

# VIRGIN REBIRTH

Spacelab has employed a deft touch to convert four historic buildings in west London into an HQ for Virgin Management that provides staff with a sense of the group's complexity and scope

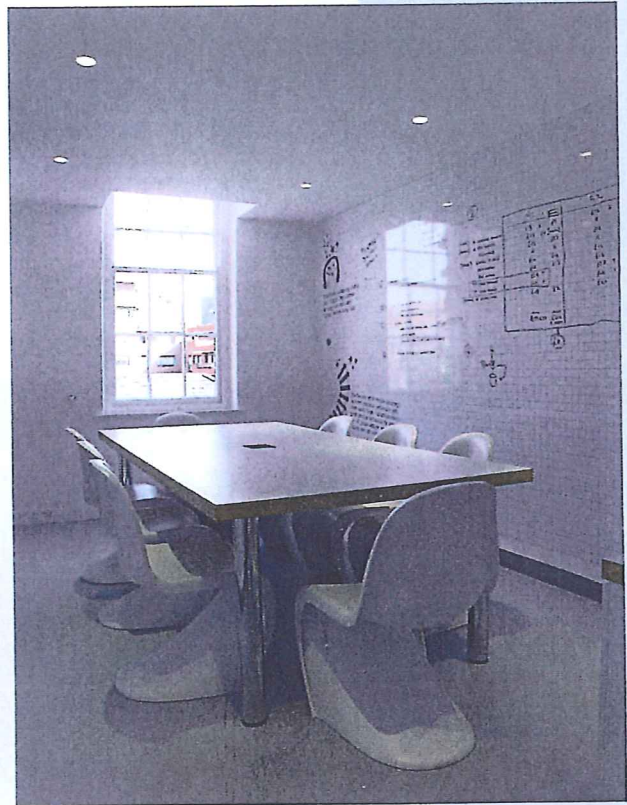


**Above** A jellybean dispenser stretches almost the full height of the building's atrium

**Right** The storage facilities are emblazoned with positive messages

**Far right** Virgin Management's new HQ features more meeting rooms than its previous site

Helen Parlon



Sex sells, they say, and the new Virgin Management offices prove the point from an interior design point of view; “Screw It”, writ large on one wall of the reception area, is the first thing visitors see when entering its new Hammersmith base. Ooh, I say! But behind the saucy swearing, architect Spacelab has employed a deftly sensitive touch as far as the original structure of the building is concerned, combined with a rather more scientific approach to making the space work as hard as possible to keep the employees happy. Virgin Management had not gone through a refurbishment programme at its previous Notting Hill office, so Spacelab had to slowly rid the client of its preconceptions of what was required in workspace terms in this new environment. “It had gone down the route of design and build, but had decided it was not quite what it wanted, so it was a case of Spacelab to the rescue,” says associate Colin MacGadie. “It was a real opportunity for it to review some of its business needs.”

Despite a swift start – Spacelab was brought onboard at the end of November 2007 and was onsite within a couple of months – MacGadie admits they had to “tread quite carefully” at first, as Virgin had a strong idea on fundamental issues such as how many employees could work in the space and how many meeting rooms it wanted. The building was not unfamiliar to at least some of the staff too, as it was previously home to Zavvi, the firm which completed a management buyout of the Virgin Megastores chain from the Virgin Group in 2007. Spacelab used its previous experience with clients such as Emap (onoffice June 2008) and digital media company Good Technology to demonstrate to this client that it simply wasn’t

a case of squeezing in staff just because it was a smaller floorplate, but rather that it was possible to use the available area intelligently. “The guiding principle was to take the building back as much as possible, working on the principle of minimal intervention and creating a blank canvas for the application of the brand identity,” says MacGadie. Even though the Virgin Management offices are home to functions within a business not traditionally regarded as creative, such as finance, it was nonetheless important that this be treated as a creative office space.

The architect rationalised the mechanical scheme across the four buildings, which date back to the 18th century. Although there was never a raised floor, there had been big, unsightly blocks of polycarbonate to house some services in the ceiling. A new mechanical installation is now concealed within new feature ceilings, which also provide up-lighting while maintaining the original volume of the space. To retain the character of the buildings, the exposed brickwork, timber flooring and large sash windows were maintained, along with the original chimney, next to the lift. Although the buildings are not listed, they are “of significant historic interest”, according to the local council, and it was necessary to gain planning permission for new insertions such as the external glass link at first-floor level between two of the buildings. This was introduced so that staff could move around more freely, while encouraging workflow between teams. This was especially important for the teams working on start-up projects, which are initially located within the space to immerse them in the culture and the knowledge base available, before flying the nest to other premises. ➤

Virgin Management  
 Architect Spacelab  
 Client Virgin Management  
 Cost Undisclosed  
 Start date January 2008  
 Completion September 2008  
 Floor space 2,023sq m

Spacelab used a process called Depthmap Analysis to provide information about who goes where and how often by predicting movement, shown in a similar way to how thermal imaging cameras highlight temperature. Although MacGadie denies any connection to the building's original function as a school, the idea was to create a campus atmosphere, even down to locating a canteen in a separate building, to draw staff away from their desks. And I bet free jellybeans courtesy of a dispenser almost the height of the atrium space doesn't go amiss either, even if your student days are long behind you.

In keeping with this need for movement, MacGadie adds that "anything that is fixed is pushed to the extremes of the space". This includes many of the meeting rooms and the storage facilities. But that is not to say that they have been neglected design-wise. On the contrary, this is where much of the cheeky vernacular reappears. The storage is emblazoned with messages of positivity – "U R GR8" and "Let's Have Some Fun". Step inside one "on-stage" meeting room and a crowd of people covers one wall and manifestations of microphones and monitors heavily reference the V Festival, while the Galactic Room is a direct nod to Virgin's spaceship project. Virgin's brand team has worked with graphics company Me Him and Her to promote the brands under the Virgin umbrella, as illustrated by the calorific values painted on the wall as you climb the stairs, to represent Virgin Active. Disappointingly, a glowing "Never Mind the Bollocks" on the reception desk, referring to Virgin's musical connections, never made it past the drawing board stage.

Large areas of glazing on the meeting rooms are a symbol of the client's desire for openness and approachability. From the Green Room, you can see directly into the heart-shaped manifestations

and poetry-adorned wall in the Love Room, while from the atrium, you can look up even higher to see the graphics depicting the ropes of the Boxing Room or the lightbulb of the Innovation Room. Although fun for now, these features can easily be removed or painted over to provide a good degree of future proofing. For similar reasons, Spacelab chose a bench system from Techo for the 170 desks it specified. As well as saving space in the open-plan working areas, they can easily be reconfigured to better manage employee churn. Again, they had some persuading to do to convince the client that this was the better option, "but after all, most of them work on laptops or with flat-screens", says MacGadie.

In short, we all know how easy it is to get lost in your own work or your own team's work, but the real selling point of the design of this workplace are the fun, visual reminders in the reception area, meeting rooms and the storage systems that demonstrate the complexity of Virgin's product offer and its geographic scope. The result is that staff can't help but feel part of the bigger picture. ■

Below The local council deemed the four buildings, which date from the 18th century, as being "of significant historic interest"

Bottom left A meeting room referencing Manhattan is a nod to the Virgin Atlantic brand's transatlantic flights

Bottom right Exposed brickwork helps to maintain the character of the buildings

