

# CRUNCH TIME

*Bahlsen, Germany's much-loved biscuit brand, brought UK design studio Freehaus on board to update its Hanover headquarters – resulting in an interior that mixes a taste of its proud manufacturing history with a warm and welcoming ethos*

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Everyone knows biscuits are an essential part of any office chat, but there's another reason why Jonathan Hagos, director of architecture and design studio

Freehaus, brings out the Bahlsen Orange Choco Leibniz during our meeting.

Freehaus recently completed the sensitive refurbishment of Bahlsen's HQ in Hanover, Germany. "They wanted to make the building more public facing, more warm and welcoming," Hagos explains – and those distinctive rectangles of sweet snack goodness make an appearance in a few design motifs that combine old and new within the scheme.

Freehaus previously delivered the interior design for Hermann's in the Berlin district of Mitte in 2016 for its co-founder Verena Bahlsen, the daughter of the third generation of the family business who are currently in charge. Hermann's is a co-working space but one centred around food, so you'll find a mix of chefs, bakers, designers, gardeners and writers pondering the future of what we eat. It cleverly has the look and feel of somewhere that the German capital's hipster population would flock to but retains the sense of being part of the Bahlsen business: a concrete counter that references a factory conveyor belt, and ceramic reliefs that take their cues from biscuit moulds, for instance.

→ The wavy design of the reception desk is a reference to equipment on the production line



Designer: **Freehaus**  
Client: **Bahlsen**  
Location: **Hanover, Germany**  
Project duration: **Dec 2016 – Apr 2018**  
Floorspace: **420 sq m**  
Cost: **Undisclosed**

"Based on the success of this project we were invited by the Bahlsen family to provide our design input on the initial strategic design that was being prepared at their headquarters," says Hagos. "We were invited to meet the project team in Hanover and expand on our design approach, which ultimately led to our appointment."

Because the Bahlsen brand is so well known and loved in its native Germany, he adds: "They came to us in the UK as they didn't want the design to be so reverential, but wanted someone who could approach it fresh."

Cue Hagos opening a big book of research and insight Freehaus undertook for the "Stammhaus": a word that can be translated as "headquarters", but which has more heart and soul in its truest meaning.

A steering group made up of members of the Bahlsen family plus the firm's mid-level managers, the building manager, the newest employee and the one who had been there the longest from its 400-strong workforce, all got together to examine how they as employees used the space. They also look at the threshold between the company's private spaces and those that would be opened up for the public to see.

"We really wanted the spaces to feel like one was at home, to give a grounded and relaxed air, informing the way in which visitors and staff might interact in the space," says Hagos.

Understandably, this being an art nouveau-inspired building, designed in 1911 by architect Karl Siebrecht, there were constraints by it being given the





↓ Contemporary chairs and tables in soft shades give a domestic edge to the window recesses



equivalent of a Grade I listing. The travertine exterior and barrel-vaulted entrance, which Hagos describes as “very haptic and tactile, with all these fossils and shells”, has been left untouched, save for a bit of cleaning up, while the local conservation body was insistent that the polished terrazzo in the foyer is darker than that of the main lobby.

This new flooring is inlaid with small brass *Butterkeks* – the company’s oblong hero product, made by the same craftsman who crafted the brass master templates forming the moulds for the famous biscuits. These are also inspired by the ornate engravings and carvings of biscuit shapes found throughout the building. Bahlsen’s fabrication capabilities have been utilised elsewhere in the interior to add a further sense of storytelling. For example, the shape of the wavy plastic composite on the reception desk is directly inspired by the equipment found on the production line.

*“We collectively felt a need to move away from a corporate aesthetic”*

To transform what was a dark, unwelcoming reception space, Freehaus worked with local architects and lighting designer Lux 100 to install a new lighting rig, suspended from existing columns, bringing light deeper into the expanse and the tall volume back to something more on a human scale. A stained-glass window on one wall has been artificially lit to further brighten the space.

