

# Midcareer Repositioning

BY VERNON MAYS

Older urban office buildings are great candidates for repositioning. While this makes good business sense for their owners and tenants, it's also one of the most sustainable things a city can do.

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The SBC Tower is a Los Angeles landmark. Designed by the flamboyant L.A. architect William Pereira, better known for San Francisco's Transamerica Pyramid, the downtown Los Angeles office building was bought by LBA Realty in 2005. Despite its backstory, SBC Tower was dated, drab, and tired. What it had in spades, though, was potential. "We saw how people experienced the building," says Gensler's John Adams. "Revived and repositioned, SBC Tower would show L.A. that South Park had finally arrived."

Building repositioning can be approached in different ways. Sometimes the focus is just on the lobby and public spaces. In other cases, it involves giving the building a new outer skin, replacing the old one in whole or in part. The underlying goal is "to heighten the appeal of the property in the marketplace," says Adams. "Our role is to help the owner assess where the value is and then unlock it."

With the 32-story SBC Tower—renamed as AT&T Center—the first order of business was to upgrade the lobby, which had stark white floors and ceilings and polished black walls. Gensler's designers varied the lighting and ceiling heights to create smaller, human-scaled zones. New materials like wood and stone updated the look and softened the feel. As a result, LBA Realty was able to attract retail tenants like Starbucks, Subway, and Kinkos for the struggling lobby, turning it into a tenant and neighborhood destination.

Pereira capped the tower with a glass-enclosed rooftop restaurant. Gensler's designers suggested combining it with the floor below as a single volume. "It's like a transparent jewel—a high-profile penthouse, perfect for a creative company looking for an instant image," Adams says.

The tower was originally clad in metal and glass—an enormous “egg crate” of vertical and horizontal aluminum sunshades that was in bad shape. Removing the decorative horizontal sunshades, the design team left the vertical fins in place to emphasize the tower’s skyward thrust. They also added metallic silver panels to cover outdated bands of mosaic tiles, to give AT&T Center a fresh and modern look, and heat-reducing film on the glazing that cut the tower’s energy use by 20 percent and helped it earn LEED Gold certification. Even better: “The tower’s revitalization has attracted prominent office tenants—AT&T, Transamerica Occidental, USC, Fox Sports, and others,” says Phil Belling, LBA Realty’s managing principal. “I couldn’t be more pleased.”

### Riding the Buzz

When a major new building opens in an existing area, the buzz it generates can benefit older buildings nearby. That was the situation for The Moinian Group’s 28-story, 1775 Broadway office tower in Manhattan: the new Time-Warner Center made its neighbors more attractive.

“We begin major repositioning projects by exploring the property’s potential and balancing that against inherent risks and costs,” says Gensler’s Leslie Jobs. “Will zoning allow additional floor area to be added or recaptured? Are code upgrades required? What is the structural capacity and condition of the façade? Are there hazardous materials present?” The architects also compare the building against others in the marketplace in terms of its floor plate configurations and amenities.

“Once we’ve done this, we meet with the client—in this case, The Moinian Group—to decide which repositioning strategies will yield the most value,” Jobs explains. Key decisions for 1775 Broadway included rebranding it as 3 Columbus Circle and closing off a secondary entrance and expanding the main entry to enhance the building’s street presence and security. Other changes—a full remake of the lobby, elevator cabs, and tenant lobbies; mechanical system upgrades; and installing a new façade and storefront—enhanced the building’s image and the tenant experience, and lowered operating costs.

Challenged by the 1926 building’s irregular geometry, Gensler designed a system to clad over the existing masonry façade with a new, energy-efficient glass curtain wall. The solution was to add a metal design element at the corners of the building and reuse the existing steel support structure, Jobs says. “It’s more sustainable and much less costly than using custom curtain wall fabrications.”

### Necessary Reinvention

Sometimes building owners have no choice but to re-position. This was true at One Indiana Square in Indianapolis—a strong windstorm ripped off most of the exterior cladding. Replacing it without disrupting office tenants was the challenge. To do so, Gensler developed an innovative two-step process: adding new curtain wall elements from the outside, creating a construction barrier, and then removing the old façade at night and on weekends, to minimize disruption.

The design team took the occasion to increase the size of the windows to bring in more daylight. “With these projects, the inside is just as important as the outside,” says Gensler’s Uriel Schlair, who specializes in repositioning older buildings. “Changing the curtain-wall or the exterior envelope creates the opportunity to transform a lackluster interior into something bright, open, and inviting.”

### Appeal to the Bottom Line

A lot of urban office buildings in midcareer are well built, reasonably well planned, and in locations that warrant new investment. Repositioning is popular with owners because it’s easier to upgrade a building in many U.S. cities than to tear it down and rebuild. The combination of higher rents and lower operating costs that repositioning offers is hard to beat. It’s also inherently sustainable.

“Every building is different, but we’ve developed an approach to repositioning that is very effective in ferreting out the possibilities and then getting them in place quickly and painlessly,” says Gensler’s John Adams. “The practice has taken hold across the U.S. and in Europe and Japan. Wherever there’s an established urban context with good buildings, there are owners wondering how to make them better.”

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