

