

Plug and play

GE Energy Services' new building in northeast Calgary was constructed, both literally and figuratively, from the floor up with energy and communication links easily accessible, allowing flexibility for changing work requirements.

By **Katherine Ylitalo**

Draw in a massive amount of energy, step it down and reroute it effectively. That's the job of the electrical transformers, designed and manufactured by GE Energy Services in Calgary and marketed and serviced internationally, primarily in the U.S. and China.

Over the years, the company has grown from an operation housed in half a building to five buildings in southeast Calgary's industrial district. As the business evolved in the current climate of mergers and consolidations, and for reasons of economy and efficiency, it was clearly time for a new facility. Donald Kampel, GE Energy Services manufacturing manager, was asked to oversee the consolidation of the diverse activities into one building.

When Kampel began to work with Christopher Bain Design Associates, Hopewell Development Corporation and architects BKDI Associates on the new site in the rapidly expanding northeast section of Calgary, he knew from experience that the most important feature in the new building would be its flexibility.



The interior design process began with information-gathering meetings to discuss individual jobs, team activity and the corporate vision. With a good understanding of the programming, the design team, led by Michael Parker, was able to create the building from the inside out. The massing of the structure followed to suit the needs.

The team's approach was a bit like designing a house by starting with the core of daily activity, the kitchen sink. In the case of GE Energy Services, the key to the design turned out to be the floor. A vast network of wiring and cable is neatly tucked under the raised floors of the two-storey office block so that energy and communication links are accessible from almost any point. Whether you spent your early years with Meccano or Nintendo, if plug and play is your style now, this is a great place to work.

Most of the jobs at G.E. Energy Services are project-based, bringing teams together in changing

configurations so a flexible, open office space blended with a small number of closed offices and labs for system engineering is appropriate. Parker's design allows the workspace to function like a downtown with a mix of public and private spaces.

Flooring and lighting are used to demarcate zones. Corridors serve as streets, with street names provided by the employees. Meeting rooms are public forums for discussion. Individual workstations and phone rooms offer more private spaces. Central areas for informal meetings include softly lit "oasis" (equipped with coffee bars, fridges and comfortable seating) and rounded "tech kiosks" (work support areas with printers, mailboxes, fax machines and copiers).


Because the floor serves as both giant circuit board and roadmap, the carpet design called for sizzle and zap. Parker designed a bright, boldly patterned carpet that looks electric and anchors the space. The red and grey carpet tiles of stripes and checkerboards were then arranged to define areas and direct traffic. The custom hybrid cherry/garnet red of the carpet is complemented by the modified chartreuse on the supporting columns and balanced with feature walls of blue.

Lighting is a major factor. The building is oriented to the southwest on an open, windy site, and your first impression is of a horizontal structure of windows that reflect Alberta's famous Big Sky. Inside maximum natural light is available from all the outside walls and the clerestory over the central staircase. Mesh screens are used to modulate the light from the outer windows as needed. The closed offices are positioned in the central area and supplementary lighting is provided with a mix of halogen and fluorescent sources as well as pierced openings in some walls. An intelligent use of colour, air conditioning, and an electronic sound masking system allowing for comfortable acoustics are among the ergonomic considerations that contribute to the environment.

And a recent visit to the building showed that the concepts work. People were engaged in different activities throughout the space, with ubiquitous whiteboards displaying diagrams, lists, and outline -- the traces of creative discussions.

As an indication of the success of the building and the continuing concern for its employees, GE Energy has received both a federal award for energy efficiency from Natural Resources Canada and a provincial Alberta award for partnership in health and safety.

Donald Kampel takes pride in the project and rightly so. When asked about overall costs, he estimates that the space is 130,000 square feet and says simply that the work was frugal. The only luxuries were sliding doors and the wood trim around the doors. "Cleverly frugal," adds Michael Parker.

At the end of the process, both client and designer are pleased and the building is operating as it was meant to, with room for change when needed. 

1. One of the informal meeting oases at G.E. Energy Services, with coffee bars and comfortable seating.
2. The floor serves as both giant circuit board and roadmap, with a pattern of red and grey carpet tiles arranged to define areas and direct traffic.
3. Corridors serve as streets, with names contributed by employees.
4. The reception desk at G.E. Energy Services is backed by a red wall panel with round lights. The granite floor is polished into a striped pattern that reflects both natural and artificial lighting.



SOURCES

Carpet: Milliken carpets
Granite flooring: C and S Ceramic
Lighting: Systemlux, Artemide
Paint: Levy Industries
Specialty furniture: Oggo, Knoll, Neihauer
Systems furniture: Knoll
Task seating: Herman Miller
Wall coverings: DesignTex
Window treatments: Nysan

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