



ONE COMPANY, MANY PASSIONS

Discovery Communications' headquarters showcases how to keep creativity alive while forming a corporate identity

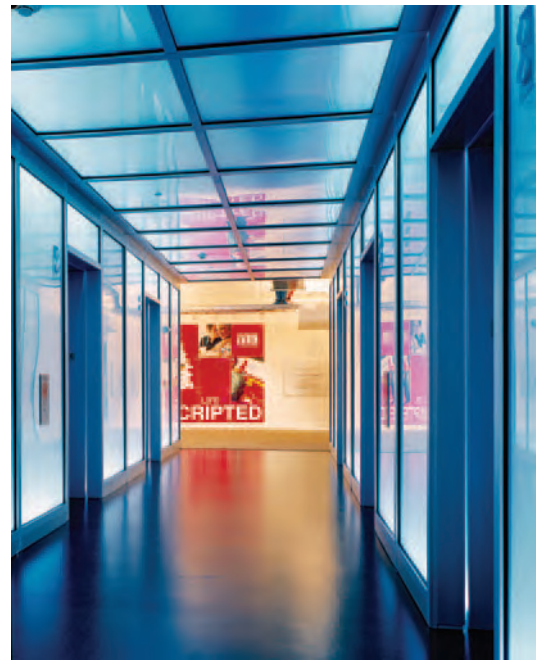
Outside, a sensory garden awakens all five of your senses. "A Brushstroke of Discovery," a 180-foot-long mural of brilliantly colored, fired-glass enamel that spans nine to 18 feet in height along the street side of the building, stimulates your mind. Walk inside, and you're greeted by Stan, a 13-foot-high, 40-foot-long replica of a T-Rex.

BY CARMEN WALSH

Joining Stan on the polished limestone lobby floor is an exhibit that includes a robotic mammoth, an actual mammoth hair and tusk and a replication of a bambiraptor, a breed of dinosaur thought to be a link between dinosaurs and birds. For those more interested in modern-day life, there is also an audiokinetic sculpture, a video wall and a custom motorcycle. Welcome to One Discovery Place in Silver Spring, Md., headquarters of media giant Discovery



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL WARCHOL



Communications, Inc., and certainly not your typical corporate office.

Soon to celebrate its 20th anniversary, Discovery has grown from one U.S. offering, the documentary-based Discovery Channel launched in 1985, to a global conglomerate comprising more than 20 entertainment brands and 60 networks, including the Learning Channel, Animal Planet, the Travel Channel, the Discovery Health Channel and the Nature Company. The Silver Spring site is Discovery's first real headquarters, the first time all the people central to the organization were brought together in one place. As such, the project posed some critical challenges.

How could so many groups of people focusing on such a variety of subject areas (health, animals, travel, education, interior decorating, etc.) be thrown together in one place without losing their separate identities? Chris Banks, AIA, IIDA, of Gensler, one of the principal designers for Discovery, says that in this collection of highly creative independent groups, the units are small enough that there is a tremendous amount of energy and synergy. The company's main goal in building the headquarters was to allow the groups to maintain their independence while still feeling like they were part of the parent organization. "The company is very committed to keeping the entrepreneurial spirit alive in all these little groups; the big company needs to be run like a corporation, but at the same time, it needs to keep that entrepreneurial spirit and passion to maintain the quality of content."

Did she say passion? Yes, according to Banks, Discovery is one of those rare places where the employees love what they do and believe what they're doing is worthwhile. They want to fulfill the original vision of Discovery's founder and chairman, John Hendricks: to provide an alternative to commercial TV and PBS. Discovery didn't want to diminish that passion by forcing



its employees into a nondescript, standardized workspace. By bringing them under one roof, Discovery wanted to further stimulate, not crush, the creativity and innovation of its employees, many of them young, energetic and excited to come to work every day.

What had been a traditional office building was transformed into an imaginative feat of contemporary design. The two wings (one 10 floors, one eight) are connected by a narrow 150-foot atrium with stairs running all the way from the ground floor to the tenth. Thankfully, elevators are available in both wings.

In addition to the museum-like lobby, the bottom floor houses a conference center, a training room, a screening room with about 80 seats, a multipurpose

It's all in the details: Common areas at Discovery are designed to create a sense of connectedness among a very diverse group.





room for meetings and events and a small café. Then, if you trekked all the way up the stairs to the tenth floor, you'd find an executive area that is "very modest," says Banks. But let's focus on the "real people" floors in between.

