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ON THE COVER:

This photograph was taken of Dream Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park in the summer of 1990. Dream Lake is about a mile hike up from Bear Lake. The photographer is Paula Hagar, Denver, a legal assistant who specializes in bankruptcy and litigation with the firm of Fairfield and Woods.

LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Basic Management

Law Office Design: Reception Area And Conference Room Essentials

by Carol A. Koplin

The reception room and conference facilities of a typical law firm support many of the routine functions of the office lawyers and staff, and are the areas that are most often seen and used by members of the public. Routinely, visitors will receive their first impressions of a law practice from their view of the reception area. These perceptions often will be extended as visitors use other public areas of the firm, such as the firm's conference rooms. These public areas present to outsiders a visual impression of the law office and convey indications of the style, attention to detail and sense of organization possessed by the attorneys who practice with the firm.

In planning for new professional office space, careful attention must be given to the proper allocation of limited financial resources for construction and build-out, and to the efficient use of the available square footage. Within these constraints, many office planners apply a significant amount of the apportioned resources toward the design and space planning of public areas, with the goal of establishing a strong positive image for the firm and efficiently creating a functional work environment for both visitors and staff.

This article describes some important elements that must be addressed when

planning the design of a new or relocated law firm's public areas.

Reception Area

Receptionist's Desk

The reception area establishes the initial professional image of a law office and serves as the direction control area for visitor traffic. It provides security and privacy for the firm as the focal point for all persons attempting to gain access. In addition, the reception area functions as a waiting area for clients and visitors. It must be designed to remain neat and businesslike and accommodate seating for a reasonably projected number of visitors. The furniture and millwork should consist of materials and finishes that are easily maintainable and, depending on budget, that have upgraded finishes over those existing in the non-public areas of the firm.¹

The planning of the location, size and configuration of the receptionist's desk is a major element in the design of an efficient reception area. The receptionist exercises a control function for the law firm by providing an introduction to the firm for visitors and assisting in the routing of traffic. Thus, the receptionist's desk should be centrally located and positioned such that the receptionist has a clear line of sight over the entrance to the firm. Typically, the receptionist's desk is custom-designed to accommodate computer and switchboard equipment and to support the receptionist in other functions which may be part of this individual's daily activities.

The height of the transaction ledge, which is the uppermost portion of the receptionist's desk, should be approximately forty-two inches above the finished floor, with the work surface of the desk

being no more than twenty-nine inches above the finished floor. The receptionist's keyboard area, if any, should be approximately twenty-seven inches above the finished floor. These heights allow the receptionist to have visual control over the reception area, while maintaining the privacy of work surfaces and the concealment of equipment and equipment wiring.² Often, the transaction ledge is sloped to facilitate the execution of documents and to deter the accumulation of clutter. The desk itself is typically permanently located and most often included as a portion of the law firm construction and millwork budget.

Furniture

Furniture in the reception area should be comfortable and should allow for individuals of all ages and sizes to sit down and stand up with ease. The furniture may be upgraded but should exhibit similar design qualities as that in the remainder of the office. Clusters of individual chair arrangements are desirable for the privacy afforded separate parties, and this configuration further accommodates the reluctance of most individuals to share a sofa with persons they do not know.

This column is prepared by the Colorado and Denver Bar Association Law Practice Management Committees to share ideas on more efficient and effective law office management. This month's article was written by Carol A. Koplin, Denver, a senior interior designer with RNL Facilities Corporation, (303) 295-1717, concentrating in space planning and design of professional offices.

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Adequate side tables or coffee tables should be provided to allow for placement of drinking cups or reading materials. These tables also provide excellent locations for brochures or publications about the firm. Although there are several choices in material finishes and styles, the reception area furnishings tend to receive heavy use. Therefore, it is important that they be durable and easy to maintain.

Space and Location Considerations

Space planning for the reception area should include approximately twenty-five square feet per anticipated seated person, with enough additional space for the receptionist's desk and the circulation of individuals within the room. With the advent of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1992,³ attention also must be given to planning access for individuals with disabilities, such as adequate room for the ingress and egress of a wheelchair.

The reception area should be in close proximity to washrooms, guest telephones, a coat closet, conference rooms, luggage storage for traveling visitors and coffee service facilities. For multi-floor offices, a connecting stairwell extending from the reception area to other floors provides immediate and direct access for visitors and law office staff to travel efficiently within the firm. Many firms also have found it desirable to have a portion of the law firm library visible from the reception area for aesthetic and image purposes. Although the reception area should be in close proximity to conference rooms, ideally individuals conducting business in law firm offices and conference rooms should be out of the line of sight of individuals in the reception area.

