



Stairways to the Stars

Gensler jumps into the talent pool with Creative Artists Agency in Los Angeles

BY EDIE COHEN

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For almost two decades, **Creative Artists Agency** shared powerhouse status with its Los Angeles headquarters in an inimitable Pei Cobb Freed & Partners building, the unofficial gateway to Beverly Hills. So why would such a major player relocate to a Century City spec development, albeit one designed by Gensler? "From the day the company moved into the Pei building, it was out of space," says Michael Rubel, CAA's general counsel and spokesman. "We had four walls that didn't move." No doubt a multi-tenant building would be more flexible.

By the time CAA called, Gensler had completed 65 percent of its working drawings for the 12-story tower, which stands next to a 4-acre park. Signing on at the shell-and-core stage, the agency was essentially able to ask for a building within a building: eight floors totaling 240,000 square feet, more than enough space for 700 employees. Then it was back to the drawing board for Gensler. CAA would clearly need its own identity. For starters, that meant a separate entry, a distinctive materials palette, and an independent elevator system. And let's not forget the stadium theater.

Probably nowhere more than in the entertainment industry do first impressions speak volumes. Gensler unequivocally made that point in CAA's double-height lobby, where those impressions derive from scale, materials, and the overwhelming whiteness. "We started with the idea of the white stone, but we ran the risk of it being too cold or too slick, given the volume. There had to be rich materials," principal and design director Gene Watanabe says. For that, he turned to Italy. The lobby's 220-foot-long sculpted focal wall is composed of massive panels of Carrara marble, measuring 3 by 9 feet and weighing 1,000 pounds. Each was cut from a block the size of a Volkswagen bus; then a pair of artisans near Forte dei Marmi hand-chiseled the surfaces to impart the requisite heft. A second white marble, Statuarietto, comes into play—in a honed finish—for the lobby floor. Gray accents enter the picture in the guise of aluminum paneling, opposite the focal wall, and Florence Knoll's leather-upholstered armchairs, furnishing a waiting area where agents in suits and creatives in jeans take informal meetings.

Often, of course, a discussion requires more in-depth treatment in the inner sanctum, the offices on levels two through eight. Because an agency's business is all about connectivity, there are multiple ways to travel up and down. Actually the least dramatic is a bank of elevators with doors clad in mirror and cabs lit by color-changing fiber optics. Rising from the back of the lobby, meanwhile, is a real Hollywood epic of a marble staircase. Its compound curves were developed in CNC programming, then test-driven via a 1-cubic-foot plastic model. Once Watanabe was satisfied, the life-size marble version could be installed to link the lobby with a skylit mezzanine, which offers access to the top of the stadium theater. A much lighter, simpler switchback stair continues up to the second floor's circular "think tank" meeting room and adjacent lounge. (They, in turn, open to CAA's private roof terrace.)

Straight flights of stairs, stacked along one wall of the eight-story atrium that ascends vertiginously from the lobby, are abuzz with agents or assistants opting for foot transit between floors. The staircases float against a frosted-glass "lantern wall," as Watanabe calls it. Its colored light show, produced by metal halides with software-controlled dichroic color filters, is a definite draw. So are the landings, furnished like mini lounges for ad hoc brainstorming—the leather upholstery on Knoll's seating, this time in white, pops against a wall surfaced in black marble. Then there's the lure of art appreciation. No

question about the atrium's gallery air, thanks to 300 fittingly L.A.-centric works mostly by local colleges' teachers, students, and graduates.

In the private offices surrounding the atrium, agents got to exercise their own choices—to a point. Furnishings were pre selected, all in the modern idiom. Assistants, following the time-honored tradition, sit just outside in an open area. However, there's nothing Working Girl about their sleek and reliable workstations. Fronts are back-painted white glass and gray wood veneers; transaction counters are fusion glass; work surfaces are plastic laminate.

No doubt, 2008's Oscar nominees will preview in the theater. A gray velvet curtain conceals the 15-by-30-foot screen, while acoustical foam and reflective panels form a Louise Nevelson–esque composition on the sidewalls. Seating is upholstered in mohair certified luxurious enough for CAA's A-listers—from the Toms (Hanks and Cruise), Steven Spielberg, and Meryl Streep to Derek Jeter.

PROJECT MANAGER: DANA GLOVER. PROJECT ARCHITECT: KIM ALFORD. PROJECT TEAM: MARK BRIGGS; BILL FAUBER; RYAN GOBUTY; JOANNA LAAJISTO; KARIN MASON; MICHAEL SHURTLEFF; ANA MARIA STANOMIR; JAMES YOUNG. SEATING (ATRIUM, LOBBY, OFFICE, SCREENING ROOM), DESK (OFFICE), WALL COVERING (SCREENING ROOM): KNOLL. CUSTOM TABLES (ATRIUM, OFFICE, CONFERENCE, MEETING ROOMS): MARTIN BRATTRUD. CHAIRS (CONFERENCE, MEETING ROOMS): HERMAN MILLER. WORKSTATION GLASS (OFFICE AREA): NIPPON ELECTRIC GLASS CORPORATION. LINEAR FIXTURES: SELUX. PANELING (SCREENING ROOM): DECOUSTICS. CUSTOM RUG (SCREENING ROOM), CARPET (THEATER): BLOOMSBURG CARPET INDUSTRIES. CUSTOM RUG (LOUNGE): DECORATIVE CARPETS. SEATING (LOUNGE, THEATER): POLTRONA FRAU. SEATING FABRIC (THEATER): UNIKA VAEV. WALL COVERING: LBI/BOYD. MILLWORK: ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORKING COMPANY. STONEWORK: CARNEVALE & LOHR. PAINTING CONTRACTOR: RANDALL MCANANY COMPANY. CONSULTANTS: WARREN BLESSING (THEATER); CIBOLA SYSTEMS (AUDIOVISUAL); **HORTON LEES BROGDEN LIGHTING DESIGN (LIGHTING)**; NEWSON BROWN ACOUSTICS (ACOUSTICAL). ENGINEERS: ACCO (MECHANICAL, HVAC); JOHN A. MARTIN ASSOCIATES (STRUCTURAL); MORROW-MEADOWS CORPORATION (ELECTRICAL); SYSKA HENNESSEY GROUP (MEP). GENERAL CONTRACTOR: TASLIMI CONSTRUCTION COMPANY.