



TAKE NOTE

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Whether in his pioneering tech workplaces
with Studio O+A or through a new
range of writable furniture, Primo Orpilla
wants workers to capture inspiration
wherever it strikes

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Words by Helen Parlon

Portraits by Ilka & Franz



Designer Primo Orpilla's name first comes up in a fancy caff in Clerkenwell while I'm sat having breakfast with the IdeaPaint team, a few months ahead of Clerkenwell Design Week (CDW). And so begins the Anglo-American collaboration that resulted in this cover story – with a little Austro-German cover shoot contribution for good measure.

Orpilla – who is best known for heading up San Francisco's Studio O+A, together with Verda Alexander – has designed a range of furniture harnessing IdeaPaint's writable surface technology and it's, if you'll pardon the pun, pretty much rewriting the rules as far as where and how people can work and generate ideas in the workplace.

He arrives on the red-eye on a midweek morning in London (he prefers them to afternoon flights). The UK capital is a key stop-off before heading to Venice for the opening week of the Architecture Biennale. As we perch on bar stools on IdeaPaint's stand in the Project area of CDW to begin our interview session, he springs into life: "We think that in the same way you can define space by painting on a wall, you can now define space with the whiteboards."

*"You can set up a workspace,
an environment for creativity,
anywhere you want"*

Orpilla's new range starts from a more or less traditional vertical board, known as Hive, but its Pivot partner can swing around to form a horizontal surface for writing on at the press of a button. "You can create separation utilising these pieces," says Orpilla. "The one that morphs into a tabletop, it wasn't part of the brief but we just thought that if you flip it, would you still write on it? And the answer would probably be yes."

The designers – Orpilla was working with Brooklyn furniture maker Uhuru – had to come up with a stable enough hinge, of course, so the user can lock it. "It's pretty intuitive – it clicks and locks into place so you can go from vertical to horizontal pretty quickly. You can just take your ideas and go horizontal with it. Line 'em up, make a big long table, surround yourself with them." He explains: "The whole idea was boundary-less work, so you can take this and you can set up a workplace, an environment for creativity anywhere you want." And, it's not just plain white that the surface comes in, but birch wood too, to tap in to the residential aesthetic that's so popular right now.

Another part of the collection is the ThinkTank Mobile, a camper van, which had more unusual inspiration. Orpilla asks: "Are you guys familiar with Burning Man?" Of course we are. The annual festival is either an ecological "leave no trace" spiritual nirvana or a load of trustafarians ☺

