

Companies don't need to spend millions building a new HQ or totally renovating an old one to reap the benefits of good design. As these examples illustrate, a targeted infusion of \$300,000 or less can work wonders on employee performance

David Sokol

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"The lobby functioned well, but the current president and many other felt it was too cold", FXFowle senior partner Guy Geier says of the lobby, in which stone floors, a steel-and-glass reception desk, and metallic details created layer upon layer of gray – and gave of a decidedly Germanic feel.

"The client really wanted to establish SAP Americas as slightly different in feel from the German headquarters," Geier says. "It's a corporation that's very employee-centered, and they wanted the atmosphere to not be standoffish".

To warm up the area, FXFowle did not have to change much. It softened the edges with simple but dramatic improvements totaling \$300,000. A glass wall dividing lobby and office circulation is now screened by plants to make the entrance seem more intimate, Rugs cover the stone floor, and smaller glass panels have been replaced by resin partitions sandwiching tall grass. Surfaces reference the woods and bamboos that will finish the new building, too: The reception desk, for example, features anigre and maple.

Agnico-Eagle Mines was ready to start prospecting for a new Toronto headquarters when it was introduced to Taylor-Smyth-Architects, which persuaded the company to stay put. What convinced the company to expand into an extra floor, rather than leave altogether? "It allowed [Agnico-Eagle] to remain in the building, saving money on moving, and it also allowed them to retain their established presence in the existing location", says Michael Taylor, a partner at the design firm.

The dramatic transformation entailed installing a new stairwell between the two floors, "a major piece of work" that Taylor estimates to have cost \$150,000. Completed in December 2007, the renovation has proven a worthwhile branding initiative for Agnico-Eagle.

Besides impressing visitors with the double-height scale of the stairwell, the passage "was designed to be an analogy for the business", Taylor says. Horizontally grained travertine

**NOTEBOOK**

## Quick Fixes, Lasting Impact

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**With a \$150,000 design investment, a Toronto company found a way to evoke its mining heritage in the material of a showpiece wall (above). For \$300,000, a software giant made a "stand-offish" lobby feel welcoming (right).**

**\$300,000 FIX: NEW-LOOK LOBBY WARMS UP U.S. OFFICE OF GERMAN SOFTWARE LEADER**

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**\$150,000 FIX: MINING COMPANY MAKEOVER SAVES COST OF A MOVE**

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and gold-colored bars evoke both mining and the final product, while a vitrine displays the real stones and gold deposits of company mines.

Visitors and employees use the stairs to access the boardroom, so this introductory lesson has pride of place in the revamped space.

More than 15 years ago, Harley Ellis Devereaux conceived an office with an Arts-and-Crafts sensibility for Chicago and agency Cramer-Krasselt (C-K). "Their mission at the time was not to look cutting-edge, but rather stable and established", says Enrique Suarez, a principal at Harley Ellis Devereaux.

But when it came time for C-K to renegotiate its lease, it divulged to its longtime architect "that it couldn't attract good talent and was having trouble grabbing some of the

newer, hipper accounts,” explains Suarez. So C-K and Harley Ellis decided, Suarez says, “to do something fun without tearing out the nice things that were apparent in the old space”.

The \$300,000 elevator lobby encapsulates the transformation. A former lozenge-shaped ceiling coffer now features a floating wood panel beneath exposed workings, with just a hint of oval left. And horizontal banding on old walls now contain anigre and cherry panels for a Mondrian effect. An all-new display system and plasma screens introduce visitors to the agency’s vision, “They wanted to tell the world that C-K is cool again,” Suarez says of the lobby, whose design also hints at additional changes such as collaborative workspaces and greater daylight just beyond.

The client not only has secured new talent and projects as a result, but it has also asked Harley Ellis for more change-ups, such as a recent cafeteria redo.

CoStar, a leading provider of data to the commercial real estate industry, was succeeding in growing two key figures: In 2007 the 1,300-person company reported income-and employee-growth rates of 28.5 percent and 21.6 percent, respectively. But a number it wanted to see decline was its employee turnover.

Thinking that a more friendly environment would inspire employees to commit, the company asked the architecture firm RTKL to rethink CoStar’s offices in White Marsh, Md. The space, where 80 staffers research and maintain CoStar’s database of sales and leasing information, was textbook obsolete. Perimeter offices blocked daylight from entering the interior workspace. The layout also made it hard for managers to keep a helpful eye on junior staffers, hindering CoStar’s team-based approach to learning.

With a renovation completed in October 2007, RTKL removed the offending ring of perimeter offices, relocating them toward the interior’s center and cladding them in glass. The relatively simple transformation, which cost about \$100,000, achieved the desired results. Lower-ranking employees now feel they take part in the life of the company and have more access to their mentors, while managers say the improved sight lines make it easier to supervise staff. Not coincidentally, turnover is down 24 percent since the redesign.