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The Law Office as Indicator and Amplifier of Professional Status

*Fred I. Williams**

I. INTRODUCTION

[T]o see the work as it is one must be able to shift one's attitude in passing from part to part, from one aspect to another, and to enrich the whole progressively in successive perceptions. . . . [We] do not see all of a work when we see it as a whole.¹

Historically, in the common-law tradition, members of the learned professions of medicine, divinity, and law have been considered "set apart" from the population at large. Their separateness is signaled by many factors, including a high regard for humanity and the high level of individual responsibility thought to attend these vocations; distinctive patterns of dress and speech characteristic of each group; and even the style and furnishings of their lodgings and offices. For instance, members of the clergy are often distinguishable on the basis of their dress, such as clerical collars, ceremonial robes, and other accoutrements. Likewise, white laboratory coats and stethoscopes are definite "markers" for physicians.² For attorneys, especially those in the United States, distinguishing characteristics may be somewhat more subtle than those of their counterparts in the other learned professions.³

To truly understand the importance and vitality of the attributes possessed by true professionals, one should recognize the specific characteristics involved. Specifically, true professionals possess esoteric knowledge;⁴ are endowed with authority, or special power by the community;⁵ are governed by a covenant to protect confidences of the client, patient, or devotee;⁶ and are restricted in the exercise of their power to appropriate times and places.⁷ In addition,

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1. STANLEY ABERCROMBIE, *A PHILOSOPHY OF INTERIOR DESIGN* 143 (1990).

2. See generally, *Wear This Stethoscope With Pride (Doctors' Useless Badges of Office)*, *NEW SCIENTIST*, Jan. 30, 1993, at 54-55.

3. However, notwithstanding contrasts among the different professions, and among each individual within a given profession, in each case, the lives, careers, and territories of true professionals are marked by modes and standards of appearance, education, authority, behavior, ethics, and etiquette. See Gerald R. Williams, *Materials on Legal Negotiation and Settlement*, 1 J. DISP. RESOL. 1, 19-22 n.33-38 (1996).

4. *Id.* at 19.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.* at 22 n.37.

7. *Id.* at 22 n.36.

professionals are subject to informal professional norms regarding their appearance, etiquette, and the appearance of their offices.⁸ The purpose of this article is to examine this last factor: the importance of lawyers designing and equipping their offices in a way that appropriately sets the law office apart⁹ as the domain of a professional and as a space in which the attorney's powers may be exercised for the benefit of others. In seeing that his office is appropriately designed and decorated, the lawyer fulfills at least two purposes: he gives a sense of the powers available to be exercised on the client's behalf by the attorney; and, he reminds himself of his obligation to appropriately exercise those powers.¹⁰ Some theorize that the difficulty people experience in making design/decor decisions stems from their own uncertainty about themselves.¹¹ Thus, interior designers may play an important role in the lives of their clients: helping the client to clarify the self and to portray it via design of personal space, including the office.¹²

While designers do not purport to play the role of clinical psychologist, they do have a role in helping their clients regulate how much information about the

8. *Id.* at 19-21 n.33-35. While critics may argue that these defining characteristics stem mainly from the desire of professionals to exhibit themselves on a higher social or economic plane, there is no doubt that the qualities and attributes of the true professional have a much deeper significance than simple career ambition or marketing design.

The ability of lawyers to effectively serve in their roles as healers and warriors depends in large part upon the recognition, by themselves and their clients, of their substantial powers. From this perspective, it is evident that the purpose of these defining characteristics is to remind lawyers and clients of the powers and professional responsibilities that attend the profession.

9. JOAN KRON, HOME-PSYCH: THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF HOME AND DECORATION 46 (1983). "All spaces are not equal. Like the divisions of space made by traditional societies, some of our spaces are sacred, others are profane." *Id.*

10. Williams, *supra* note 3, at 21 n.35 (citing M.L. VON FRANZ ET AL., C.G. JUNG, MAN AND HIS SYMBOLS (1964)).

Viewed from another perspective, office environments may be seen as a form of self-expression, which communicates both to professionals and to others who they are how they relate to the people and world around them.

STUART MILLER & JUDITH K. SCHLITT, INTERIOR SPACE: DESIGN CONCEPTS FOR PERSONAL NEEDS 53 (1985) [hereinafter MILLER & SCHLITT]. "Psychiatrists need only to study the material environment with which individuals surround themselves to secure fresh insights into their relationships to objects, people and ideas." *Id.* WALTER B. KLEEMAN JR., THE CHALLENGE OF INTERIOR DESIGN 136 (1981). Thus the office environment is an important feature of the process of "self-definition."

11. See generally, MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 53.

12. *Id.* At the most obvious level, for example, visitors are able to determine just how conservative or how unconventional their attorney is (or how he wants to be perceived); what his interests are outside the office; if he has a family; how organized he is; how intellectual, or how artistic, he is; or, how highly he thinks of himself. ROGER YEE & KAREN GUSTAFSON, CORPORATE DESIGN: THE INTERIOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE OF CORPORATE AMERICA 162 (1983) [hereinafter YEE & GUSTAFSON].

self is contained in the design of the office; perhaps revealing some things, and withholding others.¹³

To enter the law office is, for many visitors, to enter another world; a world far different from the domain of the ordinary, average human. And while not all clients who visit the law office are of the ordinary, average variety, it is imperative that their host-attorney provide them with an appropriate atmosphere for the discussion of their rights, liabilities, and needs. Accordingly, an important means of creating the appropriate atmosphere is the decor of the law office. On a very complex level, the manner and mode of the lawyer's office design is a powerful vehicle for creating and marking "sacred space," space within which the lawyer's transpersonal commitment to the client is of ultimate importance, such that the lawyer's sole aim becomes the transmission of the client through the vital, enlivening transformative process.¹⁴

The following pages contain a detailed discussion of law office design as an indicator, even amplifier, of professional status and lawyer-client relations. Section II examines the effect that office design can play in defining the lawyer's relationship with clients and other visitors to the office. Section III discusses the power of office design in properly marking the lawyer's office as a professional domain. Finally, Section IV concludes that office decor is an effective communicator of professional status and can be an effective tool for the lawyer in forming the professional persona.

