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Alternative Office Finishes: A guide to avoiding the ‘vanilla box’ by Danielle Masucci, BS

Corporate clients rely on designers to create and implement solutions that will enhance the workplace experience. Ideally, they look for a space with aesthetic impact, as well as the ability to inspire the behaviors that can ultimately drive the business. These expectations must often be achieved by using carpeting, paint, and acoustic ceiling tile within a set budget—an increasingly common challenge for those in the practice of corporate design.

In today’s comprehensive business environment, the workplace is a tool to attract, motivate, and retain highly capable employees. Additionally, the physical environment is a visual medium that sends an immediate impression of a company’s corporate culture or brand identity with a simple glance around the office.

Many office spaces designed on a tight budget become a mundane ‘vanilla box,’ which can have a psychological effect on employees’ mental state. When a space is overrun with off-white walls, gray computer equipment, dull furniture, and taupe or beige non-directional carpet, everything seems to blend together, making for an incredibly impersonal landscape.

Variations in materials can aid in how an office functions, contributing to employee well being and acting as wayfinding—a term used to describe elements in a design informs and guides people through a space. There are subtle ways to create the appearance of a more sophisticated workspace, with little or no cost implication.

Walls

Design professionals should identify areas in the place where a slight increase in finish quality can add the most impact to a space. Typically, the reception area or main entrance is an ideal place to start. This is where visitors form their first impression of a company. Common areas, such as the lunchroom or lounge, are also opportune spaces to vary the materials. There is great value for the end-user (or company occupying the space) to invest in upgrades such as inexpensive, fabric-wrapped wall panels with acoustical absorption, or tackable substrates, which can serve decorative and functional needs.



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Plastic laminate wall panels are another inexpensive surface material that can create the appearance of an elegant wood veneer wall at a fraction of the cost. Typically, there is a 50-percent cost savings when using plastic laminate in place of wood veneer on a wall panel. There are additional factors such as the type of substrate (e.g. medium density fiberboard [MDF] or plywood) and the species of wood that can also affect the cost.

Gypsum wallboard can also be used to dramatically sculpt a space into a unique atmosphere. This can be accomplished with simple reveals, which create a pattern or curves and can develop a stronger form with the application of bold paint schemes.



This accent wall with simple gypsum board reveals, creates a pattern, which provides the illusion of wall panels. The change in carpet tile and a drop in the gypsum soffit at the corridor serve as a wayfinding tool. The soffit also has reveals that visually break up the solid gypsum plane.

Additionally, when renovating an existing space, it is important to identify which rooms are the most cost-effective to leave in their current location (e.g. an electrical room), rather than move. A space plan is a helpful tool since the less power, plumbing, and electrical devices requiring relocation, the better the chances of staying within a project's budget.

Vapor barrier primers can offer moisture control. These materials are always applied in the primer phase of finishing an exterior wall and are available with a latex base. General primers with an alkyd base also act as a vapor barrier, since they prevent moisture from passing through. It is important to

note that vapor barrier primers do not stop active water leaks. In these cases, a waterproofing material can be specified.

Color

As a fundamental element of design, color has a profound effect on the end user's psychological well being, affecting a person's mood, energy level, and even appetite. Colors are often selected to create impact and evoke a particular emotional response. They can also be used as directional devices, affecting the perception of space and focusing attention on key areas. Warm colors are stimulating, while cool hues are soothing. Red is associated with passion, intensity, and excitement, but can also entice anger, dominance, or rebellion. Orange is adventurous, open, and active, but also has connotations of informality. Yellow is associated with optimism, creativity, and idealism, as well as temper and anxiety. These vibrant colors are appropriate for places that people occupy temporarily.

Cool colors, such as blue, evoke contemplation and relaxation; it has also been said to lower blood pressure. Green relates to youth, abundance, and money, and usually induces a restful and rejuvenated response. Purple is the color of royalty, spirituality, and thoughtfulness. Grays and other neutrals can be associated with boredom and sadness. However, when combined with vivid colors, grays can create a balanced contrast of visual interest appropriate for a business environment.

Regardless of what colors are used in the work environment, a diverse palette is preferable to something monochromatic. When different hues are present in a room, there are more places to selectively focus, which can improve performance. When considering a construction budget and color choice, one thing to keep in mind is that a gallon of red paint costs the same as a gallon of white.

