

INTERIOR DESIGN

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Taslimi



L.A. Law

No, it's not McKenzie, Brackman, Chaney & Kuzak—
it's Heller Ehrman's immaculately cool new office by Studios Architecture

text: greg goldin photography: benny chan/fotoworks



When Studios Architecture principal Christopher Mitchell showed a Jonathan Adler white ceramic sunburst to the powerhouse attorneys at Heller Ehrman, he nearly lost the job of designing the firm's Los Angeles office. "What we saw was light and shadow, something quirky, earthy, textural, and totally L.A.," explains Mitchell, who oversaw the project with Studios managing principal Thomas Yee. "What *they* saw was a piece of white pottery. And they hated it. They thought we were going to do the whole office that way. We said, 'No, it's about mood.' Then they got it."

The mood Heller Ehrman got is epitomized by the reception area, a huge open expanse on the 39th floor of a downtown building with views of Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall and Thom Mayne's battleship-gray Caltrans District 7 building. What's noticeably MIA from the airy,

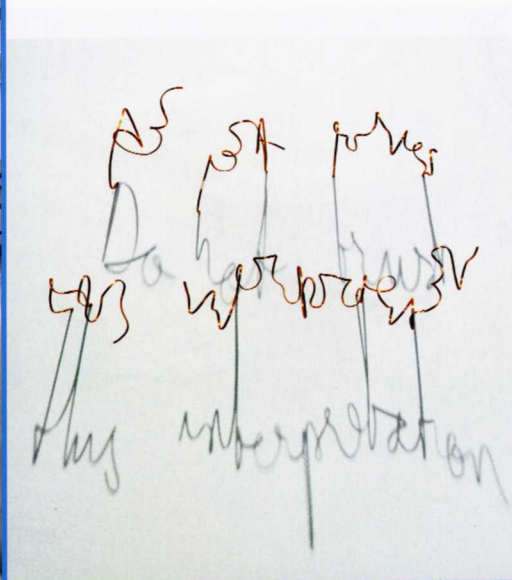
Cover: Etched glass encloses the conference rooms bookending reception. Sliding doors open to create one larger space for entertaining.

Previous spread: In reception at Los Angeles corporate law firm Heller Ehrman, Studios Architecture grouped Robert Haussmann's leather-upholstered armchairs with Fabien Baron's glass-topped table of nickel-plated steel. The floor tile is terrazzo.



white-on-cream space—apart from that contentious Adler ceramic—are the stereotypical signifiers of legal rectitude: Persian rugs, mahogany panels, steak-house lighting. There are no elaborate flower arrangements, either. Instead, the reception desk displays an empty handblown glass vase, its irregular horizontal bands adding a note of muted amber, red, and brown to the monochrome surroundings.

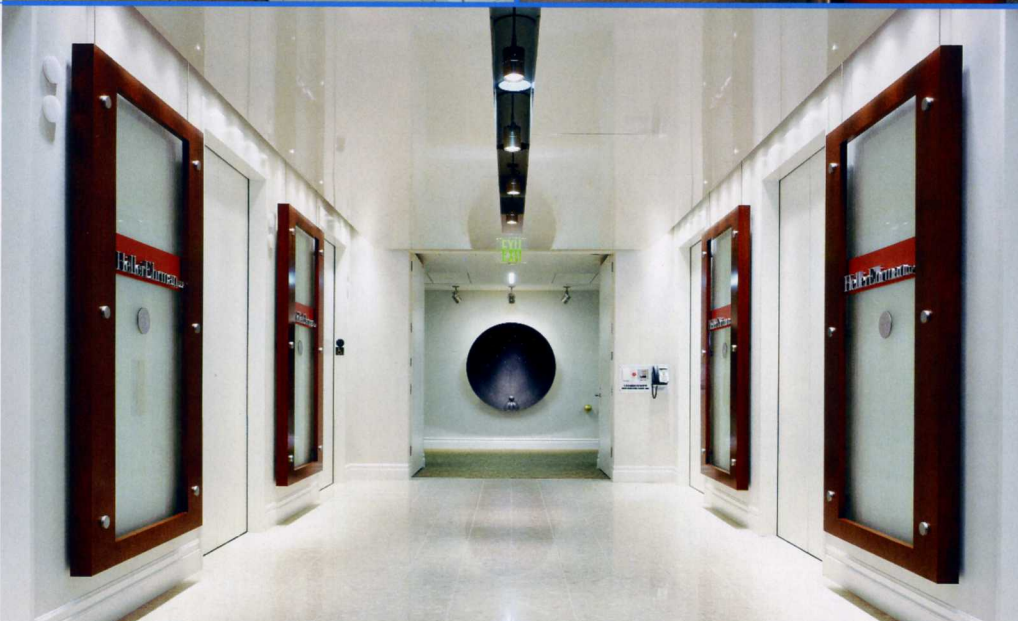
"The reception area had to be open and approachable, like our city," says Nancy Cohen, the Heller Ehrman partner who worked most closely with Studios. "And the reception desk had to be a piece of art, a focal point for the massive entry." Something of a cross between New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Hollywood's Capitol Records building, modeled on a stack of



Left: Built of American black cherry, with a backsplash of marble mosaic tile and a counter of brushed stainless steel, a coffee bar faces the custom lacquered reception desk, which displays a handblown glass vase by Caleb Siemon. **Right, clockwise from top left:** In a conference room, leather-covered chairs draw up to a custom cherry-topped table. By the cloakroom, a copper-wire sculpture by Fred Eerdekens spells out the words "Do Not Trust This Interpretation." The cloakroom is screened by an 8-foot-high cherry-framed louvered partition.

45s, the round white-lacquered desk resembles an off-center pile of pancakes 15 feet in diameter. By positioning a 10-by-25-foot white-lacquered soffit on the ceiling above the desk, Studios appears to be referencing the circle-in-a-square imagery of the mandala—this is California, after all.

Reception's lounge is visually divided in two by identical seating groups, each comprising four white leather-upholstered armchairs and a low glass-topped table. The symmetry continues with the pair of glazed conference rooms bookending the lounge. Their glass walls, etched with a fine grasslike pattern, provide privacy for meetings, but sliding doors can open to create one continuous space for entertaining. In fact, with its white terrazzo floor tile, pared-down furnishings, and fabulous views, reception seems more like a hip hotel's lobby than the entry to a corporate law →




firm. That impression is reinforced by the coffee bar, its cabinetry of American black cherry set in a niche along one wall. Two flat-screen TVs are mounted against the coffee bar's cream-colored mosaic-tile backsplash, so visitors can sit on a generous white leather-wrapped bench and sip espresso while watching MSNBC. The cloakroom is hidden from view by a screen of white vertical slats. On the adjacent wall, a copper-wire sculpture casts a shadow message—"Do Not Trust This Interpretation"—that seems to make a droll comment on the easy elegance of the space.

Although a hefty percentage of the 82,000-square-foot, three-level project's budget of \$125 per square foot went into reception and the conference rooms, some of the laid-back L.A. vibe extends to the firm's private spaces. Strategies included specifying white-painted wood base moldings in

Left, clockwise from top left: This workstation belongs to a secretary. Attorneys' offices are provided with cherry-finished case goods and a Tolomeo desk lamp by Michele De Lucchi and Giancarlo Piretti. At the end of the elevator lobby, a mixed-media work by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel plays on the circle-in-a-square imagery of the mandala. **Right:** In a conference room, a handblown glass bowl by Bengt Hökanson and Trefny Dix sits on the stainless-steel band that conceals computer docking equipment.

all corridors and attorneys' offices. "It's a little twist on 'law-firm classic,'" Mitchell says. "They provide a highlight and a shadow line." As do panel doors, which first make an appearance at the periphery of the reception area. Studios also installed acres of warmth and texture in the form of hemp-colored nylon carpet with a pronounced relief that mimics sisal.

Perhaps the coolest behind-the-scenes design element is the free-floating staircase, a three-story construction of tempered glass, steel, and terrazzo. "Most law firms use a staircase as a statement, right out front," Cohen says. "Studios didn't do that. Our stairway belongs to us, the attorneys, not to the public. It's our realm of collegiality." And another wry touch: How many lawyers do you know who are happy to use the back stairs? 



Back Cover: A staircase with stainless-steel handrails, terrazzo treads, and perforated-steel risers connects the law firm's three floors. The Twist Effect nylon carpet mimics the texture of sisal.

PROJECT TEAM: SANDRA PAGE MITCHELL; FRANCO CHAN; FARNAZ NOURMOHAMMADI.

RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES (CONFERENCE ROOM), SPOTLIGHTS (OFFICE AREA): MARK LIGHTING. CHAIRS (RECEPTION): NIENKÄMPER. TABLE: BERNHARDT. CEILING GRID: HUNTER DOUGLAS. FLOOR LAMP: NESSEN LIGHTING. COVE LIGHTING: LEGION LIGHTING CO. RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES: KURT VERSEN COMPANY. BASE PAINTING (RECEPTION, ELEVATOR LOBBY): EL & EL WOOD PRODUCTS CORP. BOWLS (RECEPTION, CONFERENCE ROOM): BOAR GLASS. SINK FITTINGS (RECEPTION): DORNBRACHT. WALL TILE: ANN SACKS. VASE: UNITED GLASS BLOWING. BENCH UPHOLSTERY (RECEPTION), CHAIR UPHOLSTERY (CONFERENCE ROOMS): SPINNEYBECK. CUSTOM TABLES (CONFERENCE ROOMS): DATESWEISER. CHAIRS: KEILHAUER. GLASS (CONFERENCE ROOMS, ELEVATOR LOBBY): SKYLINE DESIGN. CEILING SYSTEM (STAIRWELL, OFFICE AREA): ARMSTRONG. CHAIR (OFFICE AREA): HUMANSOCALE. RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES: ZUMTOBEL STAFF. WORKSTATION (OFFICE AREA), CASE GOODS (OFFICE): KNOLL. TASK LIGHT (OFFICE): ARTEMIDE. PENDANT FIXTURES (ELEVATOR LOBBY): TECH LIGHTING. CARPET: BENTLEY PRINCE STREET. FLOORING: THROUGH ROVER NORTH AMERICA. METALWORK: WASHINGTON IRON WORKS. MILLWORK: ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORKING COMPANY. CONSULTANTS: ARCHITECTURE & LIGHT (LIGHTING); CIBOLA SYSTEMS (AUDIOVISUAL); MARTIN NEWSON & ASSOCIATES (ACOUSTICAL); JENNY MONBOUQUETTE FINE ART SERVICES (ART). STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: JOHN A. MARTIN & ASSOCIATES. MEP: SYSKA HENNESSY GROUP. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: TASLIMI CONSTRUCTION COMPANY.

