

CRAFTED LODGING

G R E A T L A K E S **BY**  
**DESIGN**

Dream boat

A Wisconsin-based company has developed a legacy of designing and building custom, hand-crafted vessels for a final frontier.

RELISH | FORM | CREATIVE ENDEAVORS | TRAVEL



# Food culture

Text: R.J. Weick

Refined, agile, and welcoming, the new bon COOK headquarters in Birmingham, Michigan is an authentic reflection of a brand where the kitchen and the culinary ignite connection and inspiration. It is a space of concise lines and understated, integrated design serving as a backdrop for the diverse programmatic needs of the nearly 5,600-square-foot space on the second floor of the Woodward Avenue mixed-use building.

“You are never there for five minutes and you are never leaving hungry, and I think, to me, that is the best emotion the space creates,” said Heather Greene, NCIDQ, senior associate and director of workplace and interiors at Stantec in Detroit, Michigan. “They approach their business, their team, and the way they engage with their clients and their customers in a really open and warm way. We wanted the space to reflect it.”

Both a business headquarters and a stu-

dio, the bon COOK space is designed with an immersive retail strategy and innovative workspace concept in mind that not only supports customization for events, cooking classes, workshops, and an open, co-working environment, but also the build of a state-of-the-art chef’s kitchen. Greene noted the concept bridged similar language between the future of workplace and retail design, and envisioned an engaging experience for both clients and employees where the space could be holistically adaptive and agile.

“It was a big driving factor of the design,” Greene said. “The architecture needed to allow us to adapt from work space to event space to cooking space, or have multiple programs happening at the same time.”

Stantec is a global organization of more than 22,000 designers, engineers, scientists, and project managers with more than 400 locations across six continents dedicated to innovating and designing with community,

creativity, and client relationships in mind. As a firm, its portfolio ranges in scale and typology from education, environment, and health, to industrial, residential, sports, and hospitality, to name a few. Stantec’s Detroit office became involved in the project as Cindy Juncaj, chief executive officer and founding partner at bon COOK, interviewed potential firms to help realize the unique design concept.

“I think from a philosophical standpoint, we had a lot of alignment there with what she was trying to create and we became excited about challenging ourselves to say: how do you make a second floor retail space work? How do you make an office space that doubles as an event space, a photography studio, and a full-on cooking chef’s gourmet kitchen?” Greene said. “How do you merge all those program elements in a small space and how do you make it grow for her?”

At its heart, bon COOK embraces social



and familial gatherings built around fresh ingredients and a cooking philosophy deeply rooted in its French heritage. It strives to facilitate meaningful cooking experiences at home and across communities that ultimately become culture rather than trend; and also serves as a resource for innovative cooking products, tools, and recipes supported by a network of independent consultants across the country.

“This space was really meant to help people touch the products, touch the food, and bring that joy back to the experience. We talked about the busy and the hustle and how we are all celebrating the grind right now. We are almost forgetting about those quiet moments that matter the most, forgetting that food is very much something that ties families together and ties people to memories,” Greene said.

“The design challenge for us was to create a space where that would shine, where we could really bring people back to that nostalgia. How could we use food and the company’s mission as the centerpiece?” Greene added.

Concept in mind, Greene noted they toured a number of spaces with Juncaj before identifying a second floor space in a recently completed mixed-use building along Woodward Avenue in Birmingham. While at first glance it was an unfinished, cold box complete with a raw concrete floor, it offered the volume, window lines, and ability to ac-

commodate the programmed elements in a responsive manner. Greene also said the location was unique due to its position on the second floor in terms of asking clients or customers to travel up a level, and the ceiling heights were phenomenal at 15-foot-tall and offered a connection back to the community and energy.

“We wanted to maintain that volume of space and we had these corner windows that brought in a lot of light, but gave a little sliver of downtown Birmingham—the hustle as people are going through,” Greene said. “It was really important to [Juncaj] that people saw the energy. She was very passionate about being a part of a community that was walkable and a community that supported this live, work, and play urbanism idea.”

The space lent itself well to the level of flexibility needed and potentially could serve as a place to gather for the building as well, since there was ground floor retail below and residential condominium units above. Though presenting the concept to the building owners proved interesting, Green noted a real challenge was working through more technical aspects such as running a gas line through condominiums, parking, decks, and infrastructural parameters.

“[She] was very adamant that chefs don’t cook on electric stoves. There are no electric stoves in fine dining, so we had some mechanical and electrical challenges around things like that, because as a design element, one of the beautiful things about why we

chose this space was how wide open it was,” Greene said.

