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Indesign's 'Education And Urbanism' Issue





Biophilia in retail spaces is not new, but Ministry Of Design pushes it further with its highly imaginative design of Citi Wealth Hub. Retail never looked so fresh.

Welcome To The Jungle

Citi Wealth Hub, Singapore by Ministry Of Design
Words *Tamsin Bradshaw* Photography *KHOOGJ*



INDE.Awards 2021 Shortlisted for The Shopping Space, partnered by *Tappeti*

Wealth management hubs can often feel pretty unremarkable. They blend soullessly into one another: cold lighting, marble, red-toned wood panelling, a plant or two in the corner for good measure, and some leather if you're lucky. Which is one reason the new Citi Wealth Hub in Singapore feels like such a refreshing departure from the status quo.

Situated smack-bang in the middle of Orchard Road – next to the Apple store, no less – the 2,787-square-metre Citi Wealth Hub is a giant, glass conservatory, home to a veritable jungle. The central talking piece is the main atrium. Here, tinted glass walls and sky lights shield betel nut trees jostling with parlour palms. Saplings and arums sit side by side, and bird's nest ferns, money plants and Boston ferns add a lower layer of tropical life. In amongst this tropical flora sit Garden Pods for private meetings on

level seven, with central, marble-clad bars on each floor catering to refreshment needs. No water coolers and paper cups here, and no – as Colin Seah puts it – “dinky little menus”.

Seah is founder and director of design at Ministry of Design (MOD), and he's also one of the key minds behind this fresh-faced new wealth hub. This was the first time MOD had worked on a wealth management centre, and this, along with the design studio's ethos of “questioning convention”, surely helped it take a completely different tack.

It all started when MOD entered a design competition initiated by Citibank to find a designer for its new wealth centre. The largest of its kind for Citibank, this was slated as the workplace of private bankers and wealth relationship managers, and the polestar of their interaction with private clients.



“There was this Eureka moment: I envisaged the lush botanical quality the space would have...”

Surprisingly, Seah says MOD didn't enter to win. “When you enter to win you curb your risks and try to guess the best move. I don't find it helpful for innovation. In this case, the opportunity allowed us to take some risks.”

An initial site visit inspired Seah. “There was this Eureka moment: I envisaged the lush botanical quality the space would have, a great parallel to sustainable wealth growth as opposed to unsustainable wealth growth.”

The first hurdle was convincing the client of the “viability of the project, maintenance of all the plants and feasibility costs, but they grappled with it very willingly because they saw the value in it,” he says.

To overcome this challenge, Seah and his team brought ICN Design International on board, the landscape architects behind Jewel Changi Airport's forested microclimate. Unlike Jewel, though, this was an existing site, so purpose-building irrigation systems wasn't an option.

The solution was a hydroponic system that's completely water-based, manually supported and easy to navigate in terms of shifting plants in and out. Each plant is individually potted, although it doesn't appear that way, and it sits within a custom, laser-cut setting, alongside the Garden Pods – all of which had to be sealed, artificially ventilated and equipped with their own fire sprinkler systems, in order to facilitate private conversations between bankers and their clients.

Client-facing points in this wealth management centre are unquestionably innovative. But where the Citi Wealth Hub also steps out of the box is in its approach to back-of-house.

The foliage extends far beyond the main, client-facing space, and it's not just an afterthought. Greenery springs up like mini tropical islands at the centre of hot-desking areas, behind collaborative spaces and in other meeting rooms.



The Garden Pod

Discussion pods set within the conservatory gardens are panelled in Kvadrat Remix 3 fabric panels, Aural-Aid veneer panels, with curved LG OLED TV screens and concealed cables.







While the building's exterior may be sharp and angular in glass and steel, the interiors are all decidedly biophilic, with organic lines and rounded forms – from reception counters and planters through to staff work areas which are predominantly hot-desk-based.

“We realised the [greenery and biophilic approach] shouldn't just be relegated to the atrium area, for the enjoyment of those who are there for a few hours for a meeting,” says Seah. “We decided early on that one of the values we would espouse here was the continuity throughout of the good this space would bring to everyone who uses it – not just the clients. It's a departure from the typical model where the front-of-house is all marble and chandeliers and warm lighting, while back-of-house is full of cubicles, carpet tile and grey tones.” The client, says Seah, readily