Visible from the atrium through floor-to-ceiling windows, the remaining floors of the 543,637-square-foot building are occupied by approximately 1,800 of Discovery's 5,000 employees. Always keeping creativity in mind, the designers achieved that artist-in-his-loft feel even in places with standard ceiling heights by leaving the structural components exposed. They chose modern, imaginative lighting solutions and contemporary furnishings. Then, to add warmth, they used wood screens and floors in the common spaces. Bold colors include red, blue, green and gold.

"This was really a low-budget job. And the only way to get impact on a low budget is with shape and color," says Banks.

All the floors, and their work areas, are set up in pretty much identical fashion. No one gets special treatment; the artists get the same type of setup as the accountants. "Creative organizations have the same facilities issues as other types of organizations," says Banks. "They need to be able to move around quickly, without too much trouble. The answer to that is standardization. Of course, especially in creative companies, no one likes rules and no one wants to feel standardized."

Movable systems provided an efficient solution. The screening rooms, file rooms and offices were all created with movable wall systems with customized panel sizes. Only two office sizes were used: eight feet by 12 feet and 12 by 12. Discovery can easily reconfigure three eight by 12 offices into two 12 by 12 offices with minimal help from a furniture company, making it easy to adjust for personnel changes. Still, the offices don't look like typical standardized systems. "There are no visible vinyl panels; instead, you see only the face, which is made of glass and wood," Banks says.

Then there are the Herman Miller Resolve system workstations. With the main cabling housed in overhead trusses, the pole-based system is easily reconfigured when organizational changes occur. And although Discovery opted to keep all the workstations the same size, the workstations feel very different than conventional cubes. With open 120-degree angles, they are reminiscent of a honeycomb, offering efficient use of space while giving employees a more connected feeling, inviting interaction. And the workstations have boomerang-shaped work surfaces. "They're kind of techie; about as far from Dilbert as you can get," Banks says.

The workstations are divided by slightly translucent screens that offer visual privacy without making work spaces feel closed in. And because the screens can be rolled up or down, the employees get to choose their level of privacy. In some places, people have actually removed the screens to allow open communication with their neighbors. Then, within their not-so-standard standardized spaces, employees are allowed to decorate to their hearts' content. To-do lists, pet photos, kids' drawings, abstract art or floral arrangements are encouraged here.



Translucent screens give an open feel while allowing workers necessary privacy.

As is that small-group entrepreneurial spirit. Each group, such as the Learning Channel, is designated its own area. As you step off the elevator, you see signs for the groups occupying that particular floor. And while there are no physical barriers between groups, each group's brand identity is visible. Employees hang collateral materials — artwork for current projects, advertising posters, etc. — on the walls. Because those materials are changing constantly, the spaces reflect the living, breathing dynamic that characterizes Discovery.

If each group has its own space and essentially functions as a separate entity, how is that feeling of being part of the parent company achieved? Simple. Each floor has a "community center," where employees from the various groups can mingle. The centers are also good spaces for holding casual meetings and working on group projects. They contain the typical pantry stuff and three seating areas: one a living-room type setup, the other two containing table and chairs suitable for meeting and dining. One of the seating areas also has "touch-down space" for visitors to plug in their computers. The three seating areas are separated by transparent sliding doors, maintaining both a sense of connectedness and privacy.

It's a balancing act found throughout the company's many diverse endeavors as well as its carefully executed headquarters, from discovering Stan in the lobby to drift-



ing off to far away places in the gardens — touches meant not simply to tickle a visitor's fancy, but to fan employee creativity.

Signs proclaim what group occupies a particular floor.

O21

Carmen Walsh is a writer and editor based in York, Pa.

To place an ad in
OFFICE21

email: mherron@o21mag.com
phone: 310-645-9465
fax: 310-410-9940

Breakfast • Lunch • Dinner
Served 7 Days a Week
Monday - Friday 7:30am-8:30pm
Saturday & Sunday 8:00am-3:30pm
(310) 652-9411 **(310) 652-3100**
Eat In • Take Out • Limited Delivery Area
Parking In Rear
8909 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, CA 90069