

# INTERIOR VIEWS

*Southern California law firm office design looks toward the future. by Mary Ore*



Latham & Watkins  
SAN DIEGO

**A**s clients stroll through the gleaming reception area of the new three-story building, several lawyers meet in the open air three floors up, sitting on contemporary rattan sofas set next to a minimalist fire pit (shown above). Nearby, an attorney taps at a laptop on a metal table that spills out from a café. A steel lattice roof throws crisscross shadows across the space.

This chic terrace is part of the San Diego office of Latham & Watkins, one of a growing number of southern California firms that are redefining law firm design. A mild climate, a tech company

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A former editor at *Architectural Digest*, Mary Ore has written for various publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Sunday Times*.

clientele, and the versatile work habits of recent law school graduates all have contributed to the sea change in look and layout.

Two years ago, when leases for its two separate offices in San Diego were up—one downtown and one in Del Mar—Latham & Watkins lawyers decided to unite them, bringing together nearly 90 attorneys whose practices include corporate and environmental law, land use, finance, and litigation, and almost as many staff. After considering space in a high-rise, the advantages of a three-story stand-alone building became apparent: accessibility, indoor-outdoor spaces, and better control of attorney use and interactions. Latham ended up leasing a roughly 70,000-square-foot building on the lot next to its Del Mar office

from owner TIAA-CREF. It came with the rare opportunity to raze and redesign from the ground up.

Under the guidance of project principal Steven Martin and lead designer Antonello Musumeci—both of international architecture firm Gensler, which has 30 offices in North America and 16 abroad—the firm hashed out ways to pull these advantages together into a streamlined, sustainable design that is crisp, modern, and high-end. Gensler, whose projects range from Airbnb's stylish San Francisco headquarters to the tallest building in China (the Shanghai Tower), has designed some 20 offices for Latham & Watkins in cities ranging from Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong to Houston and New York.

Working with Gensler “was easy,” says Brett R. Rosenblatt, managing

ABOVE/LEFT: GENSLER; ABOVE RIGHT: RENO CONTRACTING





partner of Latham's San Diego office. "We'd say, 'Here's what we want' or ask questions about what can we achieve," recalls Rosenblatt, who led Latham's real estate team throughout the process. "They would come back with options and pictures, and, like an eye-chart test, kept putting things in front of us and we'd say yes ... no ... yes ... no ... yes ... no, until they honed in on our taste, because sometimes we couldn't explain ourselves in design terms—we're lawyers. We went through the process until they felt they knew what we were after, then they gave us two or three designs and we mixed and matched."

With sunny weather to make the most of and the need for informal collaborative spaces, the designers created the terrace and café. "The younger gen-

**"Clients or potential clients use our conference room for their own meetings. This turns into business for us."**

**—BRETT ROSENBLATT,  
LATHAM & WATKINS**

erations especially like a variety of work settings to choose from," says Martin. As technology has made the seductive option of working from home a real possibility, Martin is "a firm believer that the office should be a magnet," he says. "It should be so inspiring that you choose the workplace."

"We put a lot of thought into it," Rosenblatt says of the basket-weave

chairs with weather-resistant upholstery, the rectangular beds of native plantings and the ceramic wall tiles, all among the details that contribute to the terrace's appeal. Since the office opened in February, the outdoor space has been a hit: Attorneys gathered in the fresh air to multitask during World Cup games; there have been catered events; and, on most afternoons, you'll find a few attorneys, laptops open, sipping espressos in the sun.

"Lastly, maybe most importantly, we wanted the building to act as a central location that our clients would utilize and enjoy—there's a lot to that," observes Rosenblatt, who came to appreciate the myriad ways architecture can influence behavior. "It's easy to say, 'People need to coordinate better, we need clients in more often.' You can say it and take

certain steps, but to really truly effectuate the plan, you need the space.”

So they filled the first floor with striking conference rooms and invited their clients to use them. The spaces feature Eames chairs, wood and stone accents, long marble tables and modern art. Glass interior walls brighten the area, as does the light color palette. A sliding glass wall at one end of the floor opens onto a tidy patio. The building is easy to get to, and clients can drive right in and park in front, without the hassle of a parking garage.

“Our clients like to come here,” remarks Rosenblatt. “If I go down in the conference room on any day, there will be three or four meetings, and I guarantee I will find one meeting without a single attorney from our firm there. Reception will tell us it’s clients or potential clients using it for their own board meeting or a meeting with their own clients, because it’s so accessible from the freeway and convenient. This turns into business for us.”

