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HQ AUDIT/LONDON

Fit for purpose

Relocating its headquarters, London-based fashion label Cos adapted a historic building to suit its business needs.

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Relocating headquarters is a daunting prospect for any company, involving years of planning, months of moving vans and a prolonged period for staff to settle in. In February London-based fashion brand Cos completed a move to a new head office on the edge of the West End, after it outgrew its old building. How does the new HQ measure up?

It took several years for the heads of the brand (which is part of Sweden's H&M Group) to find the right location. They finally decided on a 1939 building originally designed by architect Henry Philip Cart De Lafontaine and boasting an imposing prow clock tower. Before Cos moved in, the building was renovated by architecture practice Orms, a process that included covering the façade with dazzling green glazed tiles.

One of the main reasons for choosing this building was the light that fills the interiors from a glass-roofed atrium and from windows on both sides (like Manhattan's Flatiron, it's triangular). "The starting point was the light," says Marie Honda, Cos's managing director. "No matter what you work with, light in a workspace is so important." The brand occupies the top six floors of this nine-storey building as its biggest tenant.

The move provided a chance to reflect on working practices. "When you search for a new space, you can look at things in a different way," says Honda, sitting in her new office and studying the building's floor plans. "Before we moved, everyone was eager to look at old habits and the new habits we wanted to bring in."

Her team was given free rein to shape the interiors. She worked with the



Meet and eat
The kitchen on the ninth and top floor hosts regular traditional Swedish *fikas*.



(1) The communications team tucking into a 'fika' (2) Scandinavian design at its best (3) Pattern cutters on the fourth floor

company's in-house architects and interiors team – who also look after the brand's shops worldwide – to plot out each floor, and design and furnish the interiors. The result is six floors that house workspaces full of light and furniture in muted tones, informal areas for relaxing in and practical spaces for the specific functions of a global fashion label.

But the headquarters also serves as an embassy, representing in physical form the brand's Scandinavian heritage and dedication to design (the furniture includes pieces by Hans Wegner, Vitra and Eames). So how did the team approach the task of designing a new HQ?

Creative space *Providing room for manoeuvre*

Wandering around, it's evident this is the home of a fashion label. Cos has a team of pattern cutters here and an atelier where prototypes are made and fitted. As we pass the men's fitting room, head of menswear design Christophe Copin is looking intently with folded arms at a model in a



(1) Meeting in the top-floor multifunctional space (2) Entrance area (3) Marie Honda, Cos's managing director (4) The new headquarters' prominent clock tower (5) A meeting in the rooftop garden (6) Men's fitting room (7) The spiral staircase inserted by Cos's architects

prototype jacket. This room features a connected camera, so that fittings can be live-streamed to production teams overseas (necessary if you're a label that adheres to fashion's seasonal calendar but still wants to take time over design).

Three floors up, there are workshops where the brand's shop windows and visual merchandising are designed and built. And elsewhere there are photo studios for shooting brand content and clothes racks weighed down with fabric swatches and nearly finished garments.

It was the gradual shrinking of the space for these creative sides of the business that initially motivated Cos's search for a new headquarters. "It was not so much about desk spaces but about everything around that: places to be creative, places to meet, product rooms," says Honda. "Those are the things that get less and less when you bring more people in."

Cultivating connection *Design with interaction in mind*

One of the greatest challenges presented by the new office was the fact that it is separated over six floors. Cos's architects wanted to ensure that teams on different floors still felt connected to one another.

