

Law Office Design Trends

Balancing heads-down concentration with collaboration in law office spaces.

By William T. Eberhard AIA, IIDA, Managing Partner
Eberhard Architects LLC
Cleveland, OH

With much of the country in a “Transition Economy,” with selected market sectors doing well in certain areas but not others, many law firms are finding challenges from external trends. These trends apply pressure, particularly on mid-size firms, to drill down on issues and focus on growth/ consolidation, cross-selling, managing when employee demographics to Gen X and Gen Y employees require new responses, and “branding” the firm.

The market trends affecting law firms include:

- **Buyers’ Market:** Competition for corporate business causes traditional hourly rates to be replaced with fixed fee and contingency engagements, heightening risk and reward. Clients are applying increased scrutiny to hourly rate work and questioning manhour efforts required to perform work after it has been delivered.
- **Growing Non-Traditional Competition:** Increased competition from large national, regional firms engaging in inter-jurisdictional client representation as a result of mergers and acquisitions affects general and specialty practices. These events also represent opportunities to develop networks and alliances among small and mid-size firms to compete regionally and nationally. Many companies are increasing outsourcing of commodity and legal research work to India and other countries because of significantly lower hourly and task-based costs. Paralegal firms provide commodity work via the Internet. Ancillary service firms are providing quasi-legal services in administrative, strategy, human resources benefits, training, real estate title, wealth management and investment management areas. Corporate counsel is absorbing routine tasks, altering the type of work available to mid-size firms.
- **Profit Squeeze:** Overhead increases from higher salaries and benefits. Clients are paying more slowly, impacting cash flow. Client bases are less stable with consolidations and bankruptcies, which creates additional competitive pressures to attract and retain stable, profitable clients.
- **Demographics:** For several years, employees have had a tough time. They’ve lived with the fear of downsizing, watched benefits and retirement savings shrink, and have been forced to work harder and longer, with fewer opportunities for promotions or raises. When the economy recovers, experts

say pervasive dissatisfaction is not likely to evaporate. Only 25 percent of workers feel a strong attachment to their employers, and 4 in 10 feel trapped in their jobs, according to Walker Information, an Indianapolis-based research firm. Walker VP Marc Drizin says employee loyalty was on the decline even before the economy stalled, and that pattern is likely to continue.



- The expectations of the environment, the ways in which technology is used, and the emphases on amenities is becoming more widely variant among workers as Baby Boomers mature, Generation X workers (1965-1980) become a more substantial presence in the work force and Generation Y'ers begin to populate the workplace.

- Gen X'ers now number 50 million, comprise 17% of the workforce and are characterized by a propensity for technology, skepticism to advertising claims, and attraction to personal style rather than designer price tags. Members of Generation X easily transition from one employer to another.



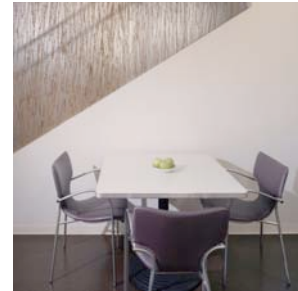
- Generation Y-ers (born between 1977 – 1995) number 70 million, are 21% of the population and will exceed the number of baby boomers at their peak. The percentage of Generation Y-ers by 2020 will reach 32% of the population. Generation Y is an ethnically diverse generation. While minorities make up 24% of baby boomers, they are 34% of Generation Y. Baby Boomers would assert that Gen X and Gen Y employees have high expectations and feelings of entitlement, a lower work ethics and low employer loyalty. Resources required to recruit and retain Gen X and Gen Y employees will be far more significant than prior efforts to attract and retain Baby Boomers.
- Gen X and Gen Y differ from Baby Boomers, whose academic and professional experiences reflect higher levels of sacrifice for advancement. Gen X and Gen Y respond positively to natural and archaic materials (wood, stone) even more so than Boomers. Surveys indicate that quality of place is now a top factor in decision making among this demographic. In the year 2020, Americans over 50 will outnumber younger generations in this country. The first of about 78 million baby boomers are turning 60 this year.

- **Growth and Consolidation:** Mergers, acquisitions and aggressive growth in the legal profession have been on the increase. Alliances, affiliations, networks are forged to extend the geographic traction of the law firm.
- **Technology:** E-mail is the dominant form of communication in today's law firm. Telecommuting and flexible hours are tolerated to attract the right people and balance billable time with lifestyle preferences. Tele-conferencing is increasing, decreasing travel. All of which serves to diminish face-to-face communication.