“It had a really beautiful column layout that lent itself to wide open spaces and we didn’t want to obstruct any of the views from the front door to the kitchen or to the focused workspaces with a big hood. I was pretty adamant from a design perspective of finding a way to use a downdraft and not obstruct this beautiful view with a giant hood that would steal the show,” Greene added.

The space itself is bright and open upon entering double glass doors and features two fixed Calcutta marble islands—complete with integrated gas lines for the stove, sinks, and appliances—and custom European cabinets sourced from Scavolini beneath an exposed ceiling. To the right, an herb wall highlighting local farm-to-table vendors and partners is used as an accent or artwork for the space; tying back into bon COOK’s philosophy of designing their catalog, products, and recipes.

“When we thought about the layout of the space, we wanted to welcome people right into that heart of the home and the heart of her workspace is the kitchen,” Greene said. “We wanted to stick with that refined, Parisian style, which is a little bit more understated, a little bit more classic, and around fine materials.”

Beyond the islands, a mixture of high-low furniture is found throughout the space. Walnut tables handmade by an artisan in Howell, Michigan; workstations; custom





sofas disguised as banquettes; and a limited number of private offices line the perimeter. Televisions are strategically mounted on the wall and are integrated with wireless capability for weekly team meetings, which are held at the kitchen tables near the heart of the space. The four private offices feature glass doors to facilitate transparency and interaction among employees, and even Juncaj's office wall is tilted on an angle so the drywall didn't block windows to the outside.

"It was really important for her to share the light and the welcoming face as you turn into the office is her grandson decked in bon COOK and cooking away. I think it is reminiscent of who they are and how they work and what they want to accomplish," Greene said.

The versatility in the space is subtle: kitchen islands not only serve a functional cooking purpose, but also an educational one as local chefs are brought in from dining establishments; work stations reconfigure as long tables for events and workshops since the technology is integrated into the floor and leverages Wi-Fi rather than a hardwired network; and even the intentional layering of lighting allows for photography and ease of transition as the space's function adapts to its users' need.

"The lighting was challenging, because we wanted it to adapt as easily as the furniture did and she didn't want to bring in movers every time they did this, so it had to be things her team could reconfigure quickly and efficiently," Greene said. "It was important to have multiple layers of light that would

allow them to transition from a daytime office to an evening space and then play with their filming. We had to have lighting that was appropriate for camera and for photography, but also for evening events and could be adaptable very quickly without it being overly complicated."

Linear bars featuring an indirect-direct approach to lighting were used, based on the benefits of indirect light particularly when using computers for long periods of time; as well as more decorative fixtures and industrial pendants to create consistent photography light. A chandelier in particular, sourced from SEED Design USA, is as versatile as the space it illuminates: large metal rings with moveable lights are almost sculptural in its geometric play.

Greene said the lighting and furniture is important to consider in designing quality spaces for the people who use it, especially in terms of how it can adapt to evolving business needs in the future.

"It has become more about how does the space change in the future, how could it evolve, what do you need to do, and think about how the space lives with you," Greene said. "Businesses are changing at a rapid pace and they need to pivot quickly and space is a pretty stagnant item. Especially when your people are spending money to build out a space that is symbolic of their brand and authentic and invites people in, if it can't evolve as much as the brand evolves, we didn't really do our job for our clients."

For Greene, creating a space that is authentic for a client's brand is about provid-

ing the tools in which they can walk the walk. When it comes to bon COOK, which is a company centered around food and the bon life in which those moments are enjoyed and the mise en place, its headquarters and studio space is a true reflection of its mission and people.

"You walk in and it is just full of light, love, and energy. There is always someone sitting in the kitchen working, there is always someone baking or trying something, and at the same time they are running this massive business," Greene said. "They are very innovative in their products and they are working with their distribution and sales team, and their manufacturers. You can feel the busy, but you can also sit down and have a quiet conversation."

Completed in 2017, bon COOK has already become a dynamic space for community to gather as nonprofit holiday parties, women's outreach events, cocktail parties, chamber meetings, cooking classes, and demonstrations have invited intimate gatherings to large social groups into its space where inspired architecture, cuisine, and culture coalesce.

"I see design as a tool to solve problems in beautiful ways and to bring a little bit of joy to everyone's life. My role as a designer is to make it real for my clients in their words, in their authentic voice," Greene said. "We are not the artist, we are the paintbrush. We are trying to channel what is in their mind, what is their vision for their space—business or store—and bring it to life in a beautiful and functional way."