

Welcome to the uber office **Funky layouts and cool colours abound in innovative work spaces**

By BILL POWER Business Reporter

Imagine a workplace so cool — so undeniably hip and funky — that friends want to stop by and check it out after hours.

Such non-traditional workplaces, featuring dramatic splashes of light and colour and respectful treatment of historical elements, are getting new respect in some busy Nova Scotia business districts and, in some cases, are adding a bit of glamour to older neighbourhoods.

Some Halifax and Dartmouth businesses recently injected new life into aged buildings with contemporary architectural features and created new and exciting places to work. In at least one case, staff at a downtown office tower used truckloads of antiques and art to make their modern glass and marble enclosure more cosy and fun.

Creative Crossing at Agricola and Charles streets in Halifax is the remarkable result of a makeover last year of the long-neglected O'Malley Bakery building that today is home to a bustling creative community of artists, graphic designers, multimedia professionals and photographers.

There is even a modelling agency and sweet-smelling Indian bakery to give the cluster of 13 individual workspaces some added panache.

"We like a lot of light. It helps with the creative process," said Pamela Baltzer at Breathe Media, a 1,600-square-foot location that boasts ceilings six metres high and an impressive glow of natural light from two massive windows, one of them overlooking a raised loft.

The business owner enjoys the warehouse-like atmosphere at Creative Crossing and the free rein owner Landon Mallery gives tenants when it comes to customizing each space.

"The design here is all us. We were given a blank canvas," she said of a spacious collage of design features that stylistically connect oversized computer monitors, a huge, corrugated steel divider and exposed portions of the building's original brick walls.

Another heritage building that has a new lease on life is the former firehall upstairs at 50 Queen St. in Dartmouth. It underwent a major renovation last fall and is now home to the creative and collaborative workspace called Queen Street Studios.

Two-metre-high windows flood all corners of this stylish, open-concept workspace with natural light. It features a loft with work stations for regulars and shared businesses amenities on the main level like a lounge, photo studio and multimedia workstations.

There is more than enough elbow room for the clusters of people often working on various projects at the studio and even space for meetings, seminars and art shows at the location directly across the street from the downtown Dartmouth post office.

Communications director Amy Hawke said writing on some glass walls located strategically throughout the bright workspace is encouraged in an environment designed to facilitate creativity.

"You have all the energy that an old building gives you and you also have a very clean and bright workspace," she said of the project undertaken by owners Julia Rivard and Trevor Marshall after Ms. Rivard started feeling isolated with her home-based graphic design business.

To witness a melding of modern and heritage elements on a massive scale, it is necessary to visit the creative labyrinth in Halifax that is home to Extreme Group at the Brewery Market at 1498 Lower Market St.



Julia Rivard and Amy Hawke look over promotional material at the Queen Street Studios in Dartmouth on Wednesday. (Peter Parsons / Staff)

The many visual delights of this 13,000-square-foot home-away-from-home for about 50 creative professionals starts with what must be the longest desk in a reception area anywhere. It is about six metres long.

An oversized digital display screen mounted on the original brick wall beside the receptionist reflects the mix of contemporary and historic elements fused together throughout the multi-level office space that became home to the advertising agency last year.

A glowing, backlit sculpture that serves as a mail station is located in a colourful foyer that provides comfortable seating for visitors and for spur-of-the-moment staff huddles. Brick-lined passageways lead to assorted clusters of workstations that include central seating areas with comfy couches for casual meetings.

One staff area features a billiard table that doubles as a buffet counter or dining table and there are a number of beer machines (filled with cold beer) aimed at encouraging some collegiate-like revelry and idea exchanges at the end of the workweek.

If a workout is more your style, there is a complete exercise gym and the couch-lined boardroom is usually open for hanging out and knocking around ideas with colleagues. On the day we visited, it was filled with moms and toddlers participating in a market study.

One Extreme Group feature that ranks high on the cool list is the project wall. It is equipped with felt markers so staffers can post rough drafts of projects to invite comments.

"We wanted a space that reflects the nature of the work we do," president Andrew Doyle said amid the din at the bustling marketing and communications operation.

Even in historic Halifax, old buildings awaiting conversion to contemporary workspaces are not sitting on every corner, so staff at Wellington West Capital Inc. brought in art and antiques to create a unique and fun environment at their modern location at 1741 Brunswick St., opposite Citadel Hill.

Visitors can admire walls adorned with art produced by some well- and lesser-known Nova Scotia artists, relax in a comfy room in one corner or chat with staff at an oak-enclosed snack and lunch station that also serves as a wine bar for corporate and social events.

Listen carefully and you can hear birds chirping in one office and don't be surprised if a gentle chocolate lab ambles by for an inspection while waiting for a meeting to commence in a boardroom that looks every bit like a well-appointed dining room.

"A lot of time the people that we deal with on a client basis are far more comfortable talking about their finances at the dining room table than they are at the boardroom table," said senior vice-president Shirley Locke.

"When you consider the number of hours you spend at work, you might as well spend it in an environment that you are comfortable in and that people are comfortable visiting," she said.

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