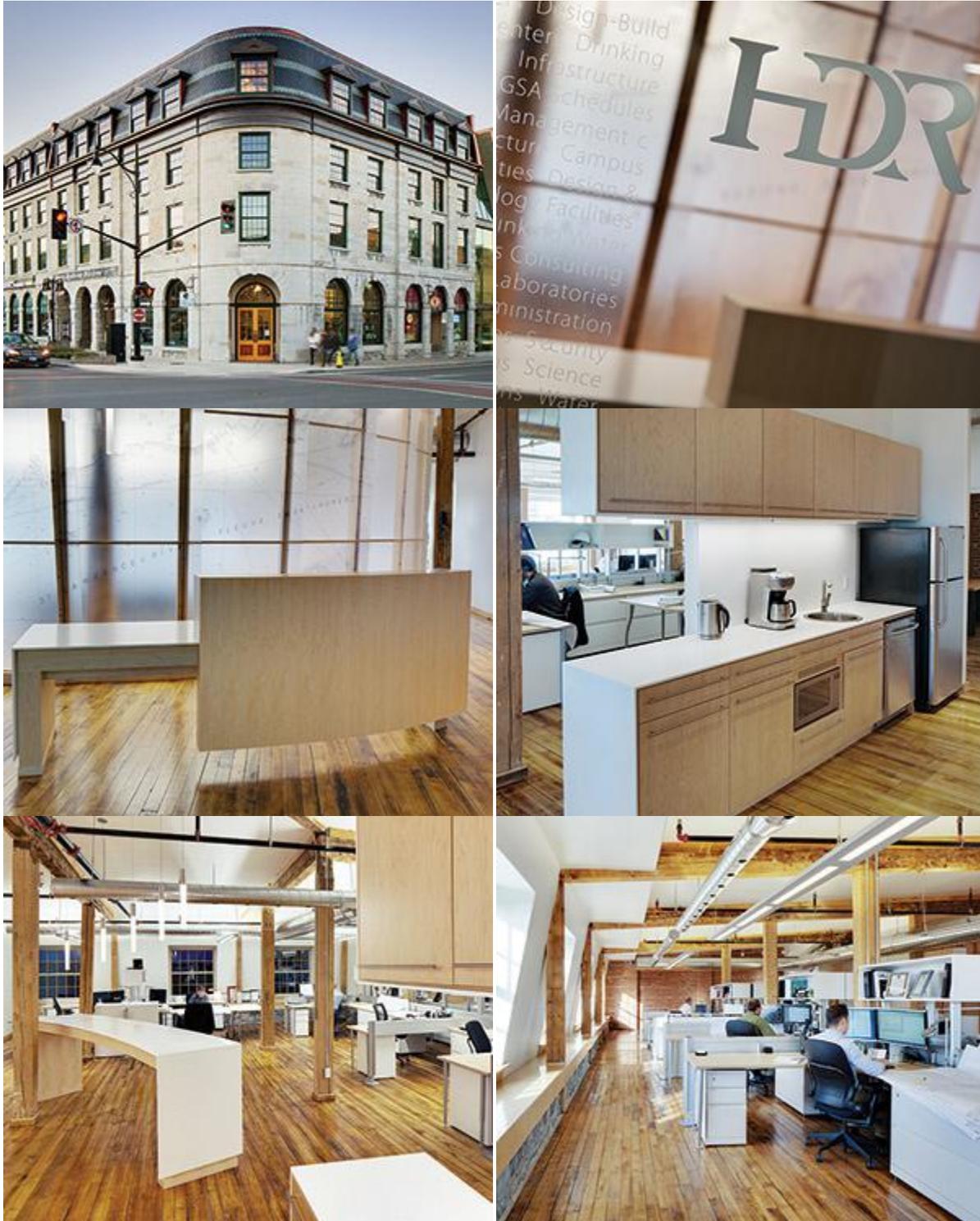


05/01/2013

## Sailing Through Work

HDR's new Kingston, Ontario office pays tribute to the firm's brand and the area's unique history through a refined storytelling approach.

By Margie Monin Dombrowski  
Photography courtesy of HDR Architecture, Inc.



Workstations are grouped in C or E formations, the latter of which include a center table on casters for going over markups together. They can also be pushed back-to-back into an I shape for collaborating with more people. [View larger](#)

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When designing its own office in downtown Kingston, Ontario, global architecture and design firm HDR gave itself one very specific task: representing its geographic location.

