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# The New York Times

## Real Estate

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### After a Merger, a Space Speaks with One Voice



Kate Glucksberg for The New York Times

The designer Natalia Alvarez created a modern, cozy space for Avenue A/Razorfish out of an odd C-shaped layout.

By CLAIRE WILSON  
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Some potential tenants might have seen the C-shaped layout and imposing central staircase in a block of space at 1440 Broadway in Midtown Manhattan as design drawbacks. But Avenue A/Razorfish, an interactive marketing and technology services company, took the space and used those elements to create a modern, communal feeling.

After a merger in 2004 between Avenue A, an online media buying concern, and Razorfish, a Web development business, the new company consolidated operations at 1440 Broadway from three separate

locations in Lower Manhattan. With a client list that includes Victoria's Secret and the Ford Motor Company it turned the 80,000-square-foot, three-story space into what seems like a group of neighborhoods with a town square at the center.

"The open floor plan allows people to get to know each other informally and helps the motivation process," said Bob Lord, who is president, East region, for the company, which is based in Seattle and is a division of aQuantive Inc. "Everyone's productivity skyrocketed."

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Avenue A/Razorfish moved into the space in late November, and Mr. Lord said that meetings that once were a chore to get to now come together spontaneously on the stairs, in seating areas around an atrium, in the open canteen that doubles as a conference room or the 3,000 square feet of outdoor space that rings the 19th floor. (The company occupies the 18th, 19th and 20th floors of the building, which has 25 stories and was previously known as the WOR Building, after a local radio station; the building opened in 1925.)



Kate Glicksberg for The New York Times  
Natalia Alvarez

“It was an effort to collaborate when you had to get into a cab and go to another office,” Mr. Lord said. “This is a real sea change for us.”

Google was the previous tenant of the space. It now holds 350 people, and Avenue A/Razorfish will be leasing the 21st floor next summer, bringing the total area to 100,000 square feet over four floors.

Natalia Alvarez, senior designer at BR Design Associates, orchestrated the renovation of the space, the largest of the company’s 17 offices worldwide. Avenue A/Razorfish had revenue of \$267.6 million in 2006, up from \$190 million in 2005. Ms. Alvarez chose a bold red to use as spot color on walls around the existing central atrium, but she wanted to keep the interior lines and furniture as clean and spare as possible. The only obvious patterns are the stripes in the gray carpet, the horizontal wood slats used as partitions, some geometric fabric on a banquet in a

conference room, and the wall panels with a design incorporating phrases from the 28 languages spoken by the company’s clients.

“I wanted to reinforce the smart, sophisticated image of Avenue A/Razorfish,” she said. “When clients walk in they get a sense that it is a backdrop for their work and ideas,” not something that overpowers it.

Visitors now enter on the 19th floor, chosen to emphasize the outdoor terraces that are connected to the principal common areas around the atrium, the reception area and the two main conference rooms. With dark floors and low lighting, the foyer makes the bright, open space around the corner something of a surprise.

The company motto, “inventing the digital future,” is inscribed on the wall behind the white Formica reception desk, and a small logo on the glass door and a monitor showing some recent projects hint at the scope and pace of what goes on in the offices at the far reaches of each floor.

The atrium and staircase allow views of staff members buzzing around the offices on the 20th floor, and the production department on the 18th floor. A table in the middle of the production department is a favorite spot for impromptu meetings, according to Sharon Chang, senior creative director at Avenue A/Razorfish.

“This lends itself to the idea of transparency and how open we are,” Ms. Chang said.

In the main reception area on the 19th floor, the vast red “word wall” is printed with the phrase “inventing the digital future” in 28 languages. On the opposite side of the space, its gray counterpart, also printed with those foreign phrases, frames a big tank full of tropical fish. Ms. Alvarez said the “word walls” reinforce the international reach of the company to staff members, clients and visitors.

A concierge sits on one side of the foyer and books conference rooms and sets up work spaces for employees from the company’s other offices. She also fills the traditional concierge role of booking tickets, car services and restaurants.

“It helps personalize it for people coming here for the first time,” Ms. Alvarez said.

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The concierge also provides assistance for members of focus groups who aid in the company's market research. In a pair of adjoining rooms with two-way mirrors between them, research participants test Web sites under the scrutiny of the people charged with inventing the sites or improving the way they function.

A new "Living Lab" renders the same service, but in a setting meant to mimic the actual rooms in a house where consumers use interactive media like flip.com, which Avenue A/Razorfish developed for Condé Nast. One room is now set up like a living room and is equipped with a 54-inch television monitor. Another looks like a teenager's bedroom, and will have a home office set up in one corner. The interior will change every few months to reflect a specific target market, Ms. Chang said.

Some 39 conference rooms of various sizes are scattered throughout the three floors, with the two largest ones seating about 20 people each. Conference rooms bear the name of a figure from art or science, like Maya Angelou, Margaret Sanger, Margaret Mead and Frida Kahlo; Mr. Lord said that combining art with science and technology is what Avenue A/Razorfish is all about. Posted on the wall, the photographs and short biographies are meant to be conversation starters.



Kate Glicksberg for The New York Times  
The new Midtown Manhattan offices include designer cubicles with sliding, frosted glass panels for ease of communication.

"It allows us to talk about who we are as an organization," he said.

Employees work in "neighborhoods" at each end of the space. They are divided into teams of 5 to 20 people who work on individual accounts, with a team



Kate Glicksberg for The New York Times  
A "word wall" frames a big tank full of tropical fish.

leader at the center. Cubicles by Herman Miller have sliding, frosted glass panels between them for ease of communication, and some walls are curved. Half-moon-shaped tables on casters are placed strategically at the ends of partitions; the tables can be moved to accommodate small meetings. All three floors have wireless capability.

The color scheme of taupe, wood in a medium tone and dark gray carpet in some areas, as well as the comfortable proportions of the work areas, provide the kind of coziness that Ms. Alvarez sought as a foil to the expansive nature of the atrium and common spaces. In her view, grouping workers into small areas helps smooth the transition from two different companies and three small offices to one large one.

"The sense of neighborhood is meant to counterbalance the largeness of the central communal space," she said. "What you get is a sense of intimacy and feeling of ownership of your own neighborhood so you don't feel like you are being swallowed up by the bigger space."

According to Ms. Alvarez, the simple classic lines that unite the design elements communicate how Avenue A/Razorfish symbolizes the next generation of a maturing dot-com industry. Before, offices of these companies were put together with too many primary colors, a hodgepodge of design elements and way too much visual stimulation.

"The garish colors said, look at how hip we are," she said. "Avenue A/Razorfish doesn't have to prove that."

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20th Floor



19th Floor



18th Floor

New York, NY  
100,000sf

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