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Pixar's New Digs Coddle Animators, Writers and Tech Heads

by RICK LYMAN

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EMERYVILLE, Calif. - Steve Jobs stood just inside the main entrance to Pixar Animation Studios, gazing across the broad atrium, flanked by sandblasted-steel bridges, that forms the main artery of the building. Dozens of Pixar's 550 workers - animators, computer technicians, writers, accountants - bustled around him, chatting, listening to music on earphones, some riding metallic scooters.

"What we really wanted was to find a big, old brick building and rehabilitate it," Mr. Jobs said. "But we couldn't find one, so we built it."

This new \$88-million headquarters for Pixar - Hollywood's most successful and trend-setting computer animation company - sits amid lush greenery in a rolling, 66-acre compound not far from the eastern end of the Bay Bridge, a 15-minute drive from downtown San Francisco.

It is intended to resemble a century-old industrial plant, part factory and part warehouse, although designed to accommodate Pixar's particular needs, including three screening rooms, a recording studio, a conical brick pizza oven, a health club, hundreds of offices and conference rooms connected by miles of computer wiring and, at its heart, a massive, air-cooled village of animation-crunching computers known as a render farm.

"We knew this was going to be the building in which we would spend the rest of our professional lives," said Mr. Jobs, who owns 60 percent of Pixar and is its chairman. "So we wanted to do it right. Has anyone shown you the Love Lounge yet?"

The recent success of "Shrek," a computer-animated feature from Pacific Data Images, a division of DreamWorks, and the eagerly awaited release of Pixar's "Monsters Inc." on Nov. 2 underscores the growing importance of computer animation to Hollywood since Pixar's "Toy Story" came out in 1995. These companies have overtaken animation created in the two-dimensional manner of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "The Lion King."

While traditional methods, introduced by Walt Disney and other pioneers in the first half of the 20th century, produced generations of hits for Hollywood, the trend has been toward computer-generated animation through which Pixar, Pacific Data Images and others concoct entire three-dimensional worlds - complete with lighting, shading and texture - out of nothing but computer code.

Disney, too, has moved into computer-generated animation, as in last summer's "Dinosaur," and it distributes all of Pixar's films. Portions of this summer's Disney animated film, "Atlantis: The Lost Empire," are computer-generated, although the bulk of the film is done in the more traditional, hand-drawn way.

Don Hahn, a producer on "Atlantis," attributed some of the recent popularity of computer animation to the audience's desire to see new things, but said he did not believe it would ever supplant traditional animation. "I think, if anything, computer animators are moving toward a style that is more like the traditional animation," he said.

Last year 20th Century Fox closed its traditional animation division. Most other studios have cut back, too. Even Disney, which long seemed immune to the downturn, said earlier this year that it, too, would institute severe cost-cutting measures in its animation division, from slashed salaries to lost jobs.

So when in the midst of these retrenchments and layoffs a company like Pixar instead unveils its costly, years-in-the-planning creative headquarters, it is a further indication of where the future seems to be headed.

Tom Carlisle, Pixar's facilities director, made long, slow strides as he wound his way around the exterior of the building. He pointed beyond the volleyball court to where an outdoor swimming pool for employees was being sunk into the compound's northwest corner. Mr. Carlisle said workers had recently noticed an odd acoustic effect in an amphitheater that acts almost as a natural loudspeaker.

"We just noticed it," he said. "We're discovering a lot of interesting things about this place. Have you been to the Love Lounge yet?"

To understand how far Pixar has come since its founding 14 years ago, it would be helpful to have seen the company's previous creative campus - a cluster of somewhat rundown buildings in an anonymous office park near a Point Richmond freeway, about 10 miles to the north. Some of the buildings were separated by a busy road, forcing workers to scurry like squirrels to avoid the fast-moving traffic.

Before "Toy Story," no one really knew whether audiences would accept the harder digital images of computer animation. They did. Soon it became apparent that Pixar would have to expand, especially if it intended to reach its goal of releasing one animated feature a year.

At the moment, Pixar is putting out movies at the rate of one every 18 months. "Monsters Inc.," based on the premise that the goblins in a child's bedroom closet are not imaginary, is due in November, followed by "Finding Nemo," an undersea adventure, in the summer of 2003.

If all goes as planned, the next Pixar film could be out in 2004. John Lasseter, the company's creative director, and Brad Bird, who made the highly regarded "Iron Giant" for Warner Brothers in 1999, are working on new projects.