13. *Id.* The clues may be found in obvious places: photographs of the attorney with his boat, dog, child, or a favorite celebrity; the titles of the books on his shelf; his awards or trophies; and the visible signs of his hobbies. *Id.*

The design literature posits that one's home represents the private interior of the inhabitants without the distorting influence of facades or personas. See MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 53. This theory may be less true in the law office, where decor is arranged (in part, at least) to represent to the world the professional qualifications and commitments of the lawyer, a declaration that may not fully reveal the inner self of the inhabitant because of the obvious influence of the "professional" persona. Nonetheless, by personalizing the office space, the lawyer paints an external picture of the Self -- a tangible portrait of who he is. *Id.* at 53-54. Regardless of personal preferences, would-be designers of the law office should avoid designing interiors in a way that the visitor may associate with materialistic pursuits. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 8.

14. The lawyer has a significant duty to protect and defend the client, all the while leading the client through an often painful transformative process, a process designed to heal the "wounds" inflicted upon the client by the conflict that brought her to the lawyer in the first place. Williams, *supra* note 3, at 17-19 n.26-31 (citing James D. Gordon III, *Law Review and the Modern Mind*, 33 ARIZ. L. REV. 265, 271 (1991) & James D. Gordon III et al., *Beyond Technique: The Soul of Family Mediation*, 11 MEDIATION 1 (1993)). The point: lawyers play the inevitable role of healers in leading their clients through this process, and the dereliction of this role would be unthinkable to the true professional. *Id.* at 22 (citing Robert Moore, *Healing the Masculine* (tape on file with C.G. Jung Institute of Chicago, #231, undated)).

II. THE EFFECT OF OFFICE DESIGN ON LAWYER-VISITOR RELATIONSHIPS

[W]hat is truly remarkable is that we are able to comprehend and manipulate all the elements of this rich symbol system as well as we do -- for surely the language of . . . decor is one of the most complex languages in the world. But because of that it is also one of the richest and most expressive means of communication.¹⁵

A. Understanding the "Language" of Interior Design

To begin, the office is composed of much more than its practical functions: it communicates psychological, symbolic, and narrative messages as well.¹⁶ In fact, the office can be seen as a system of symbols, each item having its own meaning: some have a personal meaning, others having social meanings.¹⁷

Some behavioralists assert that the design of an interior space not only communicates with those who enter the space, but will also influence their behavior in significant ways.¹⁸ Scholars even regard the objects or "details" found in an interior as significant components of "the vocabulary" of an interior "sign language," concluding that to lack such items "is to be left out of the conversation."¹⁹ The "total look" of an interior space, then, not only influences the visitor's perceptions of the space, but also the visitor's view of those who use the space and the visitor's expectations about what to do in the space.²⁰ To this end, the very organization of the office - its layout, furnishings, and equipment - defines the situation and instructs the guest how to behave appropriately, thus simplifying the interaction and making the visit more predictable for the visitor.²¹ From this perspective, it is undeniable that office components such as furniture, structural elements, and accoutrements affect the way that people perceive the office.²²

B. Applying the "Language" of Interior Design to the Law Office

15. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 20.

16. ABERCROMBIE, *supra* note 1, at 15.

17. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 19.

18. Some even go so far as to assert that the interior design of a room is the only behavioral determinant. See KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 128.

19. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 20.

20. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 142.

21. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 46. As a result, the visitor can tell from the arrangement and care given the office, its reception area, or even the building's lobby or facade, that, at least, he is not "supposed to come in here with [his] dirty jeans and throw [his] leg over the arm of the chair or put [his] boots on the coffee table." *Id.* at 47.

22. See MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 12.

In reality, the law office is just space, albeit space where confidences are revealed and discussed, where solutions to conflict are sought, where the ethereal rule of law is applied to real-life encounters. Thus, the law office constitutes a significant portion of the stage on which lawyers play out their lives and those of their clients. Given this fact, the interior design of one's office can be thought of as a "silent partner" in preparing the office for the exercise of the lawyer's power.²³

Many lawyers understand the system of symbols that may be communicated via office design. As a result, they furnish their offices with appropriate items, not because of some mindless materialism or showmanship, but rather because these objects are essential means of facilitating communication.²⁴ And while the visitor may not always agree with what the lawyer "says" through his office decor, the point is that "where there are possessions, there is always discourse."²⁵ Thus, while utilitarian considerations certainly contribute to any satisfactory law-office design plan, they are only the starting points of successful design.²⁶

Being responsive to the needs of office visitors is essential if the lawyer wishes to form new relationships and maintain existing ones.²⁷ Visitors often feel constrained when they encounter unfamiliar people or territory,²⁸ a phenomenon that occurs every time a prospective client or new client visits a lawyer.²⁹ Because these feelings of constraint tend to interfere with communication between lawyer and client,³⁰ it may be important for lawyers to offer visitors the opportunity to experience some sense of control or choice during their visit. For example, if the office contains more than one seating area, the lawyer may allow the visitor to choose whether they will sit in the desk area, at a conference table, or across from each other at a coffee table. The presence of several furniture/seating options allows the actors to regulate the distance and physical barriers between one another and may give visitors a choice of seating that accommodates different body types.³¹ However offered, the opportunity for the visitor to exercise some choice in defining her communications with the attorney will help to make the visitor feel that the attorney cares enough about her to create suitable conditions for a comfortable exchange.³²

23. See KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 137; see also *supra* note 8 and accompanying text (reflecting on professionals' special powers and appropriate places for their exercise).

24. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 19-20.

