

Donna Wilson's vision for new Manatt office began with inability to see everyone

By David Houston

Editor-in-Chief

Donna L. Wilson couldn't see past the first row when she stepped to the microphone in June 2018 to address the Manatt partners who had just elected her the firm's chief executive officer and managing partner.

The crowd was standing and many in attendance were significantly taller than the 5'2" Wilson. She promised herself that when she got a chance to oversee the designing of an office space there would be a platform that would allow her to see all the people she was addressing.

"I wanted a balanced aesthetic where everybody feels included," she said recently as she gave a tour of the firm's Los Angeles headquarters that was completed in 2019 but never properly debuted because of the pandemic.

Wilson's office design ideas went beyond accommodating a person who was shorter than many of her colleagues, or accommodating the tastes of Millennials and Gen Zers, whose specifications for where and how they work have been chewed over for several years. Or even appealing to clients in the tech and entertainment sectors who might be uncomfortable visiting a traditional law firm space.

Many law firms have reoriented their offices in a nod to these realities. Wilson agreed with those aims, too, but thought the design changes should go farther. Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP is a law firm



Manatt CEO Donna L. Wilson in the firm's Century City office | Justin Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

well known for being on the cutting edge of many trends and its office spaces should reflect that, she said.

"We like to zig when other people zag," she said.

Wilson got her chance to oversee office design when the firm decided to leave its longtime headquarters on Olympic Boulevard for space at 2049 Century Park East, one of the towers in Century City. The centerpiece of the space is a three-floor "hive" area connected by a staircase with a kitchen, games, a movie theater/jam session room,

a putting green and even a surfboard-themed room. There is also a "quiet car" room with high-backed soundproof chairs that swaddle the sitter in a tranquil sanctuary.

And if tranquil sanctuary isn't your thing there are swings dangling before floor-to-ceiling windows where one can soak in the joy and wonder of the city sprawl below. And here's where Wilson reveals that the girl who grew up in South Jersey has become fully Californian. "We wanted a space that was more mindful and more intentional," she said. "I think it

feeds the soul."

Manatt does have more traditional working spaces for the 137 legal and consulting professionals who work in Century City. There's a standard-size office with glass walls for all professionals, no matter their rank, and corner spaces are reserved for conference rooms. War rooms and huddle rooms are scattered throughout.

"Its openness and light-filled spaces are a real incentive to come to the office," said Kathleen Brown, a partner in the government and regulatory group who,

when not traveling, works from the office two or three days a week.

Greg Pimstone, a partner in the health care litigation practice, goes into the office most days and said “getting people out of their offices and into common spaces adds vitality and energy to the workplace.”

“I am still adjusting to the glass walls — doesn’t allow for the occasional power nap, which is generally not a problem given that the two-martini lunch is a relic of the past,” Pimstone joked.

“The truth is that much of the office space in more traditional offices is unused, or ego-driven, as opposed to actually being functional,” he added.

Wilson said she came to the design project with a strong vision. She told the architect that she did not want a space that resembled a law firm. She was surprised when she received the first draft for the design.

“I said, ‘This looks just like a law firm.’”

The response from the architect was: “Every time we talk to managing partners, they say, ‘innovative,’ ‘cutting edge,’ ‘We don’t want to look like a law firm.’ Then, by the end of it, it looks just like a law firm.”

“We knew we were under a time crunch so we thought we would skip that step,” the architect said.

The final design was modeled on the offices of the A&E Network

in the same tower. It’s an update on mid-century modern with a “vibe” that is an “ode to our deep roots in California,” Wilson said.

Manatt, founded in West Los Angeles in 1965, now has 460 legal and consulting professionals in 10 offices nationwide. The firm, which has been at the forefront of providing consultancy services, offers consultancy in health care, housing and real estate, as well as legal and government relations services. The firm has more recently been on the cutting edge of offering work in the digital currency and artificial intelligence sectors, Wilson said.

The firm has not mandated attorneys spend a specific number of hours in the office, but like most law firms and other white-collar workplaces, there is a desire to get professionals to spend more time there. Wilson said she understood as they were designing the space, even prior to the pandemic, that they were swimming against a tide.

“I literally said to the architect at the time, ‘We have to compete with peoples’ home offices,’” she said. “Because you could already see it. We would tour different law firm offices in Century City and you could roll a bowling ball down the space. There was nobody there.”

Leading any law firm, especially during a time of transition like a move to new space, can be a chal-

lenge. “I have five generations in one firm. And everybody is coming at it from a different perspective on almost every topic. You have to try to put yourself in the shoes of each of those generations,” Wilson said.

As if on cue, Tom Michael, a partner in the venture capital/emerging companies group, walked into the hive area and the two struck up a conversation about a “tome” of an email that Michael had sent Wilson detailing recommended “innovations in the emerging company group.”

This is the type of conversation Wilson and her partners hope will be fostered by the hive.

“We are constantly bouncing ideas off of each other and brainstorming ways that we can do this law firm thing better, which is much easier for me to do when I have an office where I can bump into our CEO while getting water,” Michael wrote in an email later.

Michael, who goes into the office every day, wrote, “I do think it’s important to come into an office regularly, not because it’s necessary to be productive or to do good work, but because it’s important for people to feel like they’re part of something bigger than themselves and part of a team that is working together for a common goal. I think that sense of community is something Manatt does really well and it’s impossible to achieve that same connection

without seeing people in person.”

“The Surfboard Room is our hub and people are there constantly, usually eating lunch, getting drinks, doing work, and sometimes playing games (lots of puzzle action recently). We also host office-wide events there at least once a week. I walk through that space over a dozen times a day and I don’t think I ever pass through without saying hi to someone. So unless socializing with colleagues is a drawback, I think it’s a consistent benefit and a great reason to get out from behind the desk,” Michael wrote.

Brown, the former California state treasurer, agreed. She described the space as a cross between that of a traditional law firm and the trading floor at Goldman Sachs, where she used to work.

“It’s the best of both worlds,” she wrote in an email. “The openness is conducive to collaboration, which is important in growing a business. And, in becoming part of a team.”

Several days before Wilson gave a tour of Manatt’s new office, the firm hosted a reception. A mix of attorneys and clients mingled, sipped wine and talked. Then Wilson climbed two steps to a blonde-wood stage about 15 inches high, and the crowd went silent.

They could see her. And she could see them.

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