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lovely bones

Embracing its location in an historic landmark building, SmithGroup's San Francisco office is purposefully rough around the edges

By Katie Weeks
Photography by David Wakely

They say you never get a second chance to make a first impression. But sometimes, a second look doesn't hurt. Just ask the Workplace Studio in SmithGroup's San Francisco office.

After more than five years in a landmark building in San Francisco, the firm wanted a more collaborative environment. In scouting locations, the possibilities included two floors in the historic Bently Reserve building a few blocks from SmithGroup's old space. Previously occupied by a law firm, the two floors were, at first glance, outdated and compartmentalized with an abundance of private offices. What's more, the move would spread the firm across two floors. These factors seemed to go against SmithGroup's goal of a more collaborative environment. "We thought it might work, but it just didn't show that well," recalls William Loftis, AIA, LEED AP, vice president and design principal of SmithGroup's San Francisco Workplace Studio.

Shortly thereafter, however, the landlord gutted the interior, leaving only the perimeter drywall, and a second walk-through revealed possibilities that previously were hidden. "We could see existing brick walls and the enormous seismic steel beams that had been installed in the late 1980s peaking out from behind the drywall," Loftis says. "There was brick, steel, exposed concrete, and almost 20 ft. between floors. It was an architect's heaven."

The designers admired the rugged shell and dramatic floor-to-ceiling expanses so much, in fact, that they left them as the backdrop for a progressive interior scheme. Although the C-shaped floor plate is similar to the firm's

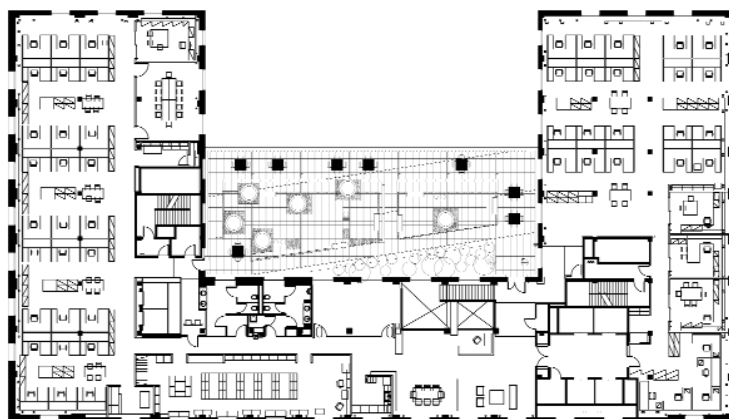
When SmithGroup scouted out two floors in San Francisco's historic Bently Reserve building, it was enticed by the rough shell (right) but wary of spreading employees between two floors. A giant, open staircase in the center of the office (over) alleviated these concerns.







previous office (which had proven problematic when it came to fostering collaboration), the new, 36,000-sq.-ft. office's organization emphasizes a sense of openness and interaction. Studios work in low-rise workstations clustered around common spaces outfitted with impromptu meeting tables and chairs. Fears about potential isolation on each floor quickly were calmed with the installation of a large staircase created from steel, glass, and reclaimed teak, which serves as a knot between the two levels. In addition, public spaces like reception, kitchens, and conference rooms are distributed around the floors to allow for spontaneous interaction.



Leaving the shell exposed not only retained the character of the Bently Reserve building (originally the branch of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank for San Francisco), but also served as a nod to SmithGroup's commitment to sustainability. "We agreed going into the project that the space would be LEED certified because sustainability is a huge deal for SmithGroup," Loftis says. The concrete floor remains exposed, with carpet used only when necessitated by acoustics, and the building's original large, operable windows help spread natural daylight. But, while the exposed



Reusing the existing concrete pillars and exposed brick (opposite) kept budgets in check and also helped reduce construction waste for the sustainably designed office. The building's large, original windows also were kept in place, now flooding workstations and group spaces with daylight (left and below), another design element contributing toward the goal of LEED-CI Gold certification.



design



shell may have reduced materials, keeping it that way didn't directly translate to additional LEED credits. "Leaving everything raw was clearly a sustainable decision as well as an aesthetic one because you use the least amount of materials possible. But it's funny because, unless you go for innovation credits, you don't get credits for not using materials," Loftis says. Nonetheless, the space is slated to achieve LEED-CI Gold certification thanks to a range of initiatives including self-adjusting supplemental lighting, operable windows, and low-VOC paints and sealants. Also, installing a green roof helped solve the dilemma of a pre-existing, 3,000-sq.-ft. terrace. The terrace, which was considered an assembly space during code analysis, had such a high occupancy level that the existing stairs of the building would be insufficient in meeting egress requirements. Rather than replace all of the stairs, the designers planted a modular green roof with low-water native grasses and poppies, which reduced the terrace's occupancy levels and also created a refuge for employees.

A commitment to sustainability wasn't the only initiative discussed from the get-go. Loftis and his team also decided the project would be a BIM pilot project for the studio. "We certainly didn't make it easy for ourselves," he admits. The hard work, however, paid off. The space, which SmithGroup occupied July 2007, may be a little rough around the edges, but the firm wouldn't have it any other way. ☐

The openness of the entire office is accentuated by the 20-ft. floor-to-ceiling heights, which can be seen in full view from the main staircase (right). While the underlying architecture is the dominant voice, carpet is used to help control acoustics where necessary in work areas (opposite) and the reception space (below).

credits

Project: SmithGroup San Francisco Office

who Client: SmithGroup. **Architect, interior designer, lighting designer:** SmithGroup; Juhee Cho, IIDA, LEED AP; Will Loftis, AIA, LEED AP; J. Paul Bohn, AIA; Terry Lew; Drew Padilla, AIA; Matthew Smialek; Gina Simidjian; Vanessa Thornton; Neil Wallis, AIA, LEED AP; Thomas Worden; Genevieve Zemke. **Structural engineer:** Murphy, Burr, Curry. **Mechanical/electrical engineer:** Glumac. **General contractor:** BCCI. **Acoustician A/V:** Shen Milsom & Wilke. **Furniture dealer:** COG. **Photographer:** David Wakely.

where Location: San Francisco, CA. **Total floor area:** 34,200 sq. ft. with a 2,900 sq. ft. private terrace. **No. of floors:** Two. **Average floor size:** 17,900 sq. ft. **Total staff size:** 137.

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