

Record Interiors 2016

Vitol by PDR

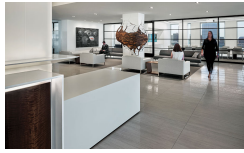
A bustling trading floor infused with art and daylight exudes a sophisticated energy.



Irruption, by **Henrique Oliveira**, breaks through a column in reception.

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People/Products

As defined by countless Hollywood depictions of the frenetic world of Wall Street, the term “trading floor” conjures up images of crowded, raucous places filled with arm-waving and shouting. But that picture doesn’t match reality at the Houston branch of Vitol, an international energy- and commodities-trading company. Though imbued with a sense of controlled intensity, the spacious new offices more closely resemble an art gallery than a fevered scene from *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

Growing from a staff of just five traders to almost 300 over the span of 30 years, Vitol needed more office space and, in expanding their quarters, also hoped to consolidate their workforce. “We’re big believers in the synergy of a trading floor,” says CEO Mike Loya, who has run the company’s operations in the Americas since 1997. “Concentrating all the traders in one area streamlines the flow of information.” But the company’s new, larger office also achieves something else: contemporary art and smart design elevate the trading floor from the merely utilitarian, creating a dynamic and elegant environment for Vitol’s work.

In 2012, Loya commissioned Houston-based PDR (an acronym for the corporate interiors firm’s focus on planning, design, and research) to lead the project—the group’s fourth for the company since the 1980s. From day one, PDR worked closely with Munoz + Albin, the architect of the new One Grove Street tower—a 16-story building in the trendy Inner Loop neighborhood of Upper Kirby—to tailor the two top floors to suit the anchor tenant’s needs.

A floor-to-ceiling glazed wall on the northern side floods light into the main level’s 300-desk trading floor, which is flanked by glazed private offices, conference rooms, a support-staff suite, and a cafeteria and gym. Three corner terraces connect employees to the outdoors, offering ample opportunities to take a break. A U-shaped mezzanine level with reception and glass-fronted meeting rooms surrounds the square

theater on three sides, while windows on the east and west faces allow even more daylight to penetrate deep into the floor. A double-height marble wall alongside the engineered quartz staircase creates visual continuity between levels. Confining public areas to the upper floor enhances security, and “getting the traders all together in one room lets energy feed off itself,” says PDR partner in charge Wayne Braun. Indeed, spirited but hushed activity buzzes throughout the cavernous space as employees chat across aisles and speak into headsets, while screens flash on innumerable computer monitors. It’s a reminder that all of PDR’s design choices were made within the constraints of Vitol’s manifold information infrastructure requirements. “The technology that supports their work is very complex,” says PDR project manager Marc Bellamy, “and they don’t want to worry about it not working or getting in the way.”

By increasing the overall square footage, Vitol now has more space, too, to display its sizable art collection—which Loya, like his predecessor, has curated during his tenure. Large, vibrant paintings and eye-catching sculptures throughout the black-and-white office lend an almost museumlike quality to the space. *Feeling Material XII*, a tornado of steel wire by British sculptor Antony Gormley, hovers over a corner of the trading floor, while *Irruption*, by Henrique Oliveira, seems to grow out of a column in the lobby. Loya commissioned this plywood and tree-bark sculpture from the São Paulo-based artist, who installed it as construction of the interior went on around him.

While the Oliveira piece incorporates architecture into art, PDR brought art to the architecture: a striking white acoustical ceiling, composed of a seemingly random array of angular protrusions, floats above the trading floor, demarcating the large arena below and emphasizing its 24-foot-high ceiling. “We knew the ceiling was going to be the wow factor,” says lead designer Amy Collins. “You can see and experience it from almost everywhere in the space.” Fabricated from recycled plastic milk cartons, the 8-by-8-foot panels make as strong a visual impact as the works of art on display, while keeping the sound to a low din. Instead of ceiling-mounted light sources, which would interrupt the origami aesthetic and require a lift to maintain, the designers opted to uplight from the perimeter, tucking fluorescent fixtures into pockets on the mezzanine fascia and adding LED strips to columns, which gracefully taper to the floor. At night, the scheme dramatizes the space with shadows, while workers use task lighting to focus illumination just where it’s needed.

By integrating diverse artworks into adroit architectural solutions for spatial, acoustical, and technological challenges, the design team has greatly improved Vitol’s environment—which, the CEO believes, will enhance the way people work. “Employees find it a much more pleasant setting,” says Loya. “We want to see that translated into profits, because, at end of the day, we’re here to make money.”