



## The Oregonian

### In steel and glass, trappings of success

Architecture firm ZGF Partnership designs a downtown headquarters that mirrors its dynamic transformation

Thursday, October 05, 2006

**RANDY GRAGG**  
The Oregonian

Wherever Portland's central city has grown, buildings designed by ZGF Partnership have often marked the route. Now the firm is planting a new flag for both the city and itself -- a new headquarters building.

In a joint venture with Gerding/Edlen Development and the Goodman family, ZGF is building a new home on the block bordered by Southwest Stark and Washington streets between 12th and 13th avenues. The firm may only be filling four floors in the 22-story retail/office/apartment combo, but the entire building will be a ZGF statement.

"The building represents the next generation of what's important to us," says Robert Frasca, the "F" of ZGF and the firm's major design visionary for the past four decades. "It will be as sustainable as we can make it. We're building in the next important place in downtown."

"It has to be a showcase," says Eugene Sandoval, the building's lead designer. "We have to make it good."

The proposed tower pushes beyond anything ZGF has done in downtown Portland in years. In many ways, more than a new headquarters, it represents a new ZGF.

The designers unveiled a 31-story version in December, but a planned hotel dropped out. The Portland Design Commission begins its review of the building's final version 1:30 p.m. today.

At age 65, ZGF has seen its peaks and plateaus, growing during the past two decades from a dominant local force to a major national player with offices in four cities. In 1991, it won the American Institute of Architects' Firm of the Year award.

But the award caused Frasca and his partners to shudder as much as celebrate -- they knew that half the firms that had won it eventually died. And so they began to lay the groundwork for a transition, giving top designers such as Sandoval, Mark Foster, Dusty Rhoads, Margaret DeBolt and Allyn Stellmacher partnerships, which, in turn, triggered a stream of new talent into the office.

For a firm with more than 400 employees -- 220 in Portland -- such transformations are rare. But ZGF's average age is now 32, even more impressive, as Sandoval points out, because 20 percent of the firm is still over 50. But the change is clearly visible, whether in the structurally dynamic models for new projects all over the world seemingly strewn everywhere or in the computer battle games being waged between the Portland and Los Angeles offices on a recent Friday afternoon.

More importantly, the firm is routinely competing --and winning -- in head-to-head competitions against such name-brand architects as Rafael Vinoly and Dominique Perrault.

"It really has grown from the synergy of youth and age," Frasca says.

The new headquarters is a case in point. The lead designer, Sandoval, 36, is widely regarded as Frasca's heir apparent. But the guiding principle for the building, Sandoval says, still came from the 73-year-old Frasca: the simple idea of "optimism." Three inspirations quickly emerged: Pietro Belluschi's 1948 Equitable Building and Skidmore Owings and Merrill's 1983 U.S. Bancorp Building locally and Mies van der Rohe's 1958 Seagram's Building in New York.

"We wanted a building that would look good forever," Frasca says.

The new headquarters will be the first major building ZGF has designed with Building Information Management (BIM), a new three-dimensional computer program that allows architects to, in effect, construct buildings electronically before they are built physically. The result is that more parts of the building can be pre-manufactured, turning construction into a simpler assembly of parts.

Working with the renowned local curtain-wall manufacturer, Benson Industries, ZGF is designing what will easily be the city's most intricately articulated skin. Detailed by ZGF designer Dave Gronowski, it will be faceted with sheets of embossed stainless steel and several varieties of delicately fritted and reflective glass to reflect and amplify Portland's subtle gradations of light.

Losing nine floors of hotel was a blow to the project, says partner Larry Bruton, who worked shoulder to shoulder with Sandoval on the building.

"At 22 stories, we had to really fight the dumpiness," Bruton says. The solution became a series of recessed balconies to add strong vertical striations.

### **Offices open, social, airy**

As the firm designed the building, the building began to redesign the firm. With BIM, Sandoval says, details that were once worked out in the latter stages of construction drawings now must be dealt with in the earliest phases of design. Problems once relegated to junior designers now must be solved collaboratively.

"Everybody's in the room," Sandoval says. "You can't hide from your decisions anymore."

The effects will be felt inside the new headquarters as well. ZGF's current headquarters features a four-story interior atrium surrounded by stairs -- a scheme they wanted to keep but current fire codes no longer allow. But in an all-employee critique session of an early version of the new headquarters, Frasca says, the staff pushed hard for some kind of open connections between the floors.

The designers went back to work. Now the offices will be organized around a series of open stairwells, each with an adjacent kitchen and lounge, to create what Sandoval calls "villages." With operable windows, 12-foot ceilings and a series of balconies, the offices in general will be open, airy and social.

From the quintet of buildings the firm has designed at Oregon Health & Science University to nearly a dozen downtown towers to OMSI, the Oregon Convention Center and the BPA Headquarters, ZGF's architecture has mapped Portland's growth. So equally important to all the partners was finding a location for its own headquarters that would change the city.

In a perfect illustration of the wise/brash dynamic of the firm, Frasca hopes the headquarters will help link the bustling Brewery Blocks with the Cultural District, triggering more development in the West End. Sandoval sees a chance to mark the major intersection of Interstate 405 and West Burnside.

"It's the last thing and the first thing you see," Sandoval says. "We needed to make it memorable."

Randy Gragg: 503-221-8575; randygragg@news.oregonian.com. Freelancer Brian Libby contributed to this report.