

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT



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## OFFICE DESIGNS IN CHANGING TIMES

Innovative Approaches  
for Progressive Law Firms

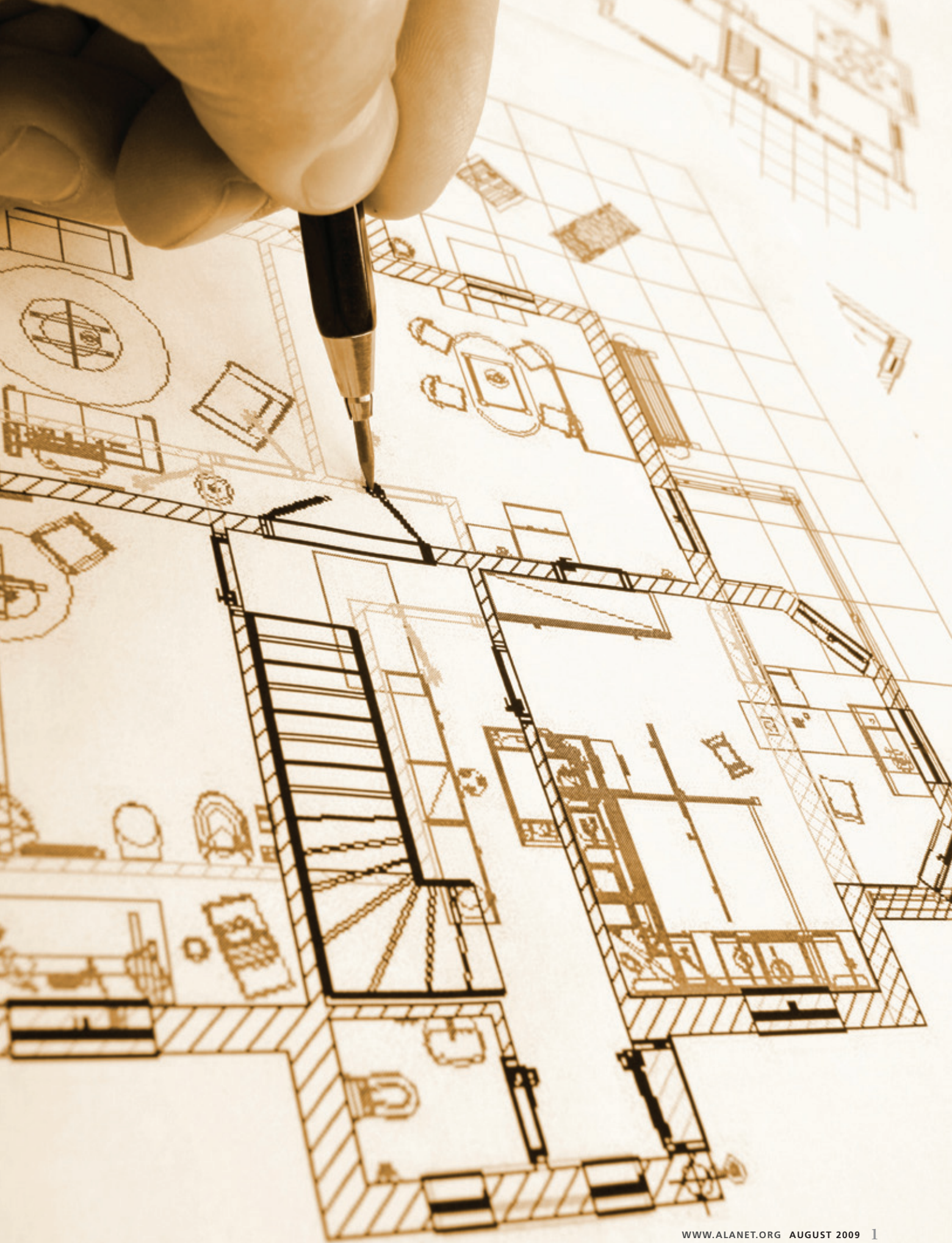


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BY ANNE KNIFFEN

# office designs

in changing times

More law firms are embracing progressive ideas in office design and building work environments that reflect the evolving priorities of a rapidly changing legal profession.

