals all wires and allows the setting to be reconfigured based on layout and technological needs.

"It truly is an office and showroom in one. The same pieces that people are coming to see are also the ones that the staff uses," Graham said. "It allows for real collaboration. The workers don't really have permanent spaces there. Sales and senior management pick their spaces based on the kind of work they need to do that day."

This immersive work experience fosters creativity and encourages interaction not only among Steelcase staff but also with potential customers. Synthesizing the presentation of a showroom with the functionality of an office may even give the manufacturer a competitive edge, suggested Graham.



Open workstations and lounge areas are scattered throughout the vast space. The glazed southwest wall stretches completely to the 24-foot ceiling, letting in abundant natural light.







The open teleconferencing area accommodates mobile workers while also displaying the function to visitors.

“Blurring the distinction is really a leap forward for the function of furniture,” she explained. “The ability to be so intimate with products in their various configurations is of great importance to Steelcase.”

QUALITY IS REFLECTED IN SUSTAINABILITY

The Toronto WorkLife Center recently achieved LEED-Commercial Interiors Gold certification. Sustainable strategies include energy-efficient and daylight-responsible lighting, and a 30 percent increase in outdoor ventilation rates. Where possible, construction materials were salvaged or refurbished and new construction materials with recycled content were selected, while at least 75 percent of construction, demolition, and packaging debris was

recycled. FSC-certified wood and low-VOC sealants, paints, primers, and carpet were used throughout.

But in the business of design, a LEED designation is far more than just a plaque to be hung on the wall. It’s simply good business—for both Superkül and Steelcase.

“We always need a framework in which to make decisions. It’s easy to talk about quality, schedule, and budget. But when we start digging deeper on each item—for example, durability is very much an aspect of quality, and durability and sustainability go hand in hand—it’s a no-brainer now,” Graham said. “When we talk about long-term usage, it’s a professional responsibility to design sustainably. It’s a baseline. The last thing we want is for something

BELOW Breakout spaces allow for private work or small huddles. Features like technology and dry erase boards enhance their functionality.



not to last, not to sustain. There's a consciousness about environmental stewardship, but it's also about a professional liability issue."

Accomplishing good design is a delicate dance—perhaps playful at times, but brutal at others. The real measure of success is whether the space engages workers and enhances their work.

"Architecture and interior design is all about achieving the best balance of proportions, materials, sustainability, and all those things. And this project really does allow the furniture to do what it needs to," Graham said. "It aspires to hit those basic, elemental goals. It all works together."

Steelcase's purpose as a manufacturer of furniture and an employer of design-minded professionals is to unlock human promise by creating great

experiences wherever work happens, explained O'Connor. His goal is to make that purpose evident.

"With the Toronto WorkLife Center, we tell our story and encourage our staff to be excited about their environment. That excitement carries over to our guests," he said. "Rather than only positioning product, our showroom space allows staff to share their own experiences. That authenticity impacts the experience of our visits and benefits everyone." 

 See additional photography from this project in our digital edition at interiorsandsources.com.

BELOW Visitors can take in displays of Steelcase offerings, or they can pop around the corner and try them out for themselves.

