

THE COOLEST NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Acquilano Leslie designed a vibrant, urban 21st-century space for law firm Husch Blackwell.

WORDS: Jane Craig

PHOTOGRAPHY: Ross Cooperthwaite

NECESSITY is the mother of reinvention. At least that's the case with Husch Blackwell's hip, new downtown law offices. The necessity? A space that was vibrant, professional, efficient, one-of-a-kind—and felt connected to the city of Denver. "The law firm was really looking to reinvent itself," says Melissa Marlow, principal at the Denver interior architecture firm Acquilano Leslie. "Husch Blackwell knew they had a great culture and they wanted a space that reflected that—something unexpected and unique. That really drove the design of their new offices."

“We always get companies saying they want ‘a Colorado vibe,’ which usually means mountains or natural materials. But we think of Denver as being this very urban, energetic city that is balanced by the mountains. We loved the fact that in this space, you could look one way and see the mountains, then turn around and get an eyeful of city.”

- MELISSA MARLOW



The firm had previously been housed on the 43rd and 47th floors of the Wells Fargo Tower. “The old offices felt disconnected and disjointed,” says Marlow, “and there was not a lot of group space. They also felt very traditional and the access to natural light was poor.”

“That space had been cobbled together,” says Kevin Kelley, managing partner of the firm’s 55-lawyer Denver office. “Our goal going forward was to create an efficient and energetic space that did not look like a law firm.”

Husch Blackwell chose for its new home the trendy, urban, 12-story Union Tower West, at 1801 Wewatta, whose bottom eight floors make up the Indigo Hotel and parking garage. The top four stories are office space. “We’re not a homegrown Denver-based law firm (Husch Blackwell is headquartered in Missouri), so it was really important to us to create a connection to the city,” says Kelley. “We also wanted a location where people want to be—and it’s amazing how much our lawyers, staff and recruits love this location and space.”

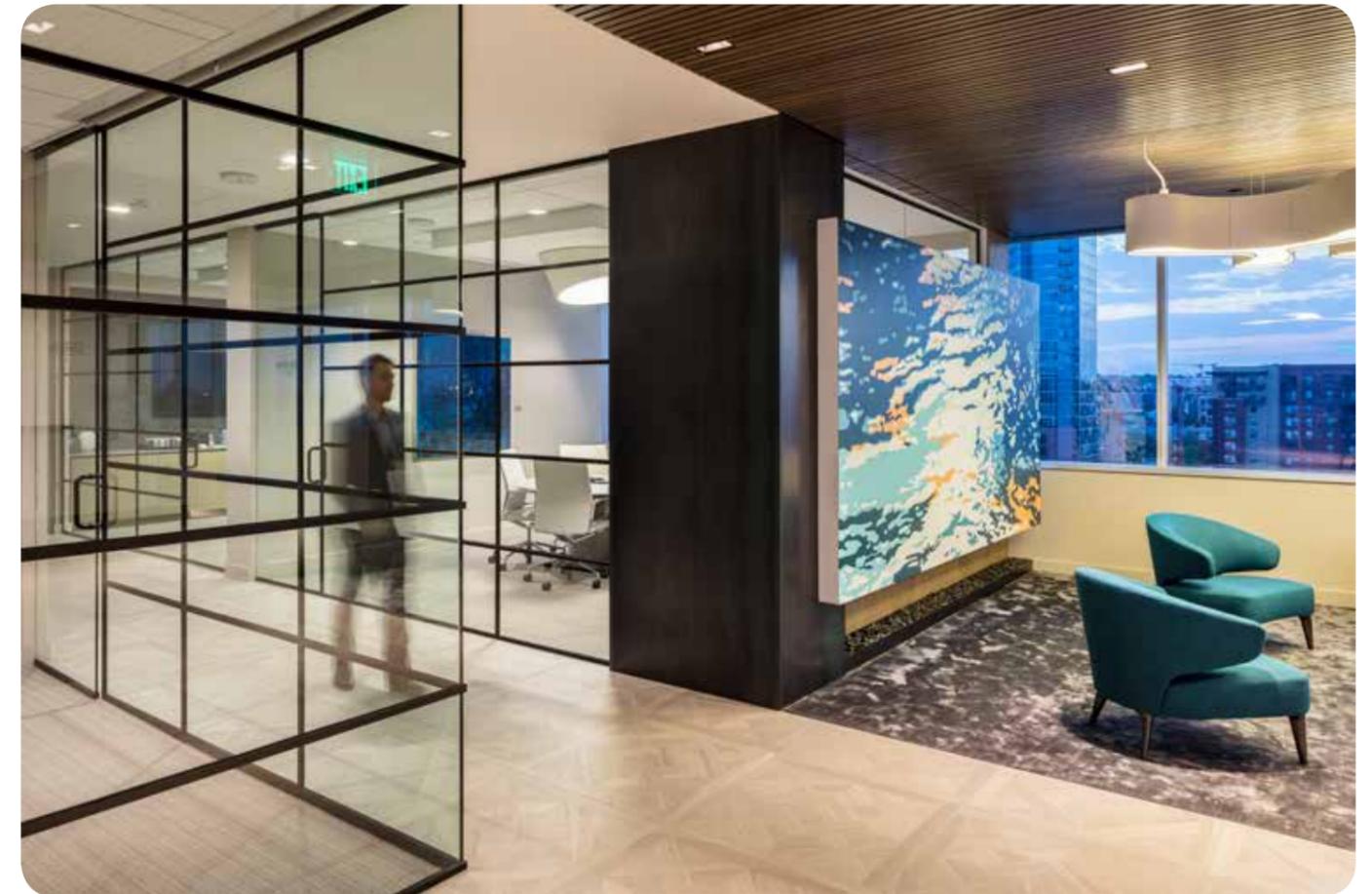
Adds Marlow: “We always get companies saying they want ‘a Colorado vibe,’ which usually means mountains or natural materials. But we think of Denver as being this very urban, very energetic city that is balanced by the mountains. We loved the fact that in this space, you could

