

ESS, Vialta go for 'designer' look

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ESS TECHNOLOGY Inc. and Vialta Inc. headquarters are an architectural oasis in a bland desert of Fremont office parks. Vaulted ceilings, fountains, huge fish tanks and marble accents set the buildings apart from other tech offices. The companies, controlled by Chinese investor Fred Chan, have their glitzy look because Chan and ESS Chief Executive Robert Blair toured Silicon Valley headquarters searching for their favorite features.

"They knew what they wanted when we decided to build our headquarters," said Bill Walls, ESS Technology's facility manager. Architect Dennis Kobza, president of Mountain View-based Dennis Kobza & Associates, recalls Chan wanted the buildings to be based on chipmaker Exar Corp.'s headquarters in Fremont. Kobza designed the Exar building and it was the reason Chan had chosen him. "They wanted a circular element like Exar's so the building wouldn't look tilt-up," Kobza said.

Tilt-up concrete construction is a cost-effective, popular method of building commercial structures between 5,000 square feet and 1.5 million square feet out of concrete plates. "We didn't want the tilt-up building to look cheap," Kobza said.

ESS, which makes chips for DVD players, bought a large parcel of land along Fremont Boulevard that the company originally wanted to build three complexes on. However, the company sold off a chunk of the land when prices soared during the technology boom.

Because both Vialta and ESS do a lot of business in Asia, they have a 20-room hotel for visiting customers and executives. It took four years for Kobza to complete the ESS project.

The decision to build two identical buildings was made as an exit strategy, in case ESS Technology hit hard times. "It's harder to sell one 200,000-square-foot building, than two smaller ones," Kobza said. Having two buildings was ideal when ESS Technology spun off its DVD player manufacturing division as Vialta in 2000.

Kobza said the wrought-iron railing found throughout the buildings were inspired by Hong Kong designs selected by the company's chairman Fred Chan. Chan also was the force behind the huge fish tanks in the lobbies of both companies and in the cafeteria, which is shared by ESS and Vialta employees. He is the reason conference rooms in the buildings are named after famous artists like Picasso and Monet.

Each building has a fountain in front that was personally selected by Chan. "He likes water and fish and wanted the company's headquarters to reflect that," Walls said. Kobza recalled with Chan a lot on the design of the buildings. "He really put a lot of time into figuring out what he wanted," Kobza said.

Building ESS headquarters seems like ancient history for Kobza. He has been an architect for 38 years, mainly focused on high-tech research and development buildings. His business has declined 50 percent in the past two years. "Things have changed a lot since then, but I stay busy with remodeling jobs," Kobza said.

Tom Wilson, principal at TMW Commerce in Hayward, tracks sales leads for companies said that calls for buildings by tech companies has dropped. "Requests for new construction are down, but mid-size companies are still looking for interior design and renovation work," Wilson said.

ESS and Vialta plan to renovate the current campus by connecting the two buildings with a \$1 million walkway, Walls said. The companies hope to complete the project by this year.