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Multi-purpose spaces often suffer from too much purpose. But Reflect Architecture finds clever ways to make a lot out of a little.

— The draw of many lively neighbourhoods is the multiplicity of happenings taking place all at one time. The most interesting, bustling corners of a city not only have beautiful architecture and cityscapes — parks, gardens, public space — but successfully leverage those spaces to engage lots and lots of people to work, relax and congregate.

Toronto-based development firm North Drive loves situating its new projects in such vibrant locales. The company has condos under construction in Forest Hill (an area of prestigious private schools, great bagel shops and the childhood home of Drake) and Yorkville (that rare place where someone can pick up cheap sushi and a \$10,000 Chanel purse within steps of each other), and is planning one in Summerhill (tony

By Matthew Hague
Photography by Riley Snelling

restaurants, chic décor stores, endless Edwardian mansions). Critically, their approach isn't to simply plonk down alien invaders — structures that are hopelessly out of place or generic. They always respect the area, contributing rather than detracting from their surroundings.

As proof that they understand what makes a neighbourhood great, they've encapsulated a sense of ever-changing simultaneity in their own, newly completed headquarters. "The ethos of being contextually responsive inspires our design process," says Jordan Morassutti, who, along with brother Taylor Morassutti and long-time friend Robert Fidani, co-founded North Drive (named for the street where the three grew up). "Our headquarters afforded us the opportunity to





indulge in our personal aesthetics while delivering a design that reflects who we are as a company.”

The space is on the ground floor of The High Park, North Drive’s first completed project (an 11-story, clean-lined condo with large windows and terraces to take in Toronto’s largest, most famous green space). “When we made the decision to build out the space, we envisioned a convergence of functions,” says Jordan. “We needed a place for our day-to-day operations. We needed a venue for events and meetings. And we needed a space that would showcase our projects.”

As such, the office has a complex, multi-pronged program. It triples as a sales showroom (featuring models of whatever development is currently underway); party space (a place to wine and dine prospective clients); and day-to-day work environment (there are clusters of desks for staff in addition to two large boardrooms). Impressively, it accommodates everything in less than 350 square meters, not because every room is really tiny, but because the design allows for various uses throughout.

To articulate the space, North Drive worked with a young design firm, Reflect Architecture. Principal Trevor Wallace started the practice five years ago, just shy of his 30th birthday (“It was my goal to be a business owner while I was still in my 20s,” he says). But previously, the Carleton University graduate spent six years working at Quadrangle, one of Toronto’s largest architecture studios.