Husch Blackwell’s expansive reception area has views of both the mountains and the city. The custom reception desk, with a Caesarstone front and a wood working desk behind, is backed by a white back-painted panel; The foreground seating area contains a Haworth Collection leather sectional, a Minotti cocktail table with a movable Minotti checkered upholstered ottoman and teal-blue Studio Como-Minotti lounge chairs.

look one way and see the mountains, then turn around and get an eyeful of city.”

The firm moved into its new offices—36,000 square feet over one-and-a-half contiguous floors—on March 13. “Law firms tend to be formal and stuffy. Ours is definitely not. Our art is a little bit irreverent and different. Everything’s got very, very clean lines. It’s got a tech feel to it. And it feels nice but not too ritzy.”

As for overcoming that former disconnected feeling? The 65 private offices are all uniform size and 18 percent of the



ABOVE: One of the office’s central seating areas is dominated by the painting “Flood of ‘65,” by Denver artist Mindy Bray. It was commissioned through NINE dot ARTS for Husch Blackwell, which wanted an image that conveyed a narrative about its new location in Union Station. The piece depicts Denver’s relationship with the Platte River, which flooded in 1965, leading to urban renewal projects in the area. The custom ash wood slat ceiling has recessed lighting from Kreon and a large-scale organic light fixture by Viba; underneath the painting is river stone rock in a black metal tray.

RIGHT: To encourage collaboration, Acquilano Leslie included in its design 18 conference rooms, most of them seating six to eight people. They include Nucraft tables with satin back-painted glass tops and wood veneer bases, surrounded by Keilhauer conference chairs. Each conference room includes a piece of art from Nine Dot Arts. Acquilano Leslie also chose full-height butt-jointed glass office fronts to allow for direct views outside.





overall square footage is dedicated to group space. “Historically, lawyers have practiced as singles tennis players – as individuals sharing office space and expenses, rather than as cohesive teams. When lawyers are each doing their own little things, not sharing information and experiences, not collaborating, clients suffer. We want to encourage lawyers to get out of their offices to collaborate so that we can serve our clients better and more efficiently. Our offices and huddle rooms are designed to encourage that behavior.”

The conference rooms are clad in black-mullioned glass, a reflection of the industrial feel of nearby Union Station, with custom wood slat ceilings that extend throughout the office’s public areas. “We had a great ceiling height, at 9 and a half feet, and we wanted to create drama by adding the wood but also bringing in lower, more horizontal furniture with a residential feel,” says Sydney Madison, an interior designer at Acquilano Leslie. Adds Marlow: “We wanted people to walk in and feel comfortable, but it’s a professional setting, so we didn’t want it to feel too casual. The word I would use is hospitable.” →140

The Stag (Bronco Spruce) sculpture is a work by Bryan Christiansen, an artist based out of Rapid City, S.D., and represented locally by Visions West Contemporary. This piece is part of a series of work that is made from recycled furniture items that the artist collects. This particular work is made up of broken-down pieces of a matching sofa, chair, and ottoman set. The Stag is positioned outside “Capitol Hill,” one of the internal conference rooms that are named after Denver neighborhoods, like LoDo, Rino, Cheesman Park and Wash Park.

That hospitality is strongly on display both in the reception area, which contains multiple (and multi-use) seating areas and is dominated by a striking piece of art by local painter Mindy Bray, and in the firm's new ninth-floor break room. "We located it on the ninth floor to drive activity and community into one location," says Marlow. "We wanted it to have a lounge feel, so we included different styles of seating," says Madison, "with bar-height tables, family-style spaces and bench seating with a TV. Attorneys and paralegals and support staff are

all coming to this one location and interacting in ways they perhaps were not before."

