



Earl Swensson Associates (ESa) Nashville, TN



Living Office helped an architecture firm put human experience at the heart of their workplace.

Offices of architecture firms tend to be remarkable spaces—and that's no coincidence. The designers are also the clients. And when architects design the entire building they will work in, as Earl Swensson Associates (ESa) had a chance to do with their new headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, the challenge is not so much in understanding what kind of office culture they want to foster, but in finding the right framework to help bring their vision to life.

For ESa, the move itself covered only a short distance—less than two miles—but the change was monumental. The ways that people at ESa work with and relate to one another have evolved in the 30 years since the firm moved into their previous office.

Case Study

Now that they had two floors in an eight-story office building in the heart of a live-work-play neighborhood, ESa had the opportunity to energize employees. The project allowed them to showcase the firm's talent while creating a close, familial atmosphere.

"It really gives people a new and fresh perspective," says Matt Manning, a senior design manager at ESa. "Our previous office didn't reflect our culture. Now the idea of being open and connected—two words you could (also) use to describe a family—the space takes on that life."

Leveraging Flow Versus Friction

With an average tenure of 16 years, ESa employees have always felt a strong sense of community. Before the move, however, their workplace limited both interaction and circulation. ESa principal Todd Hilbert explains, "There were so many barriers in how we collaborated, how we got together, how we shared ideas."

These problems deepened over time as the firm grew and ESa's portfolio expanded to include cultural, commercial, and hospitality projects. "We were all so focused on business and taking care of clients," Hilbert says. "We never stopped long enough to take care of ourselves."

In a new work environment, ESa wanted to improve knowledge-sharing, increase efficiency, and better harness the collective activity of nearly 200 employees. "Our intent in the new building was to create flow," Hilbert says.

Flexible spaces on the perimeter of the office give everyone access to the windows and the spectacular vistas beyond, but they also provide areas to gather in large and small groups. Throughout the space, group dynamics are balanced with individual preferences—employees could choose to have sit-to-stand surfaces at their workspaces, for instance. The lower heights of the partitions in those workspaces also contribute to the flow of the office, allowing for increased eye contact and providing a visual barometer of daily activity.



A mix of private and shared spaces allows ESa employees to choose the optimal setting for the work they need to do, from heads-down focus to casual collaboration.

Case Study

The creativity that was previously contained in individual workspaces is now plain to see upon walking in through the door—the transparency of the design is the best showcase of how ESa works. “[Now] when clients come through our office, they can see excitement, they can see energy,” Hilbert says. They see ESa employees collaborating in every part of the office: perched together at bar-height stools for a quick bit of work or a cup of coffee in the Plaza; nestled into glass-walled Havens for private calls; meeting in a Cove near their workstations on colorfully upholstered seats; or gathering together as a group—something that was previously impossible.

The Journey to a Living Office

Integral to the design process was an early trip to Herman Miller’s Design Yard in Holland, Michigan, a working showroom where Living Office insights come to life for more than 300 employees from the company’s marketing, engineering, legal, and executive leadership teams. “It really captured a lot of the ideas we had talked about and put them into a visual context,” says Manning. “It was a powerful way to meet and interact. That was truly inspirational.”



For Christie McCullough, a senior interior designer at ESa, the visit solidified a partnership between the two firms and “opened up our thought process.”

In some cases, the way that Herman Miller created a Living Office uniquely tailored to meet the needs of the people working at the Design Yard directly influenced how the ESa team was able to envision their own space. The Swensson conference room, for instance, was inspired by the Nelson Room at the Design Yard, and it has been a huge success: “It is one of my favorite spaces,” says interior designer Janet Wennerlund. “It is so comfortable and merges two different meeting styles in one room.”

But in general, Living Office provided the team at ESa with a lens through which to focus their approach, as well as a useful framework for designing for the activities and experiences of people in the office. The ESa team went through several rounds of surveys, testing, and mock-ups with both Herman Miller and ESa employees. “We tried to simulate what the environment was going to be like as much as we could, fine-tuning every piece of the workstations, [down to] the orientation of the monitors,” senior design manager Eric Klotz says. “Because of that we really nailed the end result.”



The overall transparency of the design of the new ESa space and the variety of settings it offers for group interaction has improved work flow for the firm’s nearly 200 employees.

Case Study

Changing the Bigger Picture

The inspiration of Living Office has changed things for ESa beyond the day-to-day. The firm's headquarters is already attracting new hires, many of whom are drawn to the quality of the environment and the connection between workplace, culture, and human-centered design. But what's more, Hilbert says, "the flexibility of that space has now allowed us to do things I don't think I ever envisioned us doing."

Community involvement outside the walls of the office had always been an important part of ESa's culture, but now the company's space gives them even more opportunities to build relationships in the greater Nashville area. "A lot of outside entities want to use our conference center," says Manning. "AIA Tennessee, the Chamber of Commerce—we've inadvertently created a public meeting space." Tours have in turn led quickly to new business.

"It's one thing to do this for a client," says Klotz, reflecting back on the process. "To live it every day start to finish is a true test. I think that's been invaluable for the work that we do."



The open staircase in the heart of the ESa space provides a visual barometer of activity. The ESa team envisioned it as a metaphor for the sense of connection they wanted to communicate throughout the environment.