

CELEBRATE INTERIOR DESIGN!



The ceiling is a nod to the interior of Radio City Music Hall and the Cincinnati train station.

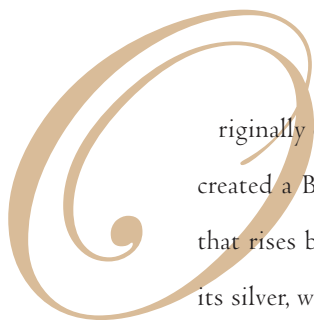
OPPOSITE The reception desk on the 16th floor executive offices comprises a mix of woods and resembles a residential table.





TWO TO TANGO

RICHARD MEIER'S 1980S CREATION IS BROUGHT INTO THE 21ST CENTURY



Originally designed by architect Richard Meier in the late 1980's, People's United Bank created a Bridgeport landmark with their 16-story building -- an unmistakable presence that rises beside Interstate 95 just as the road bends near the intersection with Route 8, its silver, white and terra cotta colored exterior distinguished by its large rooftop pergola, its interior distinguished (until recently) by its once-stylish white sheetrock walls, glass block, grey industrial carpet, and 80s-era black leather and chrome furnishings.

STORY BY CAMERON MARTIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ORION BISHOP



But the bank's employees had long complained that the building was cold, sterile and functionally obsolete - a relic of a bygone era. The computerization of the office environment and a greater concern for energy efficiency, begged for an overhaul of Meier's creation. Enter architect Jonathan Wagner AIA and interior designer Robin McGarry ASID, his wife, whose combined vision brought the look of the People's Bank United Headquarters into the 21st century.

"The People's United Bank building is a contemporary landmark designed by an architect I respect tremendously", Wagner says of Meier, whose commissions also include the Getty Center in Los

Angeles. "We tried to keep the best of what was there, and worked to update areas to overcome the weaknesses of the original plan. It was our goal to make it a more functional and comfortable workplace. A place people- clients and employees- would be proud of." (Wagner currently is working on another daunting challenge: expanding a notable 1979 house in Darien designed by modernist Hugh Newell Jacobsen. "It's amazing", says Wagner, "to again be entrusted with updating another building by a great architect. I hope that they would appreciate what I have done, even if it is not what they would have expected or done themselves", he states.

To that end, Wagner and McGarry wanted People's United to have a



ABOVE LEFT Teller windows at the ground floor branch bank are reminiscent of bygone train ticket windows.




ABOVE RIGHT Work spaces include homey touches such as table lamps with distinctive O-shaped bases.



MIDDLE RIGHT Paintings and photographs throughout building were solicited from Connecticut artists.



BOTTOM RIGHT The bright, tunnel-like approach to the ground floor branch bank.



An ambience akin
to a high-end hotel.

OPPOSITE The soft
colors of the sofa and
carpet are welcoming
touches, in contrast to
the dark color elements
that dominated the
previous milieu.



feel that was comfortable- more “residential in character than institutional”. So the masculine, clichéd looks often associated with bank interiors – dark wood walls reminiscent of a men’s club, or a sleek, high-tech trading floor persona – were bypassed in favor of something akin to a high-end Hotel.

“So many corporate spaces are cookie-cutter in their planning and furnishing, with no personality,” McGarry says. “We wanted to “warm it up.”

This approach is reflected throughout several other renovated floors by Wagner, including a new ground floor “flagship” branch bank. This new, smaller branch was designed to replace an oversized, obsolete facility. The branch bank’s teller line is circular and reminiscent of ticket booths from a 1930s train station, while the striking overhead lighting has a hint of the interior of Radio City Music Hall. This combination – the train motif and the circular ceiling lighting – is a nod to the art deco Cincinnati Train Station, which Wagner’s architect grandfather helped design.

Several departments that had outgrown their spaces were relocated into other Wagner designed offices on



Leather straps support the chandelier in a company conference room.

OPPOSITE A side conference room has at-home touches as well, including a flowery centerpiece.

various floors (including divisions renting space outside of the building that were brought into the headquarters building to improve efficiency and save money for the bank... requiring the construction of a new 15,000-square-foot floor within an existing 35-foot high tall space.