25. *Id.* at 20.

26. ABERCROMBIE, *supra* note 1, at 15.

27. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 157.

28. *Id.*

29. With this fact in mind, it is often imperative depending on the nature and background of the lawyer's clientele to avoid the appearance of pretentious materialism in the law office. The sensitive response to this predicament is to realize that each design purchase or decision embodies unavoidable issues of taste, morality, values, and appropriateness. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 5.

30. See MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 157.

31. See *id.* and *infra* notes 70-73 and accompanying text.

32. See generally *id.*

In the end, a well-designed and well-maintained office is essential, regardless of the brief nature of some visitors' stays in the office:

Because a visitor's exposure to the office is brief, you may think that he does not notice substandard efficiency and comfort. But you have to consider that the visitor is not accustomed to the particular office situation and is therefore likely to be more sensitive to problems and shortcomings. You may be accustomed to a glaring light, an uncomfortable chair, surrounding noise or a clutter of paperwork. But to a visitor, these can be quite unsettling. Any of these may lead the visitor to believe that the office is not adequate to fulfill the need for which he came into it. And that is a reflection on your own adequacy.³³

C. Toward Creating an Aesthetically Pleasing Law-Office Environment

People want to present themselves from their best angle because they suspect that others make judgments using every clue they can see, hear, or sense to sum up the situation. And their suspicions are correct. Numerous studies have shown that individuals equate certain qualities in rooms with their occupants.³⁴

Behavioral research reveals that when people are encountered in aesthetically pleasing environments, the positive feelings elicited by the positive setting are reflected onto the person met in such an environment.³⁵ There is also evidence that people prefer natural settings to built environments; in fact, "nature" is often characterized as an aesthetically pleasing element of interior design.³⁶ And, while there is risk in relying on universal principles, especially considering the expected individual differences in people's response to any design element, there appears to be a well-documented distinction based on the natural versus the artificial content of interior environments.³⁷ Among the techniques that may be used to create interiors that are high in "naturalness" are:

1. natural light, which design experts urge "whenever possible;" in rooms that get little or no sun, simulations and substitution should be

33. DECORATING YOUR OFFICE FOR SUCCESS 8 (John Pile, ed. 1982) [hereinafter Pile].

34. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 61.

35. MILLER & SCHLITZ, *supra* note 10, at 147. Research has further indicated that a decline in room aesthetics may result in a decline in affiliation between the actors involved. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 124.

37. *Id.*

- considered, including lamps strong in the yellow-red range or a "sunrise effect" created by appropriate lighting configurations;³⁸
2. a "sky effect," either via skylight, where possible, by simulation, or even by accentuating the skyline views from office-tower windows;³⁹
 3. natural materials, including wood on walls,⁴⁰ floors,⁴¹ and furnishings;⁴²
 4. natural colors, whose effect can be enhanced by using colors that come from natural sources (e.g., plants, flowers, natural materials) representing local geography or other, more distant, favorite places;
 5. water and vegetation, the incorporation of which may include plants⁴³ or even fountains.⁴⁴

Research on increasing "naturalness" by placing windows in a room is most interesting: people evaluate rooms as being "more friendly and inviting" when a window is present than when it is absent.⁴⁵ A number of factors account for the increase in aesthetics resulting from windows in the office or elsewhere: windows provide desired contact with nature; they offer access to sources of varied stimulation; and, they expand visual space.⁴⁶

In addition, experimental research on the aesthetics of interior environments has revealed that people generally prefer intermediate degrees of visual stimulation in an environment or room.⁴⁷ According to this research, a certain amount of complexity is beneficial, as it maintains a desirable level of arousal in visitors, but too much complexity in an office may induce uncertainty and have other adverse effects.⁴⁸ Some theorists interpret this data as showing an aesthetic correlation between the need for variety and the need for order in the interior environment.⁴⁹

D. Aesthetic Lessons for Lawyers

Given the fact that visitors experience strong positive feelings when they encounter others in an aesthetically pleasing environment, the visitors (whether clients, friends, colleagues, or opponents) may come to associate the positive

38. *Id.* at 124, 149.

39. *See id.* at 124.

40. *See, e.g.,* YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 199; JUDITH PRICE, EXECUTIVE STYLE 18 (1980).

41. *See, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 176; YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 206.

42. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 124; *see also, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 168.

43. *See, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 12.

44. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 125.

45. *Id.* at 149. Not surprisingly, this "friendliness effect" seems to increase with the size of the window(s) and/or with the view that is seen through the window(s). *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.* at 126.

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.* at 147.

feelings of the office with the lawyer himself, as if the lawyer's essence is somehow enhanced by the bliss of his surroundings. In addition, people will have a greater desire to affiliate with the lawyer in the attractive setting of his office than in other, less-attractive places.⁵⁰ This factor would seem relevant to nearly every interpersonal contact the lawyer has.

The layout of the traditional inner law office, where the attorney receives visitors, is characteristically bounded on two or three sides by interior walls, with the third and/or fourth wall containing exterior windows. This layout symbolizes protection, closeness, and intimacy to the visiting client.⁵¹ Of course, visitors to the same office may associate its bounded layout with restriction, confinement, and formality.⁵² This second, more negative reaction to the office layout can be expected, and may not necessarily portend client discomfort or rebellion. After all, the lawyer-client relationship is designed to be one of restrictions, confinements, and formalities.⁵³ Such is the historical development of the relationship, and properly so. It is simply important for the lawyer to keep in mind the possibility of a negative reaction to closed office space, in order to accommodate the client's needs perhaps by meeting in a conference room where the atmosphere is lighter and more open, or by seating the client on a couch or comfortable chair beside a coffee table rather than in front of the lawyer's formal desk.⁵⁴

The aforementioned research on naturalness as an enhancer of aesthetics and, accordingly, as an amplifier of interpersonal affiliation,⁵⁵ would seem to provide validation for the apparent policies of many larger law firms, which call for all attorneys to have "window offices" and for high-status members of the firm to occupy "corner offices," with two or more walls of windows.⁵⁶ And while not all lawyers would or should choose to include fountains or entire gardens in their office design, it is fortunate, and perhaps not altogether coincidental, that lawyers' offices are traditionally replete with other items high in "naturalness" content. For instance, rare is the private practice law office without natural light from exterior windows, and quite commonly, the elevation of those windows may provide vistas of the surrounding skyscape, bounded by the horizon.

