

## Workplace

### Uber

By Ron Nyren • May 20, 2015



Photography by Jasper Sanidad

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Uber Technologies is about disrupting the status quo. The Uber mobile app offers an alternative to taxicabs as we know them, allowing people to summon privately driven vehicles for hire with payment handled through the app. When it came time to design the new eleventh floor for the company's headquarters, San Francisco firm Studio O+A created a space that takes an iconoclastic approach fitting for the tech firm: Nothing is typical.

Uber moved its headquarters to San Francisco's Mid-Market neighborhood in 2014, starting with the fourth floor of a 22-story office building built in the 1970s as a data center for Bank of America. Also designed by Studio O+A, that floor represented one stage in Uber's development. Rapidly expanding, Uber leased more floors, and the next one completed was the eleventh floor (featured here), which has a deliberately "hacked" character compared to the fourth-floor offices. "This eleventh floor is the more rebellious cousin of the Uber headquarters," says Denise Cherry, principal at Studio O+A. "We wanted this to feel like a startup but in an elevated and refined way."

#### One company, distinct floors

An initial concern was how to make staff from the eleventh floor feel connected to the main office seven floors below. "As we started to talk through the way that their

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engineering teams worked, we realized that maybe it's O.K. that it is not connected at all," Cherry says. "We emphasized that and played with that a little bit."

Uber creates small teams that work on special projects, functioning like small startup companies. The eleventh floor became a de facto skunkworks space for top-secret projects. "For a long time, tech companies were all about transparency and being able to see and know what everyone is doing all the time," Cherry says. "But maybe that's not the right solution—it's about translucent collaboration instead of transparent collaboration."

Thus, the eleventh floor contains three types of team meeting spaces, each calibrated to provide a different level of transparency. Workspaces include open office studios, partially enclosed studios with benches for up to 10 workers, and fully enclosed rooms equipped with curtains that can be drawn to ensure confidentiality. Knoll Antenna worktables were modified with solid butcher-block surfaces. Each team room is designed to be self-contained, with its own snacks and drinks handy. A common tool wall holds surge protectors and office supplies in denim pockets, interspersed with plywood painted with writable IdeaPaint. Throughout the floor, Murphy desks can be folded down from the walls. In the up position, these desks are whiteboards for jotting ideas on the fly.

To bring members of different special teams together, the designers created a room at the center of the floor called the Cave, paneled in blackened Douglas fir. The light levels here are kept low. "We wanted it to feel intimate and atmospheric, as a direct contrast to the rest of the floor," Cherry says. A glistening white box in the middle of the Cave holds the game room, which is opposite a long custom table where lunch and dinner are served; a kitchen is nearby.

#### **Raw surfaces and rooms for focus**

To convey a scrappy startup feel, the O+A designers not only exposed ceilings and let the floors be raw concrete, they also left drywall in the corridors unpainted. "We had the contractor redo drywall three times to get just the appropriate level of unfinished," Cherry says. In the elevator lobby, paint extends no further than the tops of the elevator cabs. Ropes and chains are strung as accents at various points. Unique light fixtures have burnt-out fluorescent tubes bundled as enclosures for LEDs. As a sly dig at the taxi industry that Uber is turning upside down and as a creative means to bespoke wallcoverings, O+A filled out hundreds of taxi receipts by hand, scrawling large quotes from Steve Martin and Stephen Hawking, and pasted them on two walls outside the restrooms.

Adony Beniares, head of global workplace for Uber, says Studio O+A is the right fit for the burgeoning tech company, which has also engaged the firm to design the interiors for its forthcoming newly constructed Mission Bay headquarters building. "Studio O+A understands Uber's brand and office needs extremely well," Beniares says. "O+A created an environment in which our technology teams can work in a quieter setting and continue to innovate our technology."

After months of use, this Uber floor has been positively received by employees. "People love it," Beniares says. "The eleventh floor was designed to be an integrated space, and the studios provide teams with working areas where they are able connect more effectively and really focus on the project at hand."

#### **Uber Eleventh Floor**

Interior designer: Studio O+A

Client: Uber

Where: San Francisco

What: 19,800 square feet on one floor

Cost/sf: Withheld at client's request

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