Spare Change

A less-is-more aesthetic by Resistance Design establishes
NetAid's identity and reinforces its humanitarian values

By Diana Mosher
Photography by Mark Loette and Eric Mailaender

Employee productivity is paramount at the New York City offices of NetAid, a humanitarian, non-profit organization battling world poverty and hunger. So good design—the kind that attracts the best people and makes them want to come to the office on Saturday—was a key requirement when Manhattan-based Resistance Design was hired to create a new Fifth Avenue headquarters for the organization.

"These are good people doing good work," says Eric Mailaender, principal of Resistance Design in New York. "They're part of the current discourse of the world." His firm responded by designing a spare yet engaging environment for the primarily youthful workforce. There are plenty of places for employees to sit and chat as well as inviting conference rooms and private nooks for phone calls, but these comforts are balanced by a feeling of bareness that doesn't compete with the serious nature of NetAid's mission. "The main thing was to not break a certain level of luxury," explains Mailaender. "In this setting luxe would have been absurd."

NetAid was formed as a public-private partnership between the United Nations Development Program and Cisco Systems with a mission of raising public awareness and action in the fight against extreme poverty. It was launched in October 1999 with a series of high-profile rock concerts in New York, London, and Geneva. Up until NetAid's move to Fifth Avenue, the organization had no well-defined headquarters, and it resided in a number of offices scattered around San Francisco, New York, and Bonn, Germany. During the site search, other Manhattan locations with more personality (like old wood floors and huge windows) were passed over in favor of the Fifth Avenue location which Mailaender describes as banal. But, as he points out, the fact that the space was a concrete box with no drama became an advantage because it afforded NetAid an empty canvas and the opportunity to figure out the image it wanted to project. The completely raw space—just a concrete slab and plaster—offered financial benefits as well, because the shell was fairly clean. "It wasn't an old dilapidated space that would eat up the budget," explains Mailaender.

Despite its modest design budget, NetAid's New York headquarters is a highly engaging space whose spareness reinforces the organization's humanitarian mission (opposite). A generous open "street" is dominated by a steel-clad structure containing NetAid.org's server (above).

When Resistance Design came on board, NetAid's president, David Morrison, wasn't sure what direction he wanted the design to take, but he knew he didn't want to see mahogany panels or other elements synonymous with money. "Eric continually pushed and stretched us to see the possibility of what could be accomplished on our tight budget. We're very happy," says Morrison. "He didn't compromise on the fundamentals of design. But, the spare aesthetic mirrors our culture of using resources wisely.

"NetAid is a knowledge organization, and the design program facilitates a working environment in which people can exchange knowledge seamlessly," Morrison adds. "We also stand for being transparent and efficient." These qualities have been replicated in the design, which is basically one big, open space with a single office. The non-hierarchical work environment can accommodate 30 people. Originally it was going to be entirely open plan, but a glass-walled corner office was added for Morrison. "He receives major dignitaries and United Nations people who want to visit in his office, not in a conference room," explains Mailaender. A glass wall allows visual contact with those outside the office while affording acoustical privacy.

In keeping with the basic design solution, which was to leave things open and not build too much, Mailaender opted for a translucent panelite wall rather than drywall. Hung from a soffit and raised five inches from the floor on a metal frame, it possesses a floating quality against a heavy, concrete structure. "It's really successful," says Mailaender. The panelite is the only luxury material in the space, but it appears more industrial and low-budget than glass, which was first considered for the long wall that introduces NetAid's offices to visitors. Mailaender also made efficient use of the infrastructure. Rather than installing a drop ceiling, he created compelling new elements by attaching lights to the conduits. Money was also saved on the poured, self-leveling concrete floor applied to the existing slab.

"This is a great place to work, and it says something about who we are as an organization," says Morrison. "Motivated" is one adjective that immediately comes to mind, given the organization's desire to see world poverty cut in half by 2015. NetAid's flagship online program has made it easy for ordinary people to volunteer in a number of areas including research, writing, programming, and networking without even leaving home. NetAid's New York employees, on the other hand, can't wait to get to the office. **C**

The space is organized into three simple linear zones: workstations at the windowed perimeter (opposite), service and gathering spaces within the opposite bay, and internal circulation between them. The panelite wall, the project's one luxury material, was selected because of its industrial and low-budget appearance (above).
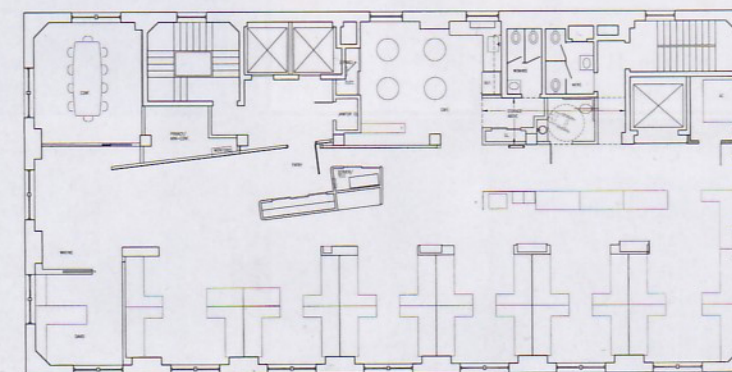
Project Summary

Who

Client: NetAid, David Morrison, president. **Architect, interior designer, lighting designer, structural/mechanical engineer:** Resistance Design, Eric Mailaender, principal. **Photographers:** Mark Loette Photography, Resistance Design.

What

Paint: Benjamin Moore. **Masonry:** Sonneborn. **Carpet/carpet tile:** Eurotex Tretford. **Lighting:** Luceplan, Artemede, custom by Resistance. **Door hardware:** Schlage. **Structural fiberglass panels:** Panelite custom. **Framing:** Product & Design. **Window treatments:** Solar Shade. **Workstation seating:** Herman Miller. **Lounge seating:** Herman Miller, Offect. **Cafeteria, dining, auditorium seating, other tables:** Pure Design. **Files:** Hon. **Shelving:** Millennium Steel. **HVAC:** Carrier. **Plumbing fixtures:** American Standard, Elkay.

Where

Project: NetAid Foundation. **Location:** New York, NY. **Total floor area:** 5,000 sq. ft. **No. of floors:** 1. **Total staff size:** 30. **Cost/sq. ft.:** $36.