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Crocker Park Chemistry

Innovative solutions define Palmer Holland's workspace expansion

Story & photos by Doug Bardwell

Walking around Crocker Park in Westlake, you might be inclined to walk into a new, unmarked sidewalk café at 191 American Boulevard. With 20-foot-high storefront glass and a plethora of comfortable seating inside, you can be forgiven for the false impression. But don't bother – it's actually the employee lounge for Palmer Holland, an international distributor of specialty chemicals and fine food ingredients.

Palmer Holland began in 1925 and is celebrating its centennial anniversary this year.

"The company expanded with a collection of offices between Cleveland, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh in the late '80s and early '90s," says Charlie Laurie, CIO of Palmer Holland. "Over the years, we concentrated our international leadership team here in Cleveland."

The new 25,000-square-foot first floor and 8,000-square-foot mezzanine join with the previously occupied third floor of the Tech Center Building to house 150 of their 250 North American employees in this recently occupied international headquarters. While other corporations are cutting back on their office space needs, Palmer Holland is expanding with this \$6 million interior project.

Palmer Holland fills the sales, marketing and service functions for some of the largest global industrial chemical

manufacturers and consumer health and nutrition food additives.

"We're confident in our growth strategies," posits Laurie. "We will need the

"In our market, where many of our competitors may be stagnant or contracting, we've taken a contrarian view. We know the market will turn around, and when it does, everybody will see growth."

Charlie Laurie
Palmer Holland

employees to help us drive that growth strategy. In our market, where many of our competitors may be stagnant or contracting, we've taken a contrarian view. We

know the market will turn around, and when it does, everybody will see growth."

"We generally see exponential growth because we continue to invest and we continue to develop our skills and our space," adds Laurie, "so when somebody else is scrambling for employees and space, TCV [Development] and HSB [Architects] have already helped us lay that groundwork ahead of time."

When asked about what drew the company to Crocker Park from their previous location in North Olmsted, Laurie explains that besides needing more space, the amenities of secure, covered parking for employees and a safe community with proximate shopping and dining options made this a win-win for the company and their people.

Finding the right formula

When Matt Brewer, CFO of Palmer Holland, was beginning to consider the



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WARM RECEPTION The unique entry desk is angled toward the exterior entrance and the interior doors to the open office beyond. Above, crescent ribbon lights add illumination to the already bright two-story space.

third floor of Tech West Building as a new home in 2022, TCV was doing a project on the second floor. Through a serendipitous project one of the electricians was doing for Brewer, the electrician mentioned that they were impressed with TCV and that Brewer might want to consider them for the project.

"With their familiarity with the building," says Laurie, "it made perfect sense to team up with TCV and HSB. Even before the lease was finalized, I would drag them along to events because they'd become trusted partners for us."

After several years, as they began to outgrow their third-floor space, they started again looking for more space. Instead of moving yet again, they began to consider the vacant retail space on the first floor of their building. It had been sitting there since the building was built in 2014 and still had a gravel floor, waiting for a tenant fit-out.

The first floor had 25,000 square feet of available space, but that wasn't as much as they needed. "They really needed more space," explains Andre Khawam, project manager with HSB Architects + Engineers. "Adding a mezzanine level would give them 8,000 square feet more and open up a connection to the stairwell and elevator to the third floor."

The only elevator connecting the first and third floors is outside their office in the building lobby. And, the elevator coming from the parking garage only serves floors two and three. Remember,

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OPENING UP Palmer Holland's headquarters now includes a 25,000-square-foot first floor and an 8,000-square-foot mezzanine, connecting with the previously utilized third floor of the Tech Center Building to accommodate 150 of the company's 250 North American employees.

the first floor was supposed to be retail when the building was envisioned, and the public parking was also on the ground level.

The elevator pit for the elevator serving floors two and three is actually suspended above the retail level, with the sump hanging down into their ceiling space.

"If the building hadn't planned the space to be retail," says Thad Vasko, owner of TCV Development, "the elevator would have served all three floors. That just added to the challenge of creating a mezzanine."

To get access to the stairway to the third floor, we needed to create a bridge from the mezzanine to the stairway," explains Kristen Smith, interior designer for HSB Architects + Engineers.

"And this is where really the struggle began," continues Khawam. "How do you get from here to there with a couple steps, trying to create enough head clearance for a doorway that swings in and yet creates this platform landing"

That required cutting into the stairway wall and measuring down to the floor level that was yet to be poured (a

challenge in itself), and then reverse-engineering the height of the mezzanine to provide head clearance when getting into the stairwell.

After that was solved, Vasko recalls also having a challenge excavating the raw floor for the mezzanine without hitting utilities. Turns out that the as-built drawings provided to the team were incorrect. Whoops.