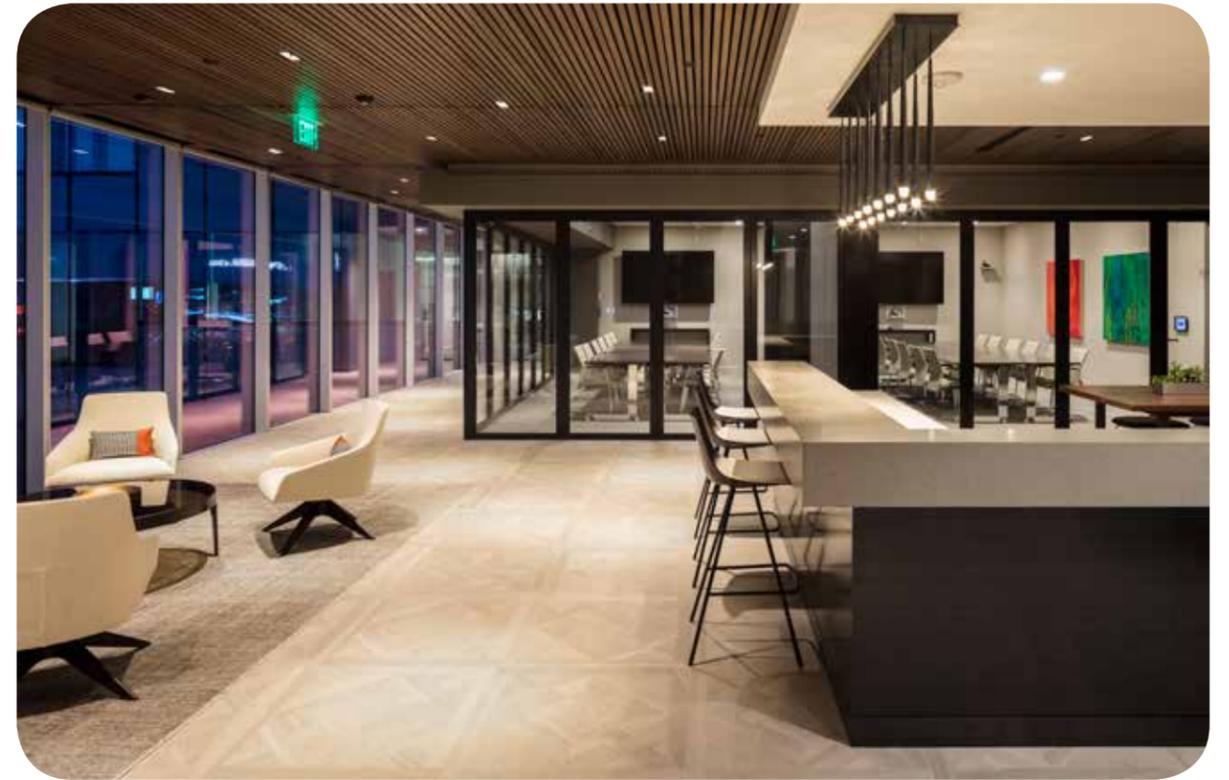
So how has the big move changed the vibe at Husch Blackwell? "There's more energy," says Kelley. "People have a bounce in their step now that they didn't have before and they have more confidence. You see more and more partners hosting industry and trade organizations, community groups or even happy hours here because we now have a space we want to show off. And that creates a better connection

to the city. People here now think of themselves as the cool kids."

Last spring, Benjamin Moore even asked Husch Blackwell if it could borrow the firm's offices to film an edgy new commercial featuring skateboarders. Boarders where there might once have been only boardrooms? That is cool. ■



The boardroom, which has views of Coors Field and Union Station, includes motorized exterior shades, and a state-of-the-art audio visual system with video conferencing capabilities. The Nucraft table features a custom Caesarstone top. Sylex Insight executive chairs and striking Kreon pendant light fixtures in black metal with black leather edges mimic the black metallic accents throughout the space.



ABOVE: This public area is used both for guests to make themselves comfortable and as a support space where industry and trade events can be hosted inside the office. The NanoWall black-framed wall system can open up various conference rooms and create one large entertaining space with city and ballpark views.

BELOW: Acquilano Leslie created a large ninth-floor break room to act as a central hub for the firm's employees. Looking for a lounge feeling, the designers varied the spaces throughout, with bar-height tables, comfy banquette seating, televisions and family-style seating. The room serves as a dining area, but is a flexible enough space to host a meeting or presentation, too.



PROJECT CREDITS

INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE
Acquilano Leslie Inc.

CONTRACTOR
Provident Construction Company

ENGINEERING
MDP Engineering

STRUCTURAL
S.A. Miro

MILLWORK
Performance Woodworking

LIGHTING
The Lighting Agency

FLOORS
AFS Flooring

AV & CABLING
LINX

ARTWORK
NINE dot ARTS

ANCILLARY FURNITURE DEALERSHIP
Pear Workplace Solutions - Haworth

PRIVATE OFFICE FURNITURE DEALERSHIP
Elements - Knoll

PLANTSCAPING
Urban Tropics