In addition, plants are a fairly common feature of the law office, whether they are found in the lawyer's inner office or in the common areas of the firm; likewise, natural colors traditionally pervade the law office landscape. Deep, rich greens, blues, and browns quickly come to mind. And perhaps the most typical "naturalness" element of the law office is the frequent presence of wood:

50. *See id.* Also, people tend to respond favorably to improvements in room decor. *Id.*

51. *Id.* at 123.

52. *Id.*

53. *See generally*, Williams, *supra* note 3 (discussing boundaries and boundary violations, client confidences and appropriate times and places).

54. *See supra* notes 31-33 and accompanying text.

55. *See generally supra* Section II.C., notes 33-45 and accompanying text.

56. *See YEE & GUSTAFSON, supra* note 12, at 11.

hardwood floors, wood paneling (hopefully more often genuine than simulated) on the walls, large wooden desks and chairs, etc. In short, the law office often is a sanctuary of natural essence, brimming with subtle references to natural things and places. And the common reaction to such environments is likely to be relaxation, comfort, and relative pleasure, which are not entirely undesirable reactions from clients and prospective clients, colleagues, etc. Thus, if it is the lawyer's goal to provide a pleasing and comforting atmosphere for visitors, it makes sense to design the office with natural elements prominently exhibited.

As for the role of complexity in office design,⁵⁷ the implications for lawyers who desire to create aesthetically pleasing office space are several. Both simplicity-based design and elaborate decor have adverse effects when overdone, and thus the preferable setting is somewhere between the two extremes. The contents of the office should be plentiful enough and interesting enough to keep the visitor's interest, but not so numerous or engaging as to overwhelm or detract. Each lawyer's personal space should vary in some degree from that of his partners and associates. Last, but not least, the lawyer's desk should be somewhat organized -- neither squalid nor pristine, but perhaps somewhere in between.

III. THE LAW OFFICE AS PROFESSIONAL-STATUS COMMUNICATOR

"Settling in a territory is equivalent to founding a world." Thus each time we set up housekeeping in a new place, . . . we organize the space according to our *imago mundi* -- our image of the world. We create a microcosm of the world according to our values and beliefs.⁵⁸

While the functional capabilities of offices have always figured prominently in office design, the symbolic qualities and powers of the office have typically received far less attention.⁵⁹ One of the most powerful symbolic qualities of the office is its status level, an important consideration in law office design. Clients, potential clients, colleagues, and friends may have certain expectations with regard to the status of an attorney, expectations that may be fulfilled simply by the inclusion of appropriate design elements in the lawyer's office. And while status markers are often a means of competition among individuals, the important nature of "status" in the law office relates to the *professional* status of the lawyer, rather than his relative economic or social standing.

As one writer has noted, in discussing items of economic or social status, "Even a brief discussion of the status drive in office design makes most of us realize its absurdity. The notion that displaying status-identified symbols will in

57. See *supra*, Section I.L.C., notes 46-48 and accompanying text.

58. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 45-46.

59. Ellen Konar & Eric Sundstrom, *Status Demarcation and Office Design*, in *BEHAVIORAL ISSUES IN OFFICE DESIGN* 203 (Jean D. Wineman, ed. 1986). But see KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 128-43.

itself create elevated status is as illogical as believing that wearing expensive clothing will make the wearer rich.⁶⁰ Thus, while at a superficial level people might characterize the display of status symbols (home, clothing, or automobile) as a primary means of competing with others ("keeping up with the Joneses"),⁶¹ their display in the law office should be of a more fundamental nature. In essence, the status symbols in the lawyer's office should communicate that he is a qualified professional in every sense. The prospective client should thereby be reassured that the lawyer can competently handle the legal matter at hand.⁶²

A status marker can be any characteristic of the law office that, because of its relative scarcity and value, its long-term association with the profession or with individuals of a given status level, comes to indicate status.⁶³ It is important to realize that such objects are cherished not necessarily because of the comfort they provide but for the information they convey about the owner.⁶⁴ Traditionally recognized status markers are important ingredients of self and tend to fall into several distinct categories: allocation of space; quantity and quality of furnishings; relative location; degree of privacy; and personalization.⁶⁵

A. Space

Anyone watching the anxious faces when space allocations are being made prior to an organization's move can't help recognizing the tremendous importance space plays in our lives. Space allocations are inevitably and quite correctly read as a type of communication.⁶⁶

60. Pile, *supra* note 33, at 14.

61. See generally KRON, *supra* note 9, at 16. It is worth re-emphasizing that the status markers discussed in this paper are not competitive pawns in some materialistic life-game; they are the genuine markers of the true professional, items used to adorn the lawyer's office in an appropriate and symbolic way. Thus, their accumulation should be borne of a selfless aim to serve as a professional, rather than as a selfish means to some materialistic end. *Id.*

62. The client may, on the other hand, interpret the status symbols in the law office as indicators of relative status among several attorneys, including those in the same firm, and may demand that a higher status lawyer handle his matter. See generally *id.*

63. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 206. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 16. Relevant to this discussion is the Jungian concept of symbols as representatives of archetypal patterns and power, to which, whether consciously or not, humans are preconditioned to respond to.

64. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 18.

