

Google has intriguing plans at the Googleplex

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Google is in the midst of more than \$120 million in construction projects at its Mountain View headquarters, including work on a series of new or previously secret hardware testing labs that hint at the Internet giant's expanding interest in crafting consumer devices like its rivals Apple and Microsoft.

Among the projects, revealed by a review of public records by this newspaper, are a lab to test a new consumer product under the brand name "@home" that will wirelessly [stream music](#) or data to other household devices, apparently similar to a prototype home audio service Google demonstrated publicly last year. And, most intriguingly, Google is modifying a lab for a project enigmatically named "Project X," which appears to involve precision optical technology and could be part of the secret technology projects Google co-founder [Sergey Brin](#) is heading.

The highest-profile project will be a "Google Experience Center" under construction at the core of the Googleplex. The 120,000-square-foot center will be a kind of private museum for Google's most important clients and partners, where the company plans "to share visionary ideas, and explore new ways of working" with up to 900 VIPs and other important guests, according to documents Google filed with the city of Mountain View.

"The Experience Center would not typically be open to the public - consisting of invited groups, and guests whose interests will be as vast as Google's range of products, and often confidential," Andrew Burnett, an architect working on the project, explained in a letter late last year to

Mountain View officials. "Therefore, the Experience Center must also operate somewhat like a museum, exhibit, or mercantile space allowing flexibility in the exhibits so that as Google's products and needs change, the space can adapt."

As Google becomes increasingly focused on selling its products to other companies, schools and government agencies, and developing consumer devices in addition to the Internet-based software that built its brand, facilities like the Experience Center and the new hardware labs illustrate a kind of rite of passage, said veteran Silicon Valley technology analyst Rob Enderle.

Google is joining a club that includes companies like Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Oracle, Boeing and IBM that have dedicated customer demonstration facilities to showcase their products and technology to potential buyers, analysts and other important partners.

"It really becomes the showcase for the company," Enderle said. "They are designed to impress. They are part of the sales process. The purpose is, you walk in and you have an 'oh, wow' moment."

Across the Googleplex, construction crews have been busy in recent months working on about 800,000 square feet of renovations, city records show. With Google completing the biggest hiring year in the company's history in 2011, many of those projects are employee amenities such as cafeterias, employee showers or charging stations for electric cars.

Google declined to say much about the Experience Center, or to discuss its new hardware testing labs or the mysterious Project X.

"Just as we continuously work to improve our products, it's important to iterate on our workspace to keep us productive," the company said in a

written statement provided by a spokesman. "That's why we are adding additional meeting and work space to our campus in Mountain View."

But with regulators signing off on Google's \$12.5 billion purchase of smartphone and tablet maker Motorola Mobility, the company also appears to be retrofitting its campus for a future where hardware is a more important part of its product offerings.

At 1600 Shoreline Blvd., for example, the company is building a lab that screens out radio frequency signals for a division labeled "Google/@home" to test new wireless consumer technology. Elsewhere on campus it is building thermal and anechoic chambers that can be used for things like testing antennas' radiation patterns.

The Google/@home "RF screen room will be used to test the Wifi performance and development of a consumer product," a Google real estate official, Lewis Darrow, said in a letter to the city last year. The Wall Street Journal said this week that Google could launch a wireless home audio product later this year.

Project X, which occupies a space with blacked-out windows at a central location of the [Googleplex](#), includes the use of rare gases like argon, a plasma cleaner that can scrub materials of contaminants, and arcane optical-coating technology, city records show. While the purpose of Project X is unclear, Brin since last year has been focusing on a list of secret projects at the company, including its efforts to develop a driverless car.

Apple and Microsoft have extensive hardware testing facilities on their campuses, as they design and develop products like the iPhone or the Xbox gaming system, Enderle said. Like the Experience Center, those testing facilities can also be part of the sales process, allowing [Google](#) to demonstrate the reliability of new products.

"If you keep it close to the executive briefing center, you can bring in (manufacturing partners) or large customers, show them the testing as its going on, make them more comfortable with that product," he said.

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