

# Designed for Confidentiality

BY MICHELE KEITH

**WITH OPEN-PLAN WORKPLACES THE NORM THESE DAYS**, how do law firms, judiciary offices, and financial institutions—places that value confidentiality above almost all else—address design issues like office layout and acoustic and visual privacy? And, how do they incorporate these needs into the image they want portrayed to their clients?

For insight into the subject, we turned to four designers who shared how they do this, from the first exploratory meeting to the final tweaked detail.

## ASK QUESTIONS...AND LISTEN

“An explicit understanding of the overarching nature of what the organization is trying to achieve, i.e., its ethos and mission,” says Christopher Pollard, principal of Vancouver, British Columbia-based architecture, interior design, and planning firm, Ratio, “and the specific objectives of the project at hand are the key considerations to be addressed at the first meeting.”

“I try to get my clients thinking about what levels





Behind closed doors, design decisions go beyond aesthetics when privacy is in demand.

IMAGE: KOPLIN INTERIORS LLC

of privacy and confidentiality will be needed,” notes Carol Koplin, principal of Koplin Interiors LLC in Denver. Among the topics are legal requirements for their profession, acoustical ratings, and whether or not they’ll be hiring acoustical or security consultants, because, if so, it’s best to start working with them from the start.

“We’re curious,” says Haley Nelson, senior interior project designer, associate, at Perkins+Will in Washington, D.C. “We ask about the client’s culture

and goals, what they want people to feel in their future space. Then we form a common visual vocabulary around those goals. For example, by ‘warm’ do they mean a lot of wood or the offer of a coffee in a cozy café?”

Homer L. Williams, DArch, founder of Williams Spurgeon Kuhl & Freshnock Architects Inc. in North Kansas City, Missouri, tries to understand the philosophy of the client-to-be, the brand image, what it is, how they want it used, and what they want it to

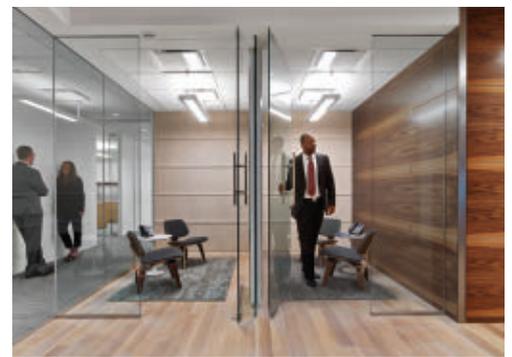
accomplish. “Most important is to get them to tell us what immediate image they want to come to mind when people step into their facilities,” he explains.

#### FLEXIBLE SPACES

Important, says Pollard, is to identify staff roles and tasks, and find out if job descriptions match physical settings. Even if privacy is not needed to get the job done, having a private space available for employees to take a personal call can mean a lot and prove



Effective design enhances a company's privacy and interaction through a combination of open and more private areas (left and right, top) or through glass-walled conference rooms (right, bottom).



its worth with improved employee attitude and productivity.

In addition, providing both visual and acoustical privacy, are designated rooms that can only be accessed with key cards. While secure, the room can be walled in glass (draperies used when needed), blending it in with the rest of the décor.

Open-work areas often allow better access to outdoor views and natural light and, with the right furnishings, can create a feeling of semi-privacy, but they can create problems.

Says Koplin, “They are what they are and provide very little privacy. However, we do have solutions, among them using materials with sound-absorbing properties, such as carpeting, drapes, furniture, upholstered wall/acoustical panels, visual privacy screens, and small rooms of various sizes where one to four people can meet, talk, or take conference calls.”

#### QUIETING THE WORKPLACE

Williams mentions that many large metropolitan banks have installed call centers and online tellers in their main areas, where clients can conduct business without human assistance. Their walls are sufficiently high to deter viewing by passersby, and are often padded with a carpet-like material to absorb sound.

Another way to keep the noise level down, and block people from hearing private conversations, is with “clouds.” Made of sound-absorbent materials, they are hung from ceilings over specific areas. A third method, suggests Koplin, is to provide sound

masking, otherwise known as white or pink noise, in areas where phones are used. She also notes that speaker phones are one of the biggest offenders in the open-work environment. “Simply limiting their use can do wonders.”

