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BIZ Spotlight

CORPORATE OFFICE DESIGN



Spigel's law firm incorporated an industrial kiln into the rear wall of the conference room of its offices in Hamilton.

Drawing on the Past

Historic elements are gaining more prominence in office designs

By Evelyn Lee

WHEN IT COMES to office design, some New Jersey companies are taking a page out of history. Located in historic buildings, these firms are finding that the older architectural elements in these structures make for unique office spaces. Having a distinctive office design can in turn help to define a company's identity and attract employees and clientele.

Incorporating historic elements of a renovated building into an office design is becoming more commonplace among local companies, according to Michael Hanrahan, a senior associate at Clarke Caton Hintz, an architectural firm in Trenton. "We do see more and more of it lately," he says. "It's certainly a look

or an aesthetic that somebody might be looking to capture, having something with more character than you might find today."

The Flaster/Greenberg law firm, for example, moved in March into its new offices at the American Metro Center in Hamilton. The 480,000-square-foot building was formerly the American Standard Foundry, where porcelain bath fixtures were manufactured during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The law firm's 11,234-square-foot space at the site is filled with architectural details from the 100-

year-old building's industrial past. In addition to high ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows and exposed brick, the office design also incorporates the remnants of four kilns, or ovens, which were used to bake porcelain bath fixtures for American Standard.

Two of the kilns, both of which measure 15 feet by 12 feet, are at the front of the office space and flank the entranceway to the law firm's offices. One kiln creates a wall to the reception area, while another forms a back wall to the main conference room. Two others, which measure 10 feet by 7 feet and 15 feet by 7 feet, respectively, serve as additional architectural elements in the back of the offices.

All four are encased in glass and the two front kilns are outfitted with lights. The law firm has also placed old reconstructed carts that had been used as part of American Standard's manufacturing operations inside of the kilns. The shelves of the carts will in turn showcase local pottery or other art, says Peter Spigel, managing shareholder at Flaster/Greenberg. Additionally, the company will create and display a sculpture made out of porcelain plumbing fixtures that had been produced at the site under American Standard.

"It's not your typical law firm space," says Spigel. He notes the firm's other major offices, which are in Cherry Hill and Philadelphia, have a much more traditional



Flaster/Greenberg proudly displays the building's American Standard heritage.

appearance. "Instead of apologizing for the industrial nature of the structure and trying to change it and sanitize it, here's showing how you can embrace it and make it a functional but unique office space," he says.

For Flaster/Greenberg, the kilns "become in essence artwork for their space, but also create a feature for their space that's unlike any other space," says Kevin Blackney, a principal at Blackney Hayes Architects, the Philadelphia-

Making imaginative use of historic office space can send a positive message to prospective clients and to employees.

based firm that designed conversion of the former manufacturing plant to a Class A office property, as well as the office interiors for Flaster/Greenberg and several other tenants.

The original developer of the American Metro Center, Conshohocken, Pa.-based Preferred Real Estate Investment Group, made the decision to keep the kilns in the building partly to receive tax credits for owning a historic structure, explains Blackney. (A partnership that includes Rutherford-based Lincoln

Equities Group purchased American Metro Center in 2006.) The kilns, which originally ran the length of the entire building, were partially removed in order to convert the building for office use and now remain in sections spaced roughly 200 feet apart, he says.

However, while Preferred was responsible for keeping the kilns in the building, "Flaster/Greenberg made the decision to design the space around them and feature them," says Blackney. He notes the extent to which the law firm went to showcase the kilns sets it apart from other office users at the American Metro Center. "There were other tenants in that building that have chosen not to feature them, to cover them up, because they didn't see the value or the interest that they provided the space," he says.

Highlighting historic details in an office space comes at a price, however. Incorporating the kilns into Flaster/Greenberg's office design added about 10 percent to the law firm's occupancy costs because of the expense required to glass in the kilns, says Spigel. Also, "they take up square footage that you're paying for but you can't use."

Such office spaces are also trickier to design. "Oftentimes, in historic buildings, you have unique elements," says Blackney. "The challenge is how to fit those elements into a cohesive plan that functions well for an office."

Hanrahan adds that given the existing features in a historic space, architects face

limitations in terms of how they can design the office layout. "It's not a blank piece of paper where you can build whatever you want," he says.

But he says a unique office space in a historic building can help to define a company's image. "It gives companies an identity, it speaks to who they are and it makes them memorable," he says. "There's a lot of inherent PR value." Hanrahan notes that Clarke Caton Hintz itself has its offices in the former West Trenton train station, which the architectural firm purchased from NJ Transit in 1990. The office space serves to promote the company's specialization in designing historic renovations and conversions, according to Hanrahan.

Having a historic office space also sends a positive message to prospective clients and employees. In the case of Flaster/Greenberg, the law firm's office design reflects flexibility and a unique way of thinking, according to Blackney. Using the kilns in the office space shows "they have that creativity and that ability to be adaptive to the situations they have to address and to come up with interesting solutions to their clients' problems," he says. Having an unconventional office space also conveys a progressive attitude that is a draw for employees, especially young workers, he adds.

"The office space that people have and how it looks says a lot about the type of company that it is," says Blackney. ♦

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