It is hoped that the new 215,000- square-foot headquarters in Emeryville - a gentrifying industrial hamlet of about 7,000 sandwiched between Oakland and Berkeley on the eastern edge of San Francisco Bay - will help Pixar accelerate its output.

After searching fruitlessly for a suitable old building, Pixar officials stumbled upon - and purchased for \$5.8 million - a dilapidated Del Monte fruit cannery that had a "haunted and creepy feeling," as Mr. Jobs put it.

"What nobody seemed to be able to see was what was under the cannery," he said. "A whole lot of land. Where else this close to San Francisco can you find a plot of land this size?"

Mr. Jobs, who is also chief executive and a founder of Apple Computer, said that in an average week he spends only a day or so on the Pixar campus. But everyone involved in the headquarters project said Mr. Jobs was deeply involved in its design and construction, down to the most minute detail.

He stood at the center of the arching bridge that ran along the western side of the atrium and described the building's design strategy. "We wanted to find a way to force people to come together, to create a lot of arbitrary collisions of people," he said.

The atrium does that, he said. All of the building's bathrooms are there. So is everyone's mailbox. The cafeteria is on one side. All the conference rooms have windows facing into the atrium, and all three screening rooms spill into it. To get from one end of the long rectangular building to the other, one must pass through the atrium or, on the second floor, cross one of the bridges.

"The most apparent immediate benefit, of course, is that we are all at last in the same building," said Ed Catmull, Pixar's president and technical director.

While the headquarters, which opened in December, accommodates Pixar's technical needs, it was not designed to be a cutting-edge marvel so much as to bring people together and foster the kind of creative bursts the company requires.

"What we want to do is to tell stories, not flex our technical muscles," Mr. Catmull said.

Perpendicular to the atrium and at opposite edges are two broad corridors. And running off these avenues are networks of office pods creating a labyrinth of high-tech spaces. The decorations mirror the sensibilities of those who work there. In the animators' wing, for instance, an eccentric kind of design competition seems to be under way.

One cluster of offices has set up its own rock 'n' roll stage. A South Seas theme dominates another area, complete with tiki torches and bamboo hutches.

Mr. Lasseter, dressed in one of his trademark aloha shirts, was moving rapidly down one of the main corridors, heading from one meeting to another. "Hey, have you seen the Love Lounge yet?" he asked. "Great. Let's go."

He took a zigzag course toward the building's southern wing, passing under some "Phantom of the Opera"-type chandeliers, around a pool table and through a grove of tree trunks used as snack tables. Finally, Mr. Lasseter pushed open the door of a corner office belonging to Andrew Gordon, an animator. It looked like any of the other dozens of offices in the complex: white walls, about 10 feet square, dominated by a desktop computer. "Is anyone in the Love Lounge?" Mr. Lasseter asked.

Mr. Gordon stood up from behind his desk, reached for a 1940's vintage smoking jacket hanging from a hook on the wall and slipped it on. Then he bent over and unlocked a small, white door half hidden near the floorboards along one edge of his office. To get through the door, you need to crawl on hands and knees before emerging into a strangely festooned crawl space about the size of a restaurant booth.

The walls and the low, irregular ceiling were stainless steel, probably because the crawl space had been put in to provide access to an air-conditioning unit. Benches covered with tasseled pillows have been installed along two of the walls, with a fold-up cocktail table in between. Every nook and cranny around the walls is filled with glassware, liquor bottles or bric-a-brac. A string of multicolored lights hangs overhead.

"Welcome to the Love Lounge," Mr. Lasseter said. "The specialty of the house is Pimm's Cup."

Sure enough, Mr. Gordon appeared with two icy glasses brimming with a rosy liquid and placed them atop official Love Lounge cocktail napkins. (There are also Love Lounge matchbooks and T-shirts.) A video monitor provides a view of the corridor to see if anyone is approaching. Distinguished visitors are invited to write their names on the wall with an indelible marker. Among the names are Michael Eisner, Roy Disney and Randy Newman.

The space was discovered shortly after the headquarters was first occupied, and it didn't take long for Mr. Gordon and others to begin decorating it and for its legend to grow.

Quietly, at first, and then with gradually rising force, the sound of a prewar swing orchestra began to purr out of small speakers. A woman crooned about love and moonlight. Mr. Lasseter swirled the ice cubes in his Pimm's Cup, which chattered noisily in the enclosed space. Mr. Gordon poked his head in again. Another drink?

Mr. Lasseter smiled and shrugged slightly, as if to say, well, why not?

“It’s a pretty good place to come to work,” he said.