

Sustainable Beauty for Alterman Law Group

by Anna Zappia

The architects at Portland, OR-based OFFICE 52 Architecture transformed a dreary commercial space into a new office for Alterman Law Group. By focusing on reuse and reconfiguration, the designers were able to create a flexible workplace that meets the needs of the successful law practice and highlights a character that's purely of the Pacific Northwest.

The partners at the law firm wanted a space they could adapt as their work and staffing needs changed, yet still retain a personal, hometown touch. "Alterman Law Group is a boutique real estate law firm here in Portland with an established practice. They wanted a design that was really going to reflect their ethos. They are connected to the community and focused on sustainability, which is a really big thing in Oregon," said Isaac Campbell, founding partner, OFFICE 52 Architecture.

Indeed, it was a meeting of the minds for both teams, with

shared principles and working styles in common. "We have similar values in terms of climate action and sustainability, but also allowing the creativity to flow and not being afraid of that. The design process, in many ways mirrors their own process of asking intelligent questions and devising creative solutions for their clients," said Michelle LaFoe, founding partner, OFFICE 52 Architecture.

LaFoe noted that this effortless alignment streamlined every aspect of the adaptive reuse project, which was essential, given the condensed timeline and budgetary goals. The architects partnered with R&H Construction to complete the office last November, no easy feat in the midst of the pandemic. "It was very fast paced because the group wanted to be in their new office in less than six months from space selection. Our meeting and material procurement schedules were pretty tight."



The team at OFFICE 52 Architecture transformed a dreary commercial space into an office for Alterman Law Group. All photography by Michelle LaFoe and Isaac Campbell, 2021.

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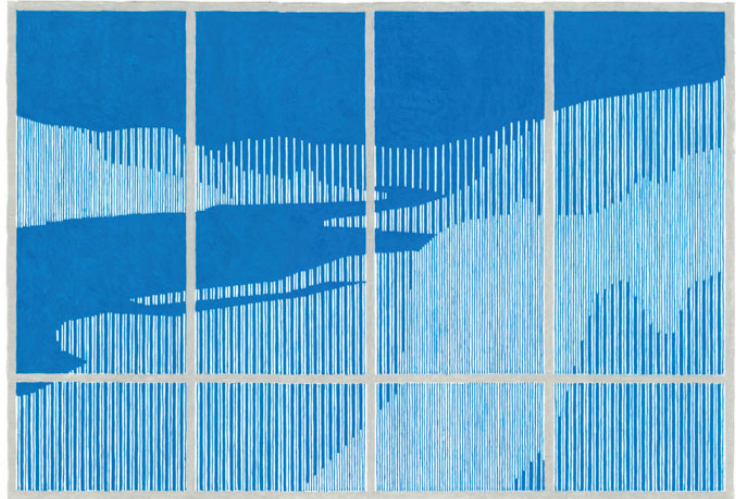
“From the beginning, we had to be really smart and rigorous about the decisions that we were making because of the time constraints. It was about clarifying and simplifying the space fairly quickly,” Campbell added.

The existing storefront made of aluminum and glass was a standout feature, and it helped crystalize the concept for the designers. “We immediately gravitated to the storefront. We realized all we had to do was reconfigure it, and so that became the touchstone for the project. Reusing everything that we possibly could, economizing, and still creating this fresh space, that was the theme,” Campbell explained.

The storefront allowed for a combination of areas ideal for the heads-down and collaborative work favored by the lawyers, and it gives the space an expansive feel. “They wanted individual spaces for contemplation,

because as lawyers, words are really the tools of their trade. There’s also sections designed to accommodate small groups. The sliding glass doors

are perfect because there’s an efficiency of circulation, but you can close off space and have the type of area that you need,” LaFoe said.



Michelle LaFoe's abstract drawing of the Columbia River Gorge. Columbia River Gorge, Prismacolor pencil drawing on Mylar, 18" x 22", Michelle LaFoe, 2021.



The new office is bright and inviting, a welcoming space for staff and visitors alike.



The artwork was printed on a transparent substrate that was then applied to the glass, letting in light but still providing privacy.

Because the lawyers are dealing with sensitive information and need to meet with clients regularly without being disturbed, LaFoe and Campbell had to balance privacy and openness in the office. They decided to transform the glass storefront into a translucent screen. Looking to the landscape for inspiration, they created abstract line patterns of the Columbia River Gorge and a series of mountains in the Cascade Range. The artwork was printed on a transparent substrate that was then applied to the glass, a less expensive alternative to installing custom panels.

“We took these iconic mountains,

and created these designs with lines, so you have to look closely at them to decipher. It’s meant to be a discovery experience as you move through the office. The film allowed us to bring in the light and give them the privacy they wanted, while still having that visual connection,” Campbell noted.

Such attention to detail abounds, and basics were turned into showpieces—like a conference table. When the architects couldn’t find a suitable ready-made piece from traditional office furniture manufacturers, they decided to have a custom table made, crafted of black walnut wood from a tree that had been downed

during an ice storm. Imperfections found in the wood were embraced rather than rejected.

