



Artist Barton Rubenstein says colors found in nature were the inspiration for his work in the lobby of the Millennium Building at 1909 K St.—a series of glass sculptures rising from a plant bed. Developers and architects say the feel of a lobby and other common areas in office buildings is a significant deciding factor in whether tenants move in.

BY KEVIN CLARK—THE WASHINGTON POST

FROM THE GROUND UP

# Potential Tenants Judge A Building by Its Lobby

## *Developers Focus on First Impressions*

By NEIL IRWIN  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Office buildings in the Washington area are most notable for their lack of notability. They are, with few exceptions, big boxes of concrete and glass that evoke nothing so much as the desire of a developer to squeeze as much floor space at as low a cost as possible onto the land available.

But upon walking into those buildings, at least the reasonably high-end ones, visitors often encounter marble floors, front desks fashioned of walnut, granite and stainless steel accents, and big sculptures priced in the six figures. Developers of high-end buildings in the Washington area, even those who couldn't care less about striking facades and innovative design, often expend extraordinary time and money to create lobbies that seem welcoming, stylish—even lavish.

the buildings with similarly unique exteriors. For example, Kaempfer is known for investing heavily in the architecture of its buildings. In renovating the Investment Building at 1501 K St. NW, Kaempfer removed everything from the 1920s building except two exterior walls.

That made for a drastically different inside lobby. The floor is Tennessee marble. A large, circular atrium runs up the center of the building. One floor below ground level and visible from above in the main lobby is a bronze, nearly spherical sculpture of an owl big enough to crush a Volkswagen. Kaempfer President Mitchell Schear said he was among those deciding on its size, shape, patina and color.

The current trend in lobby design, he said, is to be posh, but to move away from the fussiness of the early 1990s. And he said it is very much an investment.

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ish.

It has become, in the past decade or so, a matter of simple economics. Washington tenants may not demand the kinds of exciting exterior designs that get buildings on the covers of architectural magazines, but, developers and brokers say, they do want to feel that they are working in buildings that are just grand enough.

Even otherwise parsimonious developers of high-end buildings often spend \$200 to \$400 per square foot on their lobby space, compared with \$40 to \$100 for the rest of the space in a building. Fancy lobbies used to be a way for landlords to differentiate their buildings for potential tenants; now, at least in downtown Washington and in high-end suburban buildings, they are effectively a requirement.

"A lot of buildings built in the 1960s and '70s don't reflect, shall we say, the highest values of architecture," said Jeffrey Abramson, a partner at real estate developer the Tower Companies. "But because of competition, people needed to dress up their buildings, and where you put most of that renovation is the canopy [over the sidewalk] and the lobby."

More often than one might expect, say those involved with such decisions, the feel of the lobby and other common spaces in a building determine where a tenant ends up moving in. As a result, developers and architects often expend unusual effort finding a sculpture that is neither too bland nor overly dramatic, picking the shade of Italian marble that will most soothe Washington lobbyists, and evaluating whether it's really worth \$100,000 for the perfect light fixture.

For example, Blake Real Estate, which has specialized in B-quality buildings in downtown Washington, recently renovated the lobby of 1025 Connecticut Ave. NW, a building that from the outside is thoroughly unmemorable. After putting in a pricey new marble, terrazzo (a material that combines cement, marble and mica) and pear-wood lobby, annual rents rose by around \$3 per square foot, said Stephen F. Lustgarten, an executive vice president at Blake.

Lobbies are getting bigger, too. This year, Blake completed a renovation of 1425 K St. NW, a 1970s building in which the size of the lobby increased about 70 percent.

"It used to be the lobby was just a narrow path to get to the elevators," Lustgarten said. "Now, to be competitive, you have to go a lot further."

The most dramatic lobbies in town, however, are often found in

"It's for both attraction and retention of tenants as well as investors and lenders," Schear said. "We generally find that most of those constituencies won't complain about quality."

Abramson, of the Tower Companies, takes similar direct interest in the feel of his office building lobbies.

In the Millennium Building, which his firm constructed at 1909 K St., he hired Chevy Chase-based artist Barton Rubenstein, who does large sculptures for parks, universities, office buildings and the occasional residence. The centerpiece of the lobby is a sculpture Rubenstein created of a series of colored glass towers that rise from a plant bed.

"They're internally lit to have a calming presence," Rubenstein said. "They're supposed to symbolize urban landscape and coexistence with the land."

But to Abramson, creating an interesting building entrance is about more than symbolism.

"The lobby is generally the first experience a person has in walking through the building," he said. "It's the first expression of what it's like to work in that building. Does it lift the soul? Does it make me feel good to come to work? Will my clients have respect for my work? Those are the questions you have to ask in designing one."

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