

The knitting machines are long gone; today, there is a light, bright and interactive decor in the Quality Knitting Building, where Slack, a multinational communications firm, has set up shop.

Where millennials stick to their high-tech knitting

From Toronto's 20th-century industrial heritage, 21st-century firm Slack finds a place to stitch together office communications



DAVE LEBLANC
THE ARCHITURIST
daveblanc@globeandmail.com

'New ideas require old buildings." It's a phrase repeated so often it's in danger of becoming a meaning-less chestnut, as in "a stitch in time saves nine."

But to some tenants, especially those who deal with very new stock-in-trade, there is still meaning to be found in the famous Jane Jacobs axiom.

Some, such as the almost four-year-old software developer Slack, take the phrase a step further: In addition to housing their offices in brick-and-beam heritage buildings in the downtown cores of Vancouver, San Francisco, Melbourne and other cities, it's company policy to co-exist with the ghosts of old products as well as old workers.

Therefore, in Toronto, Slack now calls the Quality Knitting Building home.

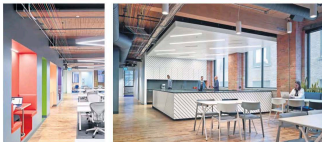
"They fell in love with it because it had a history to it of making something, something physical, not something so ephemeral," architect Heather Dubbedlam says. "Part of the company's values are craftsmanship [and] taking care in what you do."

Slack has developed a platform for workplace communication; a way to manage an office's various streams of information in a way that's meaningful to the individual user; a system that allows one to juggle various projects and even apps in one place. This means Slack's young work force spends a lot of time juggling virtual ones and zeros rather than making physical products.

But take a look around: Millennials are behind the farm-to-table trend, the resurgence of home pickling, craft beer and the Maker fairs. They've grown up in a virtual world and, rebellious by nature, they want to touch stuff. So, project manager Scott Sampson of Dubbedlam Architecture + Design ensured that the three full floors at 77 John St. were textured, colourful and supremely stroke-worthy.

The fifth-floor reception area, for instance, with its low, angled ceiling and assembled with such exacting standards, even the sprinkler heads are camouflaged: "It's a film with a photograph of the adjacent felt, isn't that amazing?" Ms. Dubbedlam observes. "Because you're not allowed to point sprinklers, but you're allowed to put film on it."

Continue to examine the long strips of felt and you'll spot thin, coloured cables racing along channels; these cables continue throughout the space — sometimes nosing down onto white walls, sometimes stapled to the wooden ceiling beams — as a way to both symbolically tie the various office areas together and to pay tribute to the long lines of yarn that once came down to feed



To get the job done, Slack requires lots of wiring — some is hidden beneath felt ceiling strips, top, while coloured cables have been incorporated into the ceiling decor. Unlike other high-tech offices that may provide games, Slack's office was purposely designed for work — staff are expected to have a life outside the office. PHOTOS BY SARA CA.

of Kathryn Walter of Felt Studios, the offcuts were created by hand and assembled with such exacting standards, even the sprinkler heads are camouflaged: "It's a film with a photograph of the adjacent felt, isn't that amazing?" Ms. Dubbedlam observes. "Because you're not allowed to point sprinklers, but you're allowed to put film on it."

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industrial knitting machines. It doesn't hurt that Slack manages different "threads of communication," says Ms. Dubbedlam said. "You'll see, all over the place, there are these linear geometries of lines everywhere, and it starts here."

The cables, in orange, red, blues and greens, while paying tribute to Slack's company colours, also establish a kind of map-like key or legend to the space: take a walk, and you'll find cool little employee cubicles carved out of walls painted in the same shades, while chairs upholstered in the same reds or blues, or you'll notice the coloured piping on a sofa or the soundproofing fabric of a meeting room (which are cheekily named Knit, Parl, Jacquard and so on). You'll also find a lot of grey to

"neutralize" all of the orange-yellow found on the original wooden ceilings, floors, and brick walls. What you won't find at Slack are pool tables, foosball, mini-golf or massage chairs as with other high-tech firms, Ms. Dubbedlam says. "They're serious about people working hard when they're there during the day and then going home and having a life; that's one thing they told us from the very beginning."

The rapidly expanding company also told the Dubbedlam team that, besides wanting things such as breakout areas or "many individual quiet spaces," its Workspace Manifesto (as penned by director of global facilities Deano Roberts), encourages the use of "local designers and artists to make each office

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Heather Dubbedlam
Toronto architect on why high-tech firm Slack set up shop in the former Quality Knitting Building

reflective of Slack's mission and the local community." So, some furniture was supplied by Derek McLeod Design Inc., the large, changeable pegboards were custom-filled by Audier Kozak and the lighting — much of it recalling the zig-zag slith path on sewing machines — was done by lighting designer Marcel Dion.

Coffee is a big deal at Slack. In addition to the commercial espresso machines found in small employee kitchen areas, Dubbedlam has dedicated a massive amount of real estate to the mighty bean: on the third floor is a sleek, Scandinavian-inspired café with acres of counter space (complete with a knock box for grounds) and banquet seating for employees.

"Starting in Vancouver and San Francisco, it seems to be trickling throughout the entire global office," office co-ordinator Lauren Woodhead says of Slack's caffeine obsession. "And we order from local roasters." When Slack Toronto needs a certain number of employees, there's talk of hiring a barista to provide sustenance. And because Dubbedlam thinks sustainably, the former tenant's walls were left where possible, and products that use recycled materials, such as Interface's fuzzy carpet tiles made from old fishing nets, were sourced.

While the thrumming of 20th-century knitting machines is long gone, Slack's lightly tailored new Toronto operation loudly trumpets what tech firms will look like well into the 21st.

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