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(M)Arch. strategic architecture's transformation of a Manhattan parking garage into the offices of the multicultural design firm NiCE is quintessentially New York

By Linda Burnett



Public and private spaces in NiCE's 6,000-sq. ft. loft are designated by the changing floor colors and a light curtain at reception (above), while to-die-for views of Manhattan can be enjoyed from president Davide Nicosia's office, raised a few feet above the main space (left). The cluster workstations designed by (M)Arch. with Nicosia's input, give designers privacy and the opportunity to collaborate (opposite).



With an address at West 52nd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues—a few blocks off the main arteries of workday traffic—it's easy to wonder about the draw behind the location of NiCE, a multicultural graphic design firm with a burgeoning client list. But step inside what once was a parking garage and the allure is readily apparent. Though located only eight stories up on the top floor of a low-rise structure, NiCE still rises above the surrounding buildings off the main strip of towering skyscrapers, resulting in spectacular panoramic views. The 6,000-sq. ft. loft space also includes an open steel staircase to a second floor conference room and a roof deck beside a looming water tower. In the middle of Manhattan, a find like this is almost impossible to imagine—until a creative young firm like (M)Arch. strategic architecture transforms it into the reality of a high-tech yet comfortable professional space.

President and creative director Davide Nicosia, who was born in Milan and moved to New York in 1988, founded NiCE in 1994 with a workforce of 20 designers. To cater to clients headquartered all over the world, Nicosia shaped his firm around a bastion of international talents. The countries his employees hail from include Holland, France, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Argentina. High-profile clients include those as diverse as Bath & Body Works, Calvin Klein, Tiffany & Co., and the venerable *New York Times*, and projects range from the packaging on perfume bottles to corporate identities and environments.

As NiCE became a fixture in its field (an additional office is in Madrid), Nicosia called on an old college acquaintance, (M)Arch. principal Todd Erlandson, to help his firm create its own packaging in the form of a New York headquarters. Along with his marketing partner Sherri Hoffman, Erlandson's design strategy conceptualizes a space in terms of how it affects the client's business. "Davide wanted a flexible space for the designers to work in," says Hoffman. "And to communicate NiCE's design values to clients." All parties agree that the success of this project emerged from the collaboration on the language of the design. Nicosia examined every detail of the design before a hammer was raised.

"This is a workspace for the next century," says Erlandson. "But classic and enduring." The classic side was fulfilled with raw materials: steel, homosote on the walls, and soft curtains to block sunlight pouring through the glorious windows. The future aspect is found in the workstations, which Erlandson designed from Nicosia's requirements. Employees can relocate to any cluster by moving a roll cart that holds their materials. Since 20 projects might be in the works at the same time, designers might have to roll over to a neighboring cluster on short notice.

Entering the NiCE office is like entering a relaxing but oddly fun zone. It's a peaceful atmosphere with an edge of life. A telescope spies on the city from



The orange roll cart holds a designer's materials and can be transported to another desk at a moment's notice. The touches of colors and a stand-alone stairway welded on site help pull this space together into a single unit.

the reception window. For Nicosia's children, who come to play in the office after school, there is a basket of toys and a playroom tucked into their father's office. Madonna's music plays over speakers. The kitchen is down-home comforting in its ordinariness. And forget mahogany; the conference room furniture consists of a Ping-Pong table and makeshift chairs with wheels on the bottom for speed racing.

The 6,000 generous sq. ft. are divided among 28 employees. Rooftop barbeques are a commonplace lunch time event as are company parties for 300 guests. And generally by seven o' clock in the evening employees are already home. "I like to treat people how I want to be treated," says Nicosia. Unusual? For a New York City design firm it is.

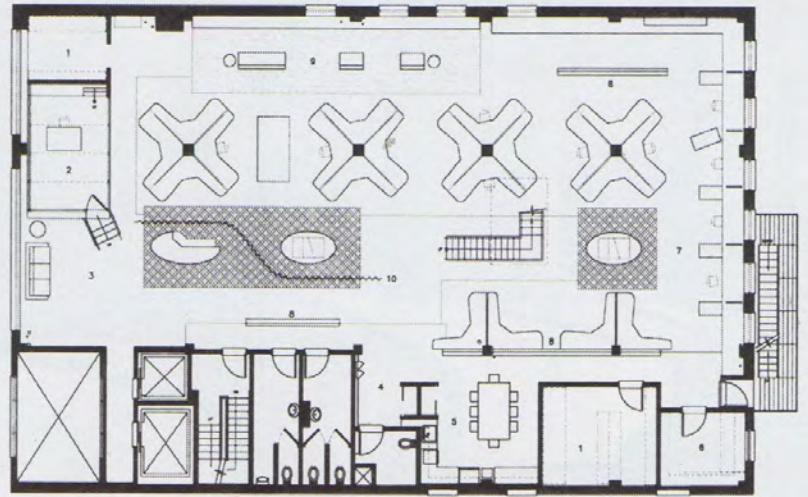
Nicosia's private office organizes the space. It stands above the rest of the loft beside reception, with windows as walls so Nicosia can easily survey the activities in the main space. Like the office itself, the stairs leading to the private doorway are also stand-alone. Throughout the space, elements are treated as independent pieces of furniture. The stairs, which were welded together on location from industrial steel, hang from the ceiling. "It holds together as a total project," says Erlandson. "It's not just a room of furniture."

The floor is color-coded, with different colored finishes indicating public versus private zones. These are important demarcations in a wide open loft space that could potentially be overwhelming in its lack of privacy. A curtain serves to block light that may throw a glare onto monitors and also separates the ongoings from the public reception.

Apparently, others have found this space equally as appealing as a quintessentially New York office. ABC shot scenes for the original television movie *Mary and Rhoda* here, as did the NBC television series *Law and Order*.

In person or through the camera lens, it's worth a lingering peek. ☐

Project Summary



Who

Project: NiCE Ltd. office space. **Client:** NiCE Ltd. **Architect:** (M)Arch. strategic architectures. **Architect of record:** Allen + Killcoyne Architects. **Structural engineer:** Goodkind+O'dea Inc. **General contractor:** The Construction Co. **Lighting designer:** RL Design Associates Inc. **Photographer:** Whitney Cox Photographer.

What

Wallcoverings: Homosote. **Flooring:** Garon Products Inc. **Carpet/carpet tile:** Fraser, Gold Carpet Corp. **Lighting:** Fabulux Inc. **Window frames, Wall systems:** Adanlock Custom Architectural Walls. **Window treatments:** Clear Design. **Workstations:** Anko Inc. **Files:** Vitra. **Shelving:** Able Steel Equipment Co. Inc. **Architectural woodworking:** Anko Inc.

Where

Location: New York, NY. **Total floor area:** 6,000 sq. ft. **No. of floors:** 1, plus penthouse. **Total staff size:** 30.