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Veoneer Proves that Nature and Tech Are in Synthesis

By Dennis Burck

A play on visionary and pioneer, Veoneer is a Swedish-based autonomous vehicle technology company on the cutting edge of redefining the travel experience. After spending time split between buildings, Veoneer's Michigan operation needed an engineering center flexible enough to be a modern test center as well as a new-age collaboration-driven workspace.

Initially, the Veoneer team thought a horizontal build would be best, but Frank Jonna, Partner of Jonna Companies, the property owner, manager and builder of the chosen Southfield site, persuaded the group that a vertical complex could be built and flourish. Flourish it has: From the terrace café overlooking an expansive 19-acre wetland nature preserve, workers sip coffee and collaborate with woodsy views spanning the horizon. There is a zig-zagging wooden bench running down the terrace, and a glass panel railing makes sure the view is clear at all times. It is a scene that makes one easily mistake the workplace for a resort. The addition of a full-service cafeteria, cafe and fitness center complete the illusion.

Before the new Veoneer complex became a new landmark on American Drive, it was a bare strip of land adjacent to a nature center. Designing around the nature preserve was a major part of this project, Jonna said. It was a feature that attracted Jonna to purchase the



TOP LEFT: Veoneer consolidated its R&D and engineering teams under one roof at its new Michigan office building in Southfield. Testing space was situated on the ground floor and office space above.

TOP RIGHT: The lobby of Veoneer's headquarters benefits from the high ceilings of the first-floor testing area, providing a spacious area with an inviting tech palate.

site nearly 30 years ago. "This site was the last 10-acre undeveloped portion of the 70-acre site that we acquired," Jonna explained. "One of the unique aspects was that there were significant wetlands to consolidate to develop a property."

Butting out from the business park, Veoneer's sleek black, grey and white design with modern paneling and large windows provides a duality of modernism and nature coexisting into the horizon for the benefit of a signature identity and work practicalities alike.

"The progressive palette set it off from its surroundings. Many other buildings in the area have the traditional safe building palettes. This one has a more European look, especially with the cutout terrace as an architectural feature," HED architect on the project Jack Bullo said. Known as the

American Commerce Center Nature Preserve, the wetland park hosts an array of wildlife including wild birds, deer, raccoons, foxes and more with its large pond flanked by cattails.

"In the early planning stages, we wanted to make sure that the views were available to the entire Veoneer team," Jonna said. "So we formed the outdoor terrace, meeting rooms and the food service to be located on that top floor to maximize the views for the team members." The focus on nature continues within the structure as well. Large windows fitted with Mecoshades capitalize on the views, providing natural lighting to most workspaces. There is space for 900 employees. Each floor contains a central hub for collaboration flanked by daylight working space on the exterior. The

180,000-square-foot complex opened in March 2020.

All Under One Roof

Headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden, Veoneer is a pioneer in autonomous driving technology and safety systems with offices in some 13 countries around the world. Founded in 2018, Veoneer was spun-off from Autoliv after having designed, manufactured and delivered electronic safety products to its customers for two decades.

As autonomous driving technology is poised to redefine the way the world drives, Veoneer needed a space to redefine the way its engineers work. The technology in the new center is at the forefront of autonomous vehicle viability and greater automotive safety. The



With a 1:1 ratio of office seating to leisure space, each floor of Veoneer's tech center provides a common area for workers to move from their desks to collaborate or get a change of scenery.

innovative company compiles and sells state-of-the-art software, hardware and systems for occupant protection, advanced driving assistance systems, collaborative and automated driving.

Veoneer hopes its work on preventing accidents with smart technology will cut down global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 50 percent, citing that the World Health Organization estimates up to 1.35 million people are killed by traffic accidents globally.

According to official company information, Veoneer employs 7,100 people worldwide with 900 working out of the Southfield office. Its engineers work with vision systems, radar, LiDAR, thermal sensing, electronic controls, and human-machine interface to combat the probabilities of traffic accidents and mitigate unavoidable accidents.

Its previous arrangement, Veoneer's engineering, testing and support staff were split between locations with the necessity of getting a shuttle to and from worksites. Veoneer envisioned a separate adjacent



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one-story test center, per Jonna, until the leadership team was introduced to the concept of vertically interconnected space. "We felt that the most efficient use was to expand more vertically with tech space and research and development space on the first floor," Jonna said. "The clear standing garage area has a taller first floor than a typical office. Being able to keep engineers vertically connected was more efficient."

Veoneer Facilities Manager Larry Walewski agreed. Employees working primarily on computer systems could now go within minutes to see their work in action, better connecting developers to their work. "[Our goal was to] acquire a modern building whose design supports consolidation of all activities under one roof and will project a high-tech image to rival that of the Veoneer competitors in the area," Walewski said.

With the need for multiple uses within the same structure, designers sought to stack the program with large structural clear spans on the first floor for testing, team workplace platforms on the second and third floors, and amenities on the top floor.

Jack Bullo of HED, the Southfield-based architectural firm hired to design the new space, said this isn't the typical office layout. "Normally things like the cafeteria would want to be on the ground floor. But because we wanted to fulfill all of Veoneer's requirements by not eating up excess space, we put them on the top floor," Bullo said. "We thought it was a great opportunity because the visual experience gets better as you move up on the site. Up there, we found it is so intrinsically better than being on the ground level."

