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Creating a new formula

Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella opens up space for new attorneys, still reduces footprint by 20%



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By **Melissa Rubalcaba Riske**

Office renovations provide an opportunity to refresh and update. For many firms it has been a chance to pivot to the new environment where online court calls and hybrid work schedules represent the new norm.

For Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella, the renovations transcend what the office needs today and represent its look to the future. Behind the new reception space, new interior staircase and inviting cafe and workspaces is a meaningful update meant to modernize the firm.

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Beyond managing the costs and budgets, Jeffrey Warren, chairman of the firm and director of the renovation committee, said the vision of the renovations was to create a space that will help the firm continue to attract young talent and ensure its longevity.

“We have to bring in new people. (We) have created a space that is designed to interest and attract people,” Warren said. “We’re quite successful in attracting new talent.”

For Warren, the renovation represented an opportunity for the firm’s office spaces to reflect its mission as a midsize, independent law firm that puts its focus on its Chicago-area clients with local, national and international businesses.

“Our focus was being a full-service Chicago law firm. That’s been our focus ever since we founded the firm,” Warren said. “People that are here have been determined to remain an independent firm that does not succumb to an acquisition by a larger firm.”

Merging history and modern times

The firm formed in 1992, but Warren said many individuals in the group trace their roots back one or two decades further. Following the establishment of Burke Warren, it moved to its current location in the mid-1990s when 330 N. Wabash Ave. was known as the IBM Building.

Today known as the AMA Plaza, the building was designed by famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. For Jorge De Ovando, project architect from Tilton, Kelly + Bell who helped lead the renovation, it was a highlight to work in the Chicago landmark known throughout the world. De Ovando said he and Michael Kelly, principal with Tilton, incorporated the AMA’s clean, modernist features into the interior spaces.

The results of the renovation are far different from the first sketches from when the firm began considering a refresh in 2019. The pandemic, which was a disruption to the process, has altered what – and how – office space is used.

Warren, along with Douglas E. Wambach, chairman of the real estate group for Burke Warren, said they considered themselves familiar with office renovations and changes. They were involved in the design process many times in their careers, including the firm’s last major renovations 10 years ago. Following the pandemic they have found the simplest question, how many individual offices are needed, can no longer be answered with a simple formula considering attrition and growth.

“Now there are other variables that are much harder to predict,” Warren said.

Today’s office needs spaces for attorneys and staff who primarily work in the building, and those who prefer a hybrid schedule. They also must create flexible spaces outside of individual offices. There’s less need to store papers, files and books and more attention to acoustics and technology.

“We wanted to create a 21st century law firm space,” Wambach said.

For De Ovando, the task of helping the firm transition the space presented challenges and

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opportunities.

“Now is the time for change and the time to rethink workplaces,” De Ovando said, explaining how today’s office can evolve and change. Space can be formal for clients, or it can be more comfortable for work and collaborations.

And there can be spaces where these two ideas intersect. One visually beautiful feature is the interior stairwell connecting the firm’s two floors. The stairs, with clean lines and simple features, create a connection between the reception area and conference center to the new open space on the 22nd floor featuring a cafe and comfortable workspaces that invite collaboration.

The thoughtful decor and large globe lights by the stairs illuminate the interior spaces outside the conference center.

At the top of the stairs is an open ceiling with a section of blue painted beams that seem to add more height to the space. It’s surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows that assist the room’s acoustics. The new space elevates the traditional break room and creates an inviting space that mimics one’s home kitchen, complete with a coffeemaker and counter island. There are tables of varying sizes, including banquette seating and smaller round tables.

Within the large cafe space are smaller workspaces decorated with modernist furniture that is functional and comfortable, and adds a pop of color. The use of greenery to separate the spaces evokes a feeling of smaller, more intimate spaces to confer and work.

“The plants work to vestibulate, bring down the scale of the space,” De Ovando said.

The space can easily transition for greater open space to accommodate large work gatherings and entertaining space.

“We’re very proud of how it turned out,” Wambach said. “People who come into the office once a week or all the time are very happy with what we did and how it turned out.”

The redesigned space allowed Burke Warren to reduce its overall footprint by 20%, while continuing to accommodate 67 attorneys and staff of 56. Individual offices are of similar sizes, with built-in cabinets and updated furnishings. The office implemented an online reservations system to manage office hoteling.

De Ovando said the space is intentionally more informal, but he compared how office dress has changed and the days of wearing a suit every day no longer exists. He said this office has something that will be embraced by future generations.

And that’s the vision that Warren, Wambach and others who worked on the designs want to hear.

“As the people who were the core of the firm mature and age, if we want to remain an independent, full-service Chicago law firm, we need to be aware of what’s in our pipeline,” Warren said. “We have to bring in new people, and these spaces are designed to attract people who want to be in a good working environment.”