

SQUARE FEET

BLUEPRINTS

Building a Work Space That Inspires Good Health

By CLAIRE WILSON

MICHAEL A. SUDIK, director of operations at Rodale, the media company that publishes magazines including Men's Health and books including "The South Beach Diet," remembers the day last September when the company moved into its newly renovated offices in Midtown Manhattan.

Only three of the five floors had been completed. But looking around at the way the glass admitted light from the outside, the way the light played with the colors and textures of the interior and the sense of calm that prevailed, Mr. Sudik said he knew that the project had achieved its goal.

"Everyone had gone home for the day, it was quiet, the lights were low and I was standing in the yoga room watching the sun filter through the city at dusk," he recalled. "It was an amazing feeling."

Rodale will eventually occupy floors 6 to 10 in the 24-story building, at 733 Third Avenue at 46th Street, and have an option to lease floors 4, 5 and 11, according to Mr. Sudik. Rodale had been in the building since 1993, occupying three noncontiguous floors — 12, 15 and 16.

The two-story glass yoga studio in the main reception area on the eighth floor may seem a quirky addition to a work environment defined by the stress of deadlines. In fact, it is intended to offer a sense of the health and wellness philosophy that Rodale promotes in its stable of magazines, which also includes Prevention, Runner's World and Women's Health.

Rodale's renovated space, measuring 160,000 square feet over all, is also meant to inspire employees to live that healthy lifestyle, too — for example, by taking the yoga classes provided by the company or the salsa dance classes that are also conducted there.

The idea, Mr. Sudik says, was to try to duplicate the atmosphere of the company's headquarters in rural Emmaus, Pa., just south of Allentown.

And with a nod to the company's founder, J. I. Rodale, a pioneer in the organic movement in the United States, it also had to be "green."

"We wanted to take the look and feel of Emmaus and put it in Midtown without it looking contrived," Mr. Sudik said.

Stepping off the elevator on the company's new main level, visitors will see the contrast of an all-white foyer, with the name Rodale spelled in relief on the opposite wall, and darker hues and wood finishes of the reception area at one end. Turn into it, and you find a vast open space, with a two-story expanse of glass walls, that includes the yoga studio in the rear.

"The idea was that you turn the corner, see the windows and the expansiveness beyond and just feel good," said Susan A. Dougherty, a partner in the Manhattan architectural firm Suben/Dougherty Partnership, which is the principal designer for the renovation. The firm is also working with the engineers Bard, Rao & Athenas of Boston.

Hardwood floors are unusual in high-traffic corporate environments, but Rodale's floor in the entryway is a honey-colored bamboo. Above it, a dark bamboo panel is suspended from the ceiling and illuminated from behind. A stripped ceiling exposing basic cement slabs adds height all around.

The lines of the floorboards and the hanging bamboo panel steer the gaze toward a Shaker-inspired cherry wood staircase with gray stone steps. The staircase cuts through the windowed area at an angle to break with the many right angles of the building, but it also has another function. "We see the stair as an art piece that encourages the exercise element as well," Ms. Dougherty said. "It also fosters a sense of community with people running up and down and sharing ideas."

There are three such decorative staircases; two others, not quite as elaborate, will be a feature of the last two floors when they are completed over the next several months.



Susan A. Dougherty, above, is a partner in the Manhattan architectural firm that is the principal designer for the renovation of Rodale's office space in Midtown Manhattan. The main reception area has lots of open space and includes a two-story glass yoga studio, left and above left, that employees are encouraged to use. Organic and energy-saving materials were used in the renovation.

The glass outer wall that is the backdrop for the three staircases brings natural light to all meeting rooms — whether they are glass-enclosed, like the 30-foot-long primary conference room, or an open common area, like the informal coffee bar on the main level.

These types of rooms in corporate spaces are typically afterthoughts, relegated to areas of the floor plan where few may want to congregate, Ms. Dougherty noted, but the natural light makes them more welcoming. Some rooms have walls of screens for video presentations.

Natural light also dictated the layout of the offices and cubicles on the floor plan. Executives like Steve Murphy, the president and chief executive, have offices along the windowed periphery, but so do many staff members. Clusters of cubicles are near windows whenever practical, with glass panels on each to further admit natural light.

Sensors regulate light levels according to available natural light, saving energy costs. (Cynthia Tollo, senior project manager at Suben/Dougherty, says the savings could total

up to 75 percent on the lighting bill.) Other energy-saving measures include temperature zones that can be regulated individually, reducing extreme hot and cold spots that can be so common in large offices. As the company philosophy dictates, so-called green materials like fabrics and carpet tiles used in the renovation are organic, energy-saving and as free as possible of volatile organic compounds, or V.O.C.'s, a family of chemicals found in common industrial products. Bamboo was chosen for the floors because it is plentiful, and supplies can be easily replenished.

The cost for "green" material "is coming down quite a bit and it is a lot easier to find things because so many manufacturers are getting on the green bandwagon," Ms. Dougherty said. "Green has become the buzzword in architecture," she said. "No one wants to contribute to hurting the environment."

A willow green color, not surprisingly, was chosen for the carpets and fabrics used for the upholstery and cubicle panels. It contrasts with the gray of the aluminum finishes on the cubicles and file cabinets for each staff member.

(The cabinets have miniature coat closets built into them.) Around the common areas, furniture like the Windsor-style chairs in the coffee bar has a traditional feel to it. Furniture for the staff includes ergonomic "Life" chairs by Knoll.

"They are not inexpensive chairs and I have to give the Rodales credit," Ms. Dougherty said. She noted that Ardash Rodale, the company's chairwoman, had insisted that all employees have the same type of chair.

"Chairs are the one thing clients love to cheap out on and they are the most important thing," Ms. Dougherty said.

To Kristen Dollard, an editor in the new product development department who also takes yoga classes in the office, the chairs say as much about the company's commitment to its healthy philosophy as does the yoga studio, which was an idea of Mr. Murphy, the chief executive.

"They are considering your overall well-being as opposed to the bottom line," Ms. Dollard said. "It's a company that stands for something." □

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