Situated on the top floor of the Smith Robinson Building, originally built in 1841, the new office does that and more by incorporating a number of impactful design features into only 4,000 square feet. From the vessel-like conference room and collaboration-friendly workspaces to its subtle nautical theme, HDR's Kingston office is an inspiring case study of a modern work environment that nods to both local and historic roots.

Preserving some of the space's original elements helped keep the building's history alive. Previously a discount department store that sat unused for more than 50 years, most of its original five-quarter hardwood floors are intact, and their variegated appearance adds character and depth to the space. "No one worries about spilling graphite or shavings on the floor here," says Vice President and Design Principal Jason-Emerly Groen.

Because of the top floor's mansard roof, two of the walls in the office are sloped—typically a design challenge, but not in this case. HDR chose to expose the brick walls, limestone and maple post-and-beam interior, leaving a continuous 1.5-foot-deep window seat along the wall. With the workspaces pushed away from the perimeter, everyone gets the same amount of sunlight and a spot to sit and chat while at a coworker's desk.

Here, it's all about impromptu meeting spaces and accessible team members. Workstations are grouped in "C" or "E" formations, the latter of which include a center table on casters for going over markups together. They can also be pushed back-to-back into an "I" shape for collaborating with more people.

"The more difficult it is to reconfigure to collaborate, the less likely it'll happen," says Groen. "We don't have any high partitions between workstations—we have a visual connection so we can see the people we're working with at all times across the office. I can call anyone's name, and we can have a conversation. I'm constantly liaising with the staff."

The almost square layout is broken up into three different spaces: the entrance and reception area, the staff and production area, and the conference room. The whole idea, he notes, is that the conference room is the backdrop to the other two spaces. A nearby kitchenette and curved bar counter provide space for taking breaks, flipping through magazines and sharing ideas.

"The bar being central creates an even more exciting space to collaborate in," says Groen. "It's all about finding those moments of collision."

The frosted acrylic panels curved around the conference room create an eye shape, and the overall effect makes the area look and feel like you're inside a boat. "We wanted a real strong sense of dynamism and energy in that space," Groen says. "The form really does produce that. Basically, it's the idea of being dynamic and energetic, and showing how you can innovate, do a different type of space and build it out of simple elements."

In a nod to Kingston's position as the freshwater capital of North America, as well as the spot where multiple rivers diverge and the Great Lakes end, each panel surrounding the conference room is printed with a nautical chart (readable in both English and French) depicting navigation paths through the city's waters.

"It's an abstraction of how you tell a story," Groen notes. "When you read a nautical drawing, there's a whole language behind how you read it. It tells us a different story—it's very much about the lore and myth of the place. We wanted it to tell people about the history and importance of the place. It's a metaphor of what we do as architects."

The design team also made it a point to celebrate craftspeople by hiring local millworkers to make and install the panels. "That's an important message we wanted to give to our clients. Sometimes the craft of what we do is lost. We expect systems now in larger buildings, [but this shows] we can still craft things."

That sense of craft and dedication is emphasized through a number of more subtle cues, as well. The entry features a tempered glass wall with frosted-film lettering that spells out the services the company provides, courtesy of its in-house graphics team. Two Wegner Shell chairs were also selected for the waiting area so that guests instantly see the firm's appreciation for fine craftsmanship.

One other unspoken design element speaks volumes about the firm: both the staff and clients get the same amount of dedicated floor space. "Without clients, we don't have staff, and without staff, we don't have clients," says Groen. It took some time to map it all out, but they were certain about one thing: "We wanted to create an amazing space to meet clients in that they want to visit, because they're inspired."

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### BASE BUILDING DESIGN

**Shoalts and Zaback  
Architects Ltd.**  
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(613) 541-0776

### BASE BUILDING RENOVATION

**Doornekamp Construction Ltd.**  
588 Scotland Road  
Odessa, Ontario  
Canada  
(613) 386-3033

## SOURCES:

### ACRYLIC PANELS

**ACRYLITE**  
(800) 631-5384

### LIGHTING

**Flux Lighting**  
(613) 592-9948

### MILLWORK/PANELS

**Anclin Group Ltd.**  
(613) 634-1014

### Dacosta Millwork

(613) 542-2157

### SEATING

**Wegner Shell Chair**  
by Carl Hansen & Son  
(212) 242-6736

### SURFACING

**Hanwha Surfaces**  
(888) 426-9421

### SYSTEMS FURNITURE

**Steelcase**  
(888) 783-3522

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