"We X-rayed the floor and found the main duct bank for the data. That is the lifeblood of American Greetings next door," Vasko says. "If we had cut



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BIG BREAK Spanning over 50 feet, the facility's break room features crescent-shaped ribbon fixtures, seating for 50 with a mix of high-top tables, booths and Parsons tables, ample storage with large refrigerators and cabinets, and a gourmet coffee station.

that, we probably wouldn't have been invited back."

Vasko adds, "There was also a sewer main right in line with the line of footers. So we had to redesign the steel quickly, but we knew about it all before it was fabricated, so that was good. It was a zero change to the owner."

"With the level of detail in here," explains Brian Irwin, TCV's superintendent, "this was probably the most intense [project] we've been involved with. I was in contact with HSB all the time. I would email questions to Kristen, and she'd get back to me within minutes. It was great."

Building inside from the ground up

One of the many challenges was getting large deliveries to the site amid

Crocker Park's active town center-style development. Three large rooftop HVAC units needed to be hoisted onto the third-floor roof.

"We asked the employees working on the second and third floors to stay home that day, recalls Laurie. "We set up the crane in the intersection right here, then backed up the truck carrying the rooftop units down the street, where the crane picked each up and swung it over the building."

Getting steel delivered also had its challenges, "Backing a steel truck down past the roundabout probably took an hour of maneuvering," says Irwin. "Not surprisingly, the neighbors didn't appreciate that. Fortunately, we could back the trailer inside the building and have a picker unload it all."

Another issue was getting sufficient manpower. "One thing that I have to do when I do scheduling these days," says Vasko, "is I have to build in additional time because contractors that I worked with 10 years ago don't have the manpower. Where many sub-trades used to send a half-dozen or more men, now they are sending two to complete the entire project."

Exploring the workspace

Most visitors will park in the attached covered garage and enter the reception area on the north side of the building. The unique entry desk is angled toward the exterior entrance and the interior doors to the open office beyond. Above, crescent ribbon lights add illumination to the already bright two-story space.

Entering the open office, as a visitor, you'll most likely turn left for a meeting in one of the two conference rooms along the north wall. Each conference room has a grand view of Crocker Park, but your meeting is confidential.

"We put cloaking film on the windows," says Irwin, "so people can't see in." The cloaking film provides enough diffusion that passersby can't read any data displayed on the wall-mounted monitors.

Both conference rooms offer single or dual-screen Teams configurations, featuring high-end microphone systems and



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FUNCTION + FLAIR The two-story open office (top) features custom workspaces and collaborative areas (middle), while keyhole wall openings with changing colored lights add to the dynamic ambiance (bottom).

dynamic video conferencing systems with multi-view capabilities, plus wireless presentation options.

Crescent Digital did a masterful job of programming the AV controls to be uniform throughout, so after learning how to use them, Laurie says he can walk in any room knowing that its controls are the same.

“We did 3Form panels in the conference rooms,” says Smith. “It presents a layered look with the accent wall behind it. Through the perforations, you get to see that pop of color.”

3Form Elements Hush Screens are 3/8-inch-thick felt panels mounted behind the monitors, which add visual interest and acoustic value to the media walls.

Continuing to the northeast corner of the building, your eyes will be drawn to the lengthy Customer Appreciation Wall with logos of all the suppliers they represent. Each hexagonal crest is reminiscent of the subliminal wall graphic behind the large Palmer Holland logo on the entry wall you passed in the reception lobby.

Behind that wall is that “restaurant” space you may have seen at the corner of the building. The break room is more than 50 feet long, with more crescent-shaped ribbon fixtures floating above.

The space can seat 50 people and has high-top and standard tables and rich, blue booth seating along the glass storefront. Two long, high Parsons tables offer seating for eight at each – one with fiberglass, back-support stools and the other with open saddle-type wood seating.

Three giant stainless steel refrigerators/freezers and a dozen large cabinets can hold many employees’ lunches if needed. On the opposite end of the lengthy snack and beverage countertop are a myriad of gourmet coffee machines capable of creating any coffee drink imaginable.

Outside the break room, Ohio Desk has created a collection of custom workspaces for collaboration as well as





TECH ON DISPLAY A large training room, with seating for up to 40 individuals, is equipped with a pair of 133" DVLED displays, a 98" digital signage display and a high-end audio system.

solo work pods. The Obeya resembles a wooden pergola you might have in your backyard but is equipped with a whiteboard wall on one end. Four other solo pods with swing-away desk surfaces are perfect for taking a phone call while enjoying the outside view of the roundabout, just beyond the east-facing window.

