

Keeping the old, embracing the new

Godrej One's new workspace in Mumbai strikes a balance between the past and future



No employee is seated more than 25ft from a window.
Photographs by Abhijit Bhatlekar/Mint

When it comes to expressing company values, the design of an office building speaks much louder than any corporate mission statement. Buildings are the tangible assets that companies leverage to enhance their intangible assets, such as corporate culture and brand values. In other words, a new corporate headquarters symbolizes how much a company values its intangible assets, and to what extent it is prepared to invest in them.

Take Godrej One, for instance. It is the new corporate headquarters of the ₹18,000 crore Godrej Industries Group, at the company's landmark campus in Vikhroli, in north-eastern Mumbai, on a former industrial site. The building houses Godrej Group companies, including Godrej Properties, Godrej Industries, Godrej Consumer Products, Godrej Agrovet and Godrej Nature's Basket. It also houses tenants such as pharmaceutical company Merck.

Godrej One is part of a new 34-acre mixed-use development of the Vikhroli campus, which will encompass residential, commercial and retail units. It is, therefore, the first of many office blocks that will

redefine the neighbourhood's skyline over the coming decade. Previously the Godrej Group companies were scattered at different locations across the campus and the city.

"From a financial perspective, we are playing a much longer game for Vikhroli than trying to maximize profits on every little bit that we do. So we are quite happy to generate long-term returns, and I think the best way to do that is by doing very high-quality planning and buildings consistently," says Pirojsha Godrej, managing director and chief executive officer of Godrej Properties, the group's realty arm and developers of the office space.

The architecture and design of the 958,000 sq. ft building highlights the group's business priorities in four ways.

Nourishing personal energy

Balram Yadav, managing director of Godrej Agrovet (engaged in agro- and poultry-based products), who has been working for the organization for the last 25 years, is happy with the new space. "We were the first ones to move into this office, about six months ago. This office gives a very good feeling, as it is well laid out, very spacious. There are as many people as the old office, but in five times the space, so there is a sense of openness, and total lack of claustrophobia."

There is ample daylight; for most of the day people don't feel the need to switch on the lights. "The best part of this office is that it's high-tech, unlike the old office. We had problems in the old office from an IT (information technology) and telecom infrastructure point of view. And there's a great view," he says, pointing to the undiluted view of mangroves surrounding the building.

Godrej One also includes several amenities, including a Starbucks Coffee shop, a Nature's Basket store, and a BBlunt hair salon. An on-site crèche and gym are in the works.

Yadav's enthused comments reflect the importance of creating workspaces that nourish one's personal energy, through a more comfortable, efficient and productive work environment. At Godrej One, an expansive 10,850 sq. ft atrium has clusters of trees which help to bring the outdoors inside.

"Our key goal was to retain all the advantages that our existing campus had; being very open, green and filled with light, and a sort of sense of being able to walk around, from office to office. But we wanted to totally transform the quality of the space, the architecture, the design, the structure because obviously the old buildings were nothing great," says Pirojsha.

Building organizational capital

The next, and possibly, the most important intangible asset that a company can influence through its workplace is its organizational capital, that is, its culture, structure, and processes.

For Nisaba Godrej, executive director of Godrej Consumer Products, who worked with Pirojsha on the building's design and execution, it was important that the building enable collaboration between different teams and companies, since it is a critical aspect of organizational capital.

Each of the 11 floors of the building is large, at about 68,000 sq. ft, which could easily result in a visually monotonous workplace, yet the building has been designed to overcome such constraints, through walkways that connect two wings of the building, a centrally placed staircase, several sets of elevators, terrace gardens and a large atrium that visually and physically connects the different floors.

The atrium has been designed in such a way that it is accessible via elevators and staircases, and allows for greater circulation between floors. "Every Godrej employee has to go through the atrium to get to their office. If you have to go to meetings in the common area, it's very easy to get between the floors. If I am walking on the walkway between offices, I can see so many people's offices and so many people while I walk down. So I think from a connection and bringing people together, it definitely works," says Nisaba.

Expressing brand values

Workspaces are an effective and long-lasting medium to express a company's brand values, and both Nisaba and Pirojsha seem to have seized the opportunity with Godrej One. The company's brand values are not depicted through loud logos stamped on the building. On the contrary, there are barely visible Godrej logos at the reception entrance and in the atrium. Each group company has a witty, yet subtle, depiction of its logo in the foyer of its floor.

Workspaces are punctuated with small surprising elements scattered across the office, such as high-backed sofas for private working, or a conference room in a bright yellow shipping container, which injects splashes of colour into the workplace.

The brand values thus emerge through how the company views its intangible assets, rather than through surface-level depictions.

"We are an 118-year-old organization. I think this is an amazing physical representation of our culture, our mission and what we want to do. We use the (Sanskrit) term *antevasin*, which means one foot in the past and one foot in the future. So what we are saying through this beautiful new building, is that we are very deep-rooted to who we are," says Nisaba.

"We have preserved these mangroves for many years and you can finally see them. But we are also in this very modern space, where we can remember our trust and values, but equally, see that we are also moving forward. That's the exciting part and it's actually been amazing in terms of hiring," she adds.

Sustaining the environment

Finally, Godrej One holds a platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating, which points to its green credentials. "LEED platinum affects almost every part of the building's planning, from the orientation of the building, to the design of the atrium to allow natural lighting to the greatest possible extent, to having solar panels on the roof," says Pirojsha. Despite its large size, no employee is seated more than 25ft away from a window, which reduces electricity consumption.

Just as Powai left its mark on the city's design sensibility many years ago, albeit to mixed critical acclaim, it will be interesting to see whether this group's emphasis on contemporary, environmentally friendly design will become a trend setter, for both Vikhroli and Mumbai.

FACT FILE

Location

Vikhroli, Mumbai

Built-up area

958,000 sq. ft

Carpet area

512,000 sq. ft, of which the Godrej Group occupies 450,000 sq. ft

Headcount

1,650 employees

Cost

Construction, `350 crore, and `165 crore for interiors

Architects

Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects