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by Emily Clingman

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It's not every time that a company's brand translates so literally into the architecture around it. But with Corix Group of Companies, its new headquarters hit the design jackpot.

Corix is a leader in the implementation of sustainable water, wastewater and energy utility infrastructure solutions for small to medium-sized communities across North America. Until recently, it was located in the Chicago suburb of Northbrook, Illinois.

The company started out 50 years ago in a farmhouse, and as it grew over the years, additions were made to the structure, but nothing was cohesive. Employees were working in small groups in actual bedrooms. Other employees were located in additions. The team was extremely segregated. It didn't feel like an office and people just gave up walking the maze of twisted hallways trying to find anyone else. The scenario was affecting the way people worked and obviously, not in a great way.

The other challenge with being located in a random farmhouse off the highway in the suburbs was talent attraction. The remote location and unusual setup lacked a certain draw. Corix decided it was time to move — and a big move it was.

Corix chose a 22,000-square-foot space on the 36th floor in a downtown Chicago high-rise as its new headquarters and brought on Nelson Worldwide to complete the build out. The company wanted the space to be designed for easy engagement and collaboration among its staff. Because of the nature of Corix's services, the company wanted to go industrial in the look and feel.

Nelson transformed Corix's new offices to create an entirely different atmosphere from its previous space. Early on, it was decided to leave the ceilings exposed to enhance the industrial feel.

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“The pipes were an obvious thing,” said Kristin Cerutti, senior designer at Nelson. “At first, we wondered if we could just paint the existing pipes on the ceiling blue, their logo color. Then, it sort of stirred from that. Does it have to be blue? Does it just have to be existing pipes or can we bring in decorative pipes? And why just be decorative? They should have a purpose and a meaning.”

Nelson installed pipes throughout the space to serve a dual purpose: vibrant décor and creative wayfinding. Each pipe color represents a core market the company serves — water, gas and electricity — and acts as a gentle and organic guide, leading employees and guests in the right direction.

The office is organized into three neighborhoods, one for each department — ecosystems, as Cerutti explained. Each is designed to support its own function, then circulate out to the environment at large. Using Corix’s three distinct logo colors — two shades of blue and a shade of green, each ecosystem is designated a different color (dark blue for water, light blue for gas and green for energy).

“So, when the pipe colors change, and the furniture colors change slightly, you’ll know which department you’re in,” she said.

The public corridors have orange pipes — a color representative of community and a nod back to pride





in the community Corix serves. All of the different color pipes come together into a graphic of the Corix logo in the center of the lobby.

Corix went with a Steelcase open benching system for its task areas.

“They really wanted to bring in the industrial look, and Steelcase had some really fitting products,” Cerutti said.

Also included in the new office is a large café — something not possible in the farmhouse as the cramped kitchen only fit about six people around the table. Now, 30 people can gather if they want to. The café views overlook the Chicago River, offering a comfortable and inspiring place to take a break, do some work or hold a casual meeting. All of the furniture in the café is easily moveable to hold events like a birthday lunch or company-wide meetings and shuffleboard games ... for real, it's their thing.

“The ability to come together was really important to them,” Cerutti said.

While the new office is amazing, the staff feedback very positive, and all the spaces are being used in the way they were intended, Corix's 70 employees were a bit apprehensive at first to move downtown.

“It was a huge shock to move from a farmhouse in the suburbs to a high-rise in the city,” Cerutti said. “But they really embraced it.”

Most of the staff lived in the suburbs near the former office, so it was quite a big change for them. Corix put in place several opportunities to prepare them to work downtown.

“They held staff meetings downtown so people could get a feel for the commute and what the surrounding area is like,” she said. “They were able to see the ongoing construction. They really felt like they were part of the process. The Corix team really helped its employees be successful in the move, rather than just springing it on them. No, ‘Oh, by the way, pack your stuff.’ By visiting frequently and watching the progress, employees could warm up to the idea how big rooms were going to be, what the views looked like, etcetera.”

Designing Corix's new headquarters was unique for Nelson.

“We do a lot of tech and law firms and corporate spaces,” Cerutti said.

“With this project, we were able to be literal in the design, such as with the pipes, to relate it to the company's services and missions.

“They are very proud of what they do, and see themselves as providing a very important service to the community. That's the biggest reason people like working there. So, we designed for the people, versus just making it a trendy, cool space. As far as attraction and retention is concerned, a meaningfully designed space is a draw for job seekers.” **BoF**