



A showpiece for Houston's MetroNational, the Treehouse serves as a LEED Platinum-certified multifunctional office and "company beehive."

SHAPE SHIFTER

MetroNational's LEED Platinum office and studio most resembles a treehouse but can be transformed into a multitude of spaces

By Brian Barth

PROJECT

LOCATION Houston, TX
Program Studio and office space
Size 14,700 ft²
Completion 2014
Certification LEED Platinum (expected)

TEAM

OWNER/DEVELOPER MetroNational
Creative Designer Acumen
Architect/Interior Designer Studio Red
Structural Engineer ASA Dally
MEP Engineer Collaborative Engineering Group
Civil Engineer Ward, Getz & Associates
Landscape Architect The Office of James Burnett
Lighting Lighting Design Alliance
General Contractor Anslow Bryant Construction

SUPPLIERS

GEOTHERMAL HVAC Gowan with Loop Tech
Windows Haley Greer
Cabinets and Wood Products AAA Woodwork
Counters Sigma Marble and Tile
Solar Panels A&H Electric
Electrical Lighting/Controls Midwest Electric
Structural Cast-in-Place Concrete Baker Concrete
Green Roof LS Decker
Wood Veneer and Metal Skin MCT Sheet Metal
Landscaping Sullivan Land Service
Reclaimed Wood Floors The Wood Shop of Texas
Folding Doors Renlita Doors of North America
Accordion Doors Nana Wall
Theatrical Rigging/Lighting Texas Scenic
Bike Racks Berger Iron Works
Fireplace / Fire Pit Saco
Water-Storage Tanks Rain Harvesting Supplies
Window Coverings Katy Blinds

PHOTO: GLOFFREY VON

When you've worked for six decades to knit together 265 acres of urban fabric in a city the size of Houston, you deserve to build something from your dreams. If it can be a showcase of sustainable design, all the better. Such is the story of the Treehouse, an unusual design studio and office space built by Houston-based MetroNational. As the new home of its design and development team, MetroNational hopes the Treehouse will serve as a demonstration of the firm's evolving ideals and vision for future development in the region.

The Treehouse is located at the intersection of I-40 and Bunker Hill Road in Memorial City—the largest, single-owner, mixed-use development inside Houston city limits—which is owned and operated by MetroNational. Though it started as a suburban shopping mall at the edge of town in the late 1950s, Memorial City has evolved into a dense, mixed-use district within what has grown to be a highly urbanized part of the Houston metropolis. Memorial City comprises 7.6 million square feet of retail, office, hotel, and multifamily residential space; the second largest medical center in the area; and now, the Treehouse—possibly the most unique new building in Texas.

"We felt like we needed a space that was a symbol to the community and to the people that we work with in the real estate business, a place that demonstrates our creativity," says Glenn Fuhrman, the vice president of design and construction for MetroNational. At just less than 15,000 square feet, the Treehouse, which was designed by Studio Red in collaboration with Acumen, is home base for the 12 full-time team members that Fuhrman oversees, but it's quickly becoming the company beehive. It has a bar, a stage, a breakfast nook, and a wrap-around deck with a fireplace on the second level. The rooftop, which features a botanical garden, is a clubhouse environment with a full outdoor kitchen, fire pit, water feature, and big-screen TV.

MetroNational has more than 100 employees across the 265-acre site, "but we discovered they were going to coffee shops or other places in the morning or maybe for happy hour after work," Fuhrman says. "We thought if we could provide an atmosphere that would encourage our employees to come over and hang out before or after work and have coffee, snacks, or fruit, perhaps there would be better interactions among employees instead of everybody working in their silos."

The Treehouse is connected to MetroNational's main offices in the towering glass and concrete building next door by a wooden catwalk reminiscent of a

swinging footbridge from the Swiss Family Robinson, but it's still a place for business to get done, albeit in a fun, collaborative manner. A large development company like MetroNational collaborates with dozens of outside professionals each week—including architects, designers, engineers, and brokers—and they are often invited to come and share the space. The staff's private offices (called "pods") open out onto a communal workspace (the "nest"), which is adjacent to the lounge area (the "camp") and just a short flight of stairs below the rooftop garden (the "perch").

With the flip of a switch, the central flex space can be reconfigured for large presentations or as several smaller work areas for project teams, and there are little nooks off to the side where external contractors or visiting staff can have a quiet place to work at their laptops. "Studio Red is known for doing a lot of theater work, and we felt that the Treehouse is like a stage," Fuhrman says. "Depending on who's coming—a banker, an architect, or a prospective tenant—we can set the stage differently."

