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INSITE STORY

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# DESIGNING Small Offices



*A small office space is the need of the hour because of the scarcity of space, exorbitant property prices and the influx of multiple small-scale startups. A designer's challenge these days is to maximise space and provide optimal use by 'creating a large within a small.'*

TEXT: Ankita Sweety and Pratyoosh Chandan  
PHOTOS COURTESY: Studio An-V-Thot Architects Pvt. Ltd.

Size may matter, but not when it comes to office design. With the right inputs and planning, a small office can be the creative hub that can facilitate work, keep employees happy, and augment business.

Ten years ago, Cornell University's International Workplace Studies Program published a 77-page report on offices that work. Researchers studied "organisational ecology" by "looking at the nature of workplace strategies that small, dynamic organisations have developed to help them meet the challenges of doing more, faster and better, with less."

Researchers also discovered that open, small-scale environments led to an increase in exchange of information, allowed greater flexibility and created a positive social environment. But how does one decode the small office design code?

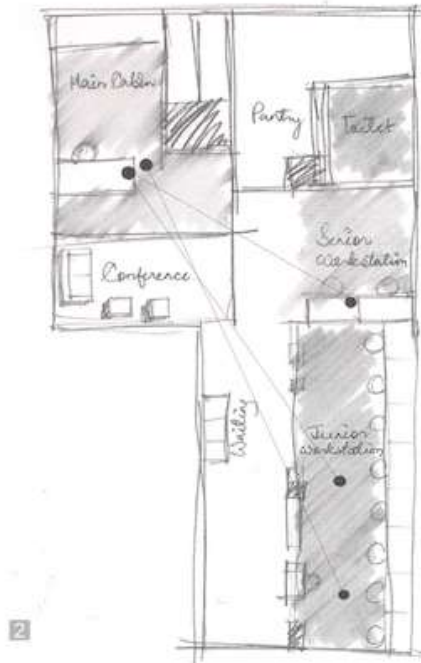
### Step 1: The conversation

Unlike many other fields of design, architecture aims at finding solutions or rather finding solutions beautifully. These solutions are answers to questions derived from "the brief" given by the client, which generally ends up being unidirectional in a chaotic manner. "The brief" ironically remains far away and immature, rather than what it should be.

We try to gain multi-directional insights on "the brief" by involving ourselves in a discussion, a talk with the client, the end users, consultants, contractors, etc. As designers, our continuous quest to find answers to the now correct questions thus lands us on the correct tracks with the right wheels.

### Step 2: Evolving stories, not storyboards

To understand how to create a large within a small, it is first and foremost important to understand what is large. A large can be understood as a space where confinements go far beyond an optimum distance from the point of sight. Thus, the design starts by forgetting about



2

immediate breaks through the flow of space, such as walls, partitions etc. The divisions are now created by forming patterns of story using path of circulation, vision of sight, virtual blocks etc. The whole area can now be seen as a series of spaces resulting from a series of stories.

These stories can be as fascinating as having lunches with casual chit-chats to as important as addressing your subordinates on crucial subjects. They can be as inconsistent as a walk to the coffee vending machine or a stroll for a smoke as you wait for the prints. So, it is important to create spaces that will eventually evolve stories rather than to bring in storyboards and divide the whole area.

### Step 3: Spatial hierarchy vs. organisational hierarchy

In terms of design, organisational hierarchy should be seen as a route depicting point of communication. Rarely does a person jump more than two levels through this route to communicate. So to minimise the chaos in travelling and maintain a free visual orientation through majority of the day, spatial hierarchy should emerge from a clear understanding of organisational hierarchy. Here it is also important to understand the exceptions such as movement of an office boy, or a guest etc.

*In terms of design, organisational hierarchy should be seen as a route depicting point of communication*

1. The best way to add colour, texture and reflectivity is to start by looking at everything in a monotonous grey scale.
2. Small, open office environments lead to an increase in exchange of information and allow greater flexibility
3. In a small office, spatial hierarchy should emerge from a clear understanding of organisational hierarchy



3



For example, in photo 4, we have used a custom-made MS jali as a spine that runs through majority of the available space with the clear benefit of not losing the expanse of vision while bringing in a beautiful play of lights and shadows. Also, we were able to tactically seclude the junior studio while the main central corridor remains aloof of any disturbances or hindrances. Not losing the concentration level yet knowing that one is under regular watch from superiors is an add-on. Another example can be seen in the retractable sliding frosted glass panels used to divide or integrate the principal cabin and the guest lounge as and when required.

#### Step 5: Functional ornamentation

“It’s like if you are wearing a tie, why not a smart one.”

At Studio AVT, we enjoy bringing in certain fashion quotient to an element or two that negates the seriousness of designing while satisfying the amateurish freedom of youth.

Something that is functional need not be boring is the concept behind the creative shape-changing book shelf in the principal cabin here in photo 5. Multiple cubical blocks can be placed and replaced onto a jali to create infinite arrangements of keeping books, that too in various ways. Such elements can be seen as elegant accessories on a beautiful dress.

Generally, the principal’s cabin overlooks the senior workstations, which in turn overlooks the junior workstations, which is then greeted by the reception area towards the entrance. Guest movement is channelised in such a way that while crossing the reception and waiting area, it reaches the guest lounge first and can then be fused with the principal cabin as and when required.

#### Step 4: Levels of transparency

Transparency plays an important role in maximising the benefits of design. For example, it can be aimed to provide certain amount of privacy, to block a direct stare, to change the course of movement or to simply insulate any sound from escaping. We can even start to play with various tools that end up giving different results along with different aesthetic values.

