

Design office
Newbury Park

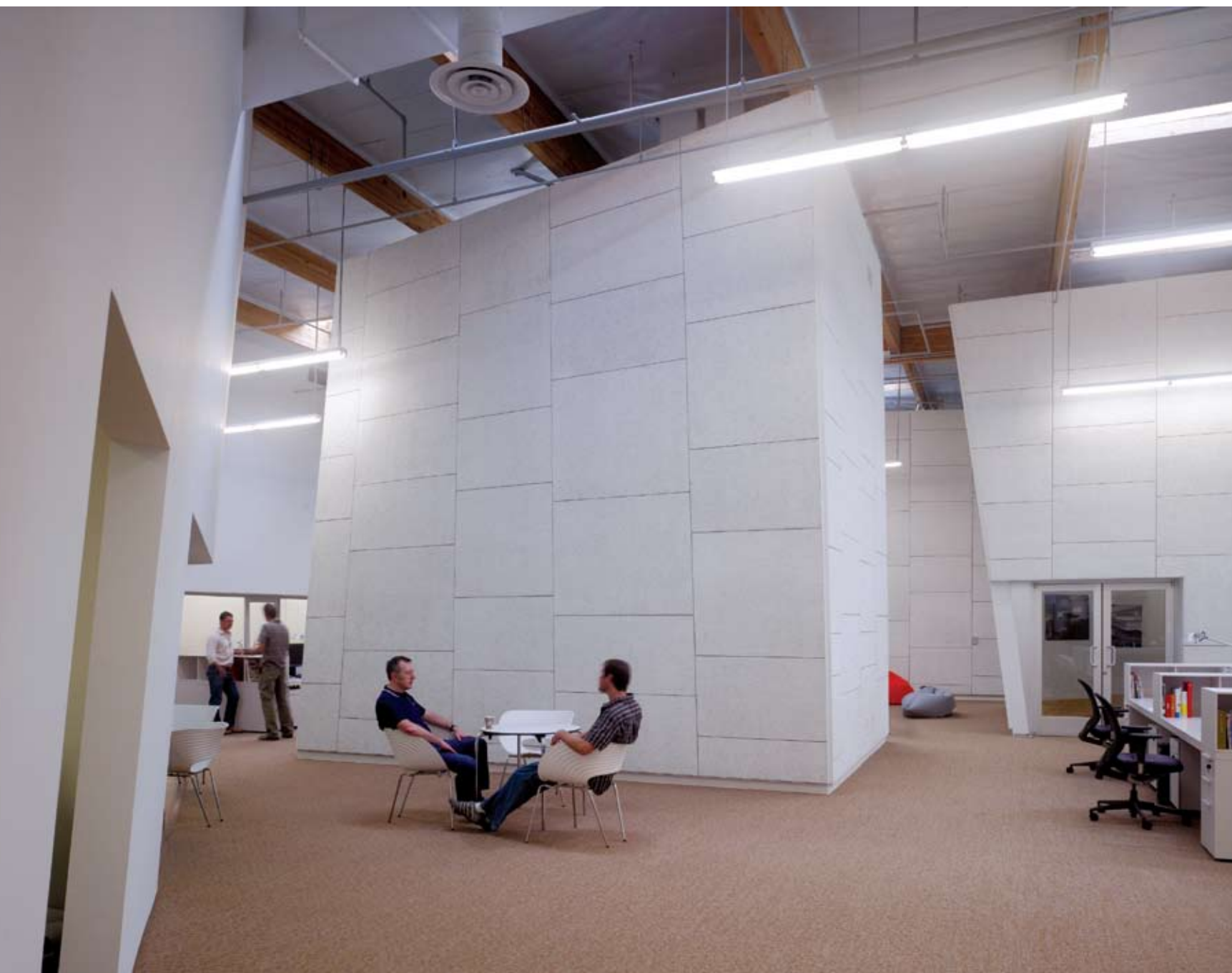
To bring the obsolete digs of a forward-looking design studio into the 21st century, Daly Genik Architects employed natural light, adaptable workstations and dramatic geometries

By Emily Young
Photography by Tim Griffith

Back to the future

The revamped office for BMW Group DesignworksUSA is configured as a city, with three "neighbourhoods" housing 12 to 16 flexible workstations each. Vitra's modular Ad One system provides plenty of work surfaces and storage, while its low privacy screens maintain views throughout the studio. Three project rooms with slanted walls add drama to the monochromatic landscape.





BMW Group DesignworksUSA prides itself on creating innovative cellphones, surgical equipment, motorcycles, cars, and rail and aircraft interiors. But until recently, the company's designers had more in common with the cobbler's shoeless children than gotta-have-it early adopters. They were toiling away in a dark, cramped cubicle farm. "Our workspace wasn't adaptable to the latest round of computer technology, and we needed more room to collaborate," says Holger Hampf, director of product design. "We also wanted to reflect a certain type of space for our own people. The interiors were dated and not inspiring anymore."