Floor Coverings

The three typical floor coverings for professional office reception areas are stone, carpet and wood. Stone flooring—such as granite, travertine, marble, slate and terrazzo—exhibit an image of formality and prestige. Black, or very dark, uniform-colored stone is not recommended because it tends to exhibit scratches and is difficult to wet mop without streak patterns remaining on the material when dry.

Carpet provides the best sound absorption, is the most cost-effective floor covering and typically offers a wide variety

of choices of colors and textures. Nylon carpet material wears well and can be combined with other materials to further increase its durability and resilience. Wool has a better color selection and richer look, but is costlier and less durable. Prospective carpet choices must be commercial grade that meet building code flame retardant and smoke emission requirements.

Wood exhibits a colder look than carpet, but provides a somewhat softer image than stone. A wood floor can be costly and difficult to maintain in a high traffic area.

“A carefully planned design will help convey a strong image of the firm that positively reflects on the character of the professional staff.”

Signage

Signage in the reception area should clearly indicate the name of the firm, have enough contrast or shadow lines between the wall and the sign, and be of large enough size to render it easily legible. The sign should be in a well-lit and prominent location within the reception area.

The sign also should be capable of being altered without being completely remade, in the event that a name change is anticipated in the future.

Conference Rooms

Conference rooms provide private meeting areas for members of the firm for discussions among themselves and with visitors. Conference rooms are used routinely for the execution of documents and closing of commercial transactions, and in litigation-related activities such as depositions and witness preparation. As such, the rooms should be designed to provide maximum flexibility for future varied uses. As with reception areas, the conference rooms of a modern law firm reflect on the professional character of the law office and the personalities of the firm's staff.

Number and Size of Conference Rooms

The number of conference rooms needed for a typical law office varies de-

pending on numerous factors, including the firm's type of practice and whether small workrooms are available to firm personnel. However, the ratio usually should be one to one-and-one-half available conference room seats for every two attorneys in the firm.

Small firms generally require a higher ratio of conference rooms for a proportionate number of attorneys than do larger firms. An extra conference room designed within a new or relocated law office also can provide space for expansion possibilities, as it can later be converted into additional office space. For a relocating office, the most efficient allocation of new conference room space requires a survey about the personnel's frequency of use of the existing conference rooms prior to the anticipated move.

Conference rooms should be planned to allow approximately twenty-five to thirty square feet per person, enough room for full table seating and adequate space for circulation of individuals within the room. Extra space should be planned if the room is to be utilized with audio/visual or other specialized equipment.

A small conference room, sometimes referred to as a caucus or break-out room, should accommodate four to six people and can double as a work room for firm staff. A medium-size conference room should be large enough to seat ten to twelve people comfortably, and a large conference room generally accommodates sixteen to eighteen people. Many larger law firms also have a very large multi-purpose meeting room that can be configured with moveable furniture for different functions. Multi-purpose rooms are often reconfigured to be used as training rooms, seminar rooms, courtroom training facilities or large work rooms, depending on the needs that arise.

Room Layout

The trend in conference room layout within law firms has been for the main conference rooms to be clustered in one area, with additional small work rooms scattered throughout the firm. This provides visual control over the availability of conference rooms previously reserved but presently unused, as well as containment of visitors to a single area away from attorney working spaces and areas which may contain sensitive documents.

This “cluster” configuration further allows for the sharing within a defined area of many common support functions, such as food preparation, duplicating,

temporary secretarial stations, conference room equipment storage and meeting break-out rooms. Should the firm decide to upgrade the finishes on the public areas, this can be selectively done on the limited area of the clustered conference rooms, rather than necessitating upgrades throughout the numerous areas of the firm in which scattered conference rooms may be located.

Technology Concerns

Conference rooms should be planned to provide for the cabling and support apparatus necessary for existing or projected technology. It is widely anticipated that video conferencing will become more prevalent over time. However, as an initial matter, most larger conference rooms should now accommodate teleconferencing capabilities and computer networking. In addition, in the space planning there should be allocated adequate space to store and use electronic equipment within the vicinity of the individual conference facilities.

Conference Room Table

Conference room tables can be round, oval, boat-shaped, rectangular, square or another shape, depending on the configuration and anticipated routine use of the room. Unconventionally shaped conference tables can be functional while making a design statement for the firm. For example, a half-ellipse (half-oval) shaped table can be placed within a rectangular room that has a panoramic view, allowing the highest number of seated participants a window view.

