

HISTORY REFINES ITSELF

The legendary French-based building materials company with a history as elegant as its architectural predilections builds a dynamic new North American HQ

By Vincent Caruso

Excellence, luxury, and efficiency are three qualities that are essentially woven into **Saint-Gobain's** DNA. Founded in the mid-17th century at the decree of King Louis XIV, the establishment served initially as an ad hoc manufacturer of glass for the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. Fast-forward a few centuries and while the monarchy crumbled under the stampede of the French Revolution, the industrial giant has remained firmly intact. In fact, Saint-Gobain has enjoyed the opposite fate of the discarded nobility. Today the company is one of the largest building materials manufacturers in the world, managing a vast, global network of diverse industrial subsidiaries and affiliates.

Building on its esteemed legacy, Saint-Gobain has marked its 350th anniversary as an industrial powerhouse with the construction of a new North American headquarters. Located roughly 25 miles west of metropolitan Philadelphia in the cozy borough of Malvern, Pennsylvania, the tranquil setting enveloping this residence might at first appear too muted for Saint-Gobain's lineage of ostentatious royalty. But the marks of highness here are expressed less by imposing extravagance than by the stature of its design ingenuities and the advanced sustainability approach that they enabled.

The space selected for the project included two separate, though cozily proximate,

freestanding buildings that were erected sometime in the 1960s, and had been sitting idly and in relatively poor shape for years before finally being scouted by Saint-Gobain's team. At 277,000 square feet and spanning more than 65 acres, this 18-month-long renovation project was executed as a comprehensive, virtually all-encompassing transformation designed to situate more than 800 employees. This began with creating an entirely new building envelope, as the one they inherited was undesirably circumscribed by exposed steel. "The steel, because it was outside of the building envelope, became a conductor of cold air straight through into the building," says **Neil B. Liebman**, principal at **Bernardon** and the core and shell architect on the project. "There were no thermal breaks." Large thermal breaks between the inside and outside were applied by the team to the effect of maintaining the space's existing feel while thwarting the cold air conductivity.

By bridging the gap, literally, between the two individual buildings on the site, this headquarters will house more than 800 employees of both Saint-Gobain and **CertainTeed**, the company's North American construction materials subsidiary. "The existing buildings were kind of in an L-shape to each other and had a very small connecting link between the two," Liebman illustrates, with one of the "L" lines positioned on a south-



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RIGHT The design was "really about people connecting with each other," so many open, comfortable meeting spaces were included in the new building.

PHOTOS: JEFFREY TOTARO



FACING PAGE The HQ boasts a cafe and fitness center, both of which were central to the entire design process and encourage employees to be healthy.

LEFT Much of the building's facade is comprised of floor-to-ceiling glazing, and in fact is made of Saint-Gobain's own SageGlass.

north axis and the other, east-west. Rather than simply linking the two buildings with a skyway-like structure, Liebman's team connected the two original buildings with a full building expansion. The resulting adjoining building was subsequently furnished with the services and amusements comprising a designated "amenity zone" that includes a place to pick up health foods and a gymnasium. "The cafe and fitness center were actually a big part of the whole design process," says **Pier Derrickson**, interior design principal at **Jacobs** and the interior architect on the project. Experts joined the project to provide wellness guidance on details such as the selection of food, fitness center equipment and programs, and the ambiance of areas where employees would convene recreationally. "We included pantry spaces that allow a lot of gathering and social interaction," Derrickson illustrates. "So it's really about people connecting with each other."

The site of the Malvern headquarters is most unique in that its very constitution is an affirming statement of self-sufficiency. In constructing the space, Saint-Gobain opted to employ a plethora of their own products, too. "Nobody has ever done this," boasts **Carmen Ferrigno**, vice president of communications for Saint-Gobain, "We became our supplier and our customer." This autonomy was demonstrated perhaps most strikingly with the utilization of Saint-Gobain Corporation subsidiary **SageGlass**, an electrochromic glass that electronically tints in proportion to the intensity of the beam of the sun. Much of the building's facade is comprised of floor-to-ceiling glazing, and SageGlass fix-

ture is heavily represented on the southern and western facades. This makes for a sleek modernist appearance, but a glass facade typically poses potential burdens. "From day one, we were concerned about how we were going to cool that space," recounts Lieberman, "but SageGlass allowed us to create a comfortable interior environment where the employees are working in the building but the building is always comfortable and temperature-maintained." In the areas of the Malvern headquarters where the SageGlass was installed, management of heat gain and optimized shading enables the space to aid the comfort of employees while reducing the energy consumption of lighting and HVAC systems.

But underpinning the impactful application of SageGlass is a larger ethical philosophy that's as deeply rooted as the soil upon which this edifice rests. "This company started with science and aesthetics," says Ferrigno, expounding that by using design to honor and interpret natural beauty, the physical and emotional experience of occupants is heightened. Prosperous visual pleasure blended with expression of the corporation's identity manifests boldly in the contours of the facade. The curved wall bears a resemblance to that of the first World Expo in Paris constructed by Saint-Gobain in 1937. For Ferrigno and his team, this represents the Saint-Gobain's next profound generational declaration. "That's a world in transition." **gb&d**

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