



Cladding, lobby and core improvements can reposition older office buildings

February 25, 2008 - Spotlights

In New York City's competitive commercial real estate market, owners of older properties are always looking for creative ways to upgrade and reposition their buildings in order to attract an upscale clientele and realize an increase in their rental rates. Through a number of thoughtful interventions, this can be achieved with an existing building, from upgrading the exterior cladding to improving the building's lobby and infrastructure.

The exterior wall plays perhaps the most important role in how a building is perceived by both the tenants and the general public. Upgrades to the exterior are by no means mere "window-dressing;" the goal is to transform the appearance of the building to make it more desirable in the marketplace.

Changes to the exterior wall can have dramatic benefits to the quality of the office space within the building as well. Whether the building is an older traditional one with small, individual "punched" windows or a more recent mid-20th century one with narrow strip windows, changes to the building cladding can have a number of benefits for the occupants and owner. The key objective is to maximize the amount of glazing from the interior by lowering the window sill, widening the openings, or increasing the light transmittance of the glass. An upgraded exterior wall should result in noise reduction for the tenants and energy savings to the owner.

One approach that SHCA has used successfully for transforming a building exterior here in Manhattan is over-cladding the existing wall with a new curtain wall— as was done at 655 Madison Ave. in Manhattan. This allows the existing masonry wall to remain in place which limits the disruption to existing tenants.

Even though most buildings are built to the property line, the building code allows a projection of up to four inches beyond that. This is often sufficient to install a new curtain wall over the existing wall. SHCA has developed a number of creative methods for simplifying the construction methods and reducing costs for this approach. A new curtain wall can be designed to conceal the character of the old wall behind it and give the building an entirely new appearance.

Another more dramatic approach to change the exterior architecture of a building is to completely remove and replace the existing exterior wall. This is particularly effective for mid-20th century curtain wall buildings that do not rely on the wall for structural performance as older, traditional buildings do. The benefit of this approach is the potential for complete transformation of both the exterior and interior experience. Modern, high performance glass allows for far higher amounts of glazing and daylight into a building without sacrificing energy performance.

Along with the upgrading of the exterior of a building, many owners look to renovate building lobbies and public spaces. At its most minimal, this can mean simply changing materials for a fresher look. But a more ambitious and generally more effective approach can involve actually re-shaping the

space of the lobby as well by introducing double height spaces, widening entry passages, and improving the openness of the lobby to the exterior. Often, such lobby work is coupled with upgrades to the elevator cab interiors and the typical elevator lobbies so the whole public sequence through a building is improved.

Finally, a key area for owners to consider when repositioning an older building is upgrading the mechanical and electrical services. Tenant requirements for lighting, power, and climate control capabilities have all increased in recent years and many older buildings are not able to meet current needs. Some of these changes can be accomplished with the tenants still occupying the building while others may require significant interruptions during the construction period. The result, however, is superior services which can be translated into improved rental rates.

Before making a decision on the most effective and most economical way to upgrade a commercial property, owners need to consult experienced professionals who can present all viable options, to ensure that they are able to get the best return on their investment.

Peter Gross, AIA, is a principal for Swanke Hayden Connell Architects, New York, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540