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SPACES



13 T. rexes & a Staircase

Out with the old and in with the new at Barnes & Thornburg

BY DUSTIN J. SEIBERT

Logistics have been a historical driver behind change and renovation in Barnes & Thornburg's Chicago office. Everything has been done with one directive in mind: To make the UBS Tower at 1 N. Wacker Drive the firm's forever headquarters.

Instead of moving elsewhere, the firm just completed a massive, \$10 million renovation that started January 2018 and was completed in February. The firm now leases 95,475 total square feet, 67,728 of which it's currently using.

"We were very fortunate to find opportunities in this building, which hadn't been built out yet," said managing partner Mark Rust.

The firm first moved to the building from 10 S. LaSalle St. in 2003.

"It was right after 9/11, the rental market was down and the West Loop

had not exploded yet. It was becoming clear that the law firms and service firms were ready to start moving to the area."

'THE STAIRCASE MEANS EVERYTHING'

When the firm moved in, it took floors 44, 45 and a quarter of 43 (eventually taking all of it), providing it the opportunity to install a staircase. Many of its design plans since have been built around the staircase. In 2016, leadership negotiated for the 42nd floor. The firm acquired it even though it didn't need the space at the time.

"We knew that we would never be able to go up from 45 (because another tenant occupied the space) but we knew that if we were going to expand in the future, it was imperative for us to be connected by a staircase," Rust said.

Rust believes the staircase is what makes the office space work for the 187-member staff, as it best serves the firm's lateral hiring trend.

"The staircase means everything culturally," he said. "It connects people who may have joined us as recently as last month with people who have been here from five years ago, seven years ago or nine years ago. The most important cultural imperative is to make sure that we never feel like some office that was just stitched together."

The decision to take a floor that the firm couldn't even fill at the time resulted in a fateful revelation: After 15 years, the place was looking a bit dated and "needed more than just new carpeting," Rust said.

"We had lots of dark wood and not a lot of windows with natural light coming in," Rust said. "All of the interior space was built for a day when we had

more secretaries and when lawyers had huge banker boxes full of files. We were wasting space like crazy.”

Enter the mothballed 42nd floor. That extra space on 42 allowed the attorneys to move around while their old space was getting remodeled. The down side was some staffers had to be displaced several times during the move and employees were forced for a while to experience a Barnes & Thornburg without stairs.

“[The staff] all said exactly the same thing: ‘Those stairs are so important. I can’t wait until we get the stairs back,’ ” Rust said. “Frankly, the rest of the tenants in this elevator bank pretty much felt the same way because when you have 186 people utilizing an elevator just to move between a couple of floors, it slows down everything.”

13 TYRANNOSAURUS REXES

The 44th floor houses the reception area as well as a significant consolidation of conference rooms that Rust said were popping up throughout the firm “like topseed.” The area, which includes a hospitality center, can be used for business or modified for pleasure — it held 400 people for the office’s 25th anniversary party, Rust said.

Following the move, the firm occupies all of 44, 43 and some of 42; it subleases the 45th floor to BakerHostetler, which moved in in May.

Barnes plans to take back the 45th floor after five years, when they predict growth that will get them to as many as 140 lawyers will necessitate additional space.

“The 45th floor is a very hot commodity,” Rust said. “It’s one of the few floors in the West Loop already built out as law firm space with beautiful views. The stairs are in place for when we need that space; we’ll just need to freshen the floor up.”

The transition involved shedding 100 tons of paper, which Rust said is the equivalent of 13 *Tyrannosaurus rexes*. The office significantly reduced onsite and offsite file storage space.

“No law firm will ever be completely paperless, but we’ve had remarkable cooperation from lawyers of all age ranges who realize that just retaining paper doesn’t make sense,” Rust said. “Certain things you do have to retain, but you can limit what you can.”

Technological upgrades made it easier to plug in and connect in any room as well as teleconferencing with other Barnes offices. But the single biggest mandate to the architects working on the redesign was bringing that natural light in.

“We’re in the business of recruiting personnel; young people looking at all the new buildings that are being built in the West Loop have lots of natural light,” Rust said. “We couldn’t not have natural light. It’s a very big morale booster.”

Going with uniform office sizes, as is the trend with many firms, would’ve required a much pricier, considerably more invasive renovation. But individual office sizes have certainly shrunk: Rust himself dropped from a 320 square



foot office to a 150 square foot office.

“I told my partners I thought it could be done and I obviously needed to demonstrate it myself,” he said. “It’s worked out very well, but it requires you to think very clearly about what you need to have in your office.”

All in all, Rust said, the staff has adjusted to living in a smaller space, dealing with less paper and being part of modern law office life.

“Almost everyone comments about how it really wasn’t a hassle and how they can live with smaller space,” Rust said. “People just had to learn how to get rid of more files and things like that. But everyone is overwhelmingly happy with the natural light.” CL

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Photography: Rena Naltsas