The Porous Office
Microsoft's Micro Polis encourages its workers to go outside while inviting the public in.
Words
TRACEY INGRAM

'MICROSOFT USED TO epitomize a hard, corporate entity,' says Francesco Messori, creative director and partner of D/DOCK. 'The company is no longer about showing its muscles. The new CEO's philosophy goes beyond solely selling products. Microsoft wants to help the world move towards digital. To do so, it needs to open its arms to society.'
Messori and his team were responsible for capturing that goal in their renovation of Microsoft's Amsterdam offices. Strolling to Micro Polis from nearby Schiphol Airport leads visitors through Base, a strip of real estate that includes workspaces, cafés and a gym. 'The proximity to Base meant we didn't need so many extra facilities in our building,' says Microsoft's René van der Vlugt. The idea is that the borders between buildings in the area are more fluid: Microsoft employees might venture out for some exercise, for instance, while outsiders are welcome in parts of Micro Polis. This is perhaps a tacit recognition of how the insular campuses of some of their rivals – Google, Apple and Facebook's Californian HQs in particular – have become a cipher for big tech's detachment from the reality of those who use their products.
What's more, Microsoft relinquished 4,000 m², around half of its former floor area, which is now leased by co-working enterprise Spaces. 'Microsoft wanted to be closer to start-ups,' says Messori. 'Bigger corporations are moving towards a more agile way of working. Micro Polis isn't a castle; it's part of a community. That's why Spaces is involved – to help create a hub.' Van der Vlugt adds that the extra territory had become superfluous. 'Thanks to two big trends in the way we work, we no longer require so many square metres. Employees have flexible hours and work from home more often, and we've also shifted towards activity-based working. We have roughly 100,000 visitors a year for events and meetings. Our primary aim is to connect with them.'
To that end, Microsoft rethought its closed-door policy. Where once every aspect of the office was inaccessible to the public, passers-by are now pulled into the ground-floor retail zone. Outsiders are free to ascend the large central staircase to the food-and-beverage area, which is shared by Spaces. An auditorium on the opposite side makes it possible to host large external events. Part of Microsoft's social agenda, for instance, is to 'teach a readiness for technology to the younger generation', says Van der Vlugt. 'We organize coding for kids workshops both here and at schools.'
D/DOCK treated the workspace as a motherboard, and the dining area illustrates this concept in action. Everything is interconnected and work happens everywhere. 'Over 200 m² of restaurant space was once closed off after lunchtime,' says D/DOCK's conceptual designer Alexander Tranter. 'We opened it all up, and people still work here after the midday rush is over.'
Catering to Microsoft's preference for activity-based working, D/DOCK designed a number of diverse environments. High, low, round, square: employees are triggered to find their ideal 'workstation'. 'Everyone gathered for a meeting on opening day,' says Tranter. 'When it was time to go their separate ways, the employees fell into place like marbles. And every space was in use.' People no longer lay claim on a certain spot, says Messori. 'Everybody feels like the entire office is theirs.' With the latest and greatest technology in its hands, Microsoft has the ability to learn from and adapt its environment. 'We're experimenting with a system to optimize our facilities,' says Van der Vlugt. 'It can adjust light temperature and ventilation levels. Over time, the building becomes smarter and delivers more comfort.' The system also handles certain operations. If a meeting room is booked but not in use, for example, the system makes it available again. By predicting how much catering is required in the cafeteria based on the building's occupancy level, food waste is minimized. Technology supports the company's flexible working philosophy as well. Up-to-the-minute traffic data can reveal when it's too busy to travel to the office for a meeting. And because the system is linked to Microsoft's wider network throughout the Netherlands, it can suggest a more convenient meeting location in between.
Although Microsoft established some guidelines about what kind of work in dome where – there are quiet rooms for focus, for example – the spatial division is largely intuitive. 'The silent revolution' – that's how Messori refers to Micro Polis. 'It's not a show-off space. It's actually difficult to explain our design since it doesn't look particularly glamorous in photos. It's more about the experience of the people who work here. We focused on flexibility – on spaces you can flow through.'
'Microsoft wants to help the world move towards digital. To do so, it needs to open its arms to society'
D/DOCK deformalized the office, creating a wide range of working environments that would appeal to all preferences.