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Photography Organization Incorporates Pixel Theme in HQ Renovation

SOME OF THE LARGER GOALS FOR THE PROJECT INCLUDED THE ADDITION OF ALTERNATIVE WORKSPACES AND COMMUNAL GATHERING AREAS. CORNER OFFICE REAL ESTATE WAS REALLOCATED TO THESE SHARED STAFF SPACES TO ENSURE A COMPANYWIDE FOCUS WAS ALWAYS AT THE FOREFRONT.

by Emily Clingman

Georgia-based nonprofit, Professional Photographers of America (PPA) — the largest association in the world for professional photographers — recently tapped global architecture and design firm, NELSON Worldwide, to refresh the interiors of its Peachtree Center home in the heart of downtown Atlanta.

The NELSON design team sought to breathe new life into the two-story space by expanding and dismantling the dated pre-existing office layout, which did not support the company's collaborative culture.

Ultimately, the new space promotes PPA's vision and supports its people-centric culture by providing a welcoming, home-away-from-home for nearly 70 employees, where they can embrace both private and collaborative work.

Jason Diaz, senior interior designer with NELSON, said engaging with PPA staff at its office helped dial in the design direction.

"They invited us to one of their regular town hall meetings, which we do at our office, too," Diaz said. "Off the bat we saw a lot of similarities in how they spoke to each other. They are very culturally focused, and that was something they wanted to maintain in their new space. We are very much the same way in our office."



PPA shared with NELSON that it has a very much, no-gossip culture and one where issues are swiftly nipped in the bud.

“They told us things like this from the beginning because they know who they are,” Diaz said. “When we are approaching a project, there’s always a getting-to-know-you process. Their forthrightness allowed us to hone in on who they were from the very get go.”

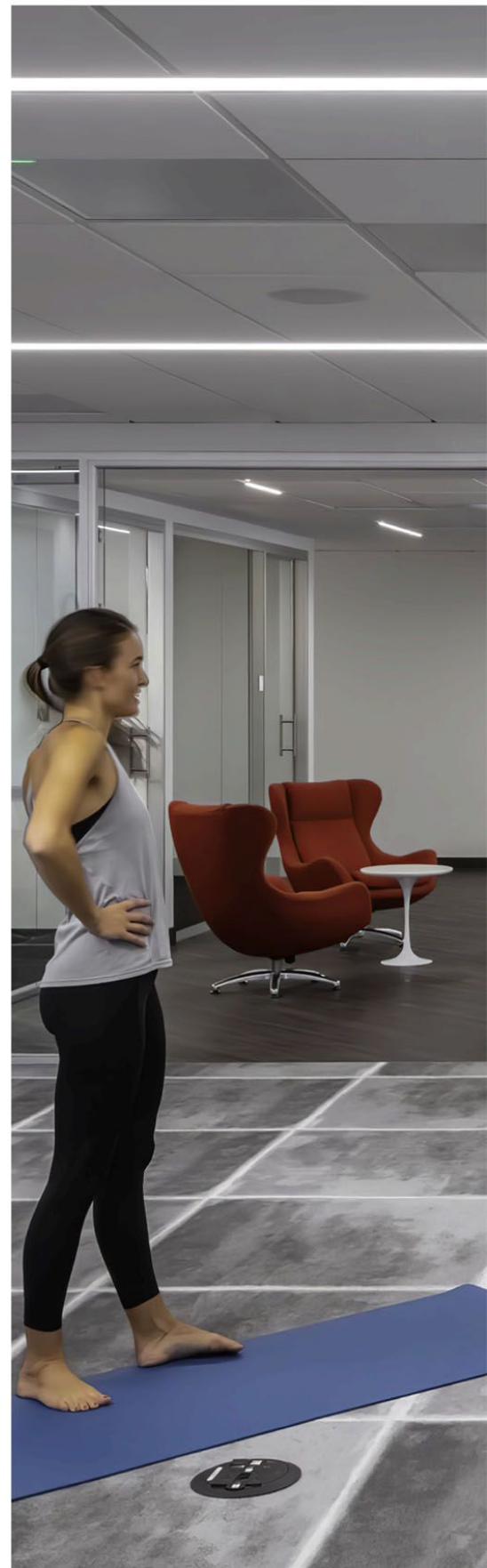
Some of the larger goals for the project included the addition of alternative workspaces and communal gathering areas. Corner office real estate was reallocated to these shared staff spaces to ensure a companywide focus was always at the forefront. These spaces support departmental meetings and express PPA’s company culture and employees’ individual personalities. A multipurpose room hosts board meetings, all-staff meetings and doubles as a studio for staff breakfasts and yoga classes.