In the balance of the two-story-high open office area are typical three-walled workstations with L-shaped work surfaces and abundant drawer and storage cabinet space. A white floating acoustical ceiling cloud provides illumination and air distribution for this 20-foot-high space. Everyone in the open office area has a view of the exterior, either directly through the full-height windows to the

east and northwest or through intentionally cut keyhole windows in the full-height partitions around the reception and conference rooms.

After seeing how the openings in the full-height walls would let in the light, the team decided to replicate the large keyhole openings in other deck-height walls, adding changing colored lights inside the openings to create a constantly changing color pattern.

"In our original design, we had quite a few more workstations than you see here today," explains Smith. "I think we had 30 more on the first floor and another five on the mezzanine level. That was their maximum capacity. We did another rendition when Charlie told

us we wouldn't need that many on day one. So we scaled back on the workstations down here and made it more open, giving them more collaborative space."

"The advantage is we know where those other workstations will go when needed," adds Vasko, "so the power and data cores are already set for their eventual placement."

Under the mezzanine's perimeter, managers' and executives' offices all have full height Steelcase Lite Scale glass walls with sliding glass doors with an amazingly effective rubber seal for acoustical privacy when closed.

Miscellaneous other eight-foot-tall rooms were created with Steelcase Everwall. Two of them downstairs and

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one upstairs are equipped with treadmill desks, so employees can walk as they work for a change of pace.

Also under the mezzanine is a large training room with four rows of tables on rollers, each seating 10 people.

"Training Room 114 is a Teams-enabled powerhouse with two 133" DVLED displays and a 98" digital signage display," says Mike Heines, president/CEO of Crescent Digital. "The room has exceptional audio quality as well."

To the right is a casual gathering area with upholstered chairs and an L-shaped sofa. To the side of the screens are a coffee station, beverage cooler and sink.

Smaller conference and enclave rooms abound under the mezzanine, primarily in the southeast corner. Seating capacities for the smaller rooms vary up to seven people at a curved table facing an eight-foot-wide monitor with teleconferencing capabilities. Much of the air distribution occurs in the sidewalls to conserve headroom space in the offices. There's also a Wellness Room available here.

On the south wall is the elevator that will reach the mezzanine level. In this area, you'll also find a water fountain, ice water bottle refill station, and another coffee station with a full-size refrigerator built under the stairs going up to the mezzanine. A large counter with multiple stools is available as a pre- or post-function space to set out refreshments.

Elevating the experience

Handrails and glass walls going to the mezzanine level were elegantly custom shop fabricated by Lakeland Glass Company. The side walls of the stairs match identically with the half-height glass wall that wraps around the mezzanine. With just a sliver of a black cap on the glass and an almost imperceptible mounting recess, the 54-foot and 70-foot lengths of the glass wall are amazingly strong.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, you enter the elevator lobby on the mezzanine. The open-plan workstations are bathed in natural light from the glass walls on the north and east sides. Meanwhile, additional managerial offices and conference rooms line the south and west walls, offering views of the open-plan workstations.



GOOD FOR GATHERING The south wall features a coffee station, a built-in refrigerator, water refill and a spacious counter that can serve as pre- or post-function space for refreshments.

At the southeast corner of the mezzanine is the connector bridge that allows employees to walk to a section of the south wall, where a glass door opens to the stairwell going to the second and third floors of the building.

Reflecting on the journey ahead

"My only regret is that we don't have three more floors to do," exclaims Vasko. "We held weekly mandatory meetings

projects are the ones where the owner, architect and construction manager all work in a positive collaborative relationship. With the leadership of Charlie Laurie, HSB and TCV worked closely to head off any issues before they became cost issues. The result is an owner that speaks highly of the team they hired."

"In a similar way, it was a pleasure working with Thad," Khawam says. "He thinks like an architect, anticipating situations and proposing intelligent solutions."

Today, Palmer Holland utilizes this space to serve customers nationwide and in Canada. They have already outlined plans to expand into Mexico and subsequently into Latin America. Meanwhile, the company is placing a strong emphasis on its employees through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) and creating an appealing new office environment.

"We were fortunate to have the opportunity to take advantage of this height with the mezzanine," concludes Laurie, "and for it not to feel cramped, but to look intentional while still being very open, welcoming and familiar for our employees. Everyone that has been here has been very impressed with the space." **P**

"Each weekly meeting was also attended by the architects and often by the owner. They were so productive and enabled us to bring the project in on time and under budget."

Thad Vasko
TCV Development

for all subs once they were within two weeks of their start date. Each weekly meeting was also attended by the architects and often by the owner. They were so productive and enabled us to bring the project in on time and under budget.

"The value of having a 'hands-on' client and architectural team at each meeting was immeasurable. The best