

Red Oak Realty unveils new 'green' headquarters in Montclair

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OAKLAND -- Ferns reach leafy fingers out and passers-by stop to take photos of a new "living wall" garden where an ATM once was at the edge of Montclair Village.

Now it's part of Red Oak Realty's new headquarters -- unveiled Sept. 20 at a grand opening -- a green rebuild that serves not only as an attractive place to work but as an inspiration to the community and the company's own agents.

"I think the management, from the top down, really tries to be different," said real estate agent Jennifer Ames, a Montclair resident.

The spark of the idea to do real estate a new way came with a new generation. Vanessa Bergmark and Kevin Hamilton, partners at Red Oak, both have young children. For Bergmark, that meant environmental concerns suddenly came into the forefront.

"It became more important overnight," she said.

Bergmark said the real estate industry, with its reams of printed paper, is famous for waste. Not only that, she realized that the vast space of the old office, which housed about half of Red Oak's 70 agents, was inefficient.

"Our PG&E bills were off the charts," she said.

More than a year later, Red Oak has turned a nondescript bank building on Moraga Avenue into a spacious, light-filled new headquarters. An exterior of native plants has replaced dark bushes, the space is lit with old chemistry lab lights turned into new fixtures, and local artisans used reclaimed wood to make new furniture and signs.

"It doesn't look like a standard real estate office," Ames said. Even the walls are "green tech," with paints that use fish oil. The office has gone as paperless as possible, with iPads and smartphones replacing the endless file cabinets.

For Ames, electronic signatures and downloadable documents aren't just environmentally friendly, they help connect with mobile and tech-savvy clients that might not have time to stop by.

"Most of my clients lead very busy lives," she said.

But the design of the new office, which houses about half the agents that work for Red Oak, isn't only about green. Bergmark also hopes the open office plan, the dry erase walls and conference room will help her agents collaborate to share knowledge about what's going on in the local market. Ames said the plan is working.

Red Oak Realty was founded in 1976 and specializes in East Bay properties. Bergmark became a partner three years ago, and acts as the general manager. Ames said it's the forward-thinking management, which planned the new headquarters, that makes it special.

"I really have to say I would not want to work anywhere else," Ames said.