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NeoCon® World's Trade Fair Preview

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Office Design

AOL Headquarters by Mancini•Duffy

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cover: Volkswagen Group of America by VOA Associates. Photography by Nick Merrick/Hedrich Blessing. Page 96.

design



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jump start

VOA Associates designed a headquarters for Volkswagen Group of America that maintains the company vision and is in tune with its customers

By Jean Nayar
Photography by Nick Merrick/Hedrich Blessing

In the main reception area of Volkswagen's new corporate headquarters (above), the custom reception desk features the same beech wood used on the workstations in the office areas on the floors above. No two angles of the six-story illuminated staircase rising through the atrium are alike (opposite). The LED pin lights in the stair treads recall those in the headlights of Audi automobiles.



Vitra chairs (below) seat about 100 in ground-floor café, exuding a refined industrial ambience with exposed ductwork and Zumtobel light fixtures. The atrium (opposite)—dubbed “the connector”—was carved out of a spec office building to link the show floor to the office floors and create a sense of drama. The famous Audi R8 racecar is displayed in the entrance to the Audi office floor (above). The office area beyond is outfitted with flexible workstations so the work areas can be easily reconfigured as the company expands.

Unlike its American counterparts, German-based auto company Volkswagen is going strong. But like American carmakers, its U.S. division, until recently, was headquartered in Detroit, a city beleaguered by the changes in consumer driving habits and the economic downturn. While some American companies have sought government bailouts to help them adapt to the changing marketplace, Volkswagen’s U.S. division bailed out of Detroit instead, moving its headquarters to a brand new building in suburban Washington, D.C., and aligning itself more closely with its U.S. customer base.

“We still have significant operations in Detroit, including several hundred people involved with technical activities, finance, and call centers there,” says David Geanacopoulos, executive vice president and general counsel for the Volkswagen Group of America. “But we wanted to establish our headquarters in a new locale to develop an identity apart from our competitors and to create our own corporate footprint closer to our customers, most of whom are concentrated on the coasts. Our new location is natural for us, partly for its proximity to Europe, but also because we’re in a dynamic economic environment, where there’s rapid growth, thriving schools systems, and infrastructure, and quality-of-life amenities, which make it an attractive place for employees to live and work.”

The vitality in the broader environs of the automaker’s new headquarters is just as evident in its new office interiors. Designed by the Washington, D.C., office of VOA Associates and housed in a new six-story, 186,000-sq.-ft. spec office building in Herndon, Va., the Volkswagen Group of America’s new headquarters “is all about inspired design,” says architect John Jessen, VOA’s managing principal on the project. “It reflects who the company is and reconnects it with the energy, environmental sensitivity, and youthfulness in design associated with VW and its other brands, including Audi.”





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VW Auto



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and fanatics across the USA.





To cultivate this sense of vibrant energy and to gain a clear sense of the automaker, the architects were invited on a secret journey to VW's European facilities before the company officially announced its plans to move. "The company recognized that the Detroit facility did not represent the image and goals of its brands, so instead of going to Auburn Hills, Mich., we were flown to its worldwide headquarters in Germany to meet its brand leaders and take a deep dive into how the brands are perceived and portrayed in Europe, where they're more comfortable with their image," says Pablo Quintano, VOA's associate principal on the project. "We got to see the brands as they are intended to be seen—with a very European flavor, very top-notch, and brand-centric, with an emphasis on marketing through architecture. The employees there aren't just car executives or salespeople, but car enthusiasts and believers that theirs are the best cars in the world, and that you and I should drive one because they will change our lives. In the United States, the facility said nothing about technological sophistication and sustainability. And aside from its programmatic needs, the company had a strategic need to move and press the restart button from a corporate identity point of view."

Armed with a fresh sense of clarity about the company's identity, but without a clear sense of who or how many people would move from its Detroit facility, the architects developed a vibrant new office that aptly showcases the company's two primary brands—VW and Audi—and reinforces a spirit of openness, transparency, and collaboration that was lacking in the company's former U.S. headquarters. Doing so, however, required some rather grand gestures on the part of the architects and a substantial financial investment on the part of the client.

Each office floor includes two pantry/bar/teaming areas on a raised platform for impromptu meetings or coffee breaks (above). Eros Swivel chairs by Philippe Starck for Kartell surround a round table. The blue color was used to accent these areas on the VW floors; red was used on the Audi floors. Bright red chairs (opposite) frame the illuminated VW "lollipop" logo in the VW show area on the ground floor. A collection of 1,500 photographs of happy VW owners, who have sent the company images of themselves and their cars over the course of the past 40 years, was mounted like a mural on the wall nearby. Emulating the talking car in VW commercials, an iconic black Beetle (below) was craned to a sixth-floor gallery space where it sits next to a white chair and microphone and speaks to visitors who stop by.





