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TI Trends Focus on Flexibility, Branding

By Amy Wolff Sorter

HOUSTON-Tenant improvements once meant new carpeting and more white paint on white walls every time a new lease was signed or an existing one renewed. But local architects tell GlobeSt.com that TIs are becoming less about paint jobs and re-carpeting and more about company branding and flexibility, with tenants and owners alike footing the bill.

"We're moving from a one-size-fits-all concept of tenant improvement into a build-to-purpose environment," says Gerald Gehm, principal and workplace studio director in Houston for San Francisco-based Gensler. "There's so much mobility in business now, and so much change, companies are finding they need to accommodate the individual worker, but be flexible enough to change the space for the next purpose."

In the past, companies tried to be flexible with modular desks and tables. But these days, "the whole environment is modular," Gehm says. "It's the floor covering, the furniture, the walls, the lighting--everything."

Modularity and flexibility are practically necessities for businesses undergoing rapid change. "A programming company, for example, could make a business plan five to 10 years out at one time," says Jim Halloran, associate and senior designer with Morris Architects. "But these days, with technology the way it is, it's hard to plan for three years out, let alone five years." When office space is flexible, plans are easier--and cheaper--to implement, he adds.

Then there is branding. Lisa Pope Westerman, principal and designer with Pope Design points out TIs can be helpful when it comes to creating a good corporate environment. "With restaurant design, you're creating an environment that's specific to where and how people want to eat," she says. "Same thing is being applied to corporate offices and where and how people want to work." Because more people are spending more time at work, she says management is "finding that offices need to be places that are interactive and stimulating."

But one worker's liveliness is another's boredom, especially in a workforce consisting of up to three generations in one space. "You've got Baby Boomers who have been there for 30 years and are close to retirement. You have Gen X-ers who have worked with the Internet and open spaces," Halloran says. Then there are the up-and-coming "Millennials," who are now in high school and entering the workforce within the next few years.

Flexibility in an office situation means that, as people retire and others come on board, carpet can be changed and walls moved around, raised or lowered, to adapt to new workers' styles without bringing in the paint bucket and carpeting brigade.

Still, not everyone is jumping on the flexible TI bandwagon. For one thing, the costs can be a little daunting, but Pope points out it's a long-term investment, especially when, for example, walls don't need to be torn out to make a single office out of two as the need arises.

Gehm agrees, adding an adaptable environment pays for itself in the long run. "The churn, the

movement of people, particularly in large organizations is constant," he says. "The cost savings comes when the space can be easily adapted to current use."

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