The Palestra and the pod

Palestra's pod is the inviting gateway to Will Alsop's architecture and ID:SR's interiors, a happy combination of styles that blend practicality and whimsy.

Words Elaine Knutt Photographs Morley von Sternberg

Will Alsop's pods invite metaphors, it's what they're there for. Irregular interruptions into regular worlds, they reach out to our imagination and form an emotional bridge to the building. Palestra, SMC Alsop's new spec-built office development in an up-and-coming corner of Southwark, has hatched a fine example. It's cute and curvy, nestling beneath the cantilevered upper floors. Could it be a secret grotto? A shelter for travelling Clangers? The business end of a Teletubby's vacuum cleaner?

But to the building's new tenants, the metaphors are clear enough. The London Development Agency has signed up for two floors of Palestra, and also taken the pod and half the ground floor space. Its brief to the interior design team from Sheppard Robson was to transform the pod into reception-cum-exhibition space: the finished pod not only invites Londoners' curiosity, but invites them inside.

Drop-in visitors can use the touch screen displays about developments in London and the plans for the 2012 Olympics, or take away brochures. Visitors with an appointment are greeted by a sleek white and glass reception desk, then guided through to the lift cores or the ground floor conference rooms by a curving GRP wall shaped like the crest of a breaking wave. Deceptively spacious, the pod can welcome 70 guests at evening events.

So the pod is a squashed TV screen displaying what's going on inside, a gramophone horn amplifying its message, the public friendly face of a faceless government agency. In fact, pod and tenant are a pretty good fit. When you consider that the pod was originally conceived by the architect and developer as retail space — selling Kit Kats and sandwiches? Laptops and light fittings? — you realise just how good.

Palestra's pod and architecture were about reconciling the developer's need to risk-proof its £160 million investment with a bold design that would awaken the commercial potential of an untested location. "It's about the intersection of various bland corporate issues about property development and the Alsop approach to life," says Neil Grey, who headed the team at project manager CB Richard Ellis. "The client [Mallory Clifford of Blackfriars Investments] has always been attracted to working with people like Will. But the ground rules of this industry are about risk. So we had to ask ourselves, would lawyers be happy here? Would accountants?"
more shots of colour — muted pink, deep vibrant red — to the side panels of the units and cabinets to identify their funneled maximised signage. The Millbank carpet of green, evolving a summer on a temporary avoiding the glossy tones that have covered the 90s-long floorplate into a new pitch.

The floor also evolved the LDA's own ingenuity and flexibility. Its corporate identity is a direct reflection of the office, wrapping its way evenly from head to toe. So pivotal to the project was a complete transformation from floor to wall, with abstracted images of flowing water transferred to the surface. This involved the introduction of a new floor plan, taking the form of a glass wall with abstracted images of flowing water transferred to the surface. The Thames flows through Palaestra in the form of a wavy wall with abstracted images of flowing water transferred to the surface.

As architects, we want to explore boundaries

Duncan Macaulay, SMC Alsop director of architecture, on unifying Palaestra's commercial potential with its bold design.

We wanted to do something that would repeat to the letting market but also stand out so that it gives the building a visual identity. Often the commercial developer's instinct is to maximise the lettable space, so the architecture becomes a very thin skin that's wrapped around it. But Neil (Gray) and Richard (Ellis) were one of the driving forces in saying to the agents and funders, 'Listen to these guys.'

After we got planning permission, the letting agents became involved, and we had to revisit the interior. Agents tend to want more of what has worked before, while as architects we want to explore the boundaries.

But we added a third layer, moved the retail space from the side elevation to the front by creating the pool, changed the shape of the entrance and the façade.

The black and grey tiling takes up a mere third of the wall. So that it's not noticeable inside, we created a brand new pattern with the yellow in the slate edges.

The covered courtyard next to the pool is highly visible and will have a public use, so we've kept it simple, clean and straightforward. The building is all about the letting agents.

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