Law firm operations have transformed dramatically during the past decade, with new technologies, a greater focus on efficiency, and cultural changes all impacting this evolution. Changes in law firm operations are expressed in many areas, but can literally be seen in the offices, corridors, and reception areas of leading firms worldwide.

Law firms provide unique settings for measuring change in business. Firms traditionally sign longer-term leases than offices in other industries – frequently 10 or more years per term. A new location or major interior redesign often translates into a total transformation to leverage best practices, new norms in operational efficiency, and shifting preferences in design aesthetics. What's more, many firms also want to reflect the values of the industries they serve. As the broader business community focuses on the importance of sustainability, so too do leading law firms.

Law firms are also dealing with members of multiple generations meeting at the water cooler for the first time. A new work environment is being created, driven in part by Generation X leaders who are increasingly stepping into more significant leadership roles to fill the void between the vast numbers of retiring Baby Boomers and the Generation Y workers. For Baby Boomers, many of whom are remaining in the workforce longer than members of prior generations, comfort and accessibility are important. Generation X workers tend to have a less hierarchical orientation in the office and place a high priority on collaboration. The Millennials bring a sophisticated understanding of technology and its role at work. Together, the mix of generations represents new considerations and priorities.



*Completed in 2008, Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP's 35,000-square-foot office in downtown Dallas, Texas, featured streamlined attorney offices that use space efficiently and a modern, sophisticated, and minimalistic reception area.*

## **SHRINKING OFFICES AND SUPPORT REDEFINE WORKSPACES**

When seeking to maximize productivity, build positive relationships with clients, and support the research and other tasks inherent to legal work, law firm leaders have numerous choices to make in the designs of their work environments. These options, however, go much deeper than color palettes. The foundational components key to the firm's operations are critical in making design decisions such as square footage allocations for attorneys, as well as the location of work areas, employee gathering centers, and meeting rooms.

Questions often asked when programming space for a law firm include:

- What does every attorney need in his or her office?
- What are the shared resources required between attorneys?
- How is information being disseminated throughout the office?

As commercial real estate values and pricing have increased during the past decade in key markets, law firms are increasingly aware of their own real estate costs and, as a result, are looking to do more with less. In comparison to the 1980s through the early 1990s, the square footage per office for attorneys has dropped substantially. In the past, partners had 300- to 400-square-foot offices. Today, the average associate office measures 10 feet by 15 feet, with a shareholder's office usually measuring 15 feet by 15 feet. In some prominent firms, even partners can even see offices as small as 10 feet by 15 feet. These smaller offices have to be well designed and near small meeting rooms to accommodate client meetings.

Smaller offices require more efficient and strategic layouts of key components to remain comfortable and highly functional. Space has been freed up in several meaningful ways. Today's personal computers, which have shrunk from large monitors to sleek flat screens within a decade, require far less workstation space. Phone systems, speakers, and other equipment are becoming smaller and more integrated. As documents and research migrate to the virtual world, individual attorneys are taking up less space in their offices with file cabinets.

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The tighter office space, however, means there must be more comfortable communal spaces for strategy meetings between attorneys and other professionals within the firm. “War rooms” and “huddle areas” help to compensate for the tighter office quarters.

Conference rooms are central elements of law firm spaces. Today’s conference rooms feature advanced video conferencing capabilities, allowing multiple parties to participate in global meetings. The rooms are also designed to be flexible to support large internal gatherings, hosted events, and client meetings. Conveying hospitality to visitors within these spaces is a priority for today’s law firms, so conference rooms have transformed into conference “centers” that are designed to make clients and other visitors feel comfortable and welcome. They feature access to beverage bars and allow visitors to step away and check e-mails and make phone calls.

Other formerly common facets of law firm design are now less prominent or gone altogether.