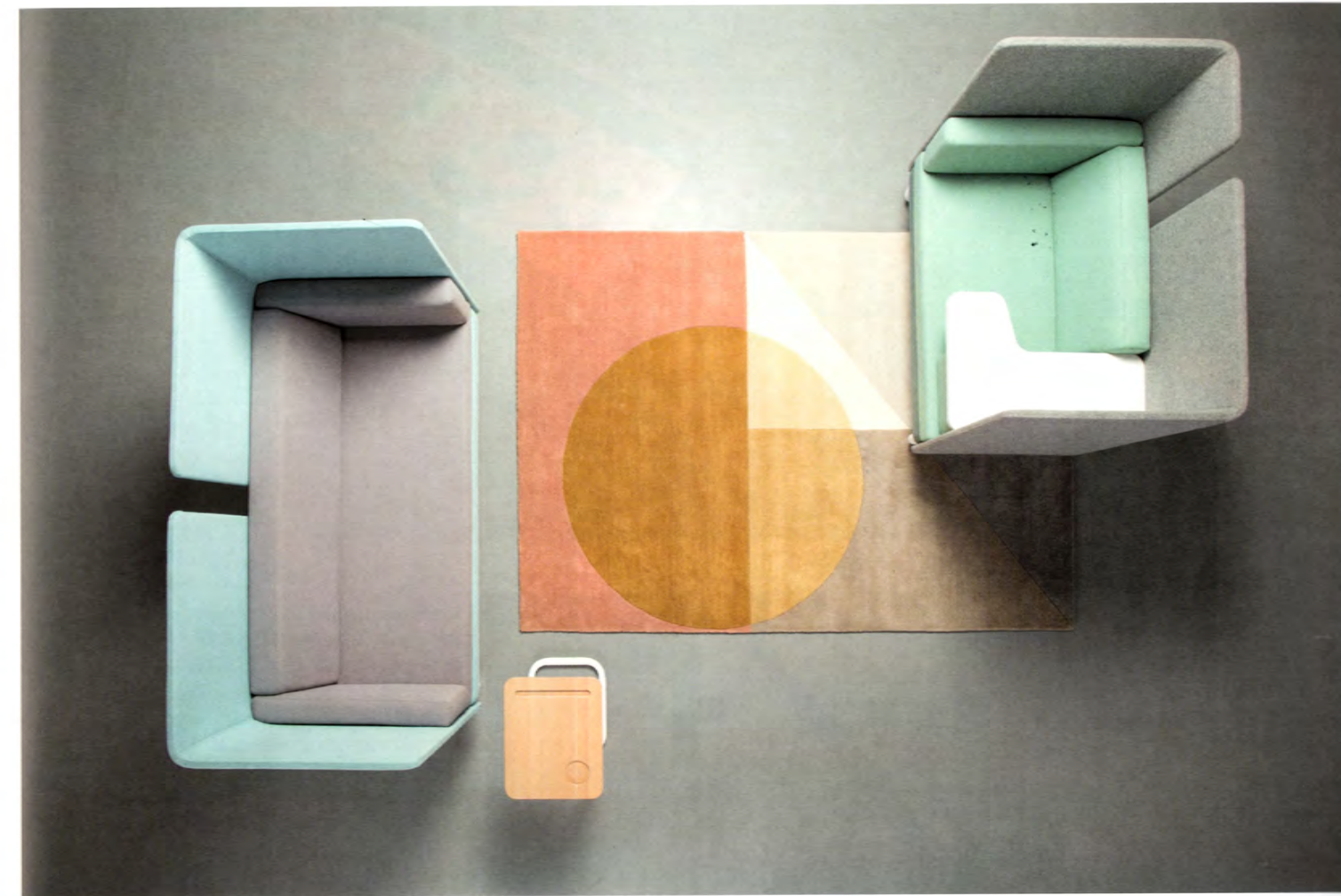
Below that are bay windows, which originally gave views into the factory floor when the building first opened over a century ago, but which had been closed off in a later refurbishment. Freehaus opened them up again to reveal Bahlsen’s test kitchen and R&D lab, giving that real sense of the Willy Wonka. Here informal meeting spaces have been introduced and elsewhere contemporary chairs and tables from brands such as Fredericia, Knoll, Bolia and Gebrüder Thonet Vienna ©

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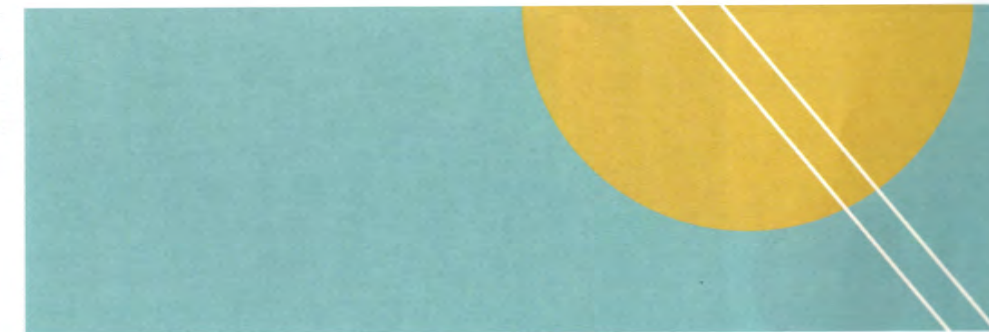
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↑ Bespoke display cases offer a glimpse into Bahlsen's history through artwork, photographs and packaging

→ Tiny Butterkeks, carefully crafted in bronze, have been inlaid in the terrazzo floor



in shades of green and blush. This ties in with the space being more domestic. "We collectively felt a need to move away from a corporate aesthetic," Hagos says. Couple this with some small non-visual improvements like biscuits being offered in the lobby, and reception staff greeting guests in their native language, and the visitor experience in 2019 is switched up immeasurably.

But not forgetting Bahlsen's history, Freehaus worked with the in-house archivist Dr Birgit Nachtwey on a curatorial strategy to make better use of the manufacturer's extensive archive. To this end, bespoke display cases have been designed to feature a range of artwork, ceramics and packaging. On the mezzanine level, there are a series of display cases featuring antique statues that represent Egyptology. Like the door handles on the ground floor, the handrail on the staircase to the upper level has been clad in leather and features the signature of the company's founder.

The story of Bahlsen's headquarters doesn't end here – two historic meeting rooms are being worked on to further improve the visitor experience and to, as Hagos adds finally, "make sure the building lasts another 100 years." ■

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