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EARTH DAY SPECIAL

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Mahogany wood surfaces, expansive corner offices, reams of paper — law firms are hardly the most modern, environmentally friendly of business offices. While that is beginning to change, experts say, practical and traditional operating constraints keep the legal industry from embracing the latest sustainable design trends in their office environments.

“They are probably behind everyone else in terms of adopting green practices,” said Elisa Garcia, a San Francisco architect and interior designer who has worked on several law firm offices. “They tend to be much more traditional and hierarchical, not as forward as the high-tech companies.”

The cost of the industry’s reluctance is not just environmental, as law firms can allocate as much of 15 percent of the operating costs to space whereas 7 percent to 8 percent is the average for most office space users.

In recent years, many law firms have moved toward more energy efficient layouts, often pursuing certification from the U.S. Green Building Council through its energy efficiency rating system, Leadership in Energy and Environment Design, along with other measures. Yet some more dramatic hallmarks of green building design, like space consolidation and open floor plans for employees, are unlikely to catch on any time soon, industry observers say, because of the unique practical and traditional considerations of the legal industry.

For example, the big private offices that some other businesses — most notably software companies — did away with as long as a decade ago, saving space and encouraging interaction, are more integral to law firms because of client confidentiality concerns.

Space allocation at law firms also tends to reflect the industry’s rigid tiered power structure, with its paralegals, associates and different

levels of partners.

“There are some national firms that have said, we’re going to have one office size for everybody,” said Jonathan Larsen, executive managing director of tenant advisory services for the commercial real estate firm Transwestern. But some “senior attorneys, who have a lot of clients and are bringing in a lot of revenue, they’re not on board with that.”

Still, with grandiosity on the outs and the economy still limping, more law firms are adopting more cost-effective office plans, he said. That often translates to greener, space-saving practices.

“Law firms are really looking to become more efficient,” Larsen said. “That’s decreasing the amount of space.”

Electronic law libraries and fewer conference rooms, clustered toward the front of offices, have reduced space usage, he said. And law firm leaders are increasingly cognizant of energy efficiency.

Larsen recently worked on DLA Piper LLP’s relocation of its Los Angeles headquarters from a roughly 42,000-square-foot space in Century City to a 65,000-square-foot office in the same area. While green credentials were not the driving factor behind the move, the new space is larger but in “a more sustainable type of property,” he said, with LEED certification at the highest Platinum level.

Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP also recently revamped its Los Angeles offices, remodeling its five floors in a downtown high-rise to meet LEED-certified standards. The renovation, said Sheppard Mullin associate and firm Sustainability Committee Chair James E. Pugh, included replacing wooden doors with glass ones and adding more glass to conference rooms to bring in more natural light, installing low-flow water fixtures, using environmentally friendly building materials, and installing new shower and changing facilities to encourage walking and biking



Robert Levins / Daily Journal

Use of natural elements and non-toxic fibers make a warm reception area for the downtown Los Angeles office of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP.

to work.

“Our space has a relatively natural look and feel to it now, and it sticks to the professional and operational needs of a high-end law firm,” Pugh said. “We built out the space we need, but integrated green components throughout.”

At the end of the day, law firms’ overriding concern is improving the bottom line, and sometimes that lines up with reducing their physical footprint.

“One of the ways to do that, given that space is their second-biggest expense, is to take less of it,” said Clay W. Hammerstein, executive vice president for office properties at the real estate brokerage CB Richard Ellis and a frequent advisor to law

firms seeking office space.

“Certainly firms are designing space differently than they did five years ago.”

For example, 225 square feet was once a typical size for a partner’s office, but now many firms have moved below the 200-square-foot office threshold across the board.

He agreed that one-size-fits all office model is not generally smiled upon, but he said even that idea is slowly gaining traction as sustainability and efficiency spreads deeper into the corporate mindset.

“There’s still partners that expect if they work hard, they get a bigger office,” Hammerstein said. “But a lot more firms are considering it now. In the past, a lot of firms have dismissed it.”