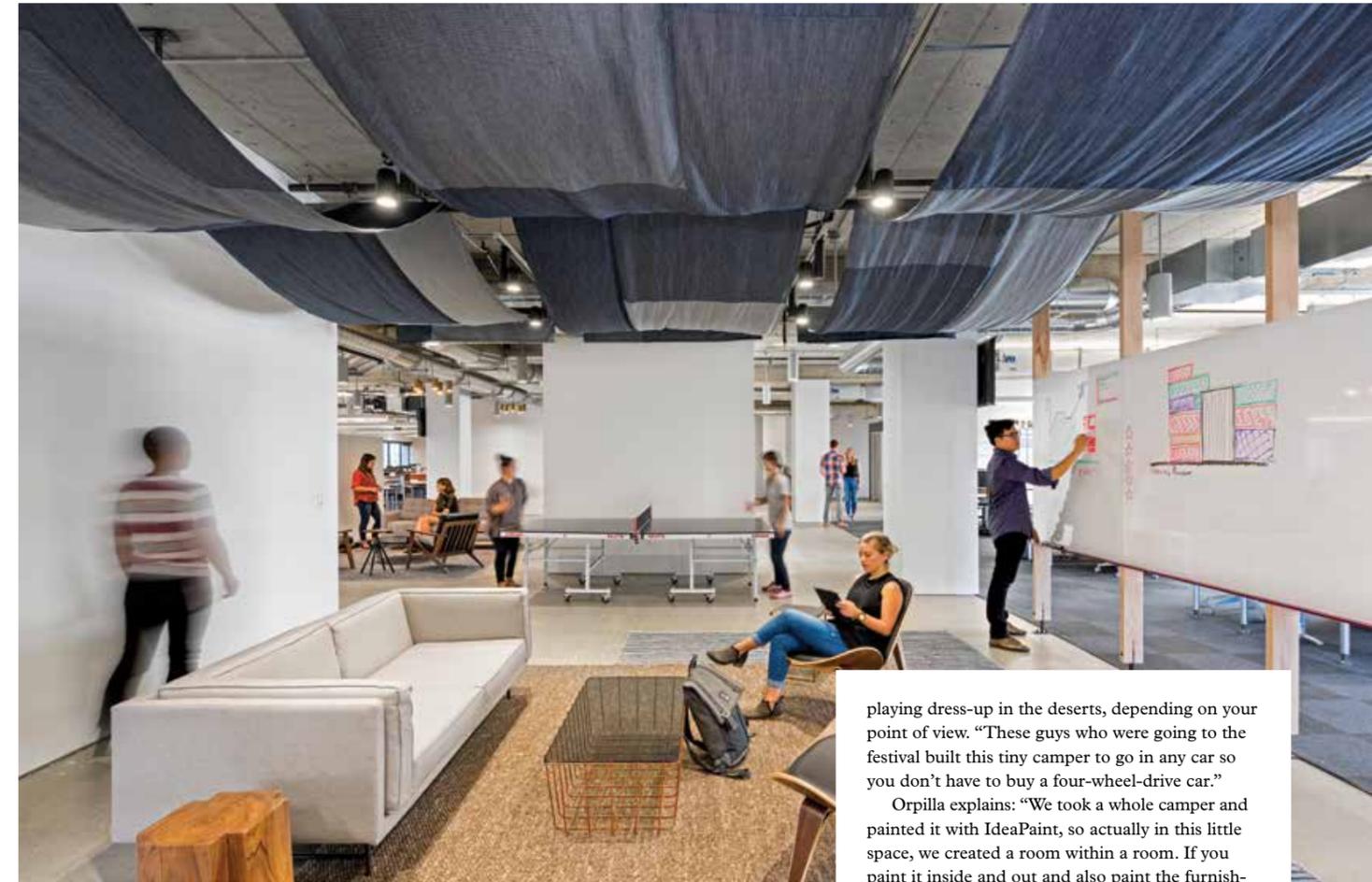


All photographs: Jasper Samdad



LEFT IdeaPaint surfaces in use in O+A's offices for tech firm Meraki

ABOVE The ThinkTank Mobile camper acts as a go-anywhere ideas room



TOP Studio O+A gave Yelp's city offices the feel of a tech campus

ABOVE ThinkTank Mobile's flexibility has proved appealing to companies

playing dress-up in the deserts, depending on your point of view. "These guys who were going to the festival built this tiny camper to go in any car so you don't have to buy a four-wheel-drive car."

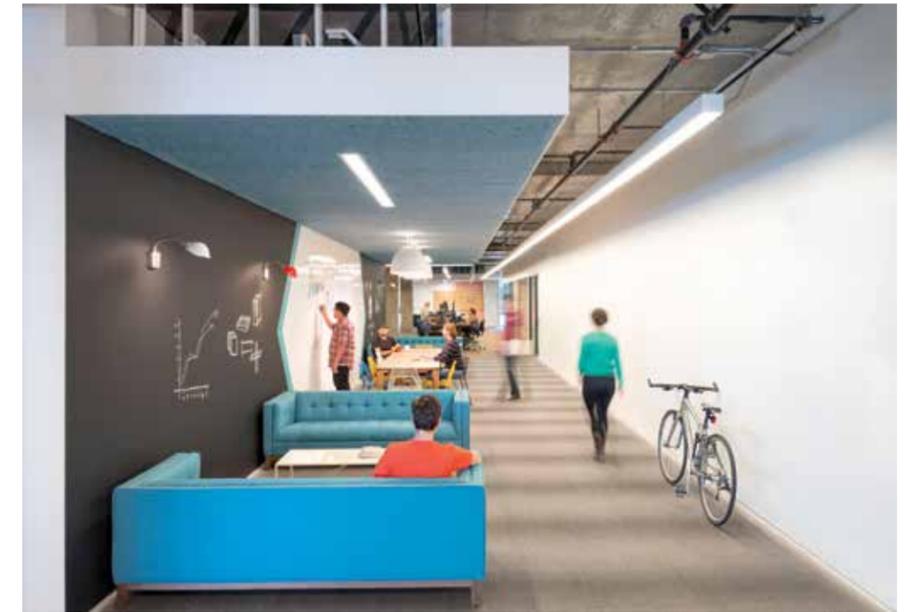
Orpilla explains: "We took a whole camper and painted it with IdeaPaint, so actually in this little space, we created a room within a room. If you paint it inside and out and also paint the furnishings then you can have a conference room or a classroom-type setting that are all part of the camper. You can have several of them within an office space. We have lots of companies interested in buying these, because it's expensive to do built out, whereas you can set out a couple of these instead."

