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SPACES



By John McNally

Client discretion is of utmost importance at new Schiller DuCanto & Fleck office

Jim Prendergast, an architect with Gensler's Chicago office, estimates he's designed well over 1 million square feet of law firms over his more than 35-year career. He knows the fundamentals in and out.

Still, when he took on the new office project for Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, he was surprised by how much they discussed the privacy of the firm's clients.

"Because of the family law focus of their

firm, I can't tell you how prominent the discussion of their clients was," he said. "Realizing what point in their clients' lives that they're going through ... it was important to think about the way their clients came into the building, how they found the building."

Schiller — which celebrated its 40th anniversary earlier this year, moved to Suite 1200 at 321 N. Clark St. — made privacy a critical element to its new space. Managing Partner



Meighan Harmon and her team knew conference rooms were going to be a major point of emphasis, considering the changing dynamics of the business.

“With the shift toward more mediation and collaborative cases, conferences rooms were at a premium,” she said. “We needed to have more space for people to get together.”

When Schiller’s VIP clients arrive, they are discreetly ushered into a private conference room connected to a main conference room. Prendergast acknowledged how much time everyone thought about the “choreography” of these arrivals and subsequent business discussions.

“We talked about how the architecture could help with those conversations,” he said. “(How to) put people at rest and ease. We did simple things like a more residential feel to the space ... we didn’t want to make it feel corporate.”

Another subtle, but important touch Prendergast added to the VIP rooms came out of his and his wife’s love of British period dramas such as Netflix’s “The Crown” and “Bridgerton.” He noticed how every door in those Victorian mansions swing open. You don’t immediately see into the room allowing for occupants to not be easily startled. This isn’t the case in modern American homes and offices, the architect said.

“I did some research and found two reasons why this was,” he said. “No. 1, in most of those rooms there was a fireplace. The deal was when you opened the door, you’re not letting the heat out of the room. The other thing is it is a more discreet way to enter a room. You open the door, and the occupant of the room (knows) someone has entered and they can say ‘wait.’ It’s just a little element of (discretion) in the room.”

The doors to Schiller’s conference rooms now open that way and nobody will be surprised. Users can prepare for someone to enter, and nobody outside in the office’s hallways can peek in.

“They loved that,” Prendergast said. “It’s another level of detail we went through thinking about how to make the occupant at ease and comfortable. These are crisis moments in people’s lives.”

There are no 45-degree angles where walls meet at Schiller, and exposed corners are curved off, Prendergast said. Many walls feature vertical slats, a “natural” surface and materials.

“We didn’t have a lot of hard, metallic, shiny surfaces,” he said. “It was a purposefully sensibility about that.”

CHANGING MINDS

The veteran firm ditched its old model and agreed to uniform office spaces for partners and associates, allowing for Prendergast to utilize the corners of the floor in a new way. Those spots were turned into conference rooms with video connections so the Chicago office could virtually meet with its Lake Forest and Wheaton locations. Those corner workspaces also can be used for client meetings via Zoom if post-pandemic life doesn’t shift completely back to normal, Prendergast stated.

“(We wanted) to tap into the psyche of the users and their clients,” he said. “We depoliticized the corners.”

Schiller’s office gets more “whimsical,” according to Prendergast in the back café area. It features a more industrial look with open lounge space along a north-facing window line. It’s near the reception area so catering is easy to set up for larger events. Schiller makes a point to know if the clients are coffee or tea drinkers before meetings. All the machinations are invisible to visitors.

“We thought through how the freight elevators enter the floor — they are separate from whatever the client sees,” he said. “It’s very much the Disney effect; all the support functions happen behind the scenes.”

Harmon appreciates that the more “front of house, back of house” structure of the new office and how it provides extra security to Schiller’s nearly 50 attorneys and the additional support staff. The move to River North was made to ensure easier access to the office clients who don’t always come into the city, as well as 321 N. Clark’s relatively recent rehab providing the strong bones for the firm to work with. Prendergast and Harmon enjoyed utilizing the existing elements left behind from the previous occupants of Suite 1200 to create the final product for Schiller.

“We didn’t have to start construction from a gut-job,” Harmon said. “We could use, not all, but a decent amount of what was here. That gave us some money to work on the bells-and-whistles we wanted to have.”

The small breakout rooms are a treat, Harmon said, but the place to be is the café.

“Having a place where everyone comes together and has a nice, fancy, relaxing environment to spend some time each day is important,” she said. “This is a high-stress practice so having a place where people can decompress is important.”

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