By elevator, visitors enter the 16th floor Executive Level through a quiet, elegant entry hall rather than a mundane elevator lobby. The warm colors and materials offer a dramatic contrast to the outside world – and to the former character of the space -- and present a welcoming quality to visitors. The adjacent reception area focuses around an oval reception desk, composed of different woods and similar to a table one might encounter in a gracious home (and replaces a boxy white plastic laminate desk designed for Selectric typewriters). Wool carpets and comfortable sofas reinforce the architectural metaphor of a gracious “urban hotel”, the underlying concept that set the tone for everything that was done, Wagner says.







A mix of bright colors – here, a red abstract painting by Connecticut luminist Robert Natkin and a red sofa in the conference room are encountered throughout the building.

OPPOSITE Artwork by Janet Slom of Westport, Connecticut dominate one end of the company conference room.



Open office areas are furnished with dark wood desks and oval table lamps (“a reference to the Bank’s logo”) -- more likely seen in an upscale home, and once again reinforcing the residential character of the space. The non-institutional character of the work spaces is further enhanced by textured, durable wallpaper treatments; non-commercial looking furniture; a mix of fabrics and colors; the application of an oak veneer plywood paneling on an existing curved sheetrock wall; and an acoustical wood tile ceiling.

“The office becomes a home away from home for many people,” Wagner says, “so in that spirit we meant to create a comfortable place to be, and to work”...and also be a statement of the strength and success of the Bank, (which did not consider ap-

plying for or need any TARP funds, when it was needed by many banks...).

In keeping with People’s Bank attitude of fiscal responsibility, all the windows in the renovated areas have energy efficient shades, which automatically rise or lower depending on the sun’s intensity- a measure that keeps the building cooler in the summer and helps it retain heat in the winter.

The trickiest aspect to the three-year project, which was completed last fall, was maintaining the day-to-day operation of the Bank during construction, Wagner says. “The challenge, which is typical in any large commercial renovation, is to keep the company working productively as the employees are being shifted around. That a project of this scope went so smoothly

was a testament to the Bank and its contractor -Kuchma Construction of Bridgeport- and how they could ‘juggle’ to keep things running smoothly,” he says.

Art and Interiors, an art consultant company in Westport, helped select work by respected Connecticut artists including Janet Slom of Westport, Claudia Mengel of Westport, Robert Meyers and the late Robert Natkin of Redding. Individual offices and conference areas all received makeovers, as the combination of soft paint colors, bright art, and a mix of different furniture from various periods and styles helped avoid the “one style fits all” furniture palette of most office buildings. Each office is also provided with beautiful large photographs by Hartford photographer Robert Benson that document



Energy-saving shades on all the windows rise or lower depending on the intensity of the day's sun.

OPPOSITE Paintings of the water are in evidence throughout the building, emphasizing Bridgeport's close ties to the sea.



The brown wallpaper is reflective of the distinct look given to each office throughout the complex.

OPPOSITE The mix of blue furniture is indicative of the approach throughout the building, where styles mix to give a non-uniform feel.



the course of the Connecticut River as it heads north and which also follows the geographic growth of the bank far into New England and beyond.

“People’s Bank is a progressive bank,” Wagner says. “It has always been very supportive towards the arts...it’s a 150 year old bank with a wonderful inventory of high quality art, and we wanted to expand that with current artists.. The use of art was very much in keeping with the non-institutional spirit we sought for this project.”

McGarry, too, has worked on 15 to 20 such assignments over the years. The duo, who are based in Weston, often work together on projects but retain separate businesses and have mostly different clients. This dynamic has its unique

challenges, they say, but they both bring different skills to a project and work in concert throughout the process.

“The biggest mistake that homeowners or commercial clients make is assuming an interior Designer should enter the project towards the tail end of construction”, McGarry says. “(Her husband) has a good sense of how furniture should lay out, but when I apply an trained interior designer’s knowledge of furniture scale and placement, we might need to tweak something to make sure the furnishings will work with the architectural plan... to make sure there’s flow; that everything works well together”.

“We both have the same goal, which is to have a beautiful, functional and cost effective project in the end.” ■

RESOURCES

Jonathan Wagner AIA Architect

11 Riverfield Drive
Weston, CT 06883
203.454.1825 ext. 14
jwaia.com

Robin McGarry ASID Interior Design

11 Riverfield Drive
Weston, CT 06883
203.454.1825 ext. 10
robinmcgarry.com