Conference room table surfaces are most commonly glass, wood or stone, but often can be made of plastic laminate, tile, metal or a combination of these materials. Of the common surfaces, glass tends to show scratches but is the easiest to clean. Wood may become scratched, gouged or water-marked but is relatively easy to repair through refinishing. A marble surface, which is classified by a four-tier alphabetic grading system established by the Marble Institute of America, can be cracked or broken on high impact. Nevertheless, it is generally durable and resilient.⁴ Marble can be repolished if the finish becomes damaged or worn.

The table's surface color should be a medium tone and of non-glare material because an intense contrast between table color and the color of the papers placed on it can cause eye strain. Mod-

ern conference tables accommodate both electrical and telephone access within the table itself, which eliminates wires stretching from wall outlets.

A conference room table should not have sharp ninety-degree edges, as this tends to be uncomfortable for participants in the conference. Instead, it is desirable to have a radius edge detail, or sloped edge detail, either of which facilitates comfortable use over long periods.

Tables can be supported by legs, trestles or center pedestals. The pedestal configuration allows the most freedom of leg movement for participants seated at the conference table, and also may provide for wire and cable management within the pedestal itself.

Conference Room Chairs

Chairs in conference rooms should provide lower back support and tilt-and-swivel mechanisms. The chairs should have arm rests, which help reduce fatigue while defining personal space allotment. The chairs also should have wide seats and a medium-height back rest approximately twenty inches above seat height to render proper back support. Such chairs are often on casters to permit ease of movement for participants within the room.

The chairs should have an adequate cushion, with a waterfall edge for the most comfort over long periods. The conference room table and chairs, like those used in the reception area, will receive routinely heavy use and should possess features of quality, durability and ease of maintenance.

Credenza

Conference rooms should have credenzas located adjacent to the entry of the room to provide working surfaces that can be used for paper sorting, telephone positioning and food and coffee service. Drawers or cabinets located under the credenza can be used to store telephone books, special equipment, drinking cups and other office supplies that conference room users might need. Credenzas can be either free-standing furniture or wall-mounted millwork. Either type can be configured with open knee space to function as an additional work surface area within the conference room.

Comfort Considerations

Acoustical soundproofing for the conference room should be carefully consid-

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ered to prevent participants from being distracted by exterior sound and to protect the privacy of the individuals at the conference. An abundance of hard surfaces within the conference room can create an irritating "tunnelecho" effect, making it difficult to carry on conversations and nearly impossible to conduct teleconferencing.

Many other variables affect the comfort level of the participants at a meeting in a firm conference room. Primary among these considerations is adequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning ("HVAC") capacity for the area. For suitable HVAC capacity, an engineering analysis must be made of the routine number, and the maximum number, of individuals who will use the room; the equipment that may be used; whether there is a southerly exposure; and the general heat-retaining characteristics of the building. If possible, it is advisable for

individual conference rooms to have separate thermostat controls.

Conclusion

As the modern law firm environment becomes increasingly competitive, budgetary constraints for establishing new professional offices are becoming more restrictive. This in turn compels firms to spend available tenant-finish dollars wisely. Never has it been more important for a new or relocating law office to invest time and resources in carefully planning the design and layout of new space, to avoid possible mistakes that can become costly to correct. Careful and thorough attention also should be given to thoughtful use of the available space and to the proper use of cost-efficient materials and finishes. This planning process will help the firm create an environment in the public areas that provides a functional working area and conveys a strong im-

age of the firm that positively reflects on the character of the professional staff.

NOTES

1. See generally Reznikoff, *Specifications for Commercial Interiors—Professional Liabilities, Regulations, and Performance Criteria* (New York: Whitney Library of Design—an imprint of Watson-Guptill Publications, 1986). This useful reference source for technical data on interior subsystems and material specifications also provides information about other relevant technical aspects of commercial space planning.

2. For a treatise on dimensional standards for office furniture and equipment, see Reznikoff, *Interior Graphic and Design Standards* (New York: Whitney Library of Design—an imprint of Watson-Guptill Publications, 1986).

3. 42 U.S.C. § 12101 *et seq.* (1990).

4. Marble Institute of America, Inc., *Dimension Stone Design Manual IV* (1991).

Colorado Civil Jury Instructions Available on Disk

The Boulder County Bar Association ("BCBA") Civil Litigation Section offers BCBA members and nonmembers a disk containing the complete text of Colorado Civil Jury Instructions (3rd ed.) in WordPerfect 5.1. The disk has been prepared by Hutchinson, Black & Cook. Cost is \$35 for BCBA members and \$50 for nonmembers.

To order, send a check indicating member or nonmember to: Boulder County Bar Association, 1942 Broadway, #318, Boulder, CO 80302.

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