

CANADIAN

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the signing culture
of a deaf centre

Condo styles and
urban strategies

Defining trends at NeoCon





By Leslie Smith

perceptions Playing with

The creative ad-ventures
of Kelly McTernan Lavoie
are visually show-
cased at the
redesigned
Toronto
offices of
Arnold
Worldwide.

An old ad agency, Vickers & Benson, a new buyer, Arnold Worldwide, and a creative brand to be established in clients' minds through the re-design of extant offices.

The departure point for Kelly McTernan Lavoie design director John Kelly and partner-in-charge Stella McTernan was a book. Specifically, Beryl McAlhone & David Stuart's *A Smile in the Mind – Witty Thinking in Graphic Design* (1996, Phaidon Press).

Witty thinking, the book explains "is playfulness with ideas, words that play against images, unexpected connections prompting new insights." Creative advertising types use source books such as these to stimulate fresh ideas. To Kelly and McTernan's way of thinking, the same methodology could be applied to the requested renovation at 1920 Yonge Street, Toronto.

Although work on the project is still ongoing, the main 6th floor reception/office/meeting room area was completed in 2005. In a way, it wasn't hard for the partners to design something marvellous: the bones of the building are very good (in fact, Kelly and McTernan had a hand in that too; when the place was first going up in the mid-1990s, the two worked at Rice Brydone, the firm handling Vickers & Benson's architectural and interior needs). A multi-storey structure, encased in glass, it boasts a large central atrium girt by glassed-in offices and wide-open terraces.



Opposite_The Zone's "exploding table" by Gord Peteran, RCA. A signature object fabricated from left-over wood scraps it could, in Stella McTernan's words, just as easily represent "all the pieces falling into place." Plus, as an added bonus, the wooden vase on the right can be lifted up to disclose a nifty secret compartment. Above, "It was a small room, so we had to explode it visually," said John Kelly, referring to the Departure Zone's amusing trompe l'oeil effects. Visitors with extra time on their hands will get a kick reading the "middle kingdom" map on the right, a pastiche of our own world with a dozen Arnold Worldwide international sites highlighted, plus such marketing-oriented landmarks as "Loyalty Lake," "Purchase Point" and "Contra Caves."

The elevator to Arnold Worldwide's main floor opens onto one of these terraces, where the receptionist sits directing enquiries behind an impressive semi-circular wooden desk. Now, pretend you're a client, there to attend a high-level creative presentation. Your first stop is the waiting room to the left of the elevator. In a normal agency environment, this would look pretty much like any other waiting room – a room where one waits, flipping through whatever magazines happen to be on the credenza, glancing at the artwork on the walls.

In Kelly and McTernan's cheeky remodelling, however, the best is not saved for the last but for

Conference Room Occupied

this first. Their "departure zone" is a space where visitors are expected to experience a mindset shift, a roiling of brain synapses right and left. For in this trompe l'oeil room, the walls are not all on the walls, the floor is mostly sky, perspective painting presents you with a door that cannot be opened and a dog that cannot be patted; seats are clouds, water bottle shelves are waves and a side table has seemingly just exploded into the air.

The soft-coated Wheaten terrier (a faithful rendition by artist Wayne Mann of Stella McTernan's "Monty") stares up at ever-shifting coloured shapes on the dichromic acrylic "door" as if trying to read its inscription, a quote from Canadian activist-aca-





Opposite_ The two-faced boardroom, featuring modular maple tables and a semi-circular media wall that can slide open or shut, depending on the size of the meeting. Ovoid overhead lights and ceiling indentations are meant to represent stylized leaves, giving one the impression of creative growth. Above_ A partially walled office with an open view of the central atrium. Angled dividers lend the space a sense of dynamism; graphics and words stencilled on the side walls promote right-left brain activity. Towards the back one catches a glimpse of some of the agency's ad offerings, as well as the front foyer's beautiful old-growth pine pegged wooden floor – a subtle salute to the founders of the former Vickers & Benson, serious collectors of Canadiana.

democratic Chaviva Hosek: “Can you stand the discomfort of not knowing what you will do next?”

Well, can you? While visitors are busy pondering this question, their minds are also preoccupied with processing the skewed dimensions of the little room, the energetic angles of its containing walls, the fact that there is, for some reason, a huge bowler hat balancing a circle of glass on top of its crown. (Where have you seen that table's surreal image before? Ah, yes, Magritte!) They may even be wondering whether this

is some kind of a joke, and whether they should laugh.

Space as a humorous experience. The whole concept pretty much knocks you off-balance, which is exactly where you should be, mentally, in order to be receptive to new creative ideas.

Then, bam, along comes the clever agency team to

lead you into the meeting room, with its modular maple tables, flat screen TVs, and stylized leaf-patterned ceiling (a subtle reminder that things may still not be as they might appear). You, the client, are now primed for their purposes. All the Arnold staff need do is back up their unique branding exercise with an equally innovative presentation to have you eagerly sign on the dotted line.

The concept of engaging both sides of the brain is carried throughout the floor's ovoid “main street,” as its designers term the interior circular hall mimicking the dimensions of the atrium. Slants and



angles appear in the partial walls separating otherwise door-less, glassed-in offices attached on either flank, contributing in their non-linear way to a dynamic sense of energy. Large quotes from the famous speaking about creativity are stencilled in colour across, up and down many of these walls, connecting with the viewer in both graphic and linguistic terms.

Other areas highlight integrated ad campaigns currently in progress, and one wall is devoted to a group of mannequin hands “delivering” direct mail pieces. The idea with these, said Kelly, is not only to show off great creative but to connect everyone in the agency with what’s happening at the moment, making them feel more a part of the team, as well as help “take their minds for a walk.”

“Vickers & Benson was always a people-oriented corporation,” he added. “That’s why merging with Arnold Worldwide, which shares

Above_Colour, creative samples, and unexpected curves and angles are used to stimulate the viewer’s central cortex, not to mention make cubicle life a little more bearable. It is all part of the designers’ three-pronged plan to focus on creativity, creative product display and interactive integration.

that philosophy, has worked so well.” To further facilitate and stimulate these team players, the terrace across the way from reception hosts a small café and games centre, complete with a pool table and foosball.

An ad office that is at once a kinetic workplace, entertaining showcase, and creative juice factory. Appearances may be deceiving, but it certainly looks like designers Stella McTernan and John Kelly have had all their wits about them. [a](#)