MetroNational believes the collaborative studio environment will increase the productivity of the design and development staff and lead to more inspiring and innovative projects in the company's portfolio. So despite the fun and games, the Treehouse is serious about fiscal productivity, and it's very serious about another one of the company's goals: environmental sustainability. "We made a conscious decision to increase the building's design and sustainability features and try for the highest number of [LEED] points," Fuhrman says. "We wanted to get all the bells and whistles we could into the building." The Treehouse is targeting LEED Platinum, which, according to its scorecard, should be easily attainable.

First, MetroNational cleaned up the brownfield left by the gas station and dry-cleaning service that formerly occupied the site. Thirty-five 400-foot geothermal wells were drilled under the parking lot and provide all of the cooling for the building "except on Houston's hottest

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DIALOGUE

GWYNDOLYN MOWBRAY

Mowbray served as the interior designer for the Treehouse on the Studio Red team. She shares her thoughts on bringing the treehouse theme to life inside the building.

There are several unique details that riff on the idea of a treehouse. Do these also play into the building's sustainability features? Yes. For example, we were focused on bringing daylight into the space. The majority glass façade with the added frit pattern mimicking tree leaves generates bright workspaces and views while creating opacity in the upper portion of the glazing.

But it sounds like the treehouse theme played out as much or more in making it a playful workspace? The vision was to foster imagination and creativity while creating a unique space for both work and play. The structural columns that run through the space are clad in vertical wood members that imitate trees. They house color-changing lights, creating a soft glow within the trees and the ability to create various ambiances. There are also a number of informal areas, including a kitchen and bar, living room, small lounges, and a space with a lowered wood ceiling that creates a nook, complete with a grass bench.

How do you see the interior layout reflecting contemporary thoughts on the office environment? There is a big focus on flexibility. We have walls that fly into the air, ceilings that move up and down, and a façade that disappears, opening the building up to the exterior to create unique gathering spaces. We used the materials to build one space that can act in multiple ways. The client can produce and entertain in one space with the features to manipulate the environment around them.

RIGHT Known as the "camp," the office's central gathering area faces a wraparound balcony that features an operable door that can be raised to create one large, open-air space.

100-degree days," Fuhrman says. The exterior wood cladding is FSC-certified South American machiche, while much of the interior flooring is pine salvaged from an old cotton warehouse in Galveston. Twin 3,500-gallon cisterns capture water for the landscape, which includes an extensive green roof planted with locally adapted botanicals. The need for interior lighting is minimal: there is a high percentage of exterior glazing (mostly tinted to keep the interior climate cool) and a massive light well that peers down into the middle of the space. The lighting that is used is part of a **Crestron** computer-controlled system that raises and lowers blinds and modulates interior light levels according to the time of day and season.

There are also quirky features like indoor bike hitches that retract into the wall like the drawers of a file cabinet and a scrap-metal wind-turbine art installation on the roof. It doesn't actually generate power, but it does generate conversations about renewable energy.

"Our intention is to use the building for educational purposes," Fuhrman says. "maybe have elementary-school kids come for a tour or host college kids or AIA professionals—to use it as a teaching tool, if you will." This intention is on display throughout, as interpretive signage and

interactive touchscreens line the walls, giving clues to the lean green design that went into the structure and tracking the building's performance. At the center of the second level, directly beneath one of the light wells, is a scale model of Memorial City, showing how the city within a city has been pieced together over time. With the arrival of the Treehouse, a new direction for the place is clear.

For MetroNational and Fuhrman, personally, it's a dream of a workplace come true. "When I was a kid, I really wanted to have a cool treehouse," he says, "but the only treehouse we had was some plywood stapled to a couple limbs in the forest. Now we have our treehouse." And Houston has a new bar for what's possible in the built environment. **gb&d**

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Gwyndolyn Mowbray, Studio Red



PHOTOS: GEMMA VON

ABOVE: A suspension bridge connects the Treehouse to MetroNational's corporate office in the adjoining building. The lush rooftop is planted with locally adapted plants that absorb stormwater.

METRONATIONAL SAYS,
"thanks"
 TO THE TREEHOUSE MEMORIAL CITY DEVELOPMENT TEAM

CREATIVE DESIGN: **Acumen**
 ARCHITECT: **Studio RED**

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: **Anslow Bryant Construction**
 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: **The Office of James Burnett**
 MEP ENGINEER: **Collaborative Engineering Group**
 STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: **ASA Dally**
 CIVIL ENGINEER: **Ward, Getz & Associates**
 LIGHTING: **Lighting Design Alliance**

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