Nelson adds that the greatest acoustic concern is between offices, not the corridor. If focus is given to the wall construction between offices, then a glass-front office with a lower sound-transmission coefficient can be used on office fronts to allow access to daylight that benefits interior spaces.

#### VISUAL PRIVACY

The layout of the furnishings is, of course, an important factor in creating visual privacy. One successful way to do it is to use heretofore empty spaces.

At First Bank of Missouri, located in Kansas City, Missouri, Williams designed a reception area surrounded by pods of high-backed seating with chairs and tables providing privacy within an open space. And elegant to boot.

Adjustable draperies and blinds are the traditional ways to create visual privacy for conference rooms, explains Koplin. There is also textured glass and a 3M film that produces a frosted glass appearance. Both allow light into the room, yet disrupt viewing from unwanted eyes. Another solution, though expensive, is electrified glass, which with the flip of a switch changes from clear to opaque.

Nelson says it's a question of balance. “We aim for ‘activity-based design’ that combines function with aesthetics, and is geared toward multiple work styles or generations and their diverse needs.” Abundant

## Designer Tips

- One size does not fit all—get clients thinking about different levels of confidentiality.
- Involve needed acoustical or security consultants in the design process from the start.
- Keep in mind that the greater acoustical concern is between offices, not the corridor.
- Don't let necessary security concerns and technology interrupt the aesthetics of a space.
- Find unique ways to promote relaxed interaction between your client and their customers.



# WHAT'S YOUR SPEECH PRIVACY STRATEGY?

Building walls and adding absorptive materials are positive steps, but omitting sound masking typically prevents facilities from achieving the desired acoustical outcome.

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Design at Nixon Peabody promotes a relaxed and more collaborative atmosphere between lawyer and client.

open workstations, for example, need to be balanced with nearby private spaces for focused, heads-down work so the right space can be chosen for the activity at hand.

#### SECURE, YET UNOBTRUSIVE

“It’s best to have any security experts hired and a part of the design team at the very beginning of the project,” urges Koplin, “Their expertise can affect such design and planning issues as size, shape, and location of rooms, and how space is allocated. They can advise on an enormous range of specifics, including thickness of walls, insulation, acoustically rated door hardware, and acoustical leaks.”

The norm is for designers to connect their clients with experts to handle such issues as digital and cyber security, storage and disposal of documents and old equipment, and the installation of security cameras. Regardless of the issue, a designer’s role should be to make sure that what can be hidden is and doesn’t interrupt the aesthetics.

#### BEYOND FUNCTIONALITY

The interior appearance of judiciary offices, financial companies, and law firms is as important as their operation. Customers must feel welcomed, recog-

nize the institution if it is a branch office, and feel equally cared for whether they are there for a large transaction, like purchasing a mortgage, or something as small as making a deposit.

One can’t always assume that bankers are conservative, says Williams, although they often are. Much is determined by location and brand, he explains, mentioning how firms in the Southwest typically prefer brighter colors than those in New England, and the marked difference between, say, a credit union that is geared to the community and ING banks that appropriated the color orange and were, perhaps, the first to install coffee bars.

“A fundamental part of the entire project from the outset,” says Pollard, “[is] the design is often conceived in tandem with a branding expert.” In many cases, this includes everything from a corporate logo to building signage, websites, and brochures.

“We try to find something intrinsic to the brand, that’s scalable and looks beyond trends and conspicuous technology. We work towards a deeper understanding of our clients’ values, identifying what is important to their customers,” notes Pollard. For a credit union on Vancouver Island, for example, where a sense of place and landscape was key, sand dollars, which are found throughout the area,

inspired textured walls; and sea-worthy blues and greens recall the surroundings. This design scheme was used in all 16 branches.

Nelson says law firms feel particular pressure to differentiate themselves from their peers. In the case of Nixon Peabody, “They wanted to break the mold, and have visiting clients say, ‘I know they’re a law firm, but what type of law do they do here? They don’t look like a typical law firm.’”

One thing this client wanted was to promote interaction between clients and staff by locating a café adjacent to the reception area. A new client experience, it created a more relaxed and collaborative atmosphere.

One size, one style, one design plan cannot and does not fit all. But with the original thinking being shown by designers today, both functionality and privacy are met within a comfortable, appealing setting. ①

**Michele Keith** is a New York-based writer and nonfiction book author who focuses on design-related topics. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *ASPIRE Design & Home*, *Luxury Listings NYC*, and *DESIGN*.