Responses:

Visual Connectivity & Interaction:

Spaces that reveal their use or vacancy convey their status and allow people to understand and effectively exploit their environment. We have been particularly concerned with “hearth” experiences where people run into one another, have spontaneous interactions and exchanges which define a firm’s culture and establish a brand identity. These interactions also have the benefit of facilitating the cross-selling of multiple practice group services to firm clients, as well as collaboration on points of law, work process and other performance enhancement tasks.



Most mid-size firms do not like superfluous design. No one wants their prospective client to wonder who is paying for lavish digs. But no one wants to retain an attorney who is not capable and successful. So we look to the elements that are present for functional reasons – lobbies, stairs, library, pantry, business center/ copy, lounge/ eating areas and spaces outside meeting/ conference rooms – and change people’s perceptions of what those things can be so they are more memorable as place makers.

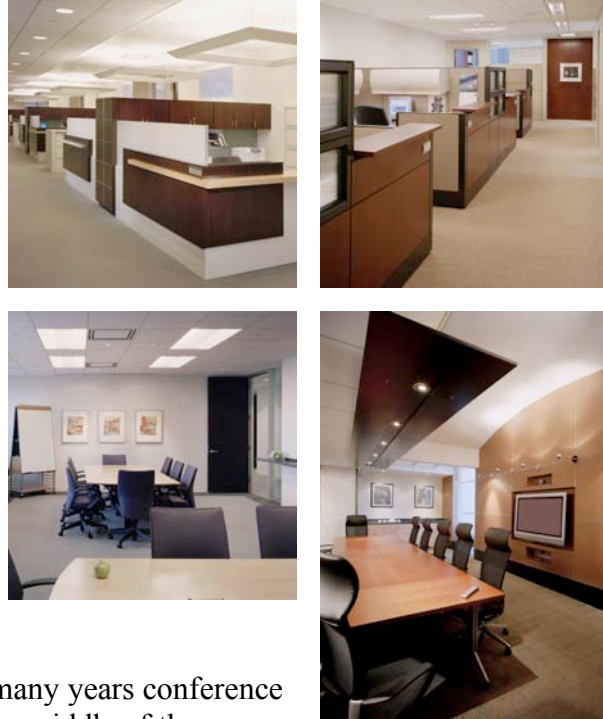
Increasingly, firms are open to designated spaces for informal interaction and collaboration. A low-resistance strategy has been to incorporate additional Partner offices for living room until growth forces capture.

Quality and Purposeful Experiences: We are now planning the visitor’s experience where the circulation path is crafted to quickly convey the breadth of the firm’s practice and its basic parts. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, the law library was placed next to the Reception area to convey that the firm had significant resources to meet client needs. But

now, it's mostly electronic and the existence of a second set of the Federal Supplement does not guaranty a well-written motion. So libraries have become functional spaces with no marketing impact (W-H).

Timely access to food and beverage creates a social, softer entry experience that allows pleasantries, expectations and technical needs to be addressed in a non-threatening and efficient manner. So the ability to stage quality food and beverage into Reception and key meeting/ conference areas requires physical assets and attention to details in mitigating staging noises and maintaining relative speech privacy with sound seals and related details.

With rental rates down throughout the country and landlord income pinched, lower tenant improvement allowances are shifting the burden of funding the firm's "Quality of Place" from landlord to shareholder. The result is controlled doses of quality materials instead of uniform deployment of high quality assets throughout the space. The increase in quality of surface materials, fit and finish of pre-manufactured furniture systems can make systems furniture acceptable for staff work stations in lieu of custom millwork, which will now mix painted, laminated, wood and glass to control costs.

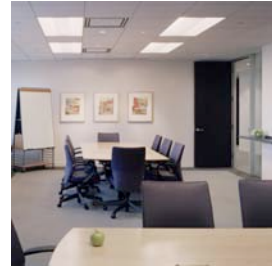


Multi-purpose Conference Spaces: For many years conference room design has been generic: a table in the middle of the room with chairs and a small credenza for coffee and the telephone. Video teleconferences, require short sight lines to a fan-shaped array of participants (Metro). Depositions (PWMA) entail a court reporter to be focused on a witness, with plaintiff and defendant proximate to the witness and questioning party. Mediations require a space where the two parties and mediator meet initially, and are then separated in proximity to one another while shuttle diplomacy is practiced. Arbitrations require a three-party seating arrangement with ample room for exhibit presentation, witness testimony from plaintiff and defendant.