LaFoe explained that Dean Alterman, principal of the law firm, is a devotee of Japanese art and architecture and a past president of the renowned Portland Japanese Garden, so the team reviewed images of centuries-old woodworking techniques. “One of my favorite books is about Japanese joinery, and we started there. We researched traditional butterfly joints, both online and in historical books. In many cases, a darker wood is used for the joints, against a lighter wood. That contrast was appealing.”

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The salvaged wood was used to create a one-of-a-kind conference table.



Black walnut wood was salvaged from a tree that had been downed during an ice storm.

While the detailing evokes craftsmanship from another time and place, the table had to be a contemporary piece that would be used often. It accommodates technology for virtual and in-person meetings, so functionality is a key component. "If there's a meeting and two or three people need to hook up their laptops they can do that. The conference table weaves craft and modern technology, and you can see that throughout the office," LaFoe noted.

Campbell said that the price of the table was in line with the cost of a high-end commercial table, but it is a unique furnishing that garners attention. "It has this great story about the tree, and everybody that walks into the

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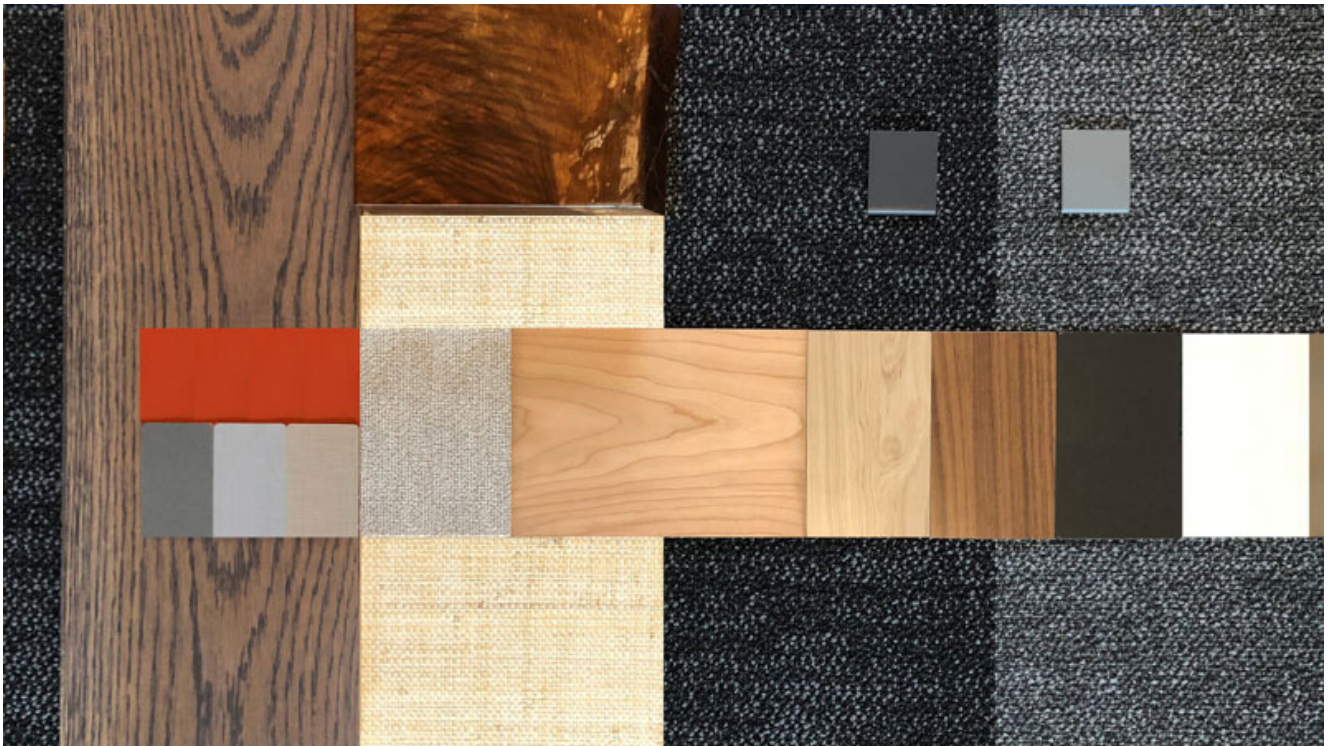
conference room asks about it. The storefront brought the project to life, and this salvaged walnut table was the icing on the cake.”

Both the material and color palettes complement the wood to produce a vitality indoors—unexpected in a law office. “When we were putting together

the colors we selected neutrals, but paired them with accents that were vibrant. We wanted a cohesive color palette that was visually enticing and worked together with the textiles.” LaFoe said.

The visual and textural richness, paired with the natural materials

and an 1879 bird’s-eye-view map of Portland, draws people into the space and provides an enhanced work setting. “The beauty of this project is that we got so much visual impact and economic value out of things that were really simple and beautiful,” Campbell added. ■



The sustainable materials have visual and textural richness that enhances the interior of the office. Materials ensemble collage, 9" x 16", Michelle LaFoe, 2020.