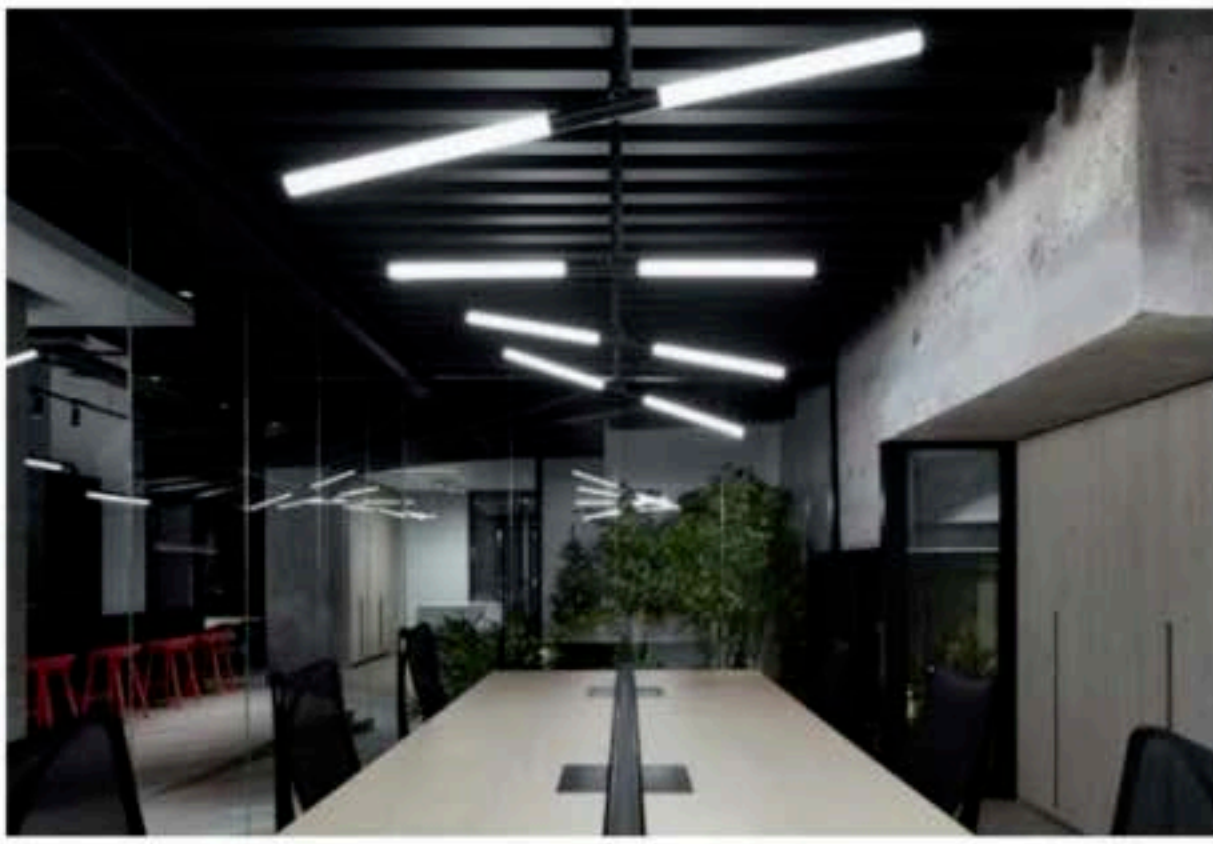
“One thing I learned at Quadrangle was to be very attuned to the business needs and the brand identity of the client,” says Wallace.

Previous page **North Drive’s flagship headquarters frames the streetscape at The High Park.** This spread **A flexible integration of office, sales centre and event space, North Drive’s new headquarters, by Reflect Architecture, puts a retail spin on the modern workplace, heavy on Nordic influences. Dramatic greenery hanging from above transforms the space, referencing elements from the surrounding park.**

“It’s something I’ve carried forward into my own practice. I’m not about imposing my own aesthetic. I’m more interested in creating designs that serve the people I’m working for to help them accomplish their business goals.” (Fitting, each of Reflect’s projects, including Toronto’s popular Wilbur Mexicana restaurant and the Brainstation + Quantum Coffee spaces, share little in terms of appearances other than the high quality of their finishes).

With North Drive, “because the founders value context so highly, it was important to pull in elements of the neighbourhood,” says Wallace. “It was also important to allow for a sense of simultaneity while still allowing for a high degree of functionality.” Which was the major challenge of the project. Other than Swiss Army knives, how many multipurpose things actually work? Two-in-one shampoo conditions tend to do neither terribly well. Printer-slash-scanners are chiefly good at making paper jams. Sporks? Enough said.

According to Jordan Morassutti, though, “Reflect Architecture was able to translate all our needs into a physical space that flows seam-



Left Office functions are framed inside a spacious glass box where the partners connect and host team collaborations. Taking cues from the Norwegian landscape, muted, clean materials and dramatic lighting frame the space.

lessly between uses.” Wallace achieved this by treating the office plan like a giant Venn diagram. All the programming that appropriately overlaps does, while the areas that need separation are given the due separation. Anything that’s possibly too close to the edges has thoughtful details that troubleshoot possible disturbances.