Studio O+A began life in 1992, after Orpilla, who graduated in interior design from San Jose State University, had been working at multidisciplinary firm Design Mark. The practice's latest news is that it has won the Cooper Hewitt Award. This national design award recognises, Orpilla says, not just Studio O+A's work (of some quarter of a century standing) but also the significance of workplace design as a force to promote civic engagement as well as productivity.

Studio O+A has shaped the look and feel of numerous workplaces, particularly in the tech sector. When cloud control wireless systems provider Meraki was taken over by software giant Cisco, it still wanted to be able to hang onto its identity, even when it moved into much larger headquarters in 2013. Studio O+A managed to create "pockets of intimacy" to signify Meraki's close-knit culture – even within the 10,200sq m space – by providing smaller spaces such as yurts for two or three people, sunken seating areas, ©

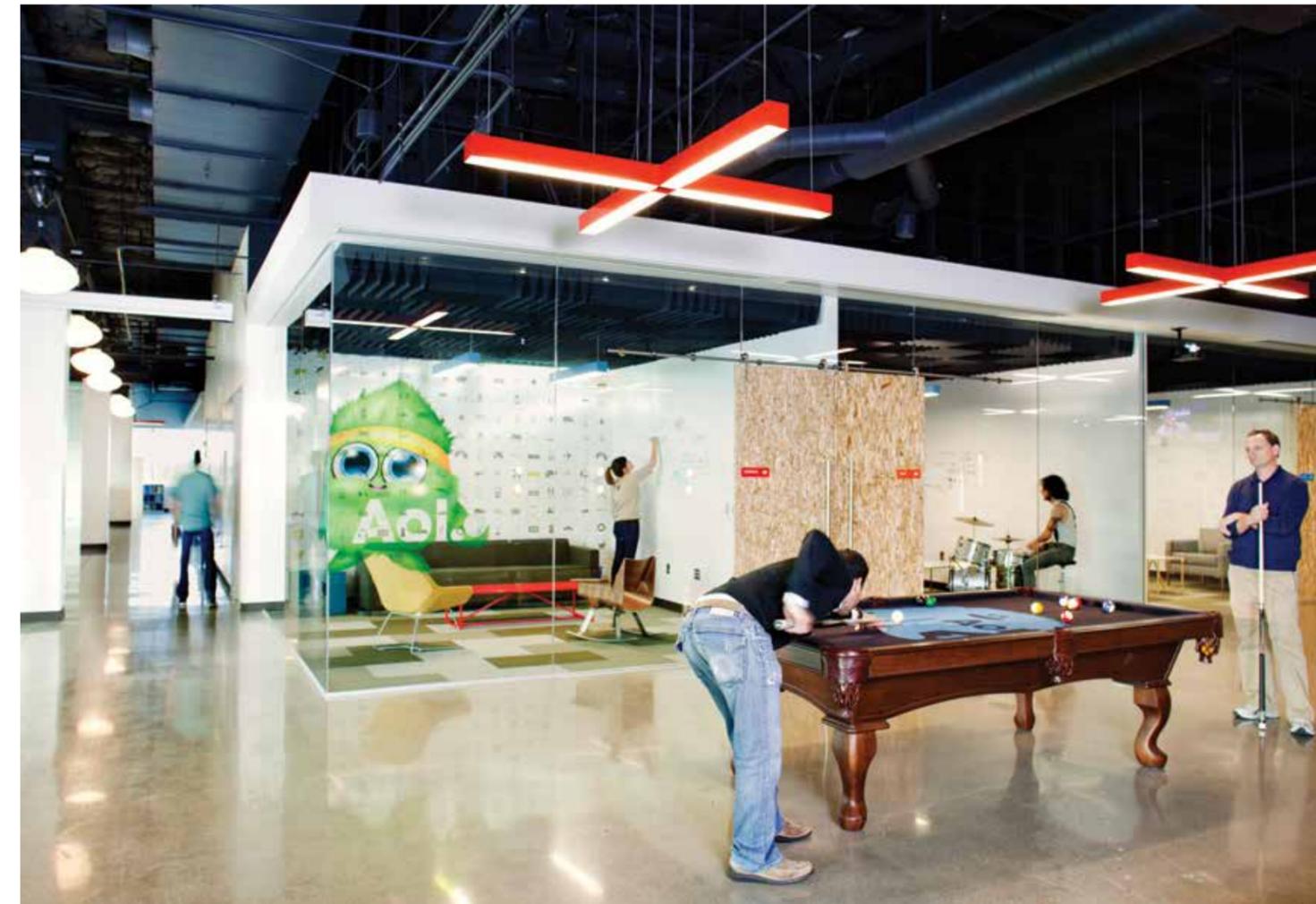
outdoor seating and kitchen cabanas. For Yelp's move to eight floors in a building in San Francisco's financial district, O+A managed to replicate the feel of a tech campus through the liberal sprinkling of amenities throughout the floors. The reception, which mimics a general store, complete with merchandise displays, jars of sweets and even a till, is on the ninth floor. Below that, a much sought-after coffee bar is a magnet for employees from the floors above and below, while all the floors boast custom spaces and informal meeting areas. The idea is for employees to feel they "own" every floor – not just the one where their workstation is.

