

Silicon Graphics breaks out of the blank box

Building offers a glimpse of architecture shaped by computer design and graphics

WHERE DO you take your relatives from Du-buque when they visit and want to see Silicon Valley?

It's hard to convince them that those boxy tilt-up buildings are the source of all that high-tech wizardry. But the tour guide's job has been made a little easier since Silicon Graphics built its new North American sales and service building at 1401 N. Shoreline Boulevard, Mountain View, plain-

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ly visible as you speed by on Highway 101.

Especially when you speed by. With the roofline slowly spiraling upward as the building curves, with planes of glass and grids

slipping along its face, the building almost seems to be in motion.

It may only be on an offramp on the ordinary asphalt and concrete highway, but this building is a glimpse of architecture shaped by the possibilities of computer design and graphics.

Silicon Graphics and its San Francisco architects, Studios, intend it as a signature building, a three-dimensional corporate logo on a high-profile freeway site that is the gateway to its current corporate headquarters as well as to its new headquarters buildings under construction on Charleston

Road scheduled for completion in about a year.

As a signature building it plays a different role than, say, the 3Com building at 5400 Bayfront Plaza in Santa Clara — another Studios design. That's basically a speculative office building, designed for 3Com but easily convertible to commercial real estate. Trim, functional and adaptable, it could easily convert to any business, but lacks the eye-catching forms of the Silicon Graphics building that broadcast a corporate message.

The message? We're open, we're accessible, we're exciting and we're on the cutting edge. More than any other recent high-tech building it defines a high-tech aesthetic.

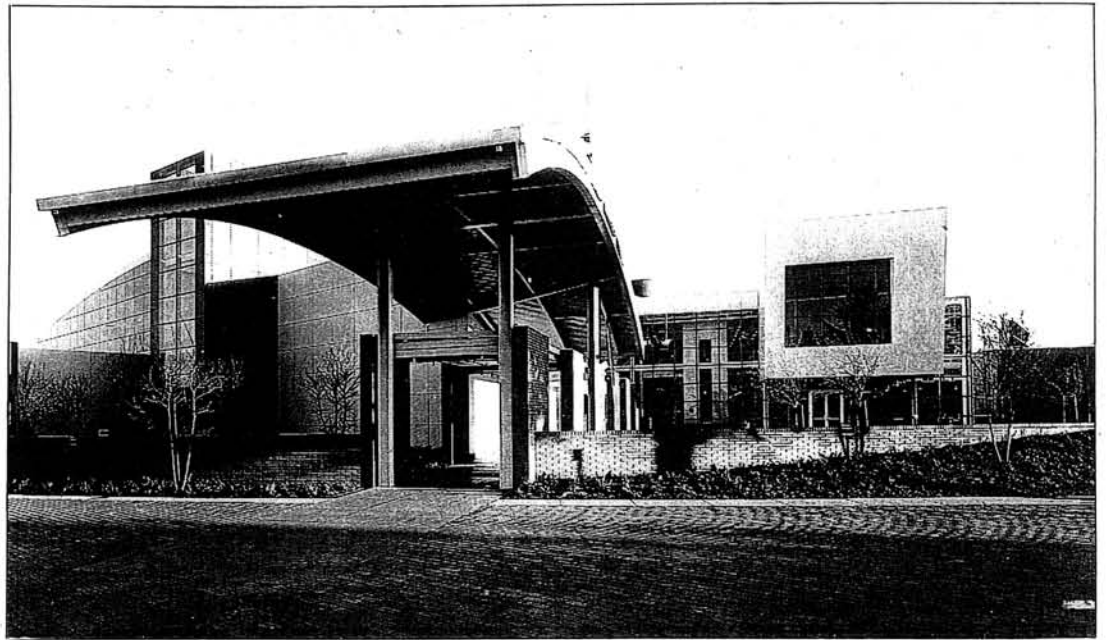
In contrast, Adobe's new San Jose building is a run-of-the-mill downtown high-rise. Even Sun Microsystems' campus in Menlo Park works harder at creating a state-of-the-art work environment than expressing the Silicon Age.

But for Silicon Graphics, Studios has consciously attempted to give a face to the technological and cultural changes brought by the computer. They do it by appropriating the aesthetic of contemporary computer graphics and translating them into a physical structure.

The aesthetic is seen in the hooking arcs, the layers of transparent planes and the 3-D metal grids on the facade of the Silicon Graphics building. They may have been put on pause, but you can believe that they'll start pinwheeling into a new configuration once someone punches the building's play button.

Despite being random and off-kilter shapes, the building is still well-composed. There are two entries, side by side — one for employees at the end of a long box-like spine, and one for visitors marked by a drooping canopy spiked by a flagpole like a canape on a toothpick. To the left a boxy arm catapults out from the second floor, its one cyclops window artfully miscentered.

Romantic architecture was influenced by Romantic painting. Modernists were influenced by the abstract geometries of Mondrian and others. Now, naturally,



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architects are being influenced by computer graphics.

The interpretation is lively and fun, much like today's high-tech. These are shapes and lines bursting with energy and movement. We have not seen such a convincingly display of gravity-defying architecture since the heyday of roadside architecture and signs in the 1950s.

The interpretation is also ephemeral. Though popular now in software graphics, this aesthetic will undoubtedly change in the future. The architecture will too. But it works for now.

If its exterior is a lively public face turned to the very public freeway, inside Silicon Graphics' 112,000 square feet of space of-

fer an open, airy and flexible work space. Like most other recent high-tech work spaces, corridors are made meeting-friendly with chairs and wipe boards available at strategic points for impromptu discussions. The two floors are knitted into one common space with second-floor balconies and open stairs. Walking through, you have a constant sense of connection to the activity and people of the organization.

Even the perennial problem of security in a high-tech company is solved in a practical but unobtrusive way that subtracts nothing from the building's open feel. The front lobby is a two-story public space, with meeting rooms open for client training and community groups. The office spaces beyond need to be secured. An artfully crafted wall of glass incorporates card-keyed doors on the lower level — but opens up above, leaving a barrier-free view between visitor and employee work areas. A public stair angles up past it, giving the tantalizing feel of complete accessibility but the reality of sound security.

An office landscape system of cubicles is used through most of the work areas, giving the rapidly expanding company the flexibili-

ty it says it needs to shift workers and work stations.

The interior has the same feel of free-flowing motion headed in all directions that we see in the exterior, but this free form, free-flow plan is tamed by Studios with some simple and eye-catching interior landmarks. The main spine corridor cutting through the building is capped by a skylight that washes the spine with light — making it easy to get your bearings when your head bobs above your cubicle wall.

A main stairway at the center of the building — it leads to the cafeteria — is highlighted by a distinctly purple cylinder visible from most places in the building. Studios places these landmarks carefully to help you orient yourself as you walk through the building. They bring order out of a purposefully crazy quilt plan.

Silicon Graphics — and Silicon Valley — is progressing rapidly past its blank box phase. The current Silicon Graphics headquarters is typical — opaque brick bastions where the windows are tinted black. The openness of the new Silicon Graphics building is a step into the light in more ways than one. ■