65. See generally Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 206. For a sample listing of common law-office status markers, see ALVIN E. PALMER & M. SUSAN LEWIS, PLANNING THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT 138-39 (1966). The increasing prevalence of high technology in the typical law office may create an additional category, which might be called extra amenities and facilities. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 206. The entry of high-technology items, varying in desirability, scarcity, and value, into the law office makes this category more prominent than it once might have been. See *id.* at 210.

66. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 143 (quoting Edward T. Hall, *preface in* LEON A. PASTALAN ET AL., SPATIAL BEHAVIOR OF OLDER PEOPLE (1970)).

While lawyers, like most any other working person, seek the rise in personal status that comes from being "promoted" to a larger office,⁶⁷ it is important that they temper their ever-increasing office-size with an appropriate measure of "coziness." After all, test subjects describe the ideal room as "spacious but cozy,"⁶⁸ indicating that the mere enormity of one's office will not fully accomplish the goal of making the space pleasing to visitors. The ideal mix of spaciousness and coziness in the law office would likely involve a large enough space to indicate the attorney's professional status and success, as well as sufficient personalizing effects to induce ease and comfort in the client.⁶⁹

The methods of mixing space and comfort are numerous. One popular method is the placement of small, intimate spaces in a larger, open area.⁷⁰ For example, placing several "meeting" areas in one room: the formal, often authoritative "desk area"⁷¹ with two or more chairs in front of the desk for visitors and one (usually larger)⁷² chair behind the desk for the attorney; the less formal "conference area," which usually consists of an oval or rectangular conference table with identical chairs for people who will ostensibly work together as equals or partners on the matter at hand; and a more informal "reception area," containing two or more comfortable chairs surrounding a coffee table or area rug.⁷³ One constant among each of the three aforementioned seating areas in the office is that the general positioning of chairs in each of the three are signals to visitors that "no excessive intimacy is expected" from their visit.⁷⁴

A second method for infusing coziness into a spacious room is the incorporation of intimate lighting, warm colors, comfortable seating, and circular arrangements,⁷⁵ in order to portray the office as a warm, friendly environment. Attorneys attempt this method with success, although it seems somewhat contrary to the staid, traditional, authoritative picture that some attorneys appear to prefer. In any case, it is up to the individual to determine the method that best suits his practice, personality, and firm.

B. Furnishings

67. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 143.

68. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 153.

69. Office space should be sufficient to satisfy the lawyer's "needs for affiliation, achievement, success, and other complex issues." KRON, *supra* note 9, at 38. In addition, there must be enough space to acquire and situate the objects that help define the office's occupant. *Id.*

70. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 153.

71. *See infra* notes 94-99 and accompanying text.

72. *See infra* note 80 and accompanying text. *But see* YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 160-61 ("Note that the executive's chair appears to be no more grand than the visitor's chairs.").

73. *See, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 39, at 12.

74. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 142.

75. *See infra* note 94.

Two windows are always better than one, marble tables generally outrank standard wood tables, and both marble and wood outrank metal. The thickness of the carpet is directly related to status level.⁷⁶

The nature of even the most essential office furnishings serves to indicate the status of the lawyer⁷⁷ and further communicate aspects of his professional person. Typical office furnishings (e.g., desks, chairs, file cabinets, bookshelves and credenzas) come in a wide variety of sizes, materials, and styles, and much of this variation is relevant to status.⁷⁸ From the design perspective, there are several general rules.

First, status is usually directly correlated to size:⁷⁹ the larger the desk or chair, the higher the status of its possessor.⁸⁰ Second, the status relevance of furnishing materials is based on simple economics.⁸¹ The common choice of attorneys, wood, is generally more expensive than metal, and is therefore more likely to be found in the offices of high-status individuals.⁸² Similarly, leather is more expensive than vinyl, cloth, or plastic, and thus more likely to be found on the upholstery in a high-status office. To put it succinctly: natural materials, including wood, stone, and leather, suggest substance, endurance and tradition; their synthetic counterparts suggest the opposite qualities.⁸³ Thus, a large mahogany desk with a wingback leather-tufted chair,⁸⁴ the traditional, perhaps stereotypical, choice of the well-healed attorney, communicates a much higher status than do the small metal desk and armless, cloth or vinyl swivel-chair of the stereotypical government attorney.⁸⁵

Third, the style of furnishings indicates the possessor's status: in the case of high-status *modern* furniture, the typical furnishings are sleek, functional pieces, complimented by abstract paintings and sculpture,⁸⁶ and, in the case of high-status *traditional* furnishings, the most common pieces are French or early American pieces, with such varied accoutrements as plants and fireplaces.⁸⁷ The style of an office's furniture often suggests a desired personal or corporate image; period pieces and period reproductions, true antiques, or new pieces that are faithful copies of antiques, can distinguish an office.⁸⁸ Finally, the construction

76. Pile, *supra* note 33, at 14.

77. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 206.

78. *Id.* at 207.

79. *Id.*

80. *Contra*, e.g., PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 168.

81. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 207.

82. *Id.* See, e.g., PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 176.

83. YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 163.

84. See, e.g., PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 12.

85. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 207; Kleeman, *supra* note 10, at 143.

86. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 138. See Yee & Gustafson, *supra* note 12, at 166 ("Modern design is usually thought of as clean in line and honest in feeling.")

87. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 139.

88. YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 163.

features of furnishings also indicate status: handcrafted and custom-detailed pieces are higher status than their machine-produced, standard counterparts.⁸⁹

The presence of more and varied furnishings in the offices of high-status members of a firm may actually serve useful, rather than purely egotistical, purposes.⁹⁰ For instance, a higher-ranking attorney may need more seating and additional workspaces for meeting and doing work with others,⁹¹ similarly, the higher ranking attorney's more frequent contact with prospective clients and corporate executives may justify the large conference table and corner office. At the same time, it is important to remember that the inclusion of more and better furnishings in the office can be taken too far. By emphasizing elegance to the extreme, the lawyer may be signaling nothing more than vanity or inflation, and such overindulgence may work decidedly against his ability to provide a suitable sacred space for the client and himself.

