

# Light touch

Two recent projects demonstrate Gregory Phillips' skill at creating laid-back minimalist interiors out of previously overlooked space, says **Emma Firmin**

**After 10 years** of running your own design practice, the last thing you're likely to say would be 'Now is the beginning'. But that is exactly how Gregory Phillips describes his present situation. This is an architect who is just as comfortable coming up with design concepts for high-street brands as he is with one-off luxury houses with serious budgets. And as styles flow back and forth, Phillips' relaxed minimalism is finding a new home in the workplace.

The changing working environment is a subject that is well documented in the design media, but often overlooked are the small-scale projects which are style-influenced but refuse to

be dominated by architectural dogmas.

Phillips – who cites the gorgeous Oriental minimalism of Tadao Ando as a key inspiration – spent his early years working for both David Chipperfield and Julian Wickham, gaining extensive experience in galleries, restaurants, residential and office projects, leaving him with a desire and ability to cross-fertilise design concepts.

One of Phillips' largest ventures has been for Coffee Republic, which, because of its sheer volume, Phillips describes as 'a real adrenalin-rush job'. The cafe chain was one of the leaders in the coffee revolution that has taken place over



the past few years, and for Phillips it meant 'making coffee bars cool and elegant, specifying materials that weren't usually used – stone floors, solid cherry chairs for example'. The modern but personalised formula was successful and brought the cafe concept right up to date.

Two of Phillips' latest projects have involved production companies that called upon the architect's pragmatic skills to come up with something elegantly different but ultimately practical, and without limitless budgets. In both instances Phillips played with the available space and light to create environments that are exposed without feeling embarrassingly naked. Stark



Above, the shifting of the entrance allowed a glass atrium to open up the space at Stark Productions. Left, the production company's interior allows for privacy and translucency. Facing page, the height of the atrium creates a dramatic yet functional space



## Making a turn-of-the-century building with four crannies to every nook workable, clean, spacious and with lots of light took quite a lot of readjusting

Productions recently bought a building in Bromley Place, west London, after the previous owners were told by the fire service that the even the slimmest of rabbits wouldn't be able to navigate the building's awkward warren of corridors and exits.

Stark managing director Steven Gash says: 'The place was full of half-landings, corridors and small offices where there was no room for more than half a desk.' Hardly ergonomic and defiantly anti-design. According to Gash, the brief for the architect was simple: 'Make it workable, clean and spacious – with lots of light.' It may sound easy, but in a turn-of-the-century building that for

every nook there were four crannies, it took quite a bit of readjusting. The most significant structural change was moving the entrance to one side and replacing it with a glazed atrium that focuses what are essentially three buildings into a central space. The atrium has the wow factor and yet doesn't appear gimmicky; it simply pulls together the existing structure and lets natural daylight do the rest. With a height of approximately 8m to exploit, the atrium provides the freestyle space needed by production companies. Stark uses the space for wardrobe calls, castings and other activities that demand both a physical and social area.

While the atrium provides a clear design feature, as Gash points out: 'In our line of business it's very important not to flaunt your wealth and success – you don't want to bowl your clients over too much.' Production companies have a more frontline profile, reflected in more restrained interiors; but that doesn't mean to say that the space didn't need an identity.

Phillips was chosen, according to Gash, because 'although his plans were expensive, the reconfiguration was attractive rather than a patch-up of the existing buildings – and what we've got now is something we can undeniably call our



Above and left, at The Quarry, an oak bench is used to architecturally define the space running through the building



**The Stark building is an oasis of white walls, discreet Kreon light fittings and simple walls of storage... this is clean but liveable modernism**

own'. Over half the budget of approximately £400,000 was assigned to structural work, so Phillips' ability to create whole interiors through his own furniture designs came in handy – his experience working for David Chipperfield had already blurred the lines between furniture and architecture. Although his ultimate feeling is 'we don't do products, we do materials', the possibility of an independent furniture brand sometime in the future isn't dismissed.

At Stark Productions, the everyday, robust

features were produced in plywood, while meeting rooms and managers were treated to elm. The furniture is practical and unfussy – simple walls of storage and sizeable desking to meet the demands of the staff.

Apart from an unidentified, colourful picture brought by the company from its old premises, the building is an egalitarian oasis of clean white walls, fretted glass screens and recessed wall lights and discreet ceiling fittings from Kreon. Only an office at the top of building, with a

conservatory view over the rooftops, gives in to the inherent hierarchy of the company. This is clean but ultimately liveable modernism.

At The Quarry, a film-production editing suite, on Soho's Brewer Street, the same domestic minimalist qualities have transformed a compact space in to a light workplace, where clean lines translate into an atmosphere of calm. Putting in a set of steps leading down from the reception, Phillips' efforts again concentrated on a central area which, as in the Stark Productions building,

Above, Phillips' interior for Bagelmania on Charing Cross, London. Right, The Scarlet Nail Bar is another reflection of Phillips' workable modernist style





## The spaces Phillips creates aren't closed to customisation and his brand of minimalism can be easily fused with a busy workplace

had previously been no more than a waste of space.

Dominating the area is one of Phillips' architectural pieces of furniture – a solid oak bench that runs the length of the area. Divided into three, the piece provides straightforward bench seating, an upholstered section and standing-height desk space. The ribbon effect creates a fluid feel and, although it initially looks like a triumph of form over function, the space allows for impromptu meetings and, Phillips

believes, 'adds to the stature of the interior'. Phillips has also provided a system of storage in plywood for the company's editing suites that, while containing enough hi-tech equipment to shame NASA, doesn't veer in to stark functionality.

Although Phillips has a clear style and a desire 'to make an impact', the spaces that he has created aren't closed to customisation, and his brand of minimalism is one that can be easily fused with the activities of a busy workplace.

Over the coming months Phillips will see his portfolio expand even more. Along with ongoing retail projects for Scarlet Nails and Bagelmania, and four luxury apartments in Shoreditch (loosely themed around Prada, Gucci, Issey Miyake and Loft – not quite sure what happened to the fashion guru on the last one!), an 83-bedroomed, five-star hotel and an extensive housing development in Ireland are under way.

When he thinks minimal, Phillips is not thinking about his work load **FX**



Top left, the lobby space created for Rose Hackney Barber. Left, keeping it simple at the Sprovieri Gallery in London. Above, plans for the luxury apartments in Shoreditch