Orpilla also headed up the team for a project for AOL where Studio O+A restored a space to – in its own words – "a clean, white canvas": stripping the walls to reveal the structure and creating an aesthetic of transparency in keeping with the company's corporate culture. The desire for transparency was also a priority at electronic writing tool producer Evernote. Flexibility of space was paramount, with the reception area doubling up as a coffee area and a staircase, with cushioned seating providing enough space for town hall meetings. The town hall concept is a key part of AOL, dubbed "part kitchen, part play space, part kick-back area". Says Orpilla: "You might do a town hall or a big central meeting space



ABOVE Meraki's offices offer opportunities for spontaneous inspiration

BELOW Studio O+A's open town hall area for AOL zones work and play



RIGHT Studio O+A took AOL's offices back to a "clean white canvas"

BELOW IdeaPaint is used as part of the flexible design for Yelp's offices



for food, lectures. Maybe paint the walls in the town hall with whiteboard too."

So, did the recently designed range of furniture come about in part by what was being demanded in this industry? "Mostly in tech, it's constantly innovate – you can't control where somebody's having a serendipitous moment or a brainstorming idea. You need to have a place to do it. We typically coat our corridors in IdeaPaint. You can just jot your idea down, take a picture and send it to your colleagues; you just need a surface you can write on. That's why it's so prevalent in the Valley – we use it a lot. It's this frictionless idea, the ability to iterate quickly," says Orpilla.

He adds: "Your workday ritual can vary from day to day. We need to make sure that those environments consider the way people want to work – whether that's in a relaxed position, working standing up, or in the lunch area. It doesn't really matter."

So where does he personally find the ideas flow best? "It's well documented I like to go to junkyards and salvage yards and walk around. I like to have all kinds of stuff that is my inspiration, that I pin up or tape to the wall, but it's also just as simple as going around the block or somewhere to help the creative juices get going." Orpilla's profile on Studio O+A's website supports this. "I'm a hoarder," he states. "I've been told I'm in need of an intervention. I hang onto things because I think I'll need them in the future."

Movement is a big part of the office, he says, and writable surfaces, whether vertical or horizontal, lend themselves to having that crucial conversation in the hallway – you can write the results down. Orpilla sums up the project, and indeed his whole approach to creating inspiring workplaces, as an "endless iteration to design activity". ■