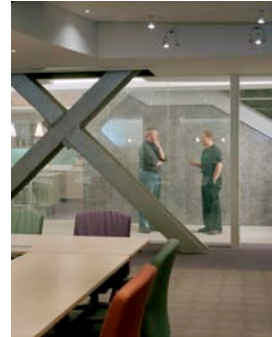
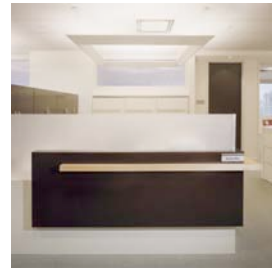
Client Meeting Rooms: Quality materials and furnishings, food and beverage staging, tabletop speakerphone and technology access are essential. Quality art is an exclamation point at the end of the physical space sentence.

Staff Meeting Rooms: Functionality is relevant, with conventional formal table and displayed thinking and credenza assets, as well as more informal-like spaces for more collaborative committee interactions. (BDB)

War Rooms: Trial preparation rooms require space for exhibit layout and organization, reference materials, tabletop speakerphone and technology access and configurations that allow collaboration among a small group. Flexibility to vary room size with demountable walls between can enable the firm to manage varying case sizes and document demands.



Visibility and Glazing: We continue to develop alternative designs that support collegial/ cultural goals of fostering collaboration by being able to discern when someone is “in” by allowing vision to private and semi-private office, meeting and support areas. When “heads-down” concentration must be protected, glazing mediums that are translucent have value. In one recent project, we employed electronic privacy glass at key meeting and social areas where, with the flick of a button, when sensitive interactions or confidential displayed client thinking is in play, transparent glass turns translucent. In electronic privacy glass, liquid crystals are suspended between two panes of glass and connected to an electrical circuit. When the crystals are not electrified, they merge into random patterns that give the glass a frosted appearance. When a current passes through the crystals, they align themselves and the glass is clear.



Signage at the elevator lobby can be glass that is lit in a way that the firm name is not read as a sign, but as a shadow instead. The glass at meeting rooms has ribs on alternating surfaces so that at an acute angle, one can see through the stripes in the glass. Viewed head on, the glass is translucent. These glazing strategies also afford the added benefit of allowing anyone on the building’s interior to remain viscerally and physiologically connected to the exterior, daylight (time of day), weather, the lake, and traffic. Giving views through multiple spaces allows users to feel a greater sense of connectedness.



Refuge and Openness: We are increasingly challenged by our law firm clients to create workspaces that offer privacy and exposure as well as a view to and a connection with the broader environment (BDB, W-H). There must be a balance with open areas that allow visibility around entrances and exits, meeting areas, libraries, business support centers and refreshment/ pantry areas that offer multiple views and support multiple ways of moving through a space that satisfies the subconscious needs for ease of environmental surveillance and escape.



Ergonomics: The right tools for the right tasks are essential. Many firms are used to down-cycle furniture, with the old Partner desks with the wrong height being used by Associates and Paralegals with computer keyboards at the wrong height. Gen X and Gen Y expect and demand the right technology and workplace tools to do their jobs. Full-function active ergonomic seating is essential. Cockpit-like work stations with seamless work surfaces and ample reference area are basic. Indirect glare-free lighting is now the baseline. User control and adjustment is increasingly important.



Color: We view a trend to utilize color as “ornament” to enliven a space and create a distinctive character and memorable experience. Law firms are often wary of risk, and prefer a light neutral base. We generally tend to use color in saturations in small doses in a way that allows flexibility to change easily, quickly and inexpensively.

Sustainability: Social consciousness, fueled in part by Baby Boomer and Gen Y sensitivities, translates into law firms being more open to sustainability as good business. The low hanging fruit of low-VOC adhesives for floorcovering and wallcovering materials is a no-brainer, as is higher recycled content in surface materials. Excluding rain forest wood has been the norm for many years. Exploiting natural light is an easy sell. Motion sensor light controls are commonplace. Cork flooring and natural reeds embedded in polycarbonate glazing bring a more natural feel to an internal lounge area at BDB.



Individual control of lighting and HVAC, universal raised flooring and demountable partitions are the next frontiers as initial cost and life cycle benefit come into play on longer term leases.