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Ice Miller reinvigorates office by bathing it in sunlight and a livelier color palette

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske



Stepping off the elevator one's eyes are drawn to the open-deck ceiling with exposed duct work and hanging lights akin to a loft space.

Then, as the eyes refocus and move to the source of sunlight streaming in from the large windows, you remember this is an office tower located in the heart of Chicago's business district.

More than once people have quizzically asked if this really is Ice Miller's office space, according to John David Burke, the firm's managing partner.

"The old space was a very traditional law firm look, with dark wood, corner offices," Burke said. "I think we find ourselves in a space that is more accessible."

Open, bright and inviting are how staff describes their new offices as they return to Suite 3500 at 200 W. Madison Ave., following completed renovations earlier this year.

"The first impression when you get off the elevator is this is a firm that is keeping up and moving forward with the times," said Reena Bajowala, a firm partner.

GOING ALL IN

Ice Miller made improvements seven years ago, Burke said. This time it was looking for more than a fresh coat of paint.

"This wasn't just a remodel," he said. "This was a complete gut job."

Starting a few years ago, Ice Miller staff began to evaluate its space and the need to accommodate for its large growth. In 2005 there were seven attorneys based in Chicago, according to Burke. Currently, the firm boasts more than 60 attorneys plus support staff. Additionally, through the years the Chicago office has become a prime place for visiting attorneys and staff from other Ice Miller offices. The location needed to accommodate those who drop into town for a day, a week or longer.

"We had outgrown our space and we were looking for new space," Burke said.





While its business district location was ideal, there was a need to improve the layout. Ice Miller leaders wanted the office to radiate unity, equality and the ability to work together.

"You really want to grow the firm by having all the practice groups work together and creating intersecting points," Burke said.

UP AND AWAY

Ice Miller retained design firm NELSON Worldwide and Kristin Cerutti of its local office to serve as the design leader. A central point in the office's renovation was creating a staircase to unite the two floors Ice Miller holds in the building. Constructing a staircase within a building constructed in the early 1980s, among ductwork, structural beams and other components wasn't an easy task, Cerutti said.

"It's quite a feat to find the right space to fit it without having to re-do things," she said. "They were very adamant about the need to be able to connect employees with one another. They wanted to bring people together. They wanted to create spaces to 'bump into one another.'"

The vision for adding a staircase went beyond providing a little exercise to someone's daily routine. It was to link the staff on both floors, provide movement and attain engagement with one another in the office.

Cerutti's design team was able to incorporate the staircase and help it become the heart of the floor plan. She noted staircases, such as the one built for Ice Miller, have become a top trend among her law firm clients. In addition to serving as a focal point for Ice Miller, she said a staircase is a sign of an established firm.

Even in the brief time back at the office, Burke said the staircase has become the go-to spot. It's serving as the place where many people find opportunities to walk and talk, engage in light conversation or a quick question.

"I like to get up, walk around, go upstairs and I might see someone in their office and pop in and start a conversation," Burke said.

One also can't help noticing the open-deck ceiling at Ice Miller. It's a unique feature in an established office building, Cerutti said.

"You can see the beams, you see the structural pieces intersecting," she said, adding that again, this is more than a beautiful design, but an opportunity for symbolic design features. "It is a reflection of the idea and concept of people intersecting while giving the office a more modern feel."

At first white, Cerutti and her design team chose to paint the exposed area and ductwork black, to help it better blend with the modern palette of colors and tones in the office space.

COME TOGETHER

Following another common trend in today's office spaces, Ice Miller agreed it was ready to bid farewell to large corner offices reserved for senior partners. All offices are the same dimensions and feature the same furnishings. Every attorney's office is located centrally in the floor plan.

Those old prime corner spots are now utilized for other purposes, including office hubs. There's also space subdivided to allow for collaborative work that includes access to smaller private spaces.

"Rather than scatter (to) wherever there is an empty desk, staff can go into one room to work and step into a smaller space with a table if they need to take a private call," Burke said.

The redesign incorporated flexible space, including its reception area which can open up to accommodate a large meeting, a seminar or host a social gathering. The firm no longer needs to find another venue when it brings in a speaker or provides Continuing Learning Education programs, which have drawn up to 60 individuals, according to the firm.

The café space on the 36th floor further entices one to unchain from the desk and join staff or friends for a meal.

"We've always been the kind of firm that if one's schedule permits we grab lunch and eat together," Bajowala said. "Now we have a wonderful café space that reflects this. It's such a nice break in the day and the opportunity to reconnect in person."

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