

... with teams distributed in numerous hubs around the external perimeter of the building and meeting rooms encircling a top-lit atrium at the centre. But these aren't ordinary meeting rooms. Paris, Amsterdam, Reykjavik, Bali and Copenhagen are replicas of real Airbnb apartments that are for rent in the destinations for which they are named. Re-created from owners' photos, with obsessive attention to detail, these spaces are little homages to the style of their owners and their locations. And they are surprisingly believable. After just a couple of hours in 'Paris', I feel at home. I'm checking email on an Eames rocker and helping myself to a 'natural' cream soda from the fridge. Only when I open a kitchen cupboard does reality set back in: no pots and pans but a sad mass of Bic pens and yellow notepads.

'It's almost irrational, the amount of detail that's gone into these somewhat insignificant things,' says Gebbia. 'But that speaks about one of the company values.' More than just a quirk of the office design, the notion of transporting real owners' homes (albeit in a Disneyesque way)

## A standout office design is key to luring top talent

to 888 Brannan, he says, is meant to bring Airbnb employees closer to the experience of their customers. 'Good design comes from good empathy – from an understanding of who it is you are designing for. I call it "enlightened empathy" ... to get so close to the person you're designing for that you sort of become them.'

'Design' is a word that gets bandied about a lot at Airbnb, whether it's applied to the food, the employee experience or the space itself. Gebbia and Chesky met as students at the Rhode Island School of Design, and their vision of the perfect work life is heavily infused with aspects of their time there. 'The design studios at RISD had these giant desks and big open-floor plans that were always buzzing and always full of people, no matter what hour of day.' The art-school atmosphere allows for spontaneous interaction, which Gebbia thinks is crucial to stoking creativity and collaborative problem-solving. 'When I'm in the early stages of a project, I often take my laptop and work in the cafeteria, where I know lots of people will walk by and start a conversation with me about what I'm working on.' Employees aren't restricted to fixed hours or fixed desks (unless they choose to be); they can select from a range of environments to suit their mood or work style. Aside from the apartment replicas, which all come with their own quirks – I'm partial to lingering in the Reykjavik kitchen, which has healthy cereal and snacks on tap – there's the soaring atrium, the clamour of the cafeteria and even a quiet, library-inspired room. ...

## 2000 projects

San Francisco's city planning department reviews about 2000 projects a year; New York, with ten times the population, handles 500. Source: *The Economist*

## 1,440,000 m<sup>2</sup>

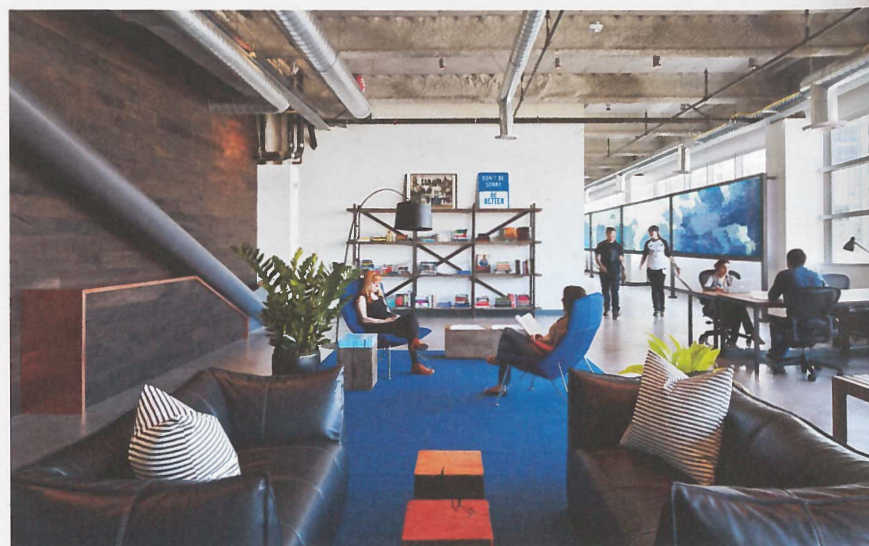
Tech companies have leased more than 1,440,000 m<sup>2</sup> (15.5 million square feet) in San Francisco since 2010. In the South of Market area (SoMa), tech firms account for 58% of all occupied space. Source: *San Francisco Chronicle*

Employees can take a quick trip to Italy by entering the Milan-themed meeting room. Photo Leslie Williamson



Staff can choose from a variety of environments that suit specific moods or work styles.

Photos Bruce Damonte



## Dropbox

**Design** Geremia Design (geremiadesign.com)  
**Architecture** Boor Bridges (boorbridges.com)  
**Location** 185 Berry Street, San Francisco, CA  
**Floor area** 6500 m<sup>2</sup>  
**Completion** April 2012  
**Big idea** The vision for the file-sharing website's latest office was that of an 'energy-infused and collaborative newsroom'. The design aimed for a container with mobile furniture, ample greenery and cosy lounges that would make staff feel at home  
**Features** Shared workrooms, informal lounges and a 'culture wall' made of ping pong balls

# Silicon City

Over the past three years, a host of techies have homed in on San Francisco in search of new premises. Their websites and systems have changed the way we live – are they about to change the way we work, too?