The public lobby is perhaps the best example of a successful overlap (there is a separate, side entrance for the staff so they can come and go during events). At first glance, the reception is only that. It has a clutch of cool, living room-worthy lounge furniture (including a custom, couch-cum-bookcase from Radform, and an ultra-comfy chair from Klaus) as well as a sculptural, Caesarstone-topped welcome desk. But the desk is large enough to accommodate scale models (one of the Summerhill project was recently installed), and the furniture can easily be moved around or simply aside if a crowd of people comes in for the launch of a new project.

The lobby is also smartly situated to quickly, efficiently disperse people to their various purposes. For those who have come for a work meeting, the principal boardroom is steps away (and elegantly articulated with a custom, white-oak table ringed with Italian-made, navy blue Appia Work chairs from Max Design). Event-goers, on the other hand, can either chill by reception or meander into the adjacent kitchen and bar area, possibly sitting on one of the bright orange, e15 counter stools designed by Stefan Diez. They can also rest their rosé on the glistening black quartz counter that juxtaposes a glass-tiled, herringbone backsplash. The wall is both top and bottom lit by LEDs tucked behind black steel shelves that uncannily seem to float in mid-air.

To call it a kitchen might undersell it; it’s far fancier than the typical office job. But during non-event times, the cook space is adjacent to the work desks, and is indeed where staff comes together for lunch. Staff also enjoy other auxiliary spaces that are set up to impress the broader public. Instead of basic corporate washrooms (sad suspended ceilings that are too often, and too disturbingly, stained), the toilets are spacious and luxurious. The one across from the kitchen is accented by a glass-lined terrarium with a molded sink from Mr. Marble.

To reinforce the sense of movement between the spaces, as well as to pull in some of the colour of the neighbourhood, a series of curvy ceiling beams not only snake through the office, but are interspersed

with vegetation; tendrils of vines, bits of ferns, lots of leaves. Installed by ByNature Design, which also kitted out the washroom terrarium as well as a kitchen-side garden, the greenery all grew naturally but has been preserved in a resin to prevent rotting (as well as reduce the maintenance necessary to keep an upside down, ceiling garden going). To help the flora make a bigger impact, it’s offset against a spare, ultra-modern palette of greys, blacks and whites (though there is character within the cleanliness. Look close at the concrete columns. They are scrawled with scribbles commonly applied in the building process, a lasting ode to the legacy of construction).

The flowing ceiling beams fall short of the workstations, though, indicating an intentional separation. The desks are in their own zone, delineated by a simple white ceiling, but they aren’t walled off, to allow nature to filter through the office’s many windows. This meant Reflect had to deal with a problem increasingly common in today’s open-concept environments: North Drive’s staff often has to make phone calls — dealing with architects, planners and perspective clients — not to mention hear their own thoughts. How could the design mitigate the potentially clamorous atmosphere to allow for quietude? As a solution, Wallace clad the work stations all outfitted by Teknion towards sound-absorbing, light blue BuzziFelt panels from Buzzi Space.

“These panels are amazing,” says Wallace. “People talk, but the felt just absorbs the noise. The partitions keep the space quiet, even though it’s open.” To highlight the importance of the panels, the felt is top-lit with cove lighting in the ceiling, creating a celestial, peaceful glow on the surfaces. “It has the feel of a Nordic nightfall,” says Wallace, noting how North Drive’s love of Scandinavian simplicity partly inspired the design.

For more collaborative yet private work, a second, glassed-in boardroom faces the open-concept workstations. It’s where North Drive’s three partners get together to brainstorm, and is lined by an armful of awards their developments have garnered since the company was founded in 2011. The desk is made of white oak and is lit by Delta-Light’s XY180, a kinetic chandelier designed by famed Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. “It’s such a cool piece,” says Wallace. “You can effortlessly tilt the lights as you want. Depending on how they are arranged, they completely change the feel of the room.” In other words, a little bit of flexibility that results in a lot of versatility. ■