The sophisticated design—“elegant and professional but not intimidating” as Rosenblatt describes it—is a break from the coffered oak paneling and Chippendale chairs of yore. Martin, who devotes a great deal of time to client “visioning sessions” before even opening CAD or doodling a sketch, sees office design as one of many touch points through which firms can convey their message and identity.

“A lot of firms are saying, ‘We don’t want to be overly opulent. We don’t want clients to come in and be surprised and think too much money is being spent on the space,’” says Martin. “You want to communicate the fact that you’re being cost-conscious and efficient.”

Rosenblatt readily acknowledges the influence of clients on the design. “You read all those articles about Apple or Google or Microsoft and how they create a campus with volleyball courts and amenities that might seem odd for a workplace, but serve to attract young tech talent,” he says. “Similarly, we wanted a space designed to attract our clients and facilitate client interactions.”

Most firms don’t have the opportunity to design a building from scratch. When Paul Hastings wanted to modernize its Orange County office, the firm decided to work within the existing building in Costa Mesa—several floors in an 18-story high rise. The office, with practices including corporate, litigation, real estate, tax, and employment law, sought to repurpose its 18th-floor space that held the library, and to consolidate all 36 attorneys and staff onto the 17th floor, returning the 16th floor to the building when the lease was up for renegotiation. (Another floor, with conference rooms, was updated in 2010.)

To accomplish this, Paul Hastings enlisted its longtime interior architecture firm, Rottet Studio. The studio’s design credits include many law offices in the country—including Seyfarth Shaw’s Houston office and Morrison & Foerster in San Francisco—and it’s currently working on Foley & Lardner’s office in New York City. Rottet has designed numerous Paul Hastings offices overseas, including in Seoul, Tokyo, Milan, Shanghai, London, and Paris. Laurence Cartledge, whose team masterminded some of those designs, took on the Costa Mesa overhaul.

The first step, as Los Angeles-based Cartledge saw it, was to eliminate much of the library, which took up most of the 18th floor, and use the space instead for a staff break room, a videoconference room, staff support, a smaller library, and a high-density file room. “Libraries are becoming things of the past in law firms,” he says. “A lot of what we’re seeing is libraries shrinking. ... The space that’s growing is the open area, collaborative space.”

To eliminate a floor and yet make room for the new collaborative areas that the firm wanted, strategic choices had to be made: Office sizes would have to be reduced. Junior attorneys saw a decrease from 150 square feet to 100 square feet, associate spaces went from 145 square feet to 125, and some senior partner offices were scaled back from 250 square feet to just under 200.



The new sizes didn’t faze the attorneys. What did make them skittish was the accompanying plan: replacing solid office walls along the hall with glass. “The lack of visual privacy will be the biggest jump and usually the hardest pill to swallow for all the attorneys,” says Cartledge. The transparency has multiple benefits: It allows daylight to reach deeper into the office, and it promotes connectedness, which increases morale.

“Typically in the past, the partners were behind closed doors and closed walls,” says Cartledge. “And a lot of times there’s a mystery as to what’s going on back there. By introducing glass, we were able to create more of a connection, which seems to be driven by the desire of the younger attorneys





Paul Hastings  
ORANGE COUNTY

to feel more a part of what's going on.”

John F. Simonis, chair of Paul Hastings's Orange County office in Costa Mesa, describes the changes as “tearing down barriers,” both physical and psychological, and says he has witnessed a new tone in the office. “The most surprising thing is that people actually like the glass-walled offices,” says Simonis. “You can close your door and have sound privacy anyway. The light and energy that it brings to the office more than offset the change in privacy.”

Transparency can also have its disadvantages. Though the state of California requires employers to provide a lactation room, many lawyers with newborns prefer to keep working in their offices while rigged up to the

breast pumps. After one attorney from the OC office gave birth and another was expecting soon, “it stirred up a lot of discussion,” says Cartledge. He offered several solutions involving screens before the firm finally decided on curtains that could stretch across the glass wall. When an attorney no longer needs the privacy, the drapery and track can be removed and reinstalled as needed. “Everyone seems to be happy with a solution that addresses a temporary issue.”

To foster connection among employees, Rottet designed the 17th floor with only one break room and beverage center. “People enjoy congregating at the counter, talking about local happenings, or specifics of work,” Cartledge

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—MARC WILLIAMS,  
DORDI WILLIAMS COHEN

notes. On the 18th floor, deft handling of floor space made room for an attractive new lounge area (see page 29), which features a wall of diner booths, each with a flat computer screen on the wall in place of a jukebox. Stretching the length of the area is a beige sofa, accessorized with orange, white, and gray throw pillows. Cropped rectangles of wavy wallpaper here and there add visual interest. “We’re designing for the future, for people coming out of law school now,” Simonis says of the space, “but everyone’s adapted to it.”