*“Transparency plays an important role in maximising the benefits of design”*



## PROJECT FACT FILE

**Project Typology:** Small office

**Area:** 600 sq ft.

**Location:** New Delhi

**Client:** Perfect Generator Technologies Pvt. Ltd.

**Design Team:** Ankit & Pratyosh

**Turnkey Consultants:** Mehta Enterprises

**Site Supervisor:** Md. Mustqeel Saifi

**Duration:** 45 days

**Completion:** February 2013

**Cost of Project:** Rs 21, 00, 000/-

**Photo Credits:** Saptorshi Majumdar



### Step 6: Breaking monotony with harmony

In a high-pressure world and amid demanding work culture, even a small-scale office environment can sap the best of you each day. Work days are often so rigorous that maintaining a level of energy throughout is not possible without the proper ambience.

One should be careful though - breaking monotony can lead to an infusion of enthusiasm, but if harmony is lost, everything fails. The balance of the two can be seen here in the placement of hanging storages at multiple levels positioned onto the running "Wall of Jali" (seen in photo 6). So rather than becoming a stack of cupboards, these evolve as the spine of jali while maturing as solids and voids at a larger scale in contrast to the smaller pores of the existing MS jali. The intentional damage to the monotony is also present through the overhead storages all across the junior workstations.

### Step 7: Colour, texture & reflectivity

Upon reaching a point of surety of the physical model, the best way to add colour, texture and reflectivity is to start by looking at everything in a monotonous grey scale. There upon, from various viewing points, we try and create multiple

imaginary picture frames of two-dimensional planes. Onto these picture frames, it becomes much easier to identify areas that demand the need of a colour or a texture in contrast and context to the remaining desaturated areas.

The result interestingly leads to an interactive balance between warm and cool colours present here in this office space (seen in photo 6). The brief demanded the use of the colour orange as it is prominent in the company's product. Our intention was to bring in orange in a diminishing manner, which can be seen throughout the ceiling which vanishes at the eye level (seen in photo 6). Green, blue, purple and grey are introduced at several areas to counter the warmth of the orange and bring in the desired youthfulness as well as serenity to the entire ambience.

### Step 8: Material palette

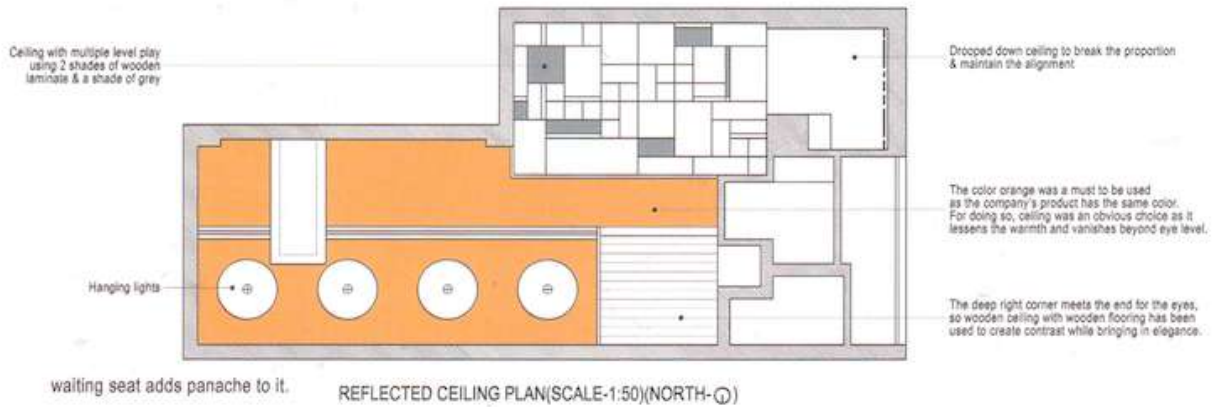
Rather than straight away landing on material specifications, an important step is to differentiate between the body and the skin of every object. A small office breathes well with finishes that are not dominating or of highly self-imposed aesthetic value, but with finishes which work as a group and are cost effective.

In this space we have used a lot of highly glossy and reflective laminates as well as

**4.** A custom-made MS jali that runs through the office space allows an expansive vision and lets in a beautiful play of lights and shadows

**5.** The shape-changing book shelf in the principal's cabin allows infinite arrangements and adds visual interest

**6.** Green, blue, purple and grey help counter the warmth of the orange ceiling and infuse youthfulness and serenity



7. The grey-coloured grooves on the wall create an illusion of increased depth of vision while adding grandeur to the principal cabin and guest lounge

high-gloss PU pigment paint that leaves the character of the body behind while enhancing the neighboring skins, leading to a better visual expanse. The impact of heaviness due to the large number of work stations is minimised by the use of light shaded wooden laminate. The intention to magnify the expanse is also achieved through the selection of fabrics with linear

horizontal lines. Glass can also be seen as an obvious choice while the "Wall of Jali" made out of laser-cut MS plates refrains from blockage while providing divisions.

**Step 9: From macro to micro level**

The final product can be dramatically improved and seasoned with precise attention to detail. The grey-coloured grooves used in the principal cabin and the guest lounge, as seen in photo 7 speak volumes in the above context. These contrasting lines magically create an illusion of increased depth of vision while adding grandeur to the combined outlook of the cabin and the lounge. The need of artifacts is fulfilled with the selection of elegant light fixtures at some places while some customised lights merge so well with the ceiling panels that one can be mistaken for its absence.



**Step 10: To rewind, restore & refine**

As designers, we are always aware of the fact that a design never ends but evolves. Thus an iterative process of going back into a continuous loop from the beginning to the end and again begins with a more informed and polished state of mind. The reward here is in sheer joy of reaching to a better outcome each time. ●

*Ankita Sweety and Pratyosh Chandan, of New Delhi-based Studio An-V-Thot Architects Pvt. Ltd., have a portfolio that's rich in many small scale offices.*

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