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SQUARE FEET

BLUEPRINTS

Ann Taylor Fabricates Its New Headquarters

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

Fully-loaded garment racks are not particularly svelte. In Ann Taylor's former 143,000-square-foot headquarters, they choked the corridors, hemming designers and merchandisers into cramped, dark cubicles already brimming with swatches, mannequins and accessories. Employees lacked a neutral backdrop for creating clothes and the physical space to collaborate across product lines.

"We were in a building with traditional workspaces," Darrell DeVoe, vice president for corporate facilities at the Ann Taylor Stores Corporation, said of the old Manhattan headquarters at 142 West 57th Street. Employees felt constrained. They wanted light and storage. They wanted ad hoc work spaces permitting self-expression.

But while Ann Taylor executives agreed that comfortable employees are productive ones, and that they needed a stand-out headquarters to be a fashion industry employer of choice, they were intent on expanding in a budget-conscious way with limited customization that would still give employees flexibility and allow for reconfiguration and expansion later.

Armed with guidance from the architectural and design firm HOK, once known as Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, and the rank and file, Mr. DeVoe orchestrated an unusual cookie-cutter solution producing, in his words, "a very special cookie," within the 300,000 square feet leased on 12 floors last August at the new Times Square Tower. (The 47-story wedge-shaped building at 7 Times Square owned by Boston Properties was designed by the architect David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.)

The proof is in the cookie, as a recent tour demonstrated. Immediately noticeable is the egalitarian distribution of light flowing through wraparound floor-to-ceiling windows: private offices, in an initially controversial decision, were exiled to the center of most floors, making space for row upon row of "spines" that are five and a half feet tall. The canvas-hued partitions encasing power and data lines extend 16 to 24 feet from the windows and are mounted on both sides with expanses of vanilla-toned laminate work sur-



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

The main design at the Ann Taylor headquarters at 7 Times Square is broken up into departments.

A formerly cramped garment operation opts for light, storage and flexibility.

faces.

A typical 27,000-square-foot floor yields about 100 work areas, arrayed in open, airy clusters of four. Atop earth-toned sisal carpet, each Aeron chair sits no farther than 20 uninterrupted feet from a window.

And there, more or less, the company gave up control over the basic layout.

"We called it the 'kit of parts,'" said Mr. DeVoe of the rolling accouterments assigned to each workspace: a privacy screen with a hanging rack on one side; a table that can be pushed against others for group creativity; a low storage cart fitted with shelves, a hanging rack or both; and a filing cabinet.

Employees use the pieces to work in ways that suit them. "Although there's only one size workstation, people have created 15 different configurations," said Juliette Lam, a

senior principal at HOK who worked on the project with Rick Focke, director of design and senior principal.

The "one size fits all" approach was altered only slightly for private offices: with the exception of the executive floor, they come in just two sizes and are fronted by smoothly sliding frosted glass. The Italian-made doors conserve space and admit natural light, calming objections of vice presidents deposed from formerly windowed perches.

The new headquarters, which is only partly occupied pending its completion in July, will house 720 of the company's 950 employees (the others are three blocks away at 1372 Broadway). In addition to offices, the quarters have scaled-down versions of Ann Taylor and Ann Taylor Loft stores to serve as "living laboratories" for experimenting with new lines and fixtures.

A cafeteria and espresso bar with a vaulted ceiling framed on two sides by enormous double-height windows are under construction. A 2,500-square-foot storage space will hold off-season clothing lines, supplementing high-density storage units scattered among the floors that compress the equivalent of 30 garment racks of clothing into the floor space of 10. The company also ensured that

women were represented among subcontractors. By splitting construction into three phases, the work was divided into smaller projects, encouraging bidding by women-owned businesses, which are typically smaller. The wider field resulted in more competitive bids and an estimated 7 percent savings on a \$35 million construction budget, said Christopher H. Gallin, the construction manager and a partner at John Gallin & Son Inc.

Mr. DeVoe anticipates future dividends as work groups evolve in the flexible environment, where there is room for around 200 more people in do-it-yourself configurations. He said employees seemed to get a morale lift not only from their influence on the overall design — in addition to intensive planning-phase interviews, employees critiqued three sample offices — but also by the ability to fashion their workplaces into extensions of themselves.

"I think there's a big trend toward trying to create spaces that are much more person-friendly," said Mr. DeVoe, noting a desire among the younger members of the work force for less-structured office space.

"I think it will go a long way toward improving productivity."