“A lot of younger people were really attracted to joining a firm that had a progressive face,” Cartledge says of the redesign. However, he acknowledges that similar changes may not work everywhere. “If you’re in Atlanta and they’re able to offer all first-years 150 square feet of office, it becomes more difficult for them to adopt a different way of thinking and reduce the size of a first-year office to 100 square feet.” Even so, he anticipates that someday summer associates and first-year associates will be moving to interior offices or doubling up in a window office. “It might be a big deal to people who are 50 or 60,” he says, though younger lawyers, accustomed to multitasking in coffee shops or squeezing into small apartments in big cities, aren’t as likely to mind.

Transparency, collaborative areas, and smaller offices are all part of the “office of the future” initiative that Rottet put together for Paul Hastings, some of which is based on research conducted by large furniture manufacturers about work habits of the younger generation. While the nature of law necessitates quiet spaces to focus, Cartledge says, today’s graduates



Dordi Williams Cohen  
LOS ANGELES

are “used to noise surrounding them.”

The strategies have been so effective in the Costa Mesa office that they’re being deployed in a total gut-and-redesign in Chicago, where office footprints will be reduced to as little as 81 square feet (9 by 9). Additional mandates include better computer and telecommunications technology, and standardized office furniture for senior partners, much of it made by the modern furniture company Knoll.

“Change is hard,” says Cartledge. “It takes a few people to take that jump and leap of faith and spend the money and do it and see how it works before others are willing to follow suit.”

**D**ordi Williams Cohen, a three-attorney civil litigation and criminal defense firm that opened its doors in January, knew it wanted to be in downtown Los Angeles, though its office design was up for grabs. After many months of searching for space at the right size and price, the partners selected a location in a restored 1915 building, says managing partner and civil litigator Marc S. Williams. “I think we’re the only lawyers in the building.” Other tenants are architects, tech companies, and fashion businesses. “We were attracted to the vibe.” His fellow partners, Reuven L. Cohen and Firdaus F. Dordi,

ABOVE: MARJORIE SALVATERRA





## Embedding with Entrepreneurs

*Sheppard Mullin's "Silicon Beach" Outpost*

Looking for a nimble way to draw business from Santa Monica's entertainment and technology entrepreneurs, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton opened a branch in the Silicon Beach start-up community. (Main offices in downtown Los Angeles and Century City are preserved.) The firm rents a small space (less than 200 square feet) in a facility that is host to 150 early-stage companies in a three-story building previously occupied by Google.

Sheppard Mullin lawyers from various offices use the space to serve their existing



Silicon Beach clients, and new clients from within the building also arrive as walk-ins. "The office is strategic for both reasons," says partner Brian J. Pass. The lawyers who spend the day there usually are the ones with meetings in the area.

"The design style is no design," Pass says with a laugh. "It's completely spare." ROC provided the furniture, which includes desks, filing cabinets, and a trash can. Sheppard Mullin did put the firm name on the office entryway, and it bought a painting from an online art retailer in the building "to support local business." It's a far cry from the firm's more stylish main offices, says Pass, who describes himself as a "digital business lawyer."

"By not overdesigning or making it look like a typical lawyer office—which is shining and chic—it becomes a comfortable place for entrepreneurs to meet with us."

"The support within the firm has been very positive, and the attorneys who participate are especially enthusiastic," Pass says. "Apart from the practice benefits, being in the office and surrounded by entrepreneurs is simply energizing and fun." —M. O.

are former federal public defenders.

"We didn't want to be in a traditional space, surrounded at all times by other lawyers," says Williams. "We thought it would be better for us to be around creative people while we do our law. Being a lawyer is not a relaxed profession, but our environment is relaxed."

Ideas for the interiors evolved over months. "We wanted our space to have an open feeling, but at the same time, we needed privacy and quiet. Our landlord worked with us to build out separate offices using lots of glass. Our space is sleek, minimalist, and filled with light."

Covering a little more than 2,500 square feet, it features four internal

offices, a conference room, and what the partners call the "bourbon room"—an informal space with an exposed brick wall that's used for collaboration and cocktails. Double-hung windows allow for fresh air. The polished concrete floors shimmer.

"We love our space," says Williams, noting that the minimalist look complements the downtown dynamic. "It fills us with the energy we need to tackle the serious and complex legal issues that we handle every day." Business seems brisk. "We're thinking of turning our conference room into two more offices so we can grow, and turning the bourbon room into the conference room." 📍