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Design: Chain Reaction

As part of a branding overhaul, Crawford Architects rethinks the headquarters of Houlihan's, a popular American restaurant franchise

By Jean Nayar

Two and a half years ago, when Robert Hartnett took over as CEO of Houlihan's, Inc., a casual restaurant franchise, his mission was to retool and invigorate the 32-year-old chain of 90 eateries across the country. Houlihan's—like many other companies in the hospitality industry—experienced a rough phase during the economic slump that followed 9/11, and one of Hartnett's first steps in a brand overhaul effort was to start fresh in new corporate offices that would stimulate the company-wide effort to revamp its image. Houlihan's new, 12,000-sq. ft. headquarters facility, designed by Kansas City, Mo.-based Crawford Architects, rekindles the company's core values while charging the work atmosphere with a shot of fresh energy.

As Houlihan's lease for its previous facility in downtown Kansas City was about to expire, Hartnett opted to relocate to spacious, more cost-efficient quarters in a suburban office park in Leawood, Kan., five miles from the city. The 1970s, four-story spec office building lacked distinction, particularly at its exterior entrance—a 100-ft. long fire exit that extends from the lobby and is accessed by all the other tenants in the building. Since Houlihan's had taken over the first floor of the structure, the architects urged their client to establish its identity from the street by creating a private entrance with exterior elements and landscaping that would set the tone for its new image. "A business as nationally prominent as Houlihan's needs a prominent front entrance—its own entrance," says architect Tom Proebstle, Crawford Architects' partner in charge of the project.

Although a modest budget of less than \$100 per sq. ft. didn't include building a new entrance (including a stairway, door, deck for al fresco dining, and new landscaping) the client loved the idea so much that the architects navigated through a series of community zoning hurdles and public hearings to get it approved and constructed. They then set about defining the interior by bringing out the best in what they call Houlihan's "core competencies."

"We immersed ourselves in the company to uncover the most important things about what it does," says Proebstle. "At the end of the day Houlihan's is about the business of serving food, so we opted to put the company's 1,200-sq. ft. test kitchen—which had been in the basement of its old space—front and center, just off the entry to the headquarters. According to Joe Corvaia, a designer on the project, the glass-enclosed kitchen "is the jewel of the space" and includes a full range of kitchen equipment, Flos pendant fixtures, and a formal tasting area surrounded by sleek bar stools.

With the crux of Houlihan's business thus presented center stage, the architects gave the remainder of the work space the function and flavor the client sought. "We really wanted something that reflects our style and personality," says Hartnett. "We wanted a very open space—nothing formal—with lots of conference areas, a space that's friendly, contemporary, progressive, and casual, where everyone is accessible to everyone else." Since the architects were working with a limited budget, they had to be creative with the use and type of materials they worked with, says Proebstle. "Because it's expensive to do so, we didn't finish the ceiling in all areas or use gypsum board on every wall—and this provided part of the edginess they were looking for," he says. "The space looks slightly unpolished, which frankly allows for a more creative and funky work environment."

Proebstle also notes that he and his fellow architects explored Houlihan's storage areas for images or elements to play up in their design. In the process, they uncovered a series of solid walnut, round table tops of various sizes that they then used as motifs on a "table wall" at one side of the entrance vestibule. The wall recalls the company's roots and, at the same time, reinterprets them with fresh vision. Another nearby wall, punctuated with portholes that echo the pattern of circles on the table wall, allows employees and visitors to get a glimpse of a glass-enclosed conference area beyond. The sense of surprise and openness found at the entrance permeates work areas around the windowed perimeter and other conference spaces scattered through the office as well. To bring light into the interior spaces, the architects used a combination of low-cost glass and translucent polycarbonate plastic sheeting to enclose private offices and meeting rooms. To add interest, they defined departments of various sizes with curved, slatted maple wing walls that serve as gateways, and they introduced color—various shades of green—with paint, fabric, and stone. To subtly reinforce the spirit of the company's core business, they created

informal meeting booths reminiscent of the banquettes at Houlihan's restaurants. Here, white circular marker boards allow employees to "scribble out concepts and broad ideas," says Corvaia, in a casual setting where creative juices can flow freely.

Project Summary

Who

Project: Houlihan's Corporate Office. Client: Houlihan's Corp. Architect, interior designer, lighting designer: Crawford Architects. Structural engineer: Martin Harper & Associates. Mechanical/electrical engineer: Bredson & Associates. General contractor: Phoenix Building Group. Furniture dealer: Contract Furnishings. Photographer: Mike Sinclair.

What

Wallcoverings: Macrolux Multiwall Polycarbonate, Stucco, Stained Maple Wood. Paint: Kwal Millenium. Laminate: Pionite. Flooring: Crossville/American Olean. Carpet/ carpet tile: Masland Contract. Ceiling: Hunter Douglas TechStyle Acoustical, Armstrong MetalWorks. Lighting: Flos, Bega, Juno, Con-tech. Doors: EFCO, Overhead Door Comp., Glass. Door hardware: Hafele. Window frames/wall systems: EFCO. Railings: Exterior Stainless Steel. Workstation seating, lounge seating: Allsteel. Upholstery: Maharam. Security: AMP XR200.

Where

Location: Leawood, KS. Total floor area: 11,795 sq. ft. No. of floors: 1. Total staff size: 50. Cost/sq. ft.: \$95.