

Nissan's new headquarters melds DNA with architecture

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Ask an insider about the new headquarters building for **Nissan North America**, and the discussion is as much about biology as it is architecture.

When the automaker decided to move its operations from California to Middle Tennessee, it hired Nashville-based **Gresham Smith and Partners** to handle the design and architectural work on the 450,000-square-foot headquarters building in Cool Springs.

One of the key goals for the project, according to Gresham officials, was to produce a building that reflects "Nissan DNA."

Rob Traynham, Nissan's director of non-manufacturing facilities, says that term encompasses elements of the Nissan brand that are widely recognizable to everyone and can be incorporated into the building so visitors and employees "immediately feel that they are in a Nissan facility."

To illustrate, Traynham notes Nissan is also building a new headquarters building in Yokohama, Japan. The two buildings, he says, should be sisters, but not twins.

"If you knew a family, you could recognize two people from the same family without them looking exactly alike," he says.

One gene embedded in Nissan's DNA is the mantra of "cross-functionality" preached by CEO Carlos Ghosn, who joined the company after it merged with Renault in 1999.

Ghosn is a true believer in the notion the best way to approach strategic decisions is by creating teams of people from a variety of disciplines within the company. The new building will reflect that approach.

The 10-story structure will be shaped like a flattened "S." Work spaces will be housed at both ends of the building, but the middle is designed to serve as a "town center," replete with formal meeting spaces and conference rooms as well as informal gathering spots with lounge furniture, coffee tables and mobile whiteboards.

Elevators will discharge passengers toward the town center, while the stair cases on either side of the building's mid-section will each be home to an atrium. One of the atriums will

connect the space to the floor above, while the opposite atrium will connect the space to the floor below.

Even the staircases were designed with interaction in mind. Jack Weber, a principal at Gresham Smith, says the landings will be extra-wide so employees can step aside to chat, and they may even be equipped with whiteboards to facilitate impromptu brainstorming sessions.

Weber says that in their California facility, Nissan employees were scattered in several different buildings. Even in their temporary headquarters at the Bell South building, he says, there are few places for chance encounters with colleagues from other parts of the company. The new building, by contrast, is designed to foster such interactions.

"I see a lot of meetings occurring everywhere in the building," Weber says.

Gresham Smith began working with Nissan while the relocation was still a secret - so secret the firm initially didn't know who its client was. The move was announced in November 2005 and Weber says that in January, the architects met with Ghosn at the company's Mississippi manufacturing plant. Weber says Ghosn urged his firm to figure out how the company worked and make sure the structure was "built around the process."

One way to do that: Make sure the facility can hold up to the wear and tear of traffic - car traffic, that is. Steven Johnson, executive vice president at Gresham Smith, says one of the aspects of the process that the building had to be designed to accommodate was the fact Nissan regularly brings cars inside - whether they are Nissan cars that haven't yet been released or even cars made by competitors.

As a result, Johnson says, the building will have "big doors and elevators and surfaces that tires don't tear up."

Unlike many businesses, Nissan is loaded with employees who have expertise - and opinions - about design. Traynham says that on one recent afternoon, he visited the Cool Springs site with the company's vice president of design, where they discussed everything from shapes to colors to the image they want to project.

"It really helps," he says, of the company's design resources.

Traynham says Nissan's level of involvement in the project might have been unusual for Gresham Smith. Johnson concurred, saying many other companies struggle to clearly express who they are and what they do in visual language.

"It was easy for (Nissan) to tell us what they wanted," he says.

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