

Making an entrance - lobbies to linger in

First impressions count,
but the attractions of a lavish lobby have to be weighed against the cost

BY EMILY CIARK | CORRESPONDENT

First impressions mean a lot, and in a competitive commercial real estate market, closing a leasing deal often depends on the drive-up and walk-in appeal of a building's entrance and lobby. In the Dallas-Fort Worth market, companies go all out to create the kind of killer lobbies that make tenants and clients happy. It's a chance to make a lasting impression and cast a company's image, even if the lobby is irrelevant to the bottom line. These days, building owners can't afford not to factor in an appealing lobby as part of the cost of doing business. As a result, the Dallas-Fort Worth area abounds with stunning, stylish and visually commanding interior spaces.

According to Judy Pesek, principal managing director of Gensler Architecture, Planning and Design Worldwide, an effective lobby speaks to its audience about whatever the building or space wants to convey. "If it's a museum, the lobby ought to speak that language to the people who come in, and it's the same for an office building or high rise," Pesek says.

Pesek, whose firm worked collaboratively on the new Pier 1 headquarters building in Fort Worth, describes the ideal lobby as being timeless, durable and maintainable. "It needs to be visually appealing, with good lighting, and it needs to be organized as far as way-finding, without confusion or visual chaos."

Jo Heinz, president of Staffelbach Design Associates Inc., says lobby entrances have always been important in conveying the quality of the property the tenants and the activities of the building. In newer buildings, lobbies and atriums have assumed a much higher profile than in the past. "We see much more greening of lobbies, more opportunities for drama," Heinz says. "But lobbies and atriums have always been places to see and be seen." Heinz says image is especially important in a single-tenant building, where lobbies harken back to a coliseum environment. "Companies are much more informal these days and are looking for means for serendipitous encounters and informal activities," she says.

Staffelbach recently designed a three-story atrium for t:m (formerly Temerlin McClain), an advertising firm based in Irving. "The company wanted to increase communication between divisions and cut down on isolation," Heinz says. "This atrium gives a sense of community and allows more penetration of daylight into the entire facility."

With the greening trend in construction, Heinz says newer buildings use earth-sensitive materials like durable stone and granite. Sound absorption is another important element and, post 9/11, there's a heightened concern for security, leading to greater visibility and continuity between interior and exterior spaces. Lobbies are so important to building owners that they don't hesitate to upgrade to remain competitive.

Currently, Staffelbach is working to rehab the lobby of Coit Central Tower in North Dallas. According to Eric Rutledge, general manager and director of asset services for Cushman & Wakefield of Texas Inc. — which manages the building for its owners — the building's lobby was "vintage 1985." "The building is in great shape as far as infrastructure," Rutledge says, "but the lobby was looking a little tired." When Cushman & Wakefield took over the management of the space in the fall of 2004, the owners agreed to move the rehab schedule up to reposition the building and stay competitive. "We want to create a sense of commitment, a quiet sense of prestige," Rutledge says. "The style is modern but reassuring." The new lobby will feature higher ceilings, new lighting and new wood surfaces.

Focal point

Art is a major focal point in a building's lobby, and it doesn't get much better than the gallery atriums at Hall Office Park in Frisco. All the art is from the collection of developer Craig Hall, and the flagship building lobby displays work by Texas artists. According to Hall Financial Group senior vice president Patricia Meadows, many people visit the building just to look at the art.

Jean Farris, director of leasing for Hall Office Park, says the art is part of the park's success. "Prospective tenants are always impressed," she says. "They linger to look at the art, they look outside, they're never in a rush to leave. "We always make a good first impression and that's definitely a first step in closing a deal." Farris and Meadows also point out that the lobby was designed for the art, rather than the other way around, and that says a lot about the quality of the company. Everything about the lobby makes a statement about the owner, they note, adding that the cleanliness of the lobby also makes a statement about the management. "The wise property owner understands the importance of the lobby as a first impression," Farris says. "Our lobby reflects the company and sets the tone. We're efficient, approachable and accessible."

Balancing act

Sometimes a building's lobby represents a balancing act between the client perspective and the shareholder or customer standpoint, says Riis Christensen, managing director of tenant services for Transwestern Commercial Services. Companies are constantly trying to get more bang for the buck with lobbies and conference rooms," Christensen says. But there's a fine line between 'I'm successful' and 'How much is it costing me to have this?' " But Christensen concedes that sometimes the image created is worth the price. "The Crescent has great lobbies," he says, noting that most of the tenants are investment banking firms. "They have to be there to play the high- stakes game," Christensen says. "Crescent lobbies have fabulous art and architecture, and firms pay the highest rents in Dallas to be there."

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