

Tracking Office Trends with West Elm: Design Q+A

Building a practice to track and respond to what people want their spaces to look and feel like.

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With customers in more than 90 countries, there's no shortage of opportunities for West Elm to learn about how people want their spaces to look, feel and perform, especially with new office trends on the rise. The modern home brand is now working with Steelcase to bring its signature design aesthetic into the workplace.

West Elm

360 had the chance to talk to Paulo Kos, West Elm vice president of Work & Contract Design. Kos started with West Elm in its infancy, designing furniture and lighting for people's homes. Three years ago, he was asked to lead design for the company's workplace and hospitality businesses. He described how West Elm designers create beautiful, compelling products through an intentional design practice. That practice, he says, is powered by a passion for design and putting people first, as well as an understanding of how people live and work.

360: West Elm is known for its close connection to its customers. How do you and your team identify the changing trends around what people want — even before they know it themselves?

Paulo Kos: We have a direct line of communication and contact with our customers, and that unique insight keeps us ahead of the curve. There are so many different ways we interact with the customer — through our stores, online and social media — that provide us with a limitless well to tap for insight. We can see what they're responding to as they respond to it. Some of these same people work in offices. So, we can see what they like in their homes and bring that into the workplace.

We also have a trend team that travels a lot. Both our designers and trend team travel to trade shows as well as to cities, museums and art galleries for inspiration.

When it comes to the home, we're constantly building on the looks we're creating because the reality is people don't change their homes completely all the time. Homes usually evolve. You might get a new sofa, but everything else might stay the same. It's about building onto these existing spaces. With the workplace, there's the same ability to update certain spaces such as lounge areas or the accessories found around the office. That's something we do constantly to make spaces feel fresh and new.

360: How would you describe you and your team's design approach?

PK: In addition to first-in-class industrial design, we employ a team of textile designers, artists and sculptors. Their work — combined with our strength in sourcing — provide a unique hand and distinctive material voice within the home and office design space.

360: What was it like transitioning from designing for the home to designing for the office? What similarities and differences do you see between residential and commercial design?

PK: It was daunting, but also exciting. It's a way to bring what I've been doing for more than 12 years into a whole new space. As a trendsetting residential brand, West Elm's modern design prowess and fast-turnaround product design process are a natural fit for the office application.

You're taking something that's completely outside of the office and redistilling it into something new. We're trying to create spaces where people want to be, where they feel comfortable and at ease. With more and more people working both from home and the office, work is no longer bound to a specific place. Home and the office are more connected than ever.

It's definitely been a learning experience, and I've learned so much from our partners. That's the great thing about working with Steelcase, they're the leaders in the industry. Working with them is a great education.

It's interesting to see what works in both environments, and what we can take from the home and bring into the office to create an inviting space. West Elm has always been about modern design and comfort, so we're uniquely poised to do that because of the materials, textiles and colors we work with. It's the perfect palette to bring into the office to create the residential look everybody's talking about.

360: What workplace trends do you expect to see in the next year or two?

PK: Companies want to give people more choice in how they work. Historically, you had your desk, you sat at your desk, you did your work for eight hours and then you went home. Today, people are much more flexible. They work from ~~sofas~~, from home, from taxis. We're always on the go and online. It's about taking that, translating it into new ways to work and giving people new tools to work with.

More than ever, we're bringing the authenticity of our homes into the office. Typically, you find more natural and authentic materials in homes. You might have some vintage pieces or an eclectic assortment of objects in your home, whereas offices tend to have the same look repeated over and over. The modern, forward-thinking workplace will bring that eclecticism — as well as the warmth of the materials into the office. Think — natural woods with real wood grain and plush textiles. Some of our metals are on the raw side, so you see through the finish into the actual steel.

Another constant trend is wellness which isn't just about sit-to-stand desks or ergonomic ball chairs. Emotional wellness and wellbeing is imperative — making people feel comfortable and relaxed at their place of work. You do much better work when you're relaxed. Nobody wants to be stressed out.

360: You have a space in Brooklyn where you test and review upcoming products to envision what the store will look like in the future. How does it inform your ability to spot and respond to trends?

PK: We're lucky to have a "mock store" here at our Brooklyn headquarters. On the residential side, we typically work on product about 16 months ahead of its launch. Just before placing orders, we bring all the furniture, textiles, decorative accessories and lighting together and stage it as if it was in the store. It's an opportunity to evaluate and edit the whole look, to see what we've done and where we're going, and to identify opportunities to chase or develop for a future season.

360: You also use your own office like a lab to learn what people are responding to and how they use your furniture. What are you learning?

PK: West Elm moved into a new building — a renovated warehouse on the Brooklyn waterfront — a few years ago. Our previous office didn't have informal spaces. We were busting at the seams, so everything was benching and desking. Our new space offers a variety of areas with sofas and sectionals which was different for us. It was amazing to see all of those lounge spaces absolutely full on day one. There wasn't an empty seat. It was very clear that this is what people wanted, to feel more comfortable. They don't want to be chained to their desks.

360: What are your thoughts on balancing desk work and away-from-the-desk work?

PK: Both are needed because no two people are exactly the same. People want different things. There are people here in our office who are constantly at their desks. They like having the horizontal surface where everything is in one place, and that's how they work best. Then, there are people who prefer to be more relaxed and sit on a sofa, maybe with their tablet or laptop. Different people and different tasks require different types of environments.

Desks will always be an office staple. There are some types of work that will always need that solution. But, especially in our office, we have so many different types of tasks being done — from design to finance to marketing. Everybody's doing different things that require different solutions, as well as different kinds of spaces to work in.

360: As a designer, do you have favorite places you go for inspiration?

PK: New York is an incredible place to be. There's always something to look at from vintage shops to high fashion to art galleries. But, it depends on what you're looking for. Inspiration tends to hit you when you're not looking for it.

A portfolio of products from Steelcase and West Elm, the [West Elm Work Collection](#) is inspired by residential design and made to withstand the wear and tear of the office. [Explore West Elm.](#)

Paulo Kos is the vice president of design for West Elm's Work & Contract division, where he leads the team responsible for developing all contract products for the architecture and design community. A key member of West Elm's design team at the company's 2002 launch, Paulo worked on furniture, lighting and functional accessories for the brand prior to joining the Contract division. A graduate of Brown University and Pratt Institute, he has a combined education in industrial design, the arts and architecture.

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