

Windows on the World

Technology behemoth Microsoft selected young San Francisco firm Blitz to design its flagship office.

Olivia Martin

Right

At the end of a 30-foot-tall stair climb, visitors to the Microsoft flagship office in San Francisco reach an interactive moss wall made using the company's Kinect technology. California poppies (the state flower) and monarch butterflies appear as people pass the screen.



Bruce Damonte



Feature



Textured carpet from Shaw Contract Group and brightly colored back-painted glass help delineate different spaces in the internal office areas. Rather than opting for a total open space office, Blitz carved out different neighborhoods in groups of 18 to 30 employees. Lighting is a mix of Focal Point, Zaneen, Foscarini, Finelite, Fabbian, Moooi, and Fontana Arte.



Left

555 California (formerly known as the Bank of America Building) is in the heart of San Francisco's financial district and is the second tallest building in the city. The facade overlooks a busy street, connecting Microsoft to its surroundings.

30-foot-tall staircase to a landing featuring an interactive, virtual moss wall. "It is technical, fun, and childlike," Hanley said. "It's a place where people can pause and think about their journey into the space." Blitz echoed the moss wall with real living walls throughout the space, a slightly surreal move that blurs the borders between reality and technology. The firm extended the outdoor, organic aesthetic with textural flooring and canopies wrapped in a bleached-cork covering that resembles birch.

Although the project was a game changer for Blitz, which now has three ongoing projects with Microsoft in addition to work for Comcast and Yahoo, it was also pivotal for Microsoft. "Before this office, Microsoft was located in the outskirts of the city; it was almost like a castle in the sky," Hanley said. "Now it is downtown, it is transparent, it engages with the city, and all the stuff that goes on outside its windows influences it day-to-day."



Bruce Damonte



Facing page

Suspended ceiling panel sails from 3form lead customers into the core of the space—the customer center. The back-painted glass entrances have carved away areas to help people navigate the office and variegate the patterns and colors displayed throughout the office.

Below

Furniture came from Haworth and Bernhardt with custom pieces by CCN International. Blitz took advantage of the building's sawtooth footprint to create nooks for informal meetings and to maximize daylight.

"You could say we were the underdogs," Blitz principal and CEO Melissa Hanley said about being selected to design Microsoft's flagship office in one of San Francisco's most notable buildings, 555 California Street. "Microsoft challenged a lot of things with this project, from hiring a tiny little baby firm like us to selecting a transparent site in San Francisco."

Aside from facing the obstacles of being a small architecture firm tapped to create an office for one of the largest technology companies in the world, Blitz had to work within the restraints of 555 California Street (formerly the Bank of America Center). Art Gensler was brought on to design the tower's indoor space when the building opened in 1969, and he's credited by some as the inventor of commercial interior architecture. "There was a great deal of responsibility to not mess it up," Hanley said.

Hanley and her team treated working within the iconic building's structure and Microsoft's "global design guidelines"

(hundreds of parameters for everything from the conference rooms to staff algorithms) as a huge, complex puzzle. To take the stakes one notch higher, the office was downsizing from a 90,000-square-foot space to a 43,500-square-foot space, and employees were understandably concerned.

In an attempt to solve all of these challenges with one elegant solution, "We really focused on the idea of neighborhood design," Hanley said. "We broke up a sea of desks into groups of 18 to 30 users, and every 'neighborhood' has familiar touch points such as lockers for flex employees, water, trash, etc." Each neighborhood is a different bright color, which offers easy wayfinding and furthers employees' sense of home. The layout offers equal access to front-row views of the cityscape from the 265 windows on the site.

The office also showcases Microsoft's latest technology to customers. Upon entering the lobby, visitors walk up a



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