



Pandora: Culture Generates Form

Social and Architectural Developments at 125 Park Avenue
March 2014



As architects, when we consider the unique quality of Pandora's work environment, we see it from multiple perspectives. First, from a social understanding that recognizes both the individual and the collective; and second, from a view that considers productivity and efficiency. The NYC office has a capacity of 300 people, roughly 150 on each floor, which is a greater occupancy per floor than is typical for a floor plate this size. Pandora comfortably achieves this seat count through an open-office plan, but remains sensitive to the very real need for each individual's personal privacy. This is accomplished through the use of "phone booths" tiny to small private rooms for one or two person calls, discussions, or just quiet. These rooms offer different degrees of privacy. Some are behind the solid wood louver walls and have very small windows, some are nooks with glass doors, and others are glass volumes adjacent to the open office areas.



Top Pandora's understated elevator lobby is a counterpoint to the vibrant color of the office interior.

Center Phone booths offer a variety of private work environments.

Bottom Large doors in the louvered wall open to reveal additional work space.

A similar variety characterizes the conference rooms, both in their size and in the degree of privacy and connectivity. Acoustical isolation is a central issue to both privacy and productivity, and is addressed with sound absorptive materials, spatial organization, and sound-mitigating details. We are experiencing a generational cultural shift in privacy concerns, and the architecture of this workspace addresses these changes, always respecting the needs of each individual by giving people options. The nature of Pandora's work process is very fluid; with many different sized rooms necessary for meetings and conversations to hold the many different configurations of groups of people that flow into and out of the rooms, either spontaneously or according to an open access internal scheduling system.



Also unique to Pandora's culture is the degree of collective social experience. There are multiple spaces for music performances, large gatherings, and "all hands" meetings, along with a large variety of loosely structured spaces for social interaction. The grand stairs, or "bleachers", as we affectionately call them, provide one kind of venue for gathering, and the more structured "amphitheater" provides another. Celebrating the experience of enjoying music can be seen as a necessary antidote in an age of ear buds and headphones. The extraordinary amount of attention paid to the acoustical issues - as again, this is a central issue to both privacy and productivity - allows the music to be played without disturbing people who want to stay at their desks, and the spatial organization of the floors, while making these events visible, deliberately does not oblige employees to join in the fun. These spaces are also used for "all-hands" meetings and other large interactive gatherings, not solely performances.



Along with Pandora's unique spatial needs are many of the program attributes of advanced and successful internet companies, including generous pantries, booth seating, areas for yoga, ping pong and foosball, built-in benches, and many soft seating areas for casual interaction. The cultural values expressed by these spatial and architectural forms are valuable and compelling social developments.

Top The view through two glass volumes
Center The top of the grand stair terminates in an elegant conference room.
Bottom The contoured exterior of the amphitheater

Architectural Forms

ABA understood that the entry to Pandora's New York office should identify Pandora as a global company. We felt, however, that this should be expressed in a gentle fashion, balancing Pandora's ambition with its more relaxed office culture and West Coast roots. ABA created a bright, double height space, first visible through a low, compressed entry. This central space provides a physical connection between the two floors via the grand stair on one side and takes advantage of the full height of both floors – about 25 feet - with a large screen made of translucent circular discs, elegantly coupled with figured aluminum hooks backed by a blue theatrical scrim. These elements combine to create a screen of an indeterminate scale designed to deliberately obscure the existing architectural elements and create a first impression of grandeur. This surface also defines a space that begins to suggest something of the indeterminate scale of the internet space that is the home to Pandora Radio. At the same time, ABA felt it was important that the space remain warm and welcoming through the use of wood, sunlight, and finely scaled details. A large "tree" made of LED bulbs references the marquee lights of music venues and leads the eye upward, suggesting growth.



It is soon apparent as the visitor enters the space, that the historical construction of the existing 1920's midtown Manhattan building has been left exposed in a very deliberate way. The new insertions are sleek and highly finished with contemporary materials, in contrast to the rougher floors, columns and beams that evince a century of service. The faceted glass volumes percolate with graphic patterns and bright colors, overlaying a different technological world and time onto that of the existing building. These angular volumes invite multiple paths of movement around them, establishing a sequence of tight and loose spaces that are shaped to encourage casual interaction. This materiality also presents a more refined take on the industrial chic that remains prominent in the identity of many tech companies. The graphic patterns on the glass function as privacy screens and graphic identification. Inspired, in part, by equalizer patterns, they also affirm the identity of Pandora as a music company.



Opposite Top Looking up to the 20th floor from the entrance
Opposite Center The grand stair and raised platform gathering areas
Opposite Bottom A view of the double-height space from the top of the stairs
Top Meeting spaces are enclosed in glass volumes
Bottom Each area of the floor offers a variety of work spaces.



