

Reinventing The LI Office Building

Published: June 11, 2007

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The trickling of waterfalls, the koi in streams, the music blowing in the wind - commercial property developer Ted Weiss could feel the stress dissipate.

Soon, there'll be virtual golf, free Wi-Fi, a cafe, a gym and even Thursday night cocktails among the palms and commissioned artwork in the atrium lobby, where "clubby" tables and chairs will create a Starbucks ambience.

"It's not your father's office building," Weiss told guests at the Thursday opening of his Melville Corporate Center III.

These days, that's the point. Weiss's philosophy on how his building should work addresses some of the most critical issues cited by potential clients and tenants of his other properties. Young professionals fleeing Long Island make it hard to fill jobs. Singles might toil here, but life for them isn't in the 'burbs - it's in the Big Apple.

"I see it firsthand," said Weiss, 59, who'd like to pass the business baton to his son and daughter working in the city. "My son works for a hedge fund in Manhattan as a trader. He gets out of work, walks out of the door just across the street, and he's in the health club. He walks down the street and he's got any one of a number of restaurants and bars to have a beer or what have you, and then he walks five blocks up the street and he's in his apartment."

The center, which is on the South Service Road of the Long Island Expressway between Route 110 and Pinelawn Road, is one of three major office buildings under construction on Long Island right now.

With more than 130,000 square feet of leasing space, the building aims for a natural ambience with stone, wood and similar materials, but it won't be mistaken for a Frank Lloyd Wright copy. It's still an office building. The insides, except for the ground-floor public areas, are raw, with exposed metal ceilings, concrete floors and unpainted walls - details that await the preferences of tenants.

What's there has been designed to feel like a country club. The courtyards have gardens that borrow from Japanese rock gardens. Light-hearted music is piped into the lobby around the clock. Especially striking is the the Pakistani marble with fossils in the elevators. The color echoes the buildings' muted yellow-browns and greens.

Weiss maintains that the promise of a comfortable work environment - garden-side cappuccino in between staff meetings - could convince potential big-name companies that they can expand here less expensively than in the city and at the same time attract workers younger than 40.

Take, for example, the national law firms that Weiss has been trying to draw to his building.

"Their industry is highly competitive," he said. "In order for a quality firm to attract top-notch candidates to a suburban market, they have to show them it's more than just the dollar."

Some architects call the resort-style offices a major departure from most buildings on Long Island, although the office-as-playground concept is used in many new office parks around the world, most notably Silicon Valley in California.

"These design concepts are definitely foreign to Long Island and should attract the attention of workers looking for a better environment to work in," Centerport architect Frank Falino said. Long Island, he said, is a long way from providing the New York City atmosphere that many desire.

Still, the koi ponds, cafe and the social ambience aren't entirely new on Long Island.

In 1978, Elkin Architecture converted 125,000 square feet of Grumman's old Syosset factory into the award-winning North Shore Atrium, with racquetball courts, sauna, retail and three atriums that allowed interior offices to have views.

In more recent projects, Elkin has also put in koi ponds, lush shrubbery, giant artwork and wider hallways for armchairs to encourage spontaneous conversations between building occupants.

"It's basically a question of trying to create a relief space for people," said Brentwood architect Peter Elkin, 61, who remembers designing buildings back then as "back offices" for city firms.

But he and other architects see resort-style offices as a growing trend. Decades ago, the buildings didn't have to be enticing because the tide of workers moving east out of the city recognized the Island lifestyle as its own reward.

Now it's different, but change may come slowly.

"Most office building developers unfortunately see no return on their investment in space that cannot be rented and therefore do not provide the amenities," said architect Orlando Maione of Maione Associates in Stony Brook. "His major challenge will be to attract the office tenants who are willing to pay for the extra amenities to keep their employees."

Because of the amenities and Weiss' labor costs - it was his first project with all union labor - his price per square foot is expected to be more than the average in Melville, currently estimated at \$30 per square foot. One pressure on Weiss is that there is a lot of empty office space on Long Island.

But Weiss said he's been talking to several big companies that are interested in being the anchor tenant, taking about 80,000 square feet of space.

At Thursday's opening party, which lasted well past sunset, real estate agents, friends and potential clients were treated to cigars rolled right on the spot with tobacco grown in the Dominican Republic. Tuxedoed musicians played. Caterers mingled, offering plates of sushi rolls and other delights.

"Make sure you go to the ladies' room," one woman said, delighted with the creamy stone walls there.

Weiss plans to move his company, T. Weiss Realty, into the new space by mid-July.

Work nowadays can be filled with distractions, including demanding "Crackberry" personal digital assistants, or PDAs, and TV news tickers, but the developer thinks his amenities will destress rather than distract.

"It's not a place to hang out and escape work," he said. "I want people to work hard in our building and enjoy the work because during the course of the day, they can play a little bit."