In reality, the inappropriate injection of status markers may have nothing to do with whether the lawyer's office represents sacred space for his clients, a fact that must be acknowledged at all times during the design process. However, among status markers, items that may be especially relevant for designating sacred space are minor office furnishings, which also tend to indicate status. Furnishings that often denote status include the size, number, and materials of desk ornaments, waste baskets, clothes racks, draperies, and phones, as well as the presence of luxury items, including rugs,⁹² paintings, credenzas, fireplaces,⁹³ coffee tables, and couches.⁹⁴ Furnishings associated with homes rather than work also tend to indicate high status,⁹⁵ while lending an aura of coziness and domestic warmth that may enhance the potential for creating sacred space.

One of the most powerful elements of the law office's decor is the attorney's desk.⁹⁶ The desk is likely to be the main focal point of activity in the office, a stationary object that creates a "sense of place," in designers' terms.⁹⁷ Accordingly, the desk functions as the centerpiece of the lawyer's work.⁹⁸ The

89. *Id.*

90. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 207.

91. *Id.*

92. *See, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 12.

93. *See, e.g.,* KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 139.

94. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 207.

95. *Id.* *See also* KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 138. And, while newness often indicates status in some items, like automobiles, when office furnishings are old, to the point of being considered antiques, they frequently indicate high status. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 207.

96. The innumerable designs and variations of desks that are available on the market make it possible for the attorney to communicate any number of signals to office visitors simply through the appearance of the desk. A circular or oval desk, for example, makes those seated around it more likely to see themselves as part of a group with each member possessing equal status. *See, e.g.,* PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 69; MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 150; YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 12, at 168 (observing that round desks de-emphasize hierarchical structure).

97. *See* MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 12.

98. *See generally id.*; PALMER & LEWIS, *supra* note 64, at 237 ("Filled bookshelves provide warmth and interest and are appropriate to almost any room . . .").

atmospheric influences of the lawyer's work zone on the overall feeling of the office space likely vary as widely as the millions of lawyers who inhabit these spaces.

The desk area generally does much more than provide something to look at; it provides the locus for interaction between lawyers and clients, and with other attorneys and visitors.⁹⁹ The psychological foundation of the desk as focal point is clear, since it is an object that attempts to bring people together in a natural or comfortable way.¹⁰⁰ Of course, the exact configuration of the desk area and the particular features of the desk and attendant seating may have considerable effect on just how naturally or comfortably a lawyer and visitor relate when seated. Notwithstanding those variables, the desk area can often have a comforting effect on the interpersonal communications that take place there. The actors' presence in the desk area (one seated behind the desk, and one or more seated in front of it) signals that they have something to talk about, something to share, and perhaps something in common; neither visitor nor lawyer need feel self-conscious during the office visit, as either can choose to focus on the activity, on the people, or on both.¹⁰¹

Like desks, chairs by themselves can often be highly expressive.¹⁰² Historically, chairs were strictly seats of the mighty, literally seats of power, and did not become a standard article of furniture until the 16th century.¹⁰³ The use of chairs as symbols of absolute or relative power is well established.¹⁰⁴ For illustrative purposes, consider the terms "county seat," "stock exchange seat," and the fact that judges are referred to by the "bench" upon which they sit.¹⁰⁵ Even everyday chairs possessing no mystical significance can be powerful indicators of status and position.¹⁰⁶ In fact, office furniture dealers must offer carefully graded series of office chairs, graded both in terms of comfort and in terms of back height.¹⁰⁷ Typically, the highest back and the most comfortable seat belongs to the top person in the organization.¹⁰⁸ Additional status content is derived from the chair's materials, the higher-status materials being leather, wood, and some metals.

C. Relative Location

99. *Id.* at 150.

100. *See generally id.*

101. *Id.*

102. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 142. *See, e.g.,* ABERCROMBIE, *supra* note 1, at 75.

103. *Id.*

104. *See id.; see, e.g.,* ABERCROMBIE, *supra* note 1, at 15 ("In a courtroom . . . 'the furniture arrangement will tell you who has what authority.'").

105. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 142.

106. *But see* YEE & GUSTAFSON, *supra* note 10, at 160-61.

107. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 142-43.

108. *Id.* at 143.

It is said that corner spaces are "powerful," in that they symbolize the ideas of protection from the rear, along with prestige of "visible amenity" (windows on two sides). And it is true that locations closer to corner locations are likely to be closer to power, both literally and symbolically, than locations in the center of a row of spaces. Locations in the center of a sea of cubicles are obviously undesirable on any basis.¹⁰⁹

The location of an attorney's office may suggest the individual's status.¹¹⁰ Some locations may be considered "intrinsically desirable."¹¹¹ For example, a corner office may possess intrinsic value because it is removed from office "traffic" and because it offers multiple views of the outside world.¹¹² In addition, in high-rise office towers, lower-status individuals or firms usually are located closer to ground level than their higher-status counterparts.¹¹³ Other locations apparently derive their high status from their relative location to other "things of value," (for example, proximity to an important partner's office or to the courthouse).¹¹⁴

D. Privacy

While "privacy" may not have a simple meaning for all people,¹¹⁵ its maintenance is of utmost concern in the law office. And clearly, privacy is one of the most important concerns underlying proper law office design, given the necessity of protecting client identities and confidences.¹¹⁶ Admittedly, the lawyer needs varying degrees of privacy for various office tasks,¹¹⁷ e.g., sharing client confidences, planning legal strategy, or dictating correspondence. The ideally designed office will allow for the needed variation.¹¹⁸ Privacy is not

109. Pile, *supra* note 33, at 28.

110. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 208; KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 143. Alternatively, an individual's office location may have more practical justifications. For example, an organization may choose to keep the offices of people who have many outside visitors near the work area entrance. See WILBERT O. GALITZ, *THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT: AUTOMATION'S IMPACT ON TOMORROW'S WORKPLACE* 95 (1984).

111. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 208.

112. *Id.*

113. *Id.*

114. *See id. Contra* Galitz, *supra* note 107, at 95 (suggesting that people who communicate frequently should be stationed close together).

115. *See* MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 26.

116. It may be helpful to think of privacy not as "I want to be alone," but as one's right to regulate the amount of information that is communicated to others and to control access to the self, which is the essence of individuality and freedom. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 27.

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.* at 28.

simply an element of interior design, however, it may actually be the key to appreciating the meaning of an office's design.¹¹⁹

The degree of privacy or control over access to the office serves as an important status marker.¹²⁰ The higher the individual's status, the more private her office and the greater her control over access to the office.¹²¹ Private offices indicate high status because they offer occupants the greatest control over access to the office. By closing the door, the private office occupant is able to effectively discourage intrusions.¹²²

Since lawyers and their clients must have privacy, it is not surprising that the common lawyer's office is shielded by several privacy-ensuring systems: a receptionist at the front door to screen visitors and callers; a secretary in front of the office to screen both calls and visitors; an electronic intercom-phone system to advise the attorney of visitors and calls; and, a private office with a closing door.¹²³ Because a lawyer generally has exclusive control over his office, the office itself becomes an effective privacy mechanism. All of the office's parts (walls, doors, furnishings, possessions) can be used to the lawyer's advantage in this regard.¹²⁴ Each element of privacy is an effective marker of the lawyer's individual space and territory, from which the lawyer can exclude practically anyone he wishes.

E. Personalization

We create environments that are extensions of ourselves, that serve to tell us who we are, and act as role models for what we can become.¹²⁵

The opportunity to personalize one's workspace is a subtle status marker in the office.¹²⁶ In fact, the freedom to add one's personal effects, or "details," (e.g., photographs, plants, works of art), tends to be restricted to relatively high-status individuals.¹²⁷ It is likely that almost all attorneys in private practice

119. See *id.* at 26.

120. Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 209.

121. *Id.*

122. *Id.* Occupants also use etiquette and "house rules" to control access to their offices: one attorney may make it known that drop-ins are welcome, while another may insist on appointments. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 32.

123. In fact, to regulate degrees of privacy, people employ an entire repertoire of privacy mechanisms, all of which add up to a privacy "system": words, gestures, body language, customs, the "bubble of space around us," and even other people, including bodyguards, butlers, and appointment secretaries. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 28.

124. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 29. However, if the level of privacy the lawyer seeks is different from the privacy he receives, the result is discomfort. *Id.* at 32.

125. *Id.* at 52.

126. See Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 209. Social scientists use the term "personalizing" when referring to the activity most people refer to as "decorating" or "interior design." KRON, *supra* note 9, at 44.

127. See, e.g., PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 12.

enjoy such freedom¹²⁸ and, therefore, such a *hystatus* level. This general freedom of attorneys may contrast starkly with the rights of lower-status law firm employees, or even government attorneys, to personalize their work areas.¹²⁹

Personalizing serves to mark the lawyer's office with symbols both of himself and of his special powers.¹³⁰ By personalizing his office, the lawyer puts his personal stamp on the space and its contents.¹³¹ This stamp helps the lawyer to assert his individual identity as well as his allegiance to a higher cause or larger group.¹³² In addition, personalizing the office environment lets others know where the office occupant's boundaries begin and end.¹³³

Perhaps the most powerful and common use of personalization in the law office is the display of diplomas and bar admission certificates. While the business world generally views these items as "having no place in the executive office,"¹³⁴ their display in the law office is quite another matter. The presence of these signals of the lawyer's professional qualification and licensure is vital, indeed, to setting the lawyer apart as a qualified, trusted professional. And in fact, few law office walls are found lacking these important markers. As noted by design theorists, "things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide but for the information they convey about the owner."¹³⁵ Thus, the communicative value of the law school diploma and certificates announcing the lawyer's admission to practice law in a particular jurisdiction or before particular courts is great. Thus, the value of those items can be immeasurable to the attorney.

Generally speaking, the law office is the home base for the lawyer's career, and the lawyer must recognize that the office expresses his style and personality.¹³⁶ In fact, people will "size him up" by the appearance of his office

128. See, e.g., *id.* at 177.

129. See Konar & Sundstrom, *supra* note 58, at 209. Konar & Sundstrom note the status-relevant aspect of "personalization freedom."

Although freedom of this type is not costly and can easily be provided to all, common practices in large offices is to restrict lower status individuals from engaging in such practices. For example, secretaries are often asked to refrain from posting photographs and other personal items that are commonplace to executive offices. These artifacts may signal to others something about the degree to which the individual can influence his or her own lifespaces and their use is therefore limited to reflect organizational realities.

Id. at 209-10 (citation omitted).

130. See KRON, *supra* note 9, at 29, 52-53.

131. *Id.* at 44. ("When [personalizing, you are] tailoring your space to your image, monogramming it with your crest, imprinting it with your . . . spirit, personality, and life style.")

132. See *id.* at 29.

133. *Id.* at 44.

134. PRICE, *supra* note 40, at 22.

135. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 18.