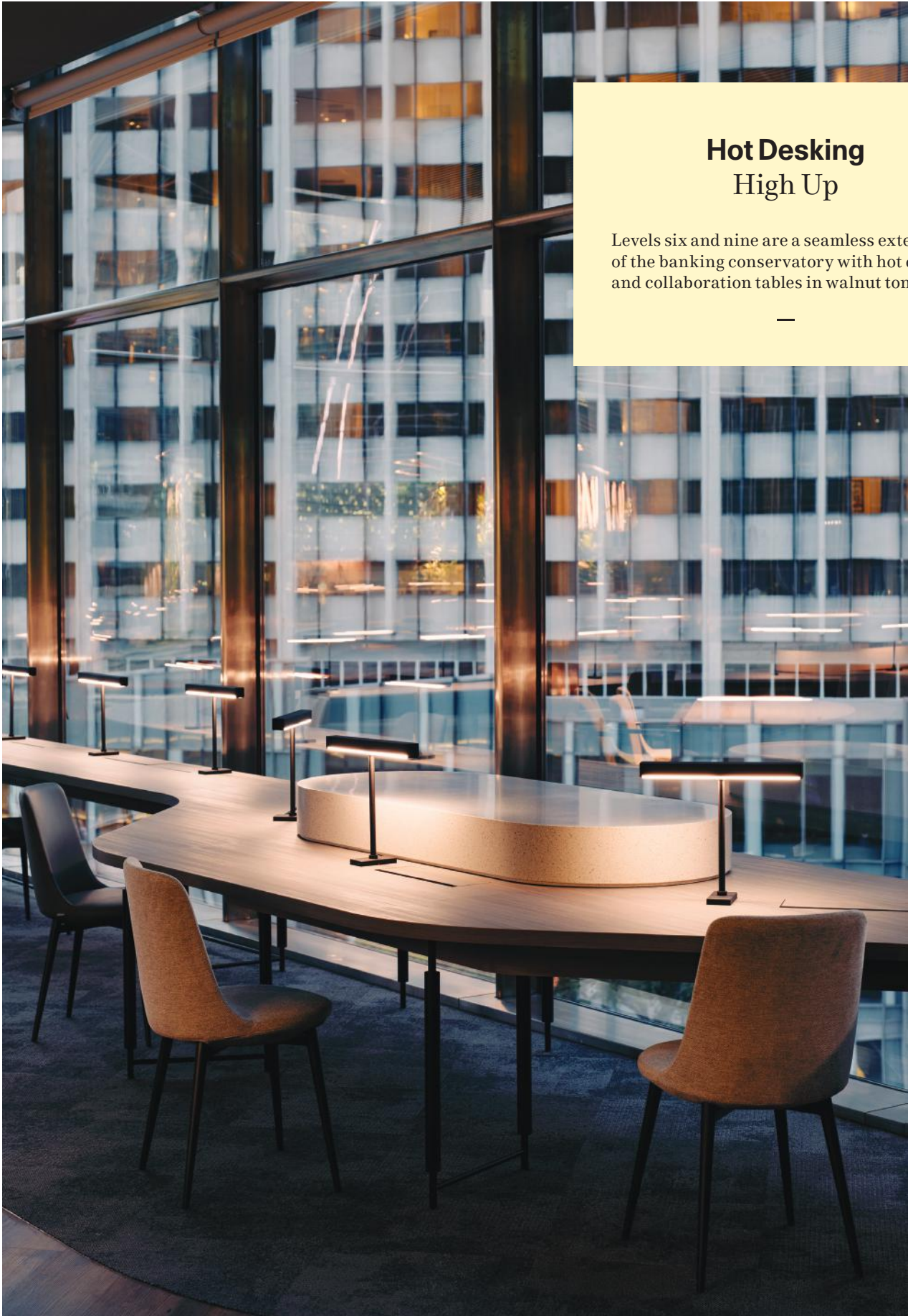
supported this, and, with “clever value engineering, we were able to achieve this continuity on budget”.

The trust and encouragement to innovate that MOD received throughout was what Seah valued most about working on this wealth hub. “It's not as if innovation is required at every turn or corner, but there are certain major milestones where it's needed. If you don't meet these, you run the risk of being irrelevant, or merely conventional.”

Conventional is exactly what Citi Wealth Hub isn't. It sets a new benchmark in not only design for wealth hubs, but also workspace as a whole.

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Page 100: The timber-panelled entrance trimmed with brass metal forms an inviting entrance as Ministry Of Design recasts the typical wealth hub as a 'banking conservatory'.
 Page 102: Lounge seating and high-tech pods offer a variety of discussion areas nestled within greenery. Page 103: The lush indoor conservatory is paired with lifestyle-inspired spaces.
 Page 104-106: Clients can admire the plants from inside the discussion pods, through the glass slats that ring the top of pods. Opposite: Hot desks facing Orchard Road.



Hot Desking High Up

Levels six and nine are a seamless extension of the banking conservatory with hot desks and collaboration tables in walnut tones.

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