Hard-copy documents, once neatly organized in rows and rows of filing cabinets, have decreased significantly. Law firm libraries are often nearly one-third of their former sizes, with volumes of information now stored electronically. No longer do law offices feature rooms dedicated to fax machines. Today, scanners are the instruments of choice, and electronic filing is more prevalent than hard-file access. As a result, workstations are being configured to enable equipment sharing among legal support staff. What’s more, younger attorneys are well versed in technology and can easily access research and important information.

The structure and number of legal support professionals required are unique to each firm. In some firms, the activities are highly segmented, with one person filling a specific role for multiple attorneys. In other firms, paralegals and other highly trained support staff are clustered into workstations in order to easily share information and high-tech equipment while collaborating. For all law firms, the dynamics and roles of their entire teams must be



*Texas-based Cantey Hanger LLP's common areas have modern, sleek designs.*



*Baker Botts LLP's Austin, Texas, office boasts a high-tech conference room that facilitates efficient communication between offices.*

considered to create customized configurations that support key operational dynamics.

### **GOING GREEN: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE**

Law firms are increasingly focused on conveying their cultures and principles in their workspaces. As attorneys' roles have transformed from legal experts to broader collaborators and strategists, they envision environments that reflect the priorities of the industries and people they serve. One critical value impacting law firm office design is sustainability. For today's law firms, being environmentally friendly is typically a major consideration when planning a new work environment. Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP's new 35,000-square-foot office in downtown Dallas, Texas, for example, leveraged sustainability as a central strategy for its design.

Gone are the days of foreboding, dark wood paneling. Modern law firms emphasize a balance between the professionalism of their spaces and more relatable and efficient senses of style. In the new world order, decadence is out and sophisticated minimalism is in – and this applies to everything from the size of an office to the materials and finishes used in the space. While the shift away

from adorned architectural details and heavy, dark woods has been in progress since the mid-1990s, the widespread focus on sustainability has had a significant impact on this transition in recent years. One of the results of sustainable design is a move toward more minimalistic finishes and organic elements. Natural finishes and designs that relate back to the environment are more prevalent in new law firms and often take center stage.

More law firms are also following the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) for Commercial Interiors (CI) designation criteria. But LEED, or simply sustainable design, involves more than simply using recycled materials; it involves calculating and evaluating all key facets of the demolition, construction, and material selection process. To create a truly environmentally progressive workspace, there are numerous considerations. To attain a LEED designation, requirements include those dealing with occupant wellness and span ventilation, as well as access to daylight. Energy-efficient lighting and plumbing designed to conserve water are also just as important as the materials selected for the space.

With LEED design, the reach of sunlight to occupants is an important component. In the late 1980s, the focus was on hard walls. In recent years, numerous studies support the link between productivity and daylight. As a result, in many law firm offices, hard walls are being replaced by obscured glass that allows light to reach all occupants, creating light-filled corridors.

Despite these trends, law firm budgets for their space are not decreasing. More and more of firms' dollars, however, are being allocated toward technology, as opposed to expensive finishes. From more expensive workstation computer equipment to conference rooms that allow partners to negotiate over high-definition flat screens, firms are dedicating more funds to investments in cutting-edge technology. The technological capabilities offset travel costs for many firms and also allow the nation's largest law firms, with multiple locations, to easily remain connected.



*Haynes and Boone LLP's offices feature sophisticated entryways and corridors.*

### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

What's in store for the future of law firm design? Technology, sustainable practices and the long-term costs of commercial real estate are likely to remain key drivers of law firm interior architecture decisions for years to come.

Increasingly, partners are willing to push the boundaries of traditional law firm operations and to create solutions that align with their firms' needs and cultures, and they are not adopting ideas slowly. In fact, many are carefully considering what their firms need to be competitive, retain talent, and

support productivity. As they do, more law firms are embracing progressive ideas in office design and building work environments that reflect the evolving priorities of a rapidly changing profession. ✱

### *about the author*

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