Sarah Holliday, NELSON senior project manager, said the transformation is the epitome of the night and day cliché.

“As PPA grew over the years, it slowly expanded — busting through a wall to expand a space, for instance,” Holliday said. “It was extremely hard to navigate. Very disconnected. Not cohesive. They were able to negotiate some swing space from the landlord to move out of the current space temporarily, and we did a full gut and reno meanwhile.”

Before the renovation began, NELSON conducted extensive in-house research with PPA to bring the project together.

“We did a lot of robust programming interviews and work sessions, as well as word and image associations to have them articulate and communicate what they were looking for,” Holliday said. “Often, clients know what they don’t want. They know what they have isn’t working, but we have to kind of extract and mine to get the information we are looking for. And through that process we learned, because they value their individuality, as well as their contribution to the whole, an open seating concept doesn’t support their work style and their flow. So, their space still has private offices, they are a bit smaller now, but marrying that individuality with a more-connected workspace, the office walls use glass now.”





PPA

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The full revitalization of the space was achieved with the addition of a monumental staircase positioned between the staff floors. This centralized staircase at the main entry allows employees to see through the core of the building to the exterior windows on either side. The central corridor flows like an artery through the heart of the space, providing streamlined circulation and allowing daylight to flood into all aspects of the space.

For furniture, PPA had a robust collection of pieces that variably “walked into their space over the years,” Diaz said. “So, we started with a clean slate.”

PPA needed something with longevity. The company chose a collection of height-adjustable desks and task seating from Haworth.

“We made those dollars go more toward ergonomics rather than aesthetic features,” Diaz said.

Inspired by the most fundamental technology of a well-timed photograph, the pixel influenced the design intent for the project. This concept not only informed NELSON’s material selections, weaving pixels into the design details of the workspace, but also informed the floor plan and overall space allocation. This representation of the value of the individual pixel as a part of the larger composition was paramount throughout the design process.

“We also incorporated brand colors throughout,” Diaz said. “They were super excited to incorporate color because their previous design was drab and artwork on the wall that had been there forever. There wasn’t a lot of life in their space, other than their staff.”

David Trust, CEO of PPA, which was founded 152 years ago, noted the most important part of the renovation story is that the decision to stay in its Peachtree Center office is a meaningful one.

“When it came time for us to renew our lease, we conducted a search of all the available office space in downtown Atlanta, and there was a lot,” Trust said. “But after six months looking at different spaces, we came to realize we like where we are.”

PPA’s heartstrings were tied to its location because it had been there for more than 20 years. It offers easy access to food, the train station and the airport, the area is very walkable, and the Peachtree Center was undergoing a complete overhaul itself.

PPA’s headquarters was kind of like the ugliest house in the nicest neighborhood.

“For the most part, the walls that were here had been here since the ‘80s, very 1980s law firm,” Trust said. “We had replaced the carpet and painted the walls and that kind of thing, but it was beige and dark. Big, heavy thick crown molding, lots of walls.”

Trust describes the 25,000-square-foot office as having floor-to-ceiling windows spaced evenly around the perimeter, with the best views of Atlanta.

“It should be a bright, cheery environment,” he said. “But the light was not shared. It was kept inside each private office. And, of course, the corner offices were the big offices, so there was a hierarchical design and feel to the office.”

The renovation did indeed shine a bright light on PPA. Its new digs have become a showcase for prospective real estate developers and designers.

“This is what a new space could look like,” Trust said.

He also said it’s been a great recruiting tool.

“They see how much effort we go through to care for our staff,” he said. “We kind of went above and beyond the call of duty. But that’s not altruism on our part. If we have a staff that loves to work here and is engaged, they are going to be much more creative, much more committed to the cause, much more bought in.” **BoF**



