

Pittsburgh law firms break with past by moving into bright, efficient spaces

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By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bill Wade/Post-Gazette

Patricia A. Hiltibidal, Reed Smith's chief of office services, tours Reed Smith's new offices in Three PNC Plaza, Downtown.

As elevator doors open on the 12th floor of the Three PNC Plaza skyscraper, a flood of natural light streams through two-story windows overlooking lower Fifth Avenue.

Construction crews are still drilling, but soon the reception area will feature marble floors and a wall of red-beaded glass. Corridors are covered in charcoal-gray carpet and trimmed with a light, eucalyptus wood. Office doors use textured glass to ensure that light filters in even when the occupants want privacy.

The atmosphere screams edgy tech startup, but the tenant moving into floors seven through 13 is pure, historic Pittsburgh: the venerable law firm Reed Smith, which set up practice Downtown more than a century ago.

Reed Smith is joining a growing trend among law firms inhabiting space that is bright, energy efficient, environmentally conscious and -- in stark contrast to a previous era -- less concerned about hierarchy.

Similar shifts occurred with the recent moves of law firms Jones Day to new space in One Mellon Center and Cohen & Grigsby to EQT Plaza (the former Dominion Tower).

And Pittsburgh's largest firm, K&L Gates, also will undergo a dramatic design change when it moves from the 100-year-old Oliver Building on Smithfield Street to One Oliver Plaza, a 41-year-old skyscraper at Sixth and Liberty avenues.

"It's going from old traditions to new," said Pat Hiltibidal, Reed Smith's chief of office services.

The move next month of Reed Smith's flagship office and more than 300 attorneys and staff from the James H. Reed Building -- a turn-of-the-20th-century landmark on Sixth Avenue with Corinthian columns in the lobby -- will upend all sorts of traditions.

Gone are the polished brass, heavy wood paneling and Persian rugs. Gregory Jordan, Reed Smith's global managing partner, will have a corner office on the 11th floor, but it's no bigger than any other corner office.

More "green" features, glass and light wood help drive home the firm's image as "a new, progressive Reed Smith," said Ms. Hiltibidal.

K&L will lease about 251,000 square feet, or 14 floors in the 37-story building that already has the law firm's name on top. It will be renamed K&L Gates Center, and the space will be home to about 275 attorneys and about 600 support staff.

Like Reed Smith's new quarters, K&L's focuses on light and efficiency. Both have a two-story reception area with the floors connected by an open staircase.

The new glass-fronted offices provide more natural light than the smaller windows in the Oliver Building, said Debra Lehman-Smith, a Washington, D.C.-based architect whose firm, Lehman Smith McLeish, has designed offices for K&L around the world for more than a decade.

"There won't be lawyers in dark offices," she said. "It's a more open dynamic. There is transparency in how they communicate and work."

Other significant features include renovation of the building's outdoor plaza and a two-story glass entry along Sixth Avenue. "When you get out of a cab there, you'll see the whole block will be renewed," she said.

A key theme running through the law firm makeovers is less grandeur for attorneys and more work space for their support staffs.

"Lawyers did not actually need the office sitting area and coffee table of a prior area," said Laura Ellsworth, partner in charge of Jones Day's Pittsburgh office.



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The hallways in the Cohen & Grigsby law firm in EQT Plaza are decorated with works from the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. The works in the exhibit rotate over time.

"If the support person handling the work needs more space ... and the partner is now largely working on a computer and needs less space, then that's what the envelope looks like. It's not judicious use of our clients' money to spend that money on frivolous things."

Jones Day's space grew by about 3,500 square feet when it moved to floors 43 through 45 at One Mellon. It previously occupied three lower floors. Its Pittsburgh office, launched in 1989, has about 125 people, including about 60 lawyers.

The new space features local design themes that represent the region's industrial heritage, including exposed steel columns, a decorative water wall, lots of glass and natural stone.

Conference room tables were custom designed by Bill James, a woodworker based in East Liberty. A table in Jones Day's company cafe was created from part of a tree Mr. James salvaged from a construction site in North Huntingdon where a Wal-Mart store is proposed.

"We work such long hours and under such stressful conditions, I wanted a connectedness to the environment," said Ms. Ellsworth.

For its commitment to energy efficiency and environmental concerns in the new space, including furniture reuse, Jones Day received a 2009 Practicing Green Initiative Award from the Allegheny County Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division.

It also kept artwork that's been acquired since opening a Pittsburgh office. "We didn't go to New York and hire art consultants to buy expensive art. We don't need a \$50,000 Picasso on the wall," said Ms. Ellsworth.



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The hallways in the Cohen & Grigsby law firm in EQT Plaza are decorated with works from the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. The works in the exhibit rotate over time.

For Cohen & Grigsby, displaying local artwork is part of its mission to support the city's Cultural District surrounding its offices.

Its reception area in EQT Plaza includes gallery space where artists will mount rotating exhibits, such as a juried show by the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh that ran from March through June.

"The space lends itself to a showcase for artists," said Jack Elliott, president and chief executive of the firm that has about 200 attorneys and staff in its Pittsburgh office.

This is the second time Cohen & Grigsby has resided at 625 Liberty Ave.; it left in 1998 for space in the former Westinghouse Electric headquarters on Stanwix Street. "When we moved back to the Cultural District, we wanted to contribute to the vibrancy of the area," Mr. Elliott said.

With light wood, a bright patio dotted by cafe tables, and flexible conference rooms, the four floors it occupies in EQT Plaza "are more modern and sleek because we wanted it primarily efficient and functional," he said. "We're trying to manage cost and still provide a good environment for clients and our people."

Like Cohen & Grigsby and Jones Day, Reed Smith tapped Gensler, a large global architectural firm, to design its new space. There are two open-air patios and one covered terrace suitable for social functions and where lawyers and staff can congregate for lunches or breaks.

Inside, the firm wants to encourage conversation and collaboration at galley kitchens on every floor. Besides the standard refrigerator and microwave oven, the galleys have bright red backsplashes behind the sinks and, in a nod to the environment, dishwashers.

"We hope people will get their coffee in ceramic mugs and then toss the mugs in the dishwasher," said Ms. Hiltibidal. "We won't mandate it, but we can facilitate good behavior."

Lawyers are grouped together on specific floors according to practice specialties, such as real estate or intellectual property. The firm created a software program similar to online airline seat assignments through which partners and associates picked offices according to their share of ownership in the firm and seniority.

"The whole thing turned into a great team-building exercise," said George Stewart, managing partner for the Pittsburgh office.

"We had betting pools on which lawyers would choose which offices; we had back-room deals being negotiated and cut between members of practice groups. ... It wound up being a lot of fun."

Reed Smith also invited staff to enter a contest to name its employee cafeteria, where menu items will include pizza and salmon cooked in a wood-fired oven.

Partner Jim Martin won with his entry, "The Lion's Den," inspired by the Shaw's Lion Award, named for one of the firm's original partners and presented annually to an outstanding lawyer in its ranks.

In another tribute to tradition, the firm will bring to Three PNC pieces of wood paneling salvaged from its original offices in the Union Trust Building.

The paneling, which also hung in the Reed Building, will be displayed in a room used for moot court competitions. The room will be named for deceased partner Walter McGough, who championed the practice of simulated court proceedings.

"That's one aspect of history following us," said Gary Sokulski, Reed Smith's chief operating officer.

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