

Law Firm Design: A Long Way from Mahogany Paneling

NOVEMBER 8, 2016 | BY NATALIE DOLCE

In looking at the past, present and future, we discuss what features define the modern law firm today, and what the future holds. One source says that the legal industry is catching up to other industries in designing offices to make workers more productive.



Law firms have come a long way from the wood-paneled offices of the last century, when office size correlated with rank and the corners were reserved for the most senior partners and management. That is according to a recent article from [GlobeSt.com's](#) sister publication, ALM's *American Lawyer*.

As legal consultant **Edwin Reeser** recalls, when he started as an associate at the Wall Street firm Thacher Proffitt & Wood in 1976, corridors were narrow and lined with portraits of the firm founders as well as paintings of sailing ships and foxhounds.

“Partners had a nice desk, and they almost always had a conference table that sat four to six people,” Reeser says. “It was very common for lawyers to have client meetings in their offices.”

Those offices might have been 250 to 350 square feet. Each partner had his own secretary sitting outside his door. Partners (or in many cases their spouses) helped design their office. “We had one law firm with 356 paint colors. They allowed the attorneys to pick their own paint,” says Ron Bateman, director of interior design at the Houston office of the architectural firm HOK.

In the early 1990s, partners started downsizing their offices. By then, law firms had started dedicating entire floors to conference centers where they could host clients. After the dot-com bust in the early 2000s, a wave of firms began doubling up associates, a practice some had always used, Barlow says.

The Modern Firm

These features define today’s offices:

Glass. The use of glass has allowed firms to totally reorganize floor plans. Previously, lawyers had window offices along a floor’s periphery, and staff and storage were located in interior spaces.

But since the 1990s, the ratio of lawyers to legal assistants has gone from 1-to-1 to 4-or-5-to-1 in many cases. Firms need less room for desks and storage. And they’re locating lawyers in interior spaces with lots of glass walls so light floods the whole floor.

Glass also gives the feeling of transparency at a time when many firms want to be more egalitarian and open about their operations with their young lawyers. “Old law firm space tends to be lots of wood, lots of private spaces, everything’s behind closed doors,” says Scott Edelman, chairman of Milbank, which recently finalized an agreement to move to New York’s newest development, Hudson Yards, in 2018. “Our aim is to open it up.”

At **Goodwin Procter**, there was some trepidation about glass walls, according to the firm’s architect, **Carolyn Hendrie**, a principal at the architecture firm **Bargmann Hendrie**. “What we tried to do was say, if there’s such worry about visual privacy, you

can add film,” so passersby can’t see in, she says. Hendrie asked lawyers to give the glass two weeks, then she’d add film if requested. Months later, she’s had no takers.

Uniform office size. An almost universal feature of new offices is smaller and same-size personal offices. Most firms still opt for an associate office of 90 to 150 square feet and a partner office up to 225 square feet, brokers say, though some are going fully one-size-fits-all.

At Paul Hastings, perimeter offices, which house partners, counsel and some associates, each have a desk, a table, shelves and a bench that doubles as storage space. (At this firm and others, old furniture is often donated to charity.) “It creates a greater level of collaboration, symmetry and team play,” chairman Zachary says. Of his own former roomy space, he says, “I am not missing one thing from that office.”

At **Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice’s** new office in Raleigh, North Carolina, all lawyers have 150-square-foot offices with 11-foot ceilings that make rooms feel more spacious, says Johnny Loper, the office’s managing partner. The decision to go with one size was an “easy conversation” among firm partners, Loper says. “They understood clients wanted us to be efficient.”

White & Case chairman **Hugh Verrier** won’t have an office at all when the firm moves into the McGraw Hill Building in Midtown next year. He’ll sit in communal space with more than 40 lawyers and other staffers with global responsibilities. “I’ll only have a desk,” he says—the same size as everyone else’s. “I’m totally excited.”

Communal spaces. Common areas for events and clients receive a lot more emphasis than partner offices in the modern firm. This is meant to reflect an egalitarian and collaborative culture.

A central feature that Hendrie designed for Goodwin Procter in Boston is a window-lit spiral staircase that connects all 12 floors. “It’s more than a stairway,” Randall says. “It’s very functional in terms of creating opportunities for folks to interact with one another.”

Randall says that because the walls are glass, people on the stairway can see into others’ offices, creating the feeling that everyone is working together. There’s an elevator, but the stairway has amazing views of Boston, he says.

When asked which firms are making the biggest changes, several lawyers and brokers mentioned the outdoor terrace in Nixon Peabody's new Los Angeles office. "It definitely gets the wow factor," says office managing partner Seth Levy. "As a still relatively new kid on the block in the market, despite having some practitioners who are well known here, we really wanted a space where we could invite people in," Levy adds. Nixon Peabody is growing in Los Angeles, from 36,000 to 46,000 square feet (not including the terrace), bucking the downsizing trend, Levy says.

The outdoor space is 2,500 square feet, 42 stories high, with lounge chairs, couches, plants and views of the mountains. The firm's Los Angeles office can host events with 150 people and, with 15 of its 21 partners under the age of 50, is a nod to a younger generation.

Amenities. Some firms have adopted amenities once associated with their clients in the technology industry to attract talent and boost productivity.

Goodwin Procter's New York office is in the same building as The New York Times. Firm attorneys and staff use the paper's cafeteria. "It really gave us a taste for that and how that might work," Randall says of on-site dining. The new Boston office has a cafeteria with big windows that serves breakfast and lunch. He says this is important because the Seaport District doesn't yet have many dining options.

Arnold & Porter's new Washington, D.C., office also has a cafeteria, where lawyers often have working lunches, says one associate. (The firm declined to comment.) The associate, who has a young child, also pointed out the building's state-of-the-art child care center. "In terms of keeping me at the firm, it's a big hesitation to give that up," he says.

LoriAnn Maas says that the legal industry is catching up to other industries in designing offices to make workers more productive. That might include a desk that allows them to work standing up or an area where they can lie down. "If you're tired, they don't want you to go home," Maas says of various companies. "They want them to shower, take a nap and refresh. Law firms are starting to do this."

Maas says that she's seen at least one firm in Los Angeles with nap rooms and others stocked with food. "It's just about not interrupting the work flow," she says. She wouldn't name the firm.