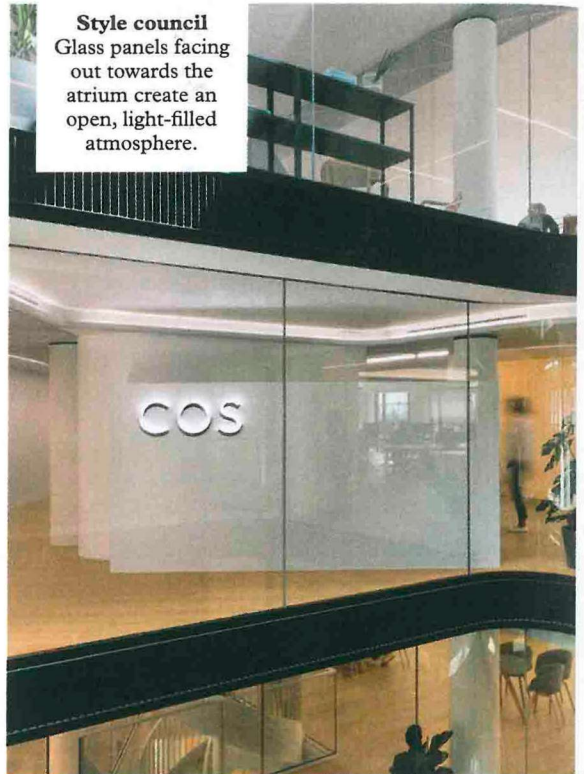
The in-house architects inserted the tight spiral staircase that winds like a corkscrew through all six floors. Although there are lifts, it seems most people prefer to use the stairs (particularly at lunchtime when the foot traffic is comparable to Holborn underground station nearby). This not only ensures staff get off their feet; it also encourages chance meetings and conversations.

The glass panels that face out onto the atrium play a vital role too. "When you come out on every floor plan you see the other floors, which makes you feel connected," says Honda. "No matter what level you come out on, you see all the functions from the atrium." From the pattern cutters on the fourth floor to communications on the eighth, "you see the whole consumer journey up to where it's being communicated to the customer".

Even on a more understated level, design decisions were made with interaction in mind. There is only one "tea point"



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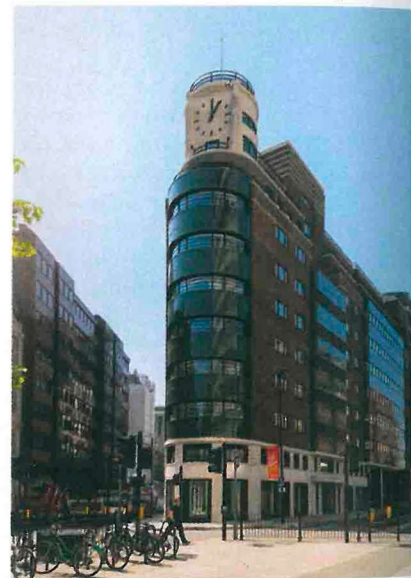


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"The starting point was the light. No matter what you work with, light in a workspace is so important"



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5



6

Steps to success
The spiral staircase provides a physical and visual link between all the floors of the HQ.



- (1) The busy top-floor kitchen area
- (2) Room to breathe

per floor, which increases the likelihood that employees will meet on a break. Each floor shares just one bin, again to encourage them to step away from their desks.

The top floor *Desk-free zone*

One of the biggest investments Cos has made to ensure staff connect with one another is on the top floor. Here, instead of handing prime real estate over to desks, they have created a vast multi-functional space. The canteen, where the majority of staff eats lunch, is here. Eating at desks is discouraged, so staff are more likely to take a break from their screens and join their colleagues up here.

There is also a kitchen, where you might find a *fika* taking place. This Swedish tradition sees staff drinking coffee and tucking into cinnamon rolls and smoked salmon on crackers. *Fikas* are prepared to celebrate everything from a staff member's birthday to the successful conclusion of an event.

But this space is not just used for eating. Throughout the day individuals use it to work on their own or have meetings overlooking the BT tower. "I like coming up here in the early morning," says Honda. "Then you see people coming in, reading or starting to work quietly on their laptops." — (M)

Food for thought
The flexible, open-plan top-floor space includes a kitchen and break-out area popular with staff.



The verdict

The new Cos headquarters is a powerful embodiment of the brand, all high-quality design, clean lines and bright, minimalist spaces. The interior-architecture team has created a series of beautiful and open spaces that they have then furnished with pieces of modernist furniture and decorated with countless artworks and potted plants.

As all open-plan offices do, this one suffers from noise travelling too easily across the floors and even between them via the hole that was punched through the building to make way for the spiral staircase. There are separate booths for quiet work, though arguably not enough, particularly if the workforce in London grows.

Nonetheless the overall effect is impressive. As the staff begin to feel more at home, they're starting to make the space their own, giving this HQ a more inhabited atmosphere.

Room for change
Cos's new HQ is tailored to satisfy all its staff, from fashion craftspeople to its sales team.

