



It may not call out Disneyland, but the Team Disney building in Anaheim, Calif., is far from boring. The Frank Gehry–designed structure is home to the creative force behind the theme park.

## High Tech Meets High Touch

Disneyland's creative building houses and inspires

If you've driven the Santa Ana Freeway through Anaheim, Calif., you've probably seen the building. Not that it's imposing. It's not a high-rise, and no big corporate logo demands your attention. It is long though; about 800 feet long (imagine a 70-story building pushed onto its side).

And it's distinctive. The freeway side of the building is covered in quilted galvanized stainless steel panels that were chemically treated to appear to change colors — going through various greens and blues — as you drive by.

The building discreetly houses the creative forces behind Disneyland — though no huge mural of Mickey or Walt Disney logo is to be found here. Because the Team Disney building is located on the edge of Disneyland, it must adhere to Disney's self-imposed "visual intrusion restrictions." Nothing can interfere with the fantasy created within the theme park. Thus, the 295,000 square-foot building has only four stories, to maintain a low profile, literally.

But no one said low-profile had to mean boring. When approaching the building, you see that aside from those



30+ year Disney veteran Wing Chao oversees development of Disney real estate across the globe.

## Stained plywood, the natural grain still showing, partitions the workspaces; down-to-earth elements provide a respite from the high-tech world of Imagineering.

intriguing stainless steel panels, the outside of the building is covered in bright yellow stucco and adorned with several metal canopies and other sculptures. As you walk inside, the bright colors often associated with "The Happiest Place on Earth" continue to the common spaces. The atrium lobby, for example, is drenched in vibrant magenta. The 12,000-square-foot employee cafeteria is decorated in retired elements from the theme park; a huge Goofy occupies one spiral staircase.

Also occupying this building are the 1,400 employees of Walt Disney Imagineering, the research and development division of The Walt Disney Company. These are the creative minds responsible for planning, designing, producing and managing the Disney resorts, theme parks, hotels, cruise ships and other entertainment venues and keeping visitors flocking to Southern California and beyond. Originally formed in 1952 by Walt Disney to create Disneyland, the Imagineering division now represents more than 140 disciplines. All of these "Imagineers" work together to blend creativity and innovative technology into some of the world's most awe-inspiring entertainment experiences. To achieve these wonders requires constant communication and collaboration.

So what type of environment enables this combination of creative and operations types to thrive? To answer that question, we were lucky enough to speak with the man who oversees the development of Disney real estate across the globe: Wing Chao, Executive Vice President, Master Planning, Architecture and Design for Walt Disney Imagineering. (Chao also happens to be Vice Chairman, Asia Pacific Development, for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, and as such, leads the development of projects like Hong Kong Disneyland, the first Disney theme park being built in China.)

In contrast to the larger-than-life visual stimulation of the common areas, the actual work areas are subtle, painted in pastels, Chao explains. "We wanted comfort for the eyes; bright colors can make you tired after a while." In fact, Chao says that much of the workspace consists of organic materials. "We used basic materials, like plywood and chain-link fence." Stained plywood, the natural grain still showing, partitions the workspaces; down-to-earth elements provide a respite from the high-tech world of Imagineering.

Those types of basic, inexpensive materials were used throughout the office design and were used intelligently, Chao says. The budget for this building wasn't huge; the cost of the

Team Disney building was comparable to other office buildings in the area, he says. "We try to spend the money inside, at the parks." What's important, according to Chao, is not how much money you spend, but having a "smart" designer. He reports that the designer of this Team Disney building, for example, "cleverly used colors and curved walls" to achieve a creative, but still functional workspace.

The intelligent use of materials and the building's overall design support and encourage the Imagineers' innovation. "It's very functional, very open. There's a sense of flexibility; we can move workstations around." The design also demonstrates the importance the Disney organization places on face-to-face interaction. "Since it's only four stories, people walk down the hall to see each other; there are many wide staircases where people can meet up with each other. As opposed to a high-rise, where people often communicate by e-mail, we work more face to face. It's just like the theme parks themselves: It's a people business. We're not just high tech; we're also high touch."

That focus on people shows up in other ways. For example, in the Disney memorabilia and pictures. "There is a very strong sense of the man Walt Disney here," says Chao. Disneyland was the first theme park and the only one that Walt Disney saw all the way through. The building also houses Disney University, the company's employee training program that ensures all employees recognize and adhere to Walt Disney's original vision; the organization is committed to maintaining the standards he set and the culture he created.

So who designed the office building for the Imagineers? Before becoming the well-known name he is today, Frank Gehry was the clever user of materials and colors who created the Team Disney, Anaheim building. More prominent Gehry-Disney collaborations include Disney ICE, also located in Anaheim, a Disney Village in Paris and the widely acclaimed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

Chao keeps long-time Disney CEO Michael Eisner's philosophy in mind when approaching building projects: "A building is 3-D art." The building itself becomes part of the culture, the history. Chao explains: "It's there every day for people to look at and experience. You need to make sure it's done well."

And in the case of Southern California's greatest attraction, you have to be sure the building inspires continued creative success.

021

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