

Downtown's Coolest Offices: Inside Johnson Fain

By Nicholas Slayton Apr 18, 2016

DTLA - **Company:** Johnson Fain

It's At: 1201 N. Broadway

Number of Employees: 60

What Do They Do?: Johnson Fain is a prominent architecture, urban design and planning firm founded by Scott Johnson and William H. Fain, Jr. in 1989. It has worked on projects around the globe, with local efforts including the Metropolitan Lofts in South Park and Blossom Plaza in Chinatown.

When They Arrived: 2004, from an office at Wilshire Boulevard and Flower Street.



Johnson Fain

by Gary Leonard

We're Talking To: Design Partner Scott Johnson

Fixing Up the Garage: Johnson Fain's office building is actually four buildings. Originally a Chrysler dealership in the 1920s, the structures on the edge of Chinatown were combined, giving the firm a sizable, open area with brick walls, high, arched ceilings and large skylights. Johnson Fain sandblasted and restored the interior, but kept much of the old dealership's trappings, including garage doors, concrete floors and ramps. "It would be hard to get a building with this much volume, that's column-free, that lets us be flexible," Johnson says. There are very few windows in the space, with most natural light coming from the skylights. There also very few private offices, and those that exist are glass-fronted, giving some level of permeability. Johnson said the idea is to create an open, lateral feel.



Scott Johnson
by Gary Leonard



Johnson Fain
by Gary Leonard

Group Think: Johnson Fain groups employees in teams, giving them desks that form a circle around drawing tables, creating social elements throughout the office. “We actually don’t move a lot of furniture, but we do move people,” Johnson says. “Some might consider this old-fashioned. We wanted teams to work in areas around common tables. They can roll out big drawings, work on designs and have meetings.”



Johnson Fain

by Gary Leonard

Hitting the Books: Even as digital technology is playing a bigger role in the architecture world, Johnson Fain’s space dedicates a large area for analog methods. Nestled in one corner of the office is a semi-enclosed library full of architecture and design books. A long conference table, covered with books and a hand-drawn landscape map, sits at the center of the room. “Because we’re a working studio, performance and flexibility are key,” Johnson says. “A lot of data is online, but we still use books. They’re very useful guides and resources.”



Johnson Fain

by Gary Leonard

Model Shop: In the back of the office, behind an open staging area, is the car repair shop-turned-workshop where staffers build the models for their projects. Along with the renderings, maps and drawings affixed to the walls — Johnson jokes that architects cannot get enough wall space — the models are ever-present. Some are traditional plywood designs, while others are plastic mock-ups made using the on-site 3-D printer. “We’re an interesting blend between digital and traditional,” Johnson says. “We’ll always have 3-D models, but we’ll also have wood models.”



Johnson Fain

by Gary Leonard

© *Los Angeles Downtown News* 2016