

Channelling tranquillity and modernity

A high degree of flexibility, technology-driven design and cool colours are just some of the highlights of Melar Business Operations' new office. **Martina Said** meets architects **Edward Coppini** and **Elisa Fedeli** from Parallel Architects to find out all about it.

The clean, sharp aesthetic of the Melar Business Operations office, located within Dragonara Business Centre in St Julian's, creates a fresh, inviting and stimulating space without being stiff - which is just the direction that Edward Coppini and Elisa Fedeli, architects at Parallel Architects, were after for this project. Unpretentious yet design-driven, the space has the visual appeal, as well as the commodities and high technology standards required by a modern-day workspace.

From the get-go, the client wanted the office to revolve around the needs of the business's core operations - that of being a 24/7 support office. "This was the first aspect that the client highlighted in the brief, and much consideration was given to the overall design of the office as a result,"

the architects explain. "Some of their top requirements were that the working area is an open-plan space, and that the acoustics and lighting inside the office are suitable for a round-the-clock workplace that accommodates a number of employees."

Entrance to the office is through the lobby area, which also paves direct access to two independent meeting rooms. The main working area is a central, open-plan space, which includes two phone booths and a fully-equipped kitchen nearby. "The working area is the largest space in the office, with the kitchen on one side and lobby and meeting rooms on the other. The spaces are partitioned with glass and gypsum, which were spec'd to a certain decibel in order to also be completely soundproof."



The architects collaborated with a sound engineer from the initial stages of the project in order to achieve the desired level of soundproofing, all the way through to selecting materials and installing them on-site. "Acoustics were a central part of the project - since the working area is open-plan and there are quite a few desks, and their line of work is support, the client

wanted to minimise noise disruptions," they explain. "Through our consultation with the sound engineer and his own acoustic studies, we were able to select the appropriate services and materials that absorb as much sound as possible, including the acoustically-treated soffits, the desk partitions and the floor carpet, which is highly absorbent."

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Also a priority was the type of lighting used for this project - the architects explain that they wanted the transition of light between day and night to be as seamless as possible, and so the lighting system was designed with a certain degree of automation. "The lights installed in the soffits are evenly distributed spot lights which light up the circulation areas and were installed on dusk sensors, with the aim that once natural levels of light start to drop around dusk, they switch on automatically, maintaining a lux level of light throughout the day and night."

Additional lighting was used by way of individual floor lamps per every group of desks, so that each group can control the light intensity of that lamp as they wish. "With quite a number of people in the office, lighting requirements may differ significantly between individuals, and so we wanted to make this lighting as customisable as possible. The lamps have the ability to increase and decrease in intensity, and also go on and off automatically. In fact, all the lights installed in the office have presence sensors so that they turn off if no one is around. The lamps may also detect the presence of people in the office and so regulate the level of light and start to dim once people walk towards them. They're also completely mobile and can be moved elsewhere, together with the desks."

This modular aspect of the office was another central part of the design, making it a dynamic space that can easily be changed around to accommodate the office's needs. The services, for instance, were passed through free-standing power poles with a one-metre radius displacement range, each one supplying a cluster of desks. "The poles have a plug and play function, therefore it's easy for them to be moved from one area of the office to another if necessary. A number of additional points were also installed in the soffits, adding a certain degree of flexibility,

which the client wanted for this project," Edward and Elisa explain. "In fact, there aren't many fixed elements in the office - apart from some of the cabinets, certain office equipment and the phone booths, which were designed to be open phone booths rather than closed cubicles but made with acoustic felt to absorb all sound, many elements in the working area can change their place."

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While finished to extremely high standards, the office exudes a laid-back, light and casual look and feel, and there are many areas within it that double up as recreational spaces, such as the lobby, the kitchen and also the meeting rooms. "The style of the office is easy-going, and the client wanted it to feel homely and inviting rather than intimidating, especially since its open 24/7. That was the direction we took in terms of style, and so the choice of materials and colours reflected this and are easy on the eyes," the architects explain.

"For instance, the wood which we used for the furniture, which was designed by us, contracted to and custom-built by Dex Workspaces, is Birch plywood - it is not a rich variety, and the edges of the cabinets were kept exposed, giving it a raw look," they assert. "We also gave a lot of importance to the choice of colours. We opted for a neutral base using grey and white for the walls and ceilings, accompanied by a palette of blues and greens for the furniture."

The furniture was designed using a mix of wood and colour, and all the tones of blue and green leaned towards the grey scale, making the colours soft and soothing. "Colour was incorporated into the units and loose furniture, namely the benches, the lobby chairs, lockers and phone booths. For the kitchen, we used the same kind of wood as the rest of the office, also keeping the drawers un-edged, but the inside of the cupboards and drawers were finished in green for a surprising twist," say Edward and Elisa.

The same green was used for the kitchen counter top, backsplash and niche, which were clad in green Corian, creating a striking contrast against the all-wood kitchen. A section of the kitchen houses a soccer table, the area for which was fully clad with acoustic foam to contain the noise, while benches and chairs were added to the dining area, also making it an informal meeting space. "All the benches are incorporated with power and data, so employees can plug in and work from there too, and the same applies to



the meeting rooms."

The architects assert that, after six months of work, the client's satisfaction with the space was the ultimate reward, but it wasn't without its own trials. "One of the greatest challenges was coordinating the services and finishes, namely for the ceiling height, as we were quite limited with headroom, and fitting in all the services in the soffits while keeping in line with an overall soffit level was not

straightforward," they explain. "Installing the carpet was also no easy task, however, for the installer rather than for us! We designed the pattern of the carpet ourselves, and you can say that there was no obvious logic to it. It arrived for installation in individual tiles, some square and others diamond-shaped, and the pattern was quite tricky to follow, but the installers did a great job and the design worked out well in the end." **cc**