136. Pile, *supra* note 40, at 9.

as easily as by the other clues he gives to his character.¹³⁷ For example, dark wall paneling may give rise to an assumption that the lawyer is somewhat conservative and that he relates to other people in a reserved, conventional manner; a dingy, disorganized office will suggest that the lawyer is an ineffective cog in a machine; if the office is neat and clean, but identical to all the others in its row, the visitor will assume that the lawyer is effective in his role, but totally interchangeable with anyone else in the firm. While these assumptions may be completely erroneous, the fact that people make them is a fact that lawyers cannot afford to disregard.¹³⁸

Most importantly, the visitor will automatically assume that the office is exactly to the inhabitant's liking. What is more, visitors will assume that the lawyer's office is the way it is because he wants it that way.¹³⁹ The visitor will use the office's condition to form an impression of the lawyer's personality and style.¹⁴⁰ Although time may enable the attorney's true abilities and qualities to outweigh anything that the office alone may express, many situations, e.g., the visit of a prospective client, will not offer the attorney sufficient opportunity to overcome any bad first impression that the office has made.¹⁴¹

The display of personal information in the office suggests a willingness on the part of the attorney to share himself with others.¹⁴² This willingness tends to put others at ease and also serves to stimulate open, self-disclosing communication between visitor and inhabitant, just the type of discourse that would seem to encourage full and frank discussion between client and lawyer.¹⁴³ Perhaps not surprisingly, a person who fails to personalize his personal space may be stigmatized. However, it is imperative that the display of personal information not be overdone to the point of distracting the client from his purpose in seeking legal counsel.

Details have a character of their own that should be used to reinforce the overall impression that the lawyer wants the office to make.¹⁴⁴ In other words, the design "attitude" of the office cannot be abandoned once the furniture, window coverings, and carpet have been selected according to plan. This attitude must continue and "inform the most minute parts of [the] design if the result is to be

137. *Id.* This "sizing" process may begin as soon as the visitor arrives in the office's neighborhood, where the visitor begins to form an impression of the firm and lawyer. *Id.* at 11. The process continues as the visitor is exposed to the building, entrance, lobby, and reception area of the office. *Id.* Needless to say, the least an attorney can do is ensure that his inner office is not a discouraging letdown, stylistically speaking.

138. Pile, *supra* note 40, at 12.

139. *Id.* at 9.

140. *Id.*

141. *See id.*

142. *See* MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 157.

143. *Id.*

144. ABERCROMBIE, *supra* note 1, at 143.

coherent.¹⁴⁵ Put another way, inappropriate details can have a destructive effect on the design of the office,¹⁴⁶ so the attentive lawyer or designer will pay attention to include only those details that support and reinforce the message sought to be conveyed by the office as a whole. Interestingly, understanding the "language" of details comes more naturally than one might expect; deciphering the symbolic messages of any detail is a naturally intuitive function that is easily employed by many.¹⁴⁷

The presence of details in the office can affect the feelings of attorneys as well. Design theorists posit that people's possessions give them a sense of security and stability. They remind them who they are.¹⁴⁸ They make them feel "in control."¹⁴⁹ Further, possessions may remind their owner of happy occasions or affirm what the owner believes in, thereby providing a bond between object and owner.¹⁵⁰ And the more she controls an object, the more it is a part of her.¹⁵¹ Without familiar objects in the office, the attorney may feel disoriented, detached, or even faceless.¹⁵² In other words, the presence of personal effects may make the office a more welcome sight for the attorney himself.

Although a display of objects serves primarily to satisfy identity and aesthetic needs, the personalization of the office environment also facilitates sociability and reduces feelings of social crowding.¹⁵³ For example, photographs often draw visitors closer; their presence in the room also gives the visitor the choice of interacting with others or, comfortably and legitimately, withdrawing from interaction to concentrate on the photographs.¹⁵⁴ The potential heartening effect of displays of this type, whether photographs, artwork, trophies, plaques, diplomas, or bar admission certificates, can be heightened by the appropriate use of accent lighting to call attention to interesting objects.¹⁵⁵ To this end, scholars agree that original art and custom art pieces are used by businesses generally, and law firms specifically, to promote an image of solid respectability with progress.¹⁵⁶ The effect should not be overdone, however, since distracting displays of this type may cause a decline in affiliation between attorney and visitor, especially if the visitor is a stranger.¹⁵⁷

145. *Id.* After all, "any interior design, beyond an infinitesimally brief first impression, is an amalgam of many ingredients that are experienced individually." *Id.*

146. *Id.*

147. *Id.* at 145-46.

148. KRON, *supra* note 9, at 56.

149. *Id.* at 15, 56.

150. *Id.* at 56.

151. *Id.* at 15. "To the outsider, the vase or the book or the plate is just that, but to the resident, the cherished item fairly glows with significance." *Id.* at 56.

152. *Id.* at 51-52.

153. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 10, at 156.

154. *Id.*

155. *Id.*

156. KLEEMAN, *supra* note 10, at 140.

157. MILLER & SCHLITT, *supra* note 12, at 157.

The personalization of the office arising from the attorney's display of personal objects also tends to structure the attorney-client discourse by suggesting appropriate topics of conversation, informing the client of proper forms of behavior, and creating certain moods.¹⁵⁸ For example, the presence of a personal photograph on the attorney's credenza, perhaps picturing the attorney and a prominent social or political figure, would seem to indicate to visitors conversation topics that are both appropriate and inappropriate. In contrast, a garish movie poster on the wall would similarly send a powerful message as to how the lawyer wishes to be treated.¹⁵⁹ A more subtle message might be communicated by the presence of a deliberately selected work of art, the subject matter of which might reflect a welcoming feeling.¹⁶⁰ Attorneys can exercise some control over the nature of the interaction between themselves and visitors by choosing to personalize the office area with environmental messages to those who visit; the challenge is understanding the effects of each personalizing choice and then making appropriate selections.

IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, the design and contents of the law office communicate far more than just the individual attorney's taste in furnishings. It may not be an overstatement, in fact, to say that each element, each detail, in the office communicates something about the attorney, his firm, his law practice, his clientele, his relationship with other people and the community. By keeping these facts in mind, the thoughtful attorney will be guided in design decisions and may thereby further illuminate his professional qualification and personal attributes. In so doing, the lawyer may more fully execute his professional duty to be an effective counselor and advocate.

158. *Id.*

159. *See id.*

160. *See id.* For example, a painting of a landscape or a picture of the attorney and his family.