“The most important element we created was what came to be called ‘the connector,’” says Jessen. “Essentially, it is an atrium with a grand staircase that rises from the first floor to the top and connects every floor to the others. The company had to pay to remove portions of the existing floor plates to create this atrium, and there were serious life-safety codes that had to be met or exceeded to achieve it. But the fact that VW was willing to pay for it demonstrates how important it was as a symbol in underscoring its corporate identity and philosophy.”

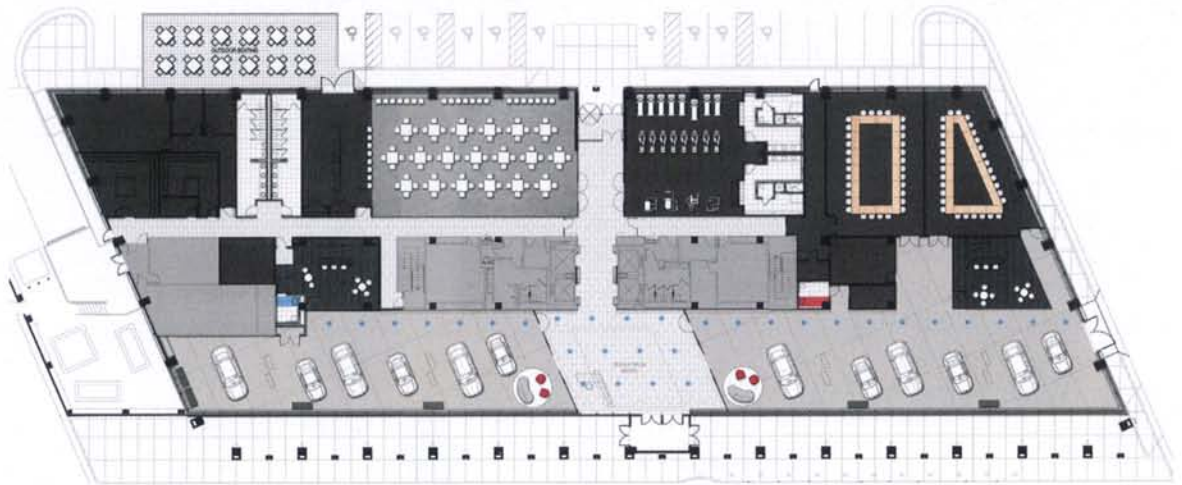
Another critical move in defining the space was to express what Quintano refers to as “a truth in materials.” “We didn’t want the space to look like a car,” he says, “but we wanted to develop a materials palette driven by those used in the company’s cars—wood, glass, aluminum. However, we employed them in the space in a way that’s very angular versus organic, so they celebrate the beauty of the cars as objects by allowing them to stand out rather than diluting them.”

A spirit of openness, energy, and forward-thinking design is evident immediately upon entering the building. Just past the doors on the ground floor on one side of the light-filled atrium, the Volkswagen show space, complete with colorful chairs and a backlit “lollipop” logo, presents a friendly, fun environment for its VW automobiles and “brand of the people,” says Jessen. On the other side, the Audi show space offers a sleek setting with hardwood floors and toned-down seating for its high-end vehicles and sophisticated brand. Interior glass walls permit access to views to the lively company café beyond, while the illuminated, transparent staircase rises in random, angular juts and turns, like a gigantic piece of sculpture through the sunny atrium to the office floors above, where transparent offices and comfortable workstations plus a mix of teaming, conference, and lounge areas offer an up-to-date, collaborative work environment.

“Being close to our customers in a dynamic setting, where we could attract both existing and new employees, was essential to restarting our business and renewing our commitment to the U.S. market,” says Geanacopoulos. So far, they appear to be off with a bang. ☐

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Herman Miller Abak workstations (below), customized Herman Miller Meridian storage units, and Interface flooring lend an almost residential quality to a typical work area. The office of Audi of America's executive president Johan deNysschen (opposite bottom) can be seen just beyond the entrance lobby, testifying to the spirit of transparency the company wanted to portray in this new headquarters (opposite, top right). One of two pantry/bar areas on each floor (opposite, top left), this space for casual snacks and impromptu meetings is characterized by a raised platform topped by a resin cantilevered bar—colored red for Audi, blue for Volkswagen—surrounded by bar stools.