Paint manufacturers are responding to the increasing demand for products containing a lower volatile organic compound (VOC) content. Great strides have been made in paint technology through the use of new raw materials, such as waterborne products, which are replacing alkyd paints. These new VOC-compliant products perform as well as, and often better than, their predecessors. There are many advantages to these products, including:

- a non-yellowing quality;
- coating flexibility;
- better gloss retention;
- improved fade resistance;
- low odor;
- low-VOC content; and
- easy cleanup.

Carpeting

In the past, broadloom carpet has been the material of choice for use in office spaces because it was believed to be a budget-conscious floor finish. However, carpet tile is now priced competitively with broadloom carpet of similar quality, and has additional long-term cost-effective benefits. Given that a smaller amount of waste is produced during installation (i.e. carpet tile is designed to be seamed together), this modular product allows for the initial purchase of up to 10 percent less. When installing a patterned broadloom carpet, there can be a considerable amount of waste created due to matching patterns, making the seaming a significant concern. Also, broadloom carpets are typically 3.7-m (12-ft) wide, which can mean a lot of trimming during installation.

Carpet tile is much easier to replace when damaged or stained, since it can be simply taken up and replacements put back down. Since these products have a different kind of backing system acting as a moisture barrier, a stain created by a spill can be cleaned and will not reappear. In the past, this has been a problem with broadloom carpet, given a stain can penetrate into the backing. Although a blemish may appear to be removed, it can wick back through the carpet fibers and resurface over time. From a facilities management point of view, there is a great benefit to using carpet tile, as opposed to replacing carpeting that covers a large area. Moving office furniture or dismantling workstations also adds to the disturbance. Additionally, there is less concern with matching dyelots when replacing carpet tile.

Like other products or furnishings used in commercial space, new carpet can be a source of chemical emissions or VOCs. Associated products, such as padding and adhesives, can contribute to these emissions as well. When specifying new carpet, the product selected should meet the requirements of the Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) Indoor Air Quality Testing Program and carry a CRI Green Label. This designation is given to carpets with total VOCs of less than 0.5 mg/m²hr¹.

Carpet tile is typically specified in open-office and high-foot traffic areas, while broadloom carpet can be more appropriate for a private office or conference room. There are several factors that can affect the specification. Many companies prefer to standardize their interior design with a particular color or carpet pattern, or use materials specified from a single source. This may limit a design professional's choice in terms of product line. The type of project or a client's operations may also affect the specification. A designer is more likely to use a 64-oz, 100-percent wool broadloom carpet in a law firm, as opposed to a research and development facility, where a 20-oz nylon carpet tile would be better suited. Wool carpet is used where a luxurious effect is desired and there is no heavy foot traffic areas, given its durability and lower cost.

Carpet tile also allows the opportunity to create subtle or bold patterns, and is a great tool for creating solid color insets, something that can be expensive and labor-intensive when using broadloom. The design is simply planned in accordance with the modular size of the tile and alternating different colors or pattern can attain a simple pattern. This can create a visual break in a long office corridor, an inset within a room, or be used as a wayfinding tool. Tiles can also be installed in a quarter-turned pattern in an open-office area, but monolithic in all built spaces, such as conference rooms and private offices, depending of the style selected. This may create the illusion of the use of more than one floor material.

A carpet's maintenance should be considered part of the purchasing decision. Like other furnishings or equipment, carpeting represents a substantial investment for any facility and requires inadequate care to prolong its effective life. A carpet care program is composed of four elements:

- reduction of soil (i.e. dirt tracked into a space);
- removal of soil;
- removal of spots and strains; and
- cleaning by hot water extraction.

Walk-off mats greatly reduce the amount of soil carried into a building through foot traffic and should be placed at all entrances. Vacuuming is the most important element in maintenance, as its designed to remove dry soil. Research shows 85 percent of dirt tracked into a building is dry, leading manufacturers to recommend commercial carpets be vacuumed every other day. Spot and stain removal is required on an "as needed" basis. Most commercial carpet manufacturers recommend commercial carpets be vacuumed every other day. Spot and stain removal is required on an 'as needed' basis. Most commercial carpet manufacturers recommend using only products tested and certified via the CRI's Seal of Approval program.

