

Property Report

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Driven by green principles

Sustainability is the backbone of HOK Canada's design philosophy – of which Honda is the latest beneficiary

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Globe and Mail Update

Much like its eco-friendly Civic hybrid car, Honda Canada Inc.'s new complex north of Toronto will aim to tread softly on the environment, while keeping a flexible footprint.

The auto maker is developing a 500,000-square-foot campus with three interconnected buildings: a four-storey head office, a single-storey R&D centre; and a 200,000-square-foot parts distribution centre that was conceived by design and architecture firm HOK Canada.

“HOK was the perfect fit for this project,” says Richard Jacobs, public relations manager at Honda. “Their expertise in campus-style design coupled with environmental stewardship matches Honda's corporate ideals.”

It's another feather in the cap for HOK, which in just over a decade in Canada has carved an award-winning reputation for its building designs that play heavily to environmental concerns.

Designing Honda's new digs required more than looking at the auto maker's growth plans and calculating the required square footage, says Gordon Stratford, director of design at HOK Canada in Toronto.

“Before putting pen to paper, you've got to understand the client's business, their [human resources] plans, the culture they want to promote, how they want to represent themselves,” he says, “so we spend a long time talking about business concepts before we examine space.”

This rigorous “visioning” process is at the heart of HOK's design philosophy and is the starting point for every project. It involves sitting down with the client and “demystifying the design process through employee surveys, day-in-the-life observations; the flow of work and information,” says Lui Mancinelli, managing director of HOK Canada. “It's about taking something that seems very complex and daunting to the client and breaking it down into small, logical steps.”

For example, one company approached HOK with a set space plan, believing it required 25,000 square feet. After carefully observing the way it works and its business plan, HOK was able to pinpoint operational inefficiencies and, ultimately, space

requirements. “It became apparent they only needed about 10,000 square feet,” Mr. Stratford says.

This problem-solving method was developed by two HOK partners, William Pena and Steven Parshall who, in 1961, published *Problem Solving: An Architectural Programming Primer*, which has become the standard text on visioning for architectural programs in universities across North America. “It makes good bedtime reading,” Mr. Stratford says jokingly.

During the Honda visioning sessions, HOK identified operational efficiencies – how employees work and manoeuvre throughout the site – as a top priority for the new development in Markham, Ont.

Honda's current site on Milner Avenue in Toronto sprawls across such a wide area that workers have to drive to each building. The new buildings will be interconnected and ordered according to the flow of work. “The office and training centre work most closely together, so they were placed in immediate juxtaposition,” Mr. Stratford says.

Collaboration is key to Honda's corporate culture, which HOK recognized by designing an office floor plan that places everyone, even senior executives, in an open space, with each employee no more than eight metres from continuous, ribbon-like windows.

The result: a bright, open space conducive to creativity. “We're trying to enrich people's lives,” Mr. Stratford says.

Akin to the lean, cost-effective vehicles Honda builds, the 5.3-acre site will be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold Certified, the stringent green-building benchmark for the design, construction and operation of commercial buildings in North America. Sustainable elements include storm water collection and recirculation for irrigation, heat-reflective roofs that reduce interior cooling requirements and a floor-plate that allows Honda to double in size without requiring more space.

Enriching lives gets to the core of HOK's commitment to what is known as the triple bottom line: how sustainable design benefits business, society and the planet. “You can't differentiate between a well-designed building and sustainable design; they are the same,” Mr. Mancinelli says.

Some clients still equate sustainability with increased upfront costs. “As short as two years ago, we'd mention sustainable design and the client's eyes would glaze over,” he says. But now, he adds, “we've reached a tipping point: Every client who shows up at our door is interested in sustainability, even if we don't use that word.”

The HOK Toronto office is no exception. In 2006, it was one of the first in Ontario to achieve LEED-CI (commercial interiors) gold certification. Issued by the U.S. Green Building Council, LEED-CI recognizes high-performance office interiors that are healthy, productive places to work, are less costly to operate and maintain and demonstrate environmental stewardship.

Retrofitted in late 2004, the 20,695-square-foot office is located on the fifth floor in a former clothing manufacturing building erected in 1974. “When we were looking for space, we wanted a location that would support LEED goals, which included the ability to install operable windows,” Mr. Stratford says. “We needed the support of a landlord that would allow us to touch the building's envelope.”

Getting the landlord on board wasn't difficult; HOK's efficient design makes the entire building more efficient, even though its office is the only LEED-certified space in the 10-floor tower.

“Landlords now recognize not of the moral imperative to sustainability but also that it affects their bottom line, too,” Mr. Mancinelli says. “They now realize they need to green their portfolios to compete for tenants with other landlords and to increase property value.”

Since coming to Canada in 1997, HOK's Toronto office has grown from 18 employees to almost 320. HOK Canada is a division of the company, founded as Hellmuth Obata + Kassabaum in 1955 in St. Louis, that now employs 2,300 people in 25 offices in Canada, the U.S., Europe and Asia.

“When we started, we were mainly an IT design firm,” Mr. Stratford says. Back then, Nortel was the firm's main client. “We were experiencing explosive growth but we knew we needed to diversify into other areas.”

It teamed up with several big banks (CIBC, TD, RBC) as well as partaking in projects as far away as Qatar, Dubai and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where HOK designed a 2.3-million-square-metre “economic city,” the largest private-sector project in the Kingdom.

“We've been working in the Middle East since 1998,” Mr. Stratford says.

Besides designing office interiors, HOK also plans facilities for health care, retail, hospitality, hotels and science and technology firms.

All HOK offices are competing to reduce carbon emissions by 50 per cent by 2010. With a chief executive officer in San Francisco, a president in Washington and board members scattered across the world, global sustainability is certainly in HOK's best interests.

Special to The Globe and Mail