



Open book: (clockwise from far left) Sumit Banerjee, CEO, ACC Ltd, in his open office; the central atrium has enhanced fire safety; the 70-year-old facade of Cement House; and the green terraces have energy-saving and safety-enhancing functions too.

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

Cement House, ACC's corporate headquarters in Mumbai, underwent a two-year renovation that put a modern, streamlined, open set of offices behind its historic facade

BY APARNA PIRAMAL RAJE

Major surgery is always a daunting prospect, especially if the patient happens to be a 70-year-old heritage building. But pulling out one's entrails can be a source of renewed vitality too, as cement manufacturer ACC Ltd found. In December, the company completed a two-year renovation of Cement House, its corporate headquarters across the road from Mumbai's Churchgate station. The office interiors were completely redesigned, without disturbing its historic facade or its structural geometry.

The gut-wrenching process left it greener, fitter, safer (in terms of fire hazards, for example) and, most importantly, richer, as the company uncovered the most valuable of urban commodities: unused real estate in the heart of its property.

Time for a retrofit

ACC decided to submit itself to major restoration in 2007, when its existing offices were considered obsolete in both form and function by the new management team.

Although Cement House's original 1939 design had been selected from a national competition among leading architects of the period, "successive designs kept shutting out the outside world", says R. Nand Kumar, the Mumbai-based head of corporate communications, who has been with ACC for 28 years.

Cabins lined the periphery of its walls, depriving the rank and file of daylight from the windows. Organizational hierarchy and individual privacy were promoted by high partitions. Officers and staff dined in separate canteens. The managing director's office consisted of a veritable presidential suite of chambers and antechambers. The centre of the building was literally a black hole—an enclosed shaft, six storeys deep, disconnected from the rest of the building, except for services and rooms protruding into it from each floor. The open-plan office movement in Indian workspaces, led by IT companies and banks in the early 1990s, had clearly escaped ACC's attention for the better part of two decades.

Fresh blood facilitated a large-scale rejuvenation. Holcim Ltd, a Swiss cement company with a penchant for sustainable construction, took a substantial equity

stake in ACC in 2005. The new CEO, Sumit Banerjee, joined the business in January 2007, and seized the opportunity to position Cement House's renovation as symbolic of a larger transformation within ACC.

'No-door' policy

Banerjee was clear about where to make his incisions. He drew an analogy from human anatomy between the 74-year-old company's corporate culture and its 70-year-old architecture: "The values, the culture, the ethics of the company represent to me its skeleton. They have been cultivated over a huge length of time and become like the structure (slabs, beams, columns) of the organization which supports it." This skeleton, he felt, should not be altered by newcomers.

But he also realized that ACC needed to become more nimble, more open and less bureaucratic. He equated these areas of improvement with "the flesh on the bone, which you see by way of architectural details, the cubicles, the false ceiling, the lighting", which he felt needed to be modernized.

He sought an open-office environment "where no one's job or position is mystified by a fully enclosed cabin", and led by example, demolishing his own front door. The head of a Rs8,000 crore company (by sales) works out of a space that is at best a generous cubicle, visible to every passer-by. "A large, enclosed cabin tends to give people the belief that the CEO is a mythical character, maybe a superhuman being. Nobody knows what he does in that room," Banerjee says. "I want to be in the middle of people, I don't want to be lonely."

All employees now have equally low partitions and can easily gesture to colleagues across the room. Getting rid of cabins has resulted in more equitable space allocation.

FACT FILE

Architects: Niteen Parulekar Architects Pvt. Ltd, Mumbai
Client: ACC Ltd
Location: Mumbai
Built-up area: 110,000 sq. ft
Cost of interior fitout: Approx. Rs30 crore
Renovation start date: Early 2008
Completion date: December 2009
Accommodates: 300 people

with individual desk spaces that are double the size of most Indian private sector offices. While most corporate offices have desks of 4x2.5ft (10 sq. ft) or so, at ACC the smallest desks are 5x5ft (25 sq. ft).

Breathing life into dead space

The other critical design intervention that enhanced openness and fire safety entailed unlocking the neglected central shaft, removing vestigial walls, and turning it into an 800 sq. ft atrium. Visitors can now easily gaze up and down the insides of Cement House. "Lots of old buildings have dead spaces that become out of sight, out of mind. Opening up the shaft was the backbone of the project, which allowed the organization to breathe inside-out," says Niteen Parulekar, founder of Niteen Parulekar Architects Pvt. Ltd, Mumbai, which was engaged for the retrofit. Open spaces such as central atriums improve fire safety by allowing heat to dissipate and discouraging fires from spreading to other parts of the building by widening the gaps between them.

Keen to acquire green credentials, ACC also implemented several other measures to become the first LEED-rated building in the "Major Renovation" category in India and to warrant the highest possible five-star rating by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (see table), LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is an internationally recognized points-based rating system for sustainable architecture and construction.

Built to last

Although Cement House is part of a small minority of heritage buildings in urban India's commercial building stock, its renovation (albeit long overdue) is significant. Such landmarks are usually the only buildings worth preserving, and are often managed by public bodies. Its internal transformation is indisputable proof that a skilled team of surgeons (architects and owners) can ensure that ailing buildings long outlive the administrators that occupy them. Finally, the successful retrofit also explodes prevailing beliefs that green buildings are necessarily new buildings and that old structures cannot be made as safe for occupants.

Write to us at businessoflife@luemint.com

| OLD DESIGN | NEW ELEMENTS | BUSINESS BENEFITS |
|---|--|---|
| Central shaft a dead space, housing only some utility services | Converted to sky-lit atrium, services relocated and condensed into smaller space | Energy efficiency from better penetration of daylight, superior space utilization and enhanced fire safety |
| Compartmentalized cabins, desks separated by floor-to-ceiling partitions and filing cabinets | Open-plan office, all partitions below eye level, no cabins, minimal storage | Energy efficiency, more equitable space utilization, greater transparency |
| Separate canteens for officers and staff | Common canteen, new gym and library | Greater sense of community, promotes work-life balance |
| Large outdoor concrete spaces and balconies | Grass-turfed terrace gardens | Turf insulates the building, increasing energy efficiency, adding visual appeal and serving as temporary refuge from fire |
| Natural light from windows restricted to cabins, extensive reliance on artificial lighting across entire building | Windows lengthened and double-glazed to reduce heat. Individual lighting control for majority of occupants. Solar panels for water heating | Energy efficiency |
| Conventional air-conditioning system. Individual AC units in cabins | Integrated building management system with light and motion sensors | Energy efficiency, with better control of HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning) and lighting |
| Conventional plumbing and waste-management facilities | Sensor-based plumbing fixtures, rainwater harvesting, new sewage treatment plant, segregation of dry and wet waste | Water efficiency, more responsible waste management |
| Smoke detectors and fire extinguishers | Automated water sprinklers, fire hydrant system, regular fire safety drills | Better fire safety |

