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ESTABLISHED 1872

Hub-Based Architecture Firm Reinvents the Mobile Office

By Jeff Stein

WHEN A VISITOR STEPS OFF THE ELEVATOR into the new offices of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott Architects at 2 Seaport Lane in Boston, the first sensation is “fresh air.”

The next, once eyes adjust to full-spectrum natural daylight flooding the company’s 12th-floor workplace (SBRA also occupies the 11th floor), is “view.” Among the highlights are Logan International Airport and the gentle curve of Boston Harbor as the city’s ocean edge follows South Boston to the Financial District and then to the North End. The whole of the city is right there, breathtaking, on the other side of nearly continuous windows along all four exterior walls.

There are no barriers to all this light and view and air throughout the nearly 30,000 square feet of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver-certified space on each floor. No cubicles, few tall partitions, no separate offices whatsoever; 180 employees, all ages, many backgrounds, both genders, various levels of expertise; and it is really, really quiet. There is one more thing about this place, and it begins to appear as one’s gaze lowers. Every bit of furniture – chairs, worktables, plan-holders, desks, files, cabinets, conference table – all are on wheels.

This is a flexible office, just what one might imagine is necessary in a 21st century firm of architects and interior designers who work in teams and work fast, who complete one job and then form or join new teams to begin others. SBRA designers do not just pack up their laptops (and they do all use laptops, too – none of those clunky heat- and dust-producing desktop machines here) at the end of a project. Each is able to quickly move a whole workspace to another part of the office and start on the next thing. It’s quite a change from



Photo by Anton Grass/Esto, courtesy Shepley Bulfinch

Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott Architects sought sustainability, flexibility and ways to remember its own tradition when creating its new offices at 2 Seaport Lane in Boston.

the firm’s staid beginnings.

Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott is the oldest continuously operating architecture firm in America. The successor firm to revered American architect H. H. Richardson, designer of Boston’s Trinity Church, the Chicago Art Institute, the Ames Library in Easton, the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh and a series of other major national landmarks, SBRA traces its start to 1874 when Richardson arrived in Boston

from New York after winning the competition to design Trinity. He set up housekeeping in Brookline and with a small staff created an architecture office in one wing of his house. Surviving photographs show that office, known as “The Coops,” with heavy furniture, varnished tongue and groove wood walls, floor-to-ceiling partitions, and blankets hung from boards separating each drafting station. It was one of the most creative stu-

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dios of its day, yet rigidly organized to reflect the hierarchy of Richardson the “decider,” and his individual draftsmen (and they were all men in the late 1800s) were each accessible by the master as he walked through an adjoining corridor.

What does the oldest continuously operating architecture firm in America look for when it needs a new workplace? It seeks sustainability, flexibility and ways to remember its own tradition. The tradition here is that SBRA always has been a tenant in a building of its own design – from The Coops in the 1870s, to its Ames building in the 20th century, to 40 Broad St. in 1982. This “tradition” part of the equation is taken care of by two floors of the 16-story World Trade Center East, a building designed by SBRA in 2000, across from Boston’s World Trade Center, near the Institute of Contemporary Art, in the very center of Boston’s new urban growth region, the Seaport District.

“Flexibility” suggests the way designers work in the 21st century. SBRA is organized into flexible teams on a project-by-project basis. In design-business parlance, this is understood as a “horizontal” organization: a team stays with a project, growing or shrinking in size throughout various phases of the design process but retaining its core members from start to finish. In contrast, the “vertical” organization of an architecture firm is one in which there is a design group, a technical group, a group that deals with product specifications, etc. This allows for a certain high level of expertise within these groups, but trades a certain understanding of client and process for that expertise; the personal touch in such an organization is difficult to maintain.

SBRA is organized horizontally. To make it work, space and furniture need to be flexible. Wheels are the answer. The office can be reconfigured infinitely and nearly effortlessly when all is lightweight and mobile. It looks great, and the absence of cubicles and tall partitions makes for more conviviality in the workplace, more transparency, more understanding of what teammates are doing, more learning and more productivity (SBRA has

charted this) throughout the entire staff.

Finally, we come to “sustainability,” that buzzword of 21st century architectural design. Sustainability may be difficult to define, but a certain aspect of it has been easy for SBRA to attain in its own offices (and in many of its clients’ projects). The trick to this, if there is one, may just be frugality – as in, if you don’t need it, don’t have it.

Take, for instance, the issue of indoor air quality. Outdoor air, especially the ocean breeze that flows through the Seaport District, actually is pretty healthy for people. We get in trouble in offices, though, when we bring that fresh air indoors and add to it some 200 chemicals common to thick carpets; volatile organic compounds (VOCs) with which we paint our walls; piles of paper, plans and magazines that store dust and off-gas printers’ ink; perfume and cigarette smoke that clings to our clothing; toxic cleaners we apply to building surfaces; and walls we construct that act as barriers to fresh-air flow and to stable air temperatures throughout an office.

Doing More With Less

SBRA principal Wagdy Anis has spent much of his professional life thinking less about building form and more about building performance, thinking quite a bit about indoor air quality in particular. He has written about it, formed professional committees to study it, designed for it and spoken about it nationally. The American Institute of Architects recently awarded him the honor of fellowship for his efforts.

Here in their own offices, Anis and SBRA demonstrate the simplicity of sustainability by doing more with less:

- *Less floor covering.* The most high-traffic areas are not covered at all; they are merely polished concrete, a handsome substance that is not made of toxic materials in the first place, never needs replacement, does not require periodic shampoo or adhesive, and does not harbor dust mites. It’s healthy, beautiful, costs almost nothing, reflects light and generally keeps unhealthy bits out of the air.

- *Less machinery.* We see laptops rather

than desktop computers. Here printers and copiers are segregated to interior print rooms, each with its own air supply and exhaust ducts that do not mix with the rest of the office’s clean air.

- *Less electric lighting.* Remember those nostalgic elbow lamps, task lighting, a staple of design firms of old, each with its own 100-watt bulb, each a heat source that requires cooling, each lamp altering the indoor atmosphere, each adding to the output of the electric utility’s power plant in the next state? Not a single one of these exists in the SBRA office. The built-in fluorescent fixtures that do exist are on photo-sensitive dimmers, so when the sun is out, the lights turn themselves down.

- *Less paper.* Too much paper in offices doesn’t only waste trees. It takes up real space, requires cabinets to keep it all in order, weighs (literally) tons, and generates dust, mold and carbon particles in the air of an ordinary office. SBRA’s solution is to clean up regularly, file what paper is used, store old records off-site and store new records electronically.

You surely get the picture. Not to put too fine a point on this argument, but the work of architects in general – and SBRA employees in particular, here in their own offices – belies the truth of the old Nike advertising slogan, “Just do it!” Instead, what works in the world of designing places for people is to just think about it, just consider its consequences, just imagine how to solve for the future. Only then should one do it.

SBRA’s president is an architect named Carol Wedge. Her leadership is part of the fresh air that SBRA employees breathe. One of a half-dozen women who head major design firms in Boston, she is part of a very small minority throughout the rest of the country, and she is the only woman to lead a design firm of this large size in the United States. Wedge is also chairwoman of the Boston-based committee that is planning the May 2008 national convention of the American Institute of Architects, an event that will bring 25,000 architects to the Hub. We recommend that some of them visit the Shepley Bulfinch offices for a real breath of fresh air. ■

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