



Branching Out

Nicola Burt, Interior Designer, KLC Tutor, and BIID member, is the founder of Finishing Touch Interior Design. Based in south west London, Nicola works all over London, and further afield

Finishing Touch was recently asked to undertake the refurbishment of the Head Office of a charity. The existing building dated from the 1950s and had a rather unfriendly, institutionalised feel. It had been modernised and updated sporadically over the years, and not always in a sympathetic manner. Lots of retro-fitted surface mounted cabling and ugly pipework. The reception area was a glass hatch; the experience of visiting was described by a guest as 'like collecting a parcel from the sorting office.'

We worked closely with the architects to bring the CEO's vision to life, and to our

delight, the design exceeded the client's expectations. Those using the facilities have commented on how warm and welcoming the building now is and how peaceful it feels.

The brief from the client was to update the building to make it friendly and welcoming for visitors and clients. This was particularly important given that part of the work of this charity involves helping adults who were either previously in their care as children, or whose adoption they were involved in. This can include meeting their birth family after many years.







▲ The client wanted us to design a warm, inclusive and welcoming environment to facilitate this process. This included updating the exterior, the reception area, two 'meeting' or 'reunion' rooms, the staff kitchen and corridor, relocating the reprographics room and creating new bespoke storage.

After meeting with the client, we envisaged the concept of a 'Family Tree'. The parents are the roots, the charity is the trunk, and the children are the leaves of the tree. This then informed our design choices in terms of materials, shapes, colours and imagery. We

also incorporated the colours of the logo into our scheme.

The priority was to open up the main reception area to create a welcoming open plan space. It was made to feel friendly and inclusive by the use of curves, circles, and warm colours and materials.

Whereas before it was dark, small and enclosed, it was now open, spacious and flooded with light. We used the leaf motif throughout, in a variety of textures – wood, glass, metal, and soft furnishings.

We used wood inside and out to create natural warmth and reference the concept of the tree. The exterior was clad in Accoya wood panels and we designed a bespoke curved wooden reception desk with Corian top. The reception desk has an integral shelf for wheelchair users that can be extended when required.

The staff kitchen was relocated away from the reception area, and updated in a contemporary style in neutrals and warm colours, with a seating area and small garden outside.

A new accessible visitors' WC was created within the public area, larger in size with a curved wall. Sleek chrome fittings were chosen to reinforce the welcoming, contemporary feel.

The materials and products both inside and out were chosen to reinforce the contemporary, 'modernising' ethos and welcoming feel, whilst reinforcing the Family Tree concept throughout.

The existing, single glazed 1950s window frames of white painted metal meant that the building was freezing in the winter and boiling in the summer. Boiling in the summer as they couldn't open the windows, otherwise they would be overrun with squirrels!

We replaced all the windows with powder-coated graphite aluminium, which works wonderfully with the red brick of the building. It was an instant update. Visitors to the refurbished building thought the existing building had been knocked down and a new one rebuilt!

Both the Family Tree concept, and the ▼



▲ circle motif of the Charity's branding were repeated in wood, powder coated steel, Corian, stained glass, etched glass, soft furnishings, and lighting.

The carpet throughout is a deep green, like a forest floor, with a large circle of orange in front of the reception desk. This circle draws the visitor gently into the space, and is highlighted by a circle of recessed ceiling lights above.

Privacy behind the reception desk is maintained, without loss of light, by a sandblasted privacy glass panel with a perpetual Celtic cross and the quote 'And the Leaves of the Trees are for the Healing of the Nations.'

The window treatments in the reception and meeting rooms continue the leaf theme with a gentle yellow pattern of intertwining leaves.

The colour scheme incorporates the ▼



▲ colours of the charity's branding – red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple – these colours are repeated in the leaves of the stained glass tree, the flooring, and the carved branches and leaves across the meeting room cupboards.

We incorporated photos from the charity's past and present into some of the leaves of the tree for the stained glass panel, further enhancing the idea of the children as the 'leaves of the tree'. This gives a living sense to the history, and that we are all part of a large 'family tree'. This was an interesting aspect of the project, researching how we could insert photos into glass panels so that they would be transparent for the light to shine through, but would not fade over time.

In order to help people to relax in the 'reunion rooms' I wanted to make them feel as un-corporate as possible, so it could almost feel like these incredibly emotional reunions were taking place in a 'home from home.' The branch and leaf design on the bespoke cabinetry was deliberately freehand, to lend an innocent quality to the design, almost like a child's drawing. I wanted the space to feel completely non-threatening, and as relaxing as possible.

The discovery of what the client thought was a long-redundant BT cable box, which they thought would no longer be used when we moved the reprographics equipment to create the new large meeting room, became somewhat of an issue – we were informed by BT that under no condition ▼



▲ could it be moved or disconnected as it was vital! So we designed the wall of storage cupboards to accommodate and hide it within the room.

My favourite element of the design came when we were given the incredible opportunity to design a bespoke stained glass window for the reception area. This stained glass panel is a tree with coloured leaves, and some of the leaves incorporate photos of the charity's past and present. When light shines through this window the space is dappled with coloured light, adding to the sense of space and light.

I am also really pleased at how well the curved reception desk fits into the overall design. When you imagine something you see how it will work in your head, and it is always wonderful when you see something you have designed on paper come to life, and 'work' in real life for the people who have to use it and work with it every day.

I really wanted a reception desk that was welcoming and beckoning, rather than an imposing 'gatekeeper' or 'security.' Having a gently curving undulating desk makes the visitor feel comfortable and at ease, rather than as an unwelcome intruder into the space.

It was wonderful to have a client who was incredibly responsive to our creative ideas, and who had a strong sense of the importance of the design of a space, in terms of how it can make people feel.

www.finishingtouchlondon.com

