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January 11, 2009**BLUEPRINTS**

Blue Marks the Spot for a Law Firm

By CLAIRE WILSON

THE law firm Thompson Wigdor & Gilly has a diverse clientele. It includes top chefs, boldface names in entertainment and sports, as well as victims of accidents like the steam pipe explosion in Midtown [Manhattan](#) in 2007 and the crane collapse at an East Side construction site last year.

When the three founding partners moved the practice, which is six years old, to a new condominium office space last fall, they wanted it designed to appeal to all those groups as well as to reflect how they see themselves: as dynamic, aggressive and successful, independent in their thinking and somewhat unstructured.

“Not your typical law firm,” said Douglas H. Wigdor, one of the partners.

From the Art Deco splendor of the [Empire State Building](#), where TWG sublet space for five years, the firm has come full circle to a modern, spacious light-filled loft that might prompt uninitiated visitors to ask exactly what kind of business is conducted there.

Designed by Studio Tractor Architecture of Williamsburg, [Brooklyn](#), the 8,000-square-foot space has the feel of a small, stylish dot-com start-up that has matured and prospered. Located on the entire fifth floor of 85 Fifth Avenue, a block from Union Square, it has a long rectangular footprint, white walls and dark wood accents.

Frosted glass partitions around two sides of the periphery create a cocoon-like interior shell that encloses offices, conference rooms and the kitchen-cafeteria area. The glass lets natural light flow through and allows a veiled glimmer of activity behind the closed doors. It adds to the productive hum of the workplace, according to Kenneth P. Thompson, another partner.

“You see stuff going on without really seeing it,” Mr. Thompson said. “People know that people are working.”

Visitors step off the elevator into a reception area separated from the offices by a dark walnut partition suspended on three floor-to-ceiling white metal beams. The building's original columns were left in place as a nod to its history and to provide contrast to the modern lines of glass and brushed steel, along with natural materials like wood and stone. The cast-iron radiators were also refurbished.

"Our aesthetic is modern but we like working with it in a historical context," said Michael Tower, a partner in Studio Tractor with Mark Kolodziejczak.

Hardwood floors of light oak offset the cocoa-colored walnut that appears throughout the space in accessories like sideboards in the conference rooms or light boxes that serve as ceiling fixtures in the cafeteria.

The reception area is dominated by an electric blue LED panel on the front of the desk. The startling shade is the firm's logo color, and will eventually be repeated in the up-down arrows above the elevators as well as inside the cars, where the number "5" will light up in the same hue.

"These subtleties of design push the design and clients embrace that," said Mr. Kolodziejczak, whose architecture firm is three years old. "It sets up something unexpected."

There are also frosted glass panels that slide into place and lock over each of the elevator doors when the office is closed.

The wall behind the desk is made from New York bluestone, which is repeated on the frames of the elevator doors. The TWG name appears in a horizontal, lighted shadow box behind the desk. A custom-made rug and two midcentury modern-style tufted leather couches by De La Espada are the only furniture in the room.

The main conference room is adjacent to the reception area and can be opened up to create a multiuse space, for parties or other events. It accommodates about 20 people at two tables, but its main features are its fifth-story views of Fifth Avenue. The architects draw attention to those with white oak panels on the ceiling that tilt up at a slight angle toward the windows from the top of the nine-foot-high glass walls.

"We made it slope up to Fifth Avenue to bring in light and create a sense of drama," Mr. Kolodziejczak said.

The designers also wanted to attract the attention of passersby on Fifth Avenue by putting

something interesting within view of the street.

The conference room is balanced at the opposite end by a second glass box that houses the kitchen and dining area, which is furnished with dark wood cabinetry, white tables and reproduction midcentury modern chairs. The boxes are linked by two parallel corridors; one of them houses closets, copiers and bathrooms, the other has offices for the partners and others. Currently there are 16 staff members, with room for a total of about 20.

Walls in the service corridor are solid white, punctuated by narrow vertical slivers of light that give the effect of the sun streaming through narrow crevices. Recessed circular fixtures in the ceiling further enliven the corridor.

The second, wider corridor is lined with offices on either side, with partners' offices along the window wall. Dark wood vertical beams lend drama to the corridor, and their purpose is two-fold. The designers wanted to introduce a natural material to the 60-foot hallway, which is dominated by glass and long steel door hardware, but the beams also provide a buffer zone inside the offices to keep files and office paraphernalia away from the glass and preserve the clean lines.

TWG got the timeless, unimposing space it wanted to present to its clients, along with unintended positive consequences for the staff.

"I didn't foresee the impact on how the office functions, how people approach their jobs and each other, and the collegial interaction," said Scott Browning Gilly, TWG's third partner. "They don't feel like they are punching a clock."

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