



Fit for work

Sneaking in between the slogans, Stack produces an office for Les Mills International that is big on light and detail.

Words: Anthony Coates. Photos: Double Scoop.

Night light: colourful lighting makes the offices of Les Mills International a spectacle at dusk, while the building's latticework is the predominant feature during the day.



With any exercise programme, we all know the hardest part is trying to stay motivated. If you're like me, you see the Spartans in the movie 300 and then scamper off to join the local gym, pausing only to put a clothes peg on your half-eaten bag of corn chips. After a brief period of furious activity, the snooze button gets hit one too many times and the exercise goes the way of your new year's resolutions. We all know that the road to obesity

is paved with good intentions.

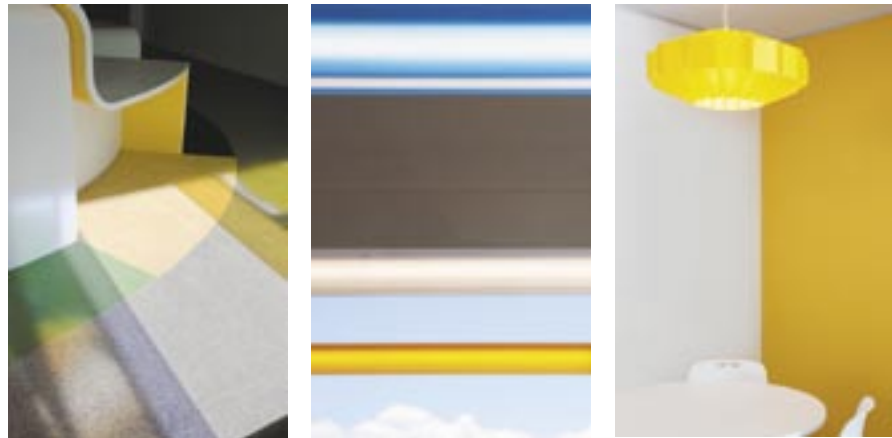
It's for good reason that the branding of fitness centres like Les Mills focuses on self-affirmation and grabbing life by the scruff of the neck. It's very easy to speak cynically about it through a mouthful of fast food, but all you need to do is watch an early-morning triathlon to see that 'the camaraderie of the active' is very real and very palpable.

Les Mills International has made a successful business out of channeling people's

need for fitness and designing and selling creative exercise programmes for people to express it. Their new commercial premises on Centre St in Auckland central reflects this creativity and drive in a heavily branded space, designed by the people at Stack.

Designer David Morgan explains that the brief was to create a world-class working environment that could accommodate the disparate working activities of the Les

Mills team, which include everything from group fitness programme creative designers to the people in accounts. The company's old workplace at Rainger House in Victoria St had evolved organically and so it was time to shape a space to suit their increased capacity and profile. Adding to the challenge for the Stack team was the fact that the company had already picked the site of the new building. The premises they chose is an NZIA-awarded building that had originally



All about colour: details (left) from the interior of Les Mills International. Break-out spaces and work areas, opposite page.

been conceived as apartments. It has attractive spiral sun shades on the outside, but the building is spread over four levels, which makes it far from ideal for fostering the 'there's no I in team'-type attitude they wanted. It seems the flat management structure that's so in vogue works much better with an equally flat floor plan, but for Stack, there was no point crying over spilled protein shake. They had to make the best of it, so Morgan and the team employed some clever design principles to encourage the workers to interact with the space and each other.

The major problem with being spread across four levels is that teams can become compartmentalised and only interact with the people next to them. The workspace branding makes it clear that Les Mills want to focus on making the staff feel as if they are part of something bigger, so the last thing they want is isolation. They have quotes on the wall from American gym goers whose lives have

been transformed by Les Mills-designed programmes, and Stack's design idea is based on the metaphorical concept of the company being like a body, with the heart being the reception area of the building and the staff providing core strength and stability. Morgan freely admits that these concepts can seem a little contrived or tongue-in-cheek, but says the results are plain to see and the company is very pleased with the way its staff are reacting to the building.

One of the key design features that Stack used was to make the reception area and cafeteria key focal points for staff. There was talk of having a side entrance that led to the second floor, but they decided to channel staff through the reception area to encourage interaction and expose them to the branding. The reception area sums up the Les Mills attitude with the line: "Fitness is a battle, welcome to the front line."

It really is the front line, because not only are the programmes designed there,

they're fine tuned and taught there. There is one large studio and two smaller studios for experimenting with new routines and techniques. The flat management structure extends to everyone except the top dog and the accounts department, and even then the two have valid reasons for getting a separate office space. CEO Phillip Mills is hardly ever there, and when he is, he wants somewhere quiet to get some real work done; and the accounts department need some degree of separation due to the accuracy requirements and confidential nature of their work. Morgan and the team compromised by putting the accounts office right off the social cafeteria space. Everyone else sits at workstations with colourful, mid-height dividers. Budget constraints meant that much of the furniture is from the original building and Morgan thinks the footprint is a tad inefficient, but it scarcely seems to matter when there is a strict clean desk policy in place.

While the office is dedicated to the benefits of living a healthy and ordered life, the team does let their hair down occasionally. I'm assured that the sign in the cafeteria welcoming visitors to The Buffalo Club is not just for show – drinking from the right hand is vigilantly policed and swiftly punished at all social gatherings. And the handprints in the office space foreshadow the physical punishment that is dished out for workplace transgressions including tardiness. Recidivism is very rare indeed.

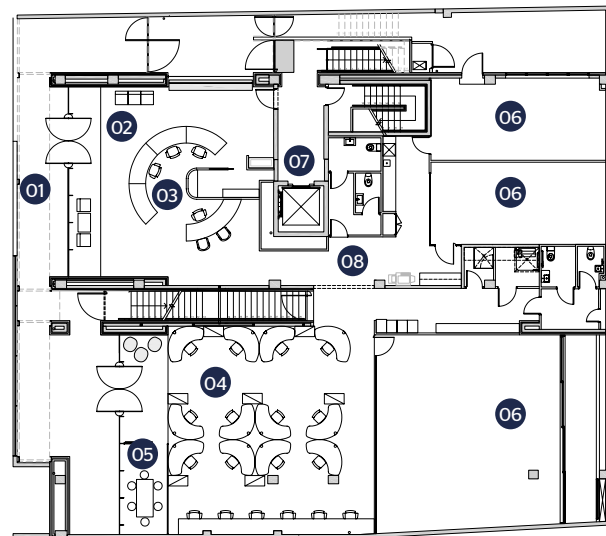
Morgan sees this direct attitude to doing business as a real breath of fresh air. Throughout the project the Stack team were always given straight feedback to their ideas, and the Les Mills employees even excused Stack their first press-ups when they were late to a meeting. It's little wonder then that Stack got the project done in only four months – being late is simply not an option at Les Mills.



The intricate latticework of Via Centro. The base building was designed by Herbst Architects.



INNOVATIVE
MARKET
LEADER
IN DESIGN



Floorplan

- 01 Entry
- 02 Meet and greet
- 03 Reception
- 04 Work area
- 05 Meeting room
- 06 Studio
- 07 Lift lobby
- 08 Utility area

Selected credits

- Client** Les Mills International
- Architect/designer** Stack Interiors
- Base building architect** Herbst Architects
- Project manager** Stack Interiors
- Fit-out contractor** Cape Interior Construction
- Graphic design / visuals** Les Mills International (in-house)
- Window treatments** New Zealand Window Shades
- Paint** Dulux
- Flooring** Interface NZ
- Lighting** Prolux; Iconic NZ; Calder Interiors
- Furniture** Vidak



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