On most commercial carpets, a detergent with a pH less than 10 and non-sticky residue should be used. For carpeting with prints, detergent solution should have a pH between 6 and 8. The detergent's ability to bind to particles of soil and oil is what allows cleaning to happen. However, residue continues to attract and hold soil even after drying, making detergent residue removal critical to preventing re-soiling. Water extraction is the best way to accomplish this. It is important to keep in mind that increasing the amount of detergent beyond the recommended dosage does not increase the cleaning performance—it actually makes it more difficult.

The other 15 percent of dirt tracked into a building is oily and cannot be removed using a vacuum. Oil tends to oxidize slowly, forming sticky material similar to varnish nearly impossible to remove over time. More frequent cleanings are required in areas where oily soil is prevalent, such as near asphalt parking lots or around cooking and dining facilities. Most commercial carpet manufacturers recommend the hot water extraction method using high-performance equipment. When selecting a cleaning system, it is important to choose one that cleans effectively, does not leave an excessive amount of cleaning material residue. Additional information on carpet cleaning and the hot water extraction method can be found in Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC) S100, *Carpet Cleaning Standards*.

Ceiling

Adding accent lighting and using standard drywall construction to create soffits in ceilings are two ways to reduce the overwhelming scale of a large 'cube farm' space. Soffits, which are also subtle places to add color, can also be used as wayfinding or organizational tools. This may be appropriate at cross-corridor locations, or over specialty spaces, such as the reception desk or collaborative areas. Additionally, a break in large expanses of ceiling tile can be a visual relief.

The most common source of ambient light used in the typical office space is the deep cell parabolic, which distributes most of its illumination downward. However, this fixture can produce a pattern of light that does not always coordinate with workstation or furniture placement below, creating undesirable shadows and uncomfortable glares on computer screens. Since the light shines downward, the ceiling plane and walls near the ceiling can be somewhat dark, contrasting the light and causing glare.

One alternative is to use indirect ambient light, which casts most of its light upward, reflecting off the ceiling and creating an evenly illuminated space. With the elimination of a hot spot from a direct light source above, the problem of glare can be reduced to a minimum. This type of fixture is available in a 0.6 x 1.2-m (2 x 4-ft) or 0.6 x



Adding color and texture in furnishings brightens up a space, particularly with neutral workstation finishes.

0.6-m (2 x 2 ft) lay-in basket styles and can be easily substituted. These products can add a 30 to 35- percent increase to the cost, depending on the project size. However, this small upgrade can reduced employee discomfort relating to eyestrain and greatly improve their efficiency.

When renovating a space, recycling the existing ceiling tiles is one method of achieving a sustainable and cost-saving design. Reclamation programs are available through many of the major acoustical ceiling tile manufacturers. This closed-loop process allows old tiles

to become new again with a high post-consumer content, which saves the use of virgin materials. Recycling can cost about half of what it would take to send this material to a landfill. Factors, such as transportation distance, can contribute to reclamation costs.

Furnishings

Furniture is a big part of the vanilla box. These are the design elements people physically interact with on a daily basis, and many of the budget-conscious suggestions previously discussed can also apply to furniture. The workstation is another common limitation in a corporate office design. When selecting components of a workstation, the height of the panels should be carefully considered, as they make a significant impact on the perception of an open-office area.

For example, in a large open space with windows, lowering the height of these panels from a typical 1727-mm (68-in.) standing privacy to 1219-mm (480-in.) seated privacy, allows natural light into the core of a space and can have positive effect on employee well-being. This small adjustment contributes to the mental state of users, and is cost-efficient in that the product is slightly smaller, and thus requires less material.

If a project does not budget for new workstations, replacing panel fabric is another alternative. A new fabric can add color and visual texture that can brighten a worker's personal space. However, it may be practical to keep color schemes on workstations neutral, and instead apply color, pattern, and texture to furnishings in common areas.

Conclusion

Supporting complex budgetary demands by using a combination of color, texture, and surface materials can contribute to stimulating, satisfying, and healthy work environment. A sense of well being among workers can result in more productivity, less absenteeism, and higher employee retention, contributing to a company's longevity. Incorporating elements, associated with a more sophisticated workspace allows the creation of a desirable place for employees to spend eight hours to 10 hours a day.

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