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DRIVING THRU

IA Interior Architects delivers a sense of forward dynamism with Speedee Labs, a new R&D facility within McDonald's Chicago headquarters



Previous spread: A motion-activated LED wall installation animates the entry to the customer-experience hub at Speedee Labs, a new 22,500-square-foot, two-level R&D center within McDonald's Chicago headquarters by IA Interior Architects.

Opposite: Beneath custom triangular LED fixtures, a new terrazzo-resin stair links two of the lab's core components—the second-floor lobby lounge and the ground-floor test kitchens.

Top: In the main lobby, a backlit installation dubbed the "cheese wall" adjoins the elevator lobby serving the second-floor labs and other program spaces. **Center, from left:** A 20-foot-long vitrine anchors the heritage exhibit area. Nearby, hickory millwork frames a grid of dark-glass display cabinets flanked by video screens. **Bottom:** Here Now Studio's Hugh modular sofa and Allermuir Design Studio's FortySeven side table, finished in a custom brand color, outfit the lobby lounge.

Almost a decade ago, IA Interior Architects helped McDonald's move its headquarters from suburban Oak Brook into a new Gensler-designed building in Chicago's buzzy West Loop. The firm, which retains its 11th-place ranking on *Interior Design's* 100 Giants list, gave the corporation new digs that signaled a wholesale cultural shift for the global brand, replacing cubicle-bound norms with a fluid, activity-based workplace where mobility, openness, and cross-functional collaboration became the new defaults. Now, after years of continued partnership, IA is back, extending and recalibrating parts of the nine-story headquarters for an ever-evolving organization and the workforce that drives it.

The project involves several parts. IA's design for Hamburger University—McDonald's global training and leadership institute on the second floor—has been one of the original move's standout successes. Building on that momentum, the company decided to pair it with a new R&D center, Speedee Labs, named for its 1950's mascot, a hamburger-headed chef. The facility links directly to new ground-floor test kitchens—inserted into a former courtyard—the final major component to shift from Oak Brook to the city. Completing the program are a gallery-like space for heritage displays; the Fan Store, an in-house merch emporium reserved for employees and corporate visitors; and a showstopping feature wall in the main lobby, bringing the total to 35,200 square feet.

Right from the main lobby, there's a conscious effort to move beyond familiar brand identifiers. As Chad Finken, IA's creative director, notes, "McDonald's is well established; we're not going to tell them who they are, right?" Hence the backlit wall installation—a glowing expanse of yellow lacquer that, from afar, resembles nine layers of melting cheese. "But up close, you can see it's a topographical view of the West Loop, with the building centered in the middle of it." Along with referencing the HQ's floor count and urban neighborhood, the 3D mural not only nods to a signature menu staple but also incorporates wire-mesh panels that evoke another restaurant hallmark: fry baskets.

Flanking the elevator lobby, the cheese wall acts as a beacon, signaling the start of the Speedee Labs experience—a progression through environments dedicated to the development of all things McDonald's, from customer service to restaurant design and kitchen technology. Staff and visitors arrive in the second-floor lobby lounge, a long communal space furnished with comfortable sofas and yellow side tables. "It's a central touchdown," IA senior designer Erin Dayrit observes, "where people can take a break, sit and make a phone call, or go on their laptops." The hickory-paneled walls are festooned with digital banners bearing multilingual greetings and kinetic imagery "as a nice way of adding a sense of movement," Finken adds. ➤





Opposite top: Refreshed with bright custom graphics, an existing stair provides access to the Hamburger University training institute and the new in-house Fan Store selling brand merchandise. **Opposite bottom:** Christophe Pillet's Rec worktables, flanked by Pearson Lloyd's Routes stools, populate the design studio in the hub.

Top: Backdropped by a curved digital screen, Studio TK's Borough modular sofa, Patrick Norguet's Jima side chairs, a built-in banquette incorporating powder-coated metal mesh, and Caine Heintzman's Vale scone form an open work environment in the hub. **Bottom:** The double-height main lobby retains its original Patricia Urquiola Tuffy Time modular seating, with Jessica Stockholder's site-specific sculpture—an assemblage of cooking implements patented by McDonald's employees—still suspended overhead.



The dynamism continues overhead with a series of arrowhead-shape LED fixtures pointing the way to the project's biggest intervention: a new stair that descends to a stagelike landing overlooking the adaptable test kitchens and adjacent restaurant-development environments. "The idea is that coming down, before you're in the buzz, you're experiencing it," Finken says. "You're smelling it, hearing it, seeing it." The low platform is a multifunctional viewing spot with an open pantry; bar, stools, and lounge chairs for coffee breaks; and a wall grid of poster-sized images of McDonald's outlets around the globe, each bearing the appropriate passport stamp—"so international visitors feel represented," Dayrit reports. "It's also a gathering place where they have big meetings."

At the top of the stair, an all-yellow portal space—its wall emblazoned with the motto "welcome to innovation" next to a motion-activated, multicolor LED display—forms a dazzling threshold to the customer-experience hub. The facility is a hotbed of hands-on experimentation enabled by state-of-the-art technology, including interactive immersion rooms with ➤



Top: Overlooking the test kitchens, the landing hosts Khodi Feiz's Libelle chairs, Paul James's Alfred stools, Joey Ruiter's bar table, and poster-sized images of McDonald's outlets worldwide. **Center, from left:** The exterior of the store evokes the restaurants' classic kraft-paper takeout bags, printed with current branding. The heritage vitrine features visitor-operated pullout display drawers. **Bottom:** One end of the elevator lobby leads to the training institute; the other, to the labs. **Opposite:** Custom pendant fixtures above the store counter replicate McDonald's cups and straws, while serving trays are repurposed as wall signage.



operable glass walls that allow spaces to be reconfigured as needed; a Drive Thru lab; and an open work environment back-dropped by an enormous curved video screen and furnished with a choice of seating arrangements. Nearby, the open design studio and prototype lab let everyone see evolutions in brand identity and collateral taking shape in real time.

But it's McDonald's past, stretching all the way back to the 1940's, that takes center stage in the heritage exhibit—a long space off the lobby lounge dedicated to displaying materials from the company's extensive archives. One wall is spanned by a massive hickory-framed grid of dark-glass panels, some of them operable doors fronting illuminated cubbies containing vintage artifacts. At either end of the grid, digital screens play videos documenting the history of corporate innovation and training. A 20-foot-long freestanding vitrine runs down the middle of the space, a trove of intriguing objects spread beneath its glass top, while drawers along its sides can be opened by visitors to reveal even more memorabilia—"all sorts of wild stuff," Finken notes with a laugh, "things I didn't know existed."



That sense of fun is pervasive. "One of the original design narratives from 2018 was about creating moments that make you smile," Dayrit notes—a goal more than met by the adjacent Fan Store. With an exterior that mimics the restaurants' kraft-paper takeout bags and an interior filled with homages to iconic accoutrements—red serving trays repurposed as signage, custom pendant fixtures in the form of giant drink cups with straws—the outlet is as much a source of visual wit as of colorful merchandise. It's a little temple of mouthwatering temptations. "I can vouch for that," Dayrit concludes. "When I first visited, I bought a bunch of swag." 🍷

PROJECT TEAM
SHANE SMITH; ASHLEY MIKELS; RUBEN GONZALEZ; MICHELLE DERRICO; LANE FELTS; ETHAN BARBOUR; ALYSSA ALVAREZ; SCOTT MCCAGE: IA INTERIOR ARCHITECTS.
ZIKEN SIGNAGE: GRAPHICS CONSULTANT. **WAVEGUIDE:** AUDIOVISUAL, ACOUSTICS CONSULTANT. **OFFICE REVOLUTION:** FURNITURE DEALER. **PARENTI & RAFFAELLI:** WOODWORK. **SALAS O'BRIEN:** MEP. **MAGNUSSON KLEMENCIC ASSOCIATES:** STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. **EXECUTIVE CONSTRUCTION:** GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES
FROM FRONT LUMINII: CUSTOM WALL FIXTURE (HUB ENTRY). **MCGRORY GLASS:** VESTIBULE GLASS (STAIR 1). **OCL ARCHITECTURAL LIGHTING:** CUSTOM PENDANT FIXTURES. **TERRAZZO & MARBLE SUPPLY:** STAIR TREADS, RISERS, LANDING. **GRAND RAPIDS CHAIR:** BAR TABLE, STOOLS (LANDING). **FIRECLAY TILE:** BACKSPLASH TILE. **STUDIO TK:** CHAIRS (LANDING), WORKTABLES (STUDIO), MODULAR SOFA, SIDE CHAIRS (WORKSPACE). **BANKER WIRE:** METAL MESH (CHEESE WALL, WORKSPACE). **QTL:** DISPLAY CASE FIXTURES (HERITAGE). **SKYLINE DESIGN:** GLASS WALL INSTALLATION (HERITAGE), GLASS BOARD (STUDIO). **HERE NOW DESIGN:** MODULAR SOFA (LOBBY LOUNGE). **ALLERMUIR:** SIDE TABLE. **TARKETT:** RUG. **ASTEK:** HAPTIC WALLCOVERING (STAIR 2). **TEKNION:** STOOLS (STUDIO). **KOROSEAL:** WALLCOVERING. **INTERFACE:** CARPET (STUDIO, WORKSPACE). **A-N-D:** SCONCE (WORKSPACE). **B&B ITALIA:** MODULAR SEATING (MAIN LOBBY). **FORMICA:** WALLCOVERING (STORE). **EUREKA LIGHTING:** TRACK LIGHTING. **THROUGHOUT IGUZZINI:** RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES. **DOOGE VENEERS:** WOOD VEENER. **BENJAMIN MOORE & CO.;** SCUFFMASTER: PAINT.