The unruly spaces that make up the ‘core’ of the existing building are organized and concealed behind a new decorative surface that features abstracted images of famous musical artists from different periods and genres. The regular intervals of carefully shaped wood slats reduces each image to vertical stripes of binary information and presents different visual effects depending on the viewer’s perspective and distance. The ability to see both the image, and simultaneously, the way the image can be abstracted into “information” of light and dark, is suggesting a transformation that is part of our digital age. This wall is a tour de force of craftsmanship and also contains the doorways to many rooms, some private phone booths barely visible and some large doors at the scale of the freight elevator.

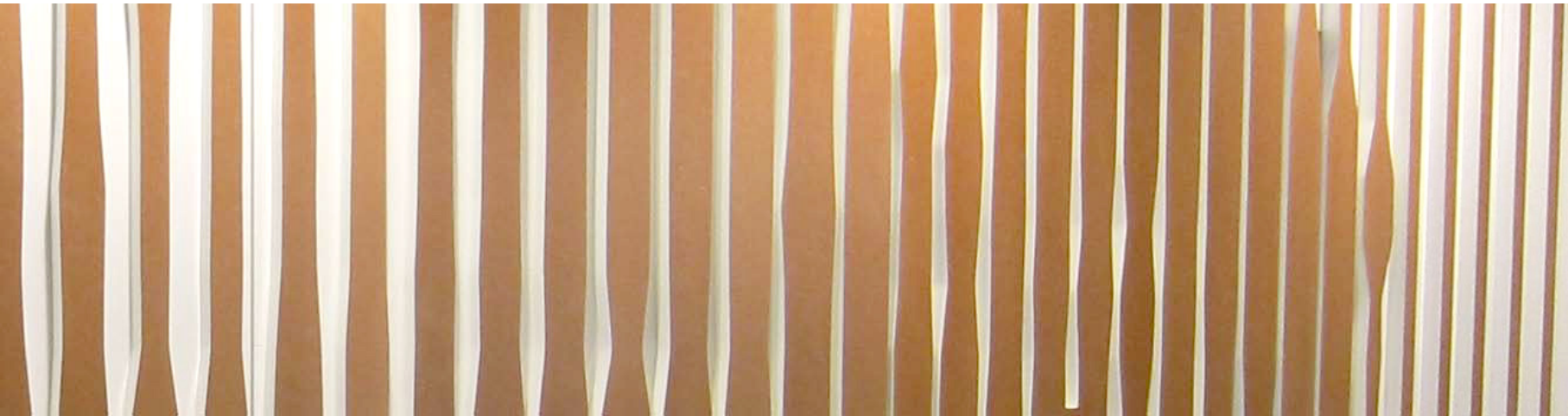
Construction and Craft

Thanks to an energetic, tech-savvy team of contractors and trades led by construction management firm B.R. Fries, these design gestures and spatial effects take on life with a high degree of precision and efficiency. Though B.R. Fries favors new technologies like CNC milling and building information modeling, it also stands for the bespoke and the handcrafted. With experience in building today’s free-form, millennial workplace – many in landmarked historic structures like this one – the construction team worked to achieve not only the degree of precision Pandora envisioned but to meet the basics of budget and schedule.

In particular, the wood millwork and glass partitions demanded careful oversight and control. The answer was to leverage some sophisticated construction processes, including the computer numeric controlled (CNC) milling, laser-guided tools for aligning the bespoke geometries, and full-scale digital templates for key details and assemblies.

In addition to the digital techniques, the project team used a proven organizational system that benefits high-tech workplace clients like Pandora. A close network of fabrication shops, wood and glass artisans and seasoned trades brought ideas old and new to the ABA design. B.R. Fries has a productive relationship with ABA – and the owner’s liaison, WG Project Management – which helped galvanize attention on executing Pandora’s true vision, rather than cost reduction through value engineering.

Combining technical and field experience with a clear business management approach, the building team used early planning and fast-tracking of long lead time items to ensure the shortest possible fit-out period and reduced labor needs. This level of rigor and internal sophistication is not common among all construction management teams, yet it is increasingly a requisite capability for competing in the high-tech workplace market. Most important, it enables Pandora the opportunity to express the unique quality of its culture and talent base into a fitting, compelling architectural form. In the end, the design and construction give physical form to Pandora’s peerless business model – but even more so, a social attitude that recognizes both the individual and the collective, the node and the network, and the community that makes and appreciates music.



Top A view along the length of the floor, spanning an entire city block
Center Super-sized abstracted images create a dynamic background
Bottom A detail of the lacquered wood slats
Opposite Page A detail of the custom acrylic screen and aluminum clips

Project Credits

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