

## An office in a startup state of mind

By Dustin J. Seibert

**T**he Chicago office of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton is a space that focuses more on function than form.

The Los Angeles-based full-service firm has existed since the 1920s and has 15 offices. The Chicago office, SheppardMullin's youngest stateside, opened in July 2012.

Lawrence Eppley is one of six partners who founded the Chicago office and one of five who left what's now called K&L Gates, which is on the 31st floor of the same building.

"We got a call from our CEO in Los Angeles who told us there's a floor in our building and asked what we thought," Eppley said. "I joked with him and said, 'It's one thing to change firms, but changing Starbucks is out of the question.'"

The nearly 25,000 square feet of SheppardMullin's 48th floor office at 3 First National Plaza was formerly the space of Sara Lee Corp. and has undergone little physical transformation since the firm moved in. Eppley said the firm's headquarters transformed the space "from dirty carpet and dirty walls to a fully-functioning law firm" in just 11 days, setting it up so employees could start work immediately.

"Though SheppardMullin has been around for years, it was brand new here, so it was like a startup," Eppley said. "We've been able to have fun with that."



Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton has 25,000 square feet on the 48th floor of 3 First National Plaza.

### Art with a purpose

While the themes in much of the art that hangs in SheppardMullin, including Chicago buildings and monuments, isn't unique among the city's law firms, the methods in which the firm acquired the art is.

Much of the firm's artwork comes from artists who created them through local nonprofits, including Misericordia, a home and training facility for people with developmental disabilities; Marwen, a visual arts program geared toward underserved Chicago middle and high school students; and the late Maggie Daley's After School Matters program.

The firm's art committee collaborates to de-

cide what will go on the walls, and it has hosted receptions for three of the organizations whose art has been commissioned for use in the firm, allowing the employees to meet the artists.

"It's important for us not just to support the organizations but to have a personal connection with them," said Office Administrator Betsy Zukley. "We get a chance to meet them and tell them how much we loved their work. It's a great level of engagement and a way for us to get engaged civically."

The office's most striking piece, the "Jasper Johns Map Study," was purchased from the 2013 Misericordia Artist in All silent auction held annually at the Art Institute of Chicago. The large, colorful mixed media mosaic is "probably too big for most people, but it's perfect for us," Zukley said.

"You walk in and that's the first thing you see and everyone responds to it ... clients, candidates and employees," she said. "It sets the mood instantly about what this office is all about."

On the west-facing wall off the office's main reception area is a mural of Chicago's skyline and the Millennium Park Cloud Gate painted late last year by students from Legal Prep Charter Academies, a high school on the city's West Side with a law-based curriculum. The firm created a two-minute film chronicling the creation of the mural.

Gabriel Anaya, an alumnus of Marwen's after-school program who became a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, met with Sheppard Mullin's art committee to determine what pieces it wanted from Marwin's Art to Work program; he returned with what



Office Administrator Betsy Zukley holds a photobook of Misericordia artists whose work is on display at the firm's Chicago office. Photos by Michael R. Schmidt



A painting by Legal Prep Charter students hangs at the firm's Chicago office.

they requested along with some photographs of an organic farm. The committee picked the photos of the farm.

#### 'Making it ours'

Eppley noted that the space, with its huge hallways and minimal offices, was built inefficiently for Sara Lee. He said Sheppard Mullin's goal was to utilize that space into a more efficient, environmentally conscious space.

To that end, nearly all of the furniture in the office is secondhand, including that in the conference rooms and partner offices.

"We did our buildout and furnishing as efficiently as possible because we didn't know how long we would be here," Eppley said. "There's a lot of really sharp new spaces coming out for law firms these days, and there's hardly anything new and modern here. But we're taking a blank, empty, old canvas and making it ours."

Eppley said the firm benefited greatly from the departure of consulting firm McKinsey & Co. from Chase Tower across the street. The firm left much of its furniture behind, which was sold to SheppardMullin through a broker.

"It probably cost us more to have it shipped across the street than to actually buy it," Eppley said.

The main reception area and elevator lobby were the only spaces that were significantly rehabbed when SheppardMullin moved in — but with a catch. The floor looks like marble but is actually industrial-grade porcelain tile. And the sections of the wall that look like mahogany are coated with an architectural

film resembling wood. There are even pictures of shelves with hardcover books on the walls of the reception area in lieu of actual books.

"We decided to do something modern and clean with a tiny bit of whimsy so folks know that, despite the fact that we're a law office, we don't take ourselves too seriously," Eppley said.

#### Growing firm culture

The startup mentality that guides Sheppard-Mullin is reflective in the collaborative approach to their work.

"There's a view in most professional service firms that you can work anywhere, but our view is law is a pretty collaborative business," he said. "So we want to make our office as inviting as possible and encourage people to want to work here."

In one corner of the office is a living room setup, complete with a flat-screen TV that

stays on during work hours. It's an inviting space for clients, but is also used by any of the 33 staff members to meet, relax or catch a bit of whatever sports event is going on at any given time.

The basketball machine (complete with a white board for drawing up brackets for tournaments), jean Mondays and Fridays and the minigolf games that take advantage of the office's slanted floors are all indicative of the firm's startup culture.

Golf is especially popular at Sheppard-Mullin: Last September, the office hosted a four-hole minigolf tournament for staff and attorneys complete with a list of tournament rules, scorecards and official PGA gear courtesy of an administrative assistant who serves as a PGA course marshal outside of work.

"I've had clients call and ask if they can come in just to play a round of golf," Zukley said. "They'll grab putters and some beers from the fridge, play for 20 minutes or so and go home."

With 19 lawyers and other staff taking up 22 of an available 35 offices, SheppardMullin can handle continued growth for the foreseeable future.

If the offices get too crowded, there's always the option of bringing in walls and building more small offices out of the firm's current wide hallways.

As for the possibility of leaving for another space, it's still too early to tell, and the employees wouldn't be entirely keen on the idea anyway.

"Whenever we talk about the possibility of moving," Zukley said, "employees always say, 'No, we love it here!'" ■

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Table tennis paddles from one of the many games at the firm's Chicago office.