The need for a product testing lab to have specific requirements like a loading dock forced amenities to move upward. "The lab on the first floor shaped our ability of the building for the better. It ended up being a win-win."

"We focused on consolidations to have everyone under one roof. Being able to have all of their engineering and testing was huge for them," Jonna added. "[Of the changes,] most importantly was reuniting our associates under one roof to capitalize on missing synergies between the different engineering groups," Walewski said.

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Furthermore, the building centralized the support of Veoneer's engineering community. Instead of being spread out, product validation, analysis, testing, tech support and vehicle-related functions are now all located on the first floor.

The heart of the office sees a focus on socialization and a mobile interconnected workplace. Unlike traditional office environments that have bathrooms and stairwells at the center of the space, Veoneer put these amenities on the exterior, allowing for a centralized linear collaborative hub. There, workers can interact and connect in person with expediency.

With no shuttle needed, visiting project sites and coworkers across disciplines are as simple as hitting a button on the elevator. That is if everyone is still in their seats ...

A Redefined Workspace

Veoneer emphasized that its employees shouldn't have just one assigned seat but a ratio of 1:1 additional collaborative seats at any location throughout the building. This means that if an employee needs a change of pace or wants to work in a different mode, they can easily go mobile and transition to the terrace or lounge for a refreshing change in scenery. "Today's modern workplace wants to be a more experiential driven facility," Bullo said. "People want something where 'I can come in, work at the desk, daydream and work with a team.'"

Each floor is outfitted with multiple types of furniture and light fixtures to grant a change of environment. "Having the building look and convey that multitude of experiences is what makes it to me a modern building. It portrays a community-oriented space." This approach further attracts talent to the client, Bullo added. "You can imagine them doing a tour going through these amenities and the open workspace then to end at the terrace view of the nature preserve. It is a great place to ask prospective employees 'Well, what do you think?'"

In the preliminary planning stages for Veoneer, the project team also focused on situating the office best for natural lighting. "As a team, very early in the design of the building, we identified natural light as one of the highest priorities for the office space. The Jonna team and HED felt the same level of importance. "Natural light has a powerful effect on employees' mental health, boosting mood and lessening anxiety. Better moods and lower anxiety translate to more productive work," Walewski said. "People exposed to direct and indirect sunlight reported higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment."

HED placed the enclosed offices in the east and west spaces, where there was low sun and glare that required light control, leaving the north and south face totally open for a continuous window band for elevations. "From the north, you get no glare, and the south light is controllable and not problematic," Bullo said.

To draw in even more light, the team at HED gave Veoneer workspaces a luxury floor-to-ceiling height of 15 feet. Most offices are 13 to 14 feet. "We didn't want it

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Natural lighting was a big factor in the design of Veoneer's workspaces. Through large windows, lighting permeates to the central collaborative corridor workspace.

to feel compressed. Higher than normal floor space allowed daylight to penetrate deeper in the space," Bullo said. A perk of the elevated height of the first floor is that its lobby is spacious, open, and bright, providing a modern and inviting feel that speaks technology to visitors.

Included also on these floors are stacked workplace lounges outfitted with bright colors, wood paneling and modern light fixtures. Yet another changeup from the cubicle and break room structuring of the past, this space was designed to better facilitate community building and energize project teams.

To further achieve this, an emphasis is placed on "collaboration" with primary pathways running down the middle of the facility that can be rearranged to suit project team needs. "It gives the building more future flexibility," Jonna said. "That is an important issue that can have an alternative use down the road."

Among other amenities the building had over its previous arrangement was well-equipped training rooms to support internal training and seminars, a full-service cafeteria, cafe and a lounge on every floor.

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Moving forward from consolidating teams in one location, Veoneer created flexible spaces so its diverse workers could work side-by-side on projects as needed.

Breaking Ground in Winter

Despite an audacious vertical build, Jonna said that the biggest challenge was the omnipresent one in all construction jobs – trying to make sure the product is delivered by the deadline. The project team found themselves starting the build in December to make the scheduled open date of March 2020.

“It wasn’t ideal, but we were able to use a heating system to thaw the ground and protect the concrete,” Jonna said. “We were very efficient in getting the foundations done to get our steel fabricator grinding away and ready to go in February. Our goal was to have the building fully enclosed by fall (2019).” Facades would take longer, but the windows and exterior structure were able to be enclosed much more quickly than other buildings, Jonna added.

Closing on the Build

Jonna had owned the land since the early 1990s. Opportunities to develop the site had come and gone over the years, Jonna said. He felt that the ability to partner with Veoneer, a faithful tenant, from the ground up was special. “It was really gratifying to develop this last 10-acre parcel. Having this opportunity to be involved from the ground up and participate in the design, manage construction and building...it was a crowning moment for us.”

Bullo commented that the build reminded him of the classic architect saying, “Doctors can bury their mistakes. Architects have to live with them. I can live with this one. To see this completed is why architects choose their profession. But it’s important to say that I am just the tip of the iceberg here – architecture is such a team endeavor. And great buildings don’t happen without great clients.”

Aside from a brief HVAC adjustment, the building after completion has no issues, Walewski said. “I was excited to see the positive daily reactions from the workforce during the various phases of moving in. It’s a very accomplished feeling knowing that all the hard work and dedication from the entire team was well-appreciated.”