

DESIGNER

FORUM

Huntsman Architectural Group designs for flexibility with the expansion of Relativity's headquarters.

■ By Karie Vagedes



Gerflor's Creation 70 LVT in the color Oceanside was used in the West Lounge and is complemented by upcycled millwork and a branded neon sign.

Relativity, a global technology company, sought to expand the footprint of its Chicago headquarters to accommodate the company's rapid growth and support the evolving workstyles of its employees. The company already occupied three floors in a neo-classical architectural gem located in the city's financial district on South LaSalle Street. The scope of this project was to expand the firm's space by adding a fourth floor to accommodate the firm's growth.

The historically significant building features large floor plates allowing for virtually unrestricted flexibility and creativity in workplace planning. The challenge for Huntsman Architectural Group's design team was to leverage recent improvements made on the new floor for a speculative tenant and tie in the new 48,000-square-foot expansion—both in function and brand identity—to Relativity's existing facilities.

A dynamic software company prone to frequent departmental re-stacks and expansions, Relativity's goal for the project was to maximize flexibility, especially in the application of furniture and technology. Work groups should be able to grow, relocate and reconfigure their workspaces seamlessly, needing only limited assistance from facilities and IT personnel. Plug-and-play furniture systems, mobile components and wireless technology were employed to deliver an inherently adaptable design solution.

Leveraging materials and finishes already in place, including resilient flooring in the public lounge area, the design team was tasked with creating a dynamic and high-energy environ-

ment reflective of Relativity's strong visual brand identity. Key design elements were layered into the space: carpet, custom wallcoverings, accent lighting and playful yet functional furniture pieces—all complemented by an on-brand color scheme of red, oranges and teal—along with signage elements, including a neon logo to welcome visitors.

PLAN AND DESIGN

The floor's layout is arranged axially with public and collaborative spaces on both the east and west ends of the space and the main workspaces positioned in the center. These open and collaborative central work zones are made flexible with a "spine power system," allowing for sit-stand desks to be positioned and rotated according to the work styles and preferences of various groups or individual users.

A variety of alternative work areas are dispersed throughout the open plan to support other activities and work modes. Conference areas of all sizes, open and enclosed team meeting spaces, and phone rooms for privacy dot the office landscape.



The East Lounge continues the use of Gerflor's LVT, while the adjoining conference room makes use of Shaw Contract's Hexagon carpet tile collection in the color Social Dialogue to differentiate the communal spaces.

Amenity spaces, including a large central gathering area, round out the program. This colorful and flexible group space features sliding doors to adjacent conference rooms, which increase capacity for all-hands meetings and other functions.

To break up the orthogonal shape of the open office areas, a series of meeting, breakout and pantry functions are positioned in curvilinear shapes clad in vertical wood mullions. These visual features anchor the four corners of the large floorplan and help with orientation and wayfinding.

The design of the main open workspace focuses on employee comfort. Access to daylight is maximized by keeping the perimeter generally free of built spaces. The building's rough concrete ceilings are painted white to reflect daylight deeper into the floor plate.

In the workspaces, acoustical ceiling treatments help reduce noise, an element often addressed insufficiently or too late in the design of open plan offices.

To further mitigate noise, collaborative areas contain lighting fixtures with acoustical materials including Andlight Slab Series pendants and Vapor Echo acoustic pendant lighting by Luxxbox. Suspended ceilings are used in private conference rooms, offices and meeting rooms to ensure privacy.

A zen relaxation room is a private oasis for employees used for meditation, prayer or recharging and reflecting. The room helps employees be more productive, depending on their personal needs. The room is furnished with soothing grey BuzziZone space dividers by BuzziSpace and a range of comfortable upholstered reclining furniture by Paola Lenti and Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams Home Furnishings in subtle, muted tones.

RE-USE AND RE-IMAGINE

Built in two phases and on a fast-paced schedule, the project posed several challenges. The design solution sought to conserve resources and minimize costs by prioritizing the reuse and re-purposing of elements from the prior, recent build-out of a portion of the floor. One such inherited element is the Gerflor Creation Oceanside LVT flooring found in the space's entry and lounge area. Using the same product in similar, active spaces throughout the floor visually unified old and new construction. Rather than a constraint, the design team welcomed the challenge of this sustainable strategy and preserved many other existing elements, including partitions, ceilings and millwork,

integrating them seamlessly with new design features. The Gerflor Creation line contains 55% recycled content and is 100% recyclable.

FLOORING DESIGNED FOR FUNCTION

Flooring is used both as a star and as a supporting element in the project. The design approach for the project's flooring focused on the differentiation of space types, wayfinding and promoting movement through the space. Carpet colors and patterns were selected in order to add dimension and energy in some areas and were contrasted by softness and calm in others. While the design palette for the main workspace is mostly a muted one, touches of color are strategically placed to help visitors with orientation—a dynamic red palette on the east side and teal highlights on the west.

In the open workspaces, Shaw Contract's Advance carpet



This breakout space, one of Relativity's four, offers comfortable seating atop Shaw Contract's Track carpet tile collection in the Balance colorway.

tile line provides a grey ombre effect, with perimeter circulation paths in a patterned, lively design, while core and enclosed office areas use a subtle, less-patterned product to complement the dynamically arrayed furniture solution. The carpet pattern intentionally tapers as one advances deeper into the workspace to promote a more calming environment where employees perform heads-down work. Upholstered lounge chairs, benches and task chairs provide colorful accents. Since sustainability was a key goal, Advance carpet tile is used for the largest floor area/main workspace. The line features 44% post-industrial recycled content, is Cradle to Cradle Certified Silver, and can be collected and recycled through Shaw Contract's Environmental Guarantee program.



The informal conference room's decor includes a Modena Chesterfield ebony sofa and a Milano tufted chair by Restoration Hardware along with Shaw Contract's Primitive carpet collection in the color Myth.

The dynamic Shaw Contract Hexagon carpet tile boldly leads visitors into corner collaboration areas with a deconstructed geometric pattern that tightens into a solid red. In this location, the floor acts almost as an art piece, creating both visual interest and movement. Additionally, Hexagon draws attention to one of the more significant cultural moments in the office—the Pet Wall. Relativity's tradition of collecting and posting personal photos of employee pets, rendered here by the design team in a custom wallcovering, aims to connect colleagues to their life outside the office with their furry friends, many of whom drop by the office occasionally.

A STRONG CONNECTION

The expansion, located on the fifth floor of the building, enables Relativity to deploy a highly flexible and adaptable workplace concept, comprised of open work areas supported by spaces that promote team collaboration and heads-down work as well as meaningful amenities that support wellbeing and social interaction. Employees from Relativity's other three floors can often be found visiting the dynamic new space to collaborate and socialize with their peers—a testament to achieving the goal of integrating all workspaces in the building and maintaining a strong cultural connection among employees. ■



● THE AUTHOR

Karie Vagedes, senior associate with Huntsman Architectural Group, has collaborated with a wide variety of clients in the planning and design of office, retail, civic and healthcare sectors including Relativity, Golub, Sterling Bay, Analysis Group, Kaiser Permanente, Tishman Speyer and Google. She received a bachelor of science in interior design from the University of Cincinnati.



This collaborative space blends Social Dialogue and Plane Hex Red from Shaw Contract's Hexagon collection, showcasing the Coalesce Lagunitas sofas, Herman Miller polygon wire coffee tables and Mattiazzi She Said chair.