By 2003, after almost two decades in the same tilt-up concrete-panel building in Newbury Park, an hour north of Los Angeles, it was time for a change. A 2.7-metre-high drop ceiling contributed to a feeling of claustrophobia. Light levels were low due to recessed fluorescent lighting more appropriate for long-gone CRT computer screens. And small desks didn't lend themselves to the kind of casual brainstorming and critique sessions central to DesignworksUSA's interdisciplinary team approach to design.

To bring the work environment into the 21st century, the company staged a design competition. Daly Genik Architects of Santa Monica edged out firms from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle with a proposal

to renovate the 1,700-square-metre studio, as well as a workshop and an administrative space, both measuring 1,400 square metres. "We wanted to treat the studio like a blank sheet of paper, to facilitate a creative process that encompasses everything from analog hand sketches to 3-D digital modelling," says Kevin Daly, the principal in charge. "It was like taking a warehouse and making it a giant tack board."

For starters, Daly and partner Chris Genik tore out the drop grid ceiling panels and recessed lighting to reveal the original 6.7-metre-high canopy. Then they punched out a grid of skylights to flood the interior with natural light. While they were at it, they brought back fluorescent lights, this time in the industrial-chic form of energy-efficient exposed fixtures. "Eliminating the drop ceiling allowed us to have adequate daylight for work most of the time," Daly says. "That reduced the need for electric lighting, and less electric lighting reduced the cooling demand, so they can run less air conditioning."

Next, the firm played urban planner, reconfiguring the studio as a small city. Three monumental project rooms act as landmarks and define three clusters, or neighborhoods, of workstations for the studio's core services: engineering, product design, transportation design, communication design, colour and materials, and design strategy and research.

Above Located in front of one of the monumental project rooms, the café provides a social gathering place amid the office's "commercial" district. The recycled wood-fibre panels on the walls absorb sound and serve as a backdrop for drawings and other graphics.

Opposite The entry to the commercial area leads to a library and materials research space. On the floor, the eco-friendly carpet tiles were created by the studio for Lees Carpets, which manufactures the product with recyclable fibres and a biodegradable backing.



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The open concept design encourages cross-departmental interaction, while broad paths between workstations maintain a sense of personal space



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**Flexible and efficient,
the workplace can now
be adapted to fit the
studio's changing needs**



Opposite The open steel and wood-slat framing demarcating the project rooms filters light and muffles noise. Beneath the new drop ceiling, the conference table and chairs (from Vitra) can be used during the design process or for formal client meetings.

Right Large enough to assemble the entire staff for informal briefings, the town square connects the workspace neighbourhoods and the project rooms. The beanbag loungers provide the only hits of colour.

Each neighborhood consists of 12 to 16 large, inviting desks that encourage cross-departmental interaction. A modular office system gives designers ample work surface, low privacy screens and storage. Broad pathways between workstations increase the sense of personal space while promoting convenient access to others' work.

Each bright and airy project room features two trapezoidal walls that create dramatic twisted volumes. On the outside, steel studs are clad with recycled wood-fibre panels that muffle noise and double as billboards for drawings, photos, clippings and other graphics. Inside, drywall that will eventually be layered with fabric tack board encircles the room. A new drop ceiling, composed of steel framing and painted wooden slats, allows light to filter through. Beneath it, the conference table and surrounding chairs can be used at any stage of the design process, as well as for formal client meetings, with a flat-screen TV handy for slide, video and PowerPoint presentations.

The void between the project rooms serves as a kind of town hall for informal meetings. Equipped with wall ports for laptop computers, it also functions as an ad hoc workspace. Large beanbag loungers upholstered in orange, red and lime nylon provide the only splashes of vibrant colour in the nearly all-white decor – a palette that doesn't distract designers when they're working with colour on client projects. Manufactured with recyclable fibres and a biodegradable backing, the earth-toned carpet tiles covering the floors were created by DesignworksUSA for Lees Carpets.

The studio's perimeter – the suburbs, so to speak – houses glass-walled offices for the department directors, a copier and office supply centre, file storage and a printer room. A colour and materials library is arranged like a storefront where designers can research and pick up samples from behind an open counter. In addition to a refrigerator, sink and microwave ovens, the lunch room – known as the café – includes Saeco coffee machines and an EcoPod container recycling device, two more products from DesignworksUSA's drawing boards.

Designers moved back into the studio in July, and already Daly Genik's revamp has proved practical, efficient and comfortable. "The space is much more adaptive now," Hampf says. "It's neutral and flexible enough that we can reprogram it, depending on changes in equipment, the kind of projects we're doing and the way we work." For that reason alone, he predicts, this is one workplace that won't become obsolete anytime soon. **AZ**



- 1 Material research
- 2 Library
- 3 Café
- 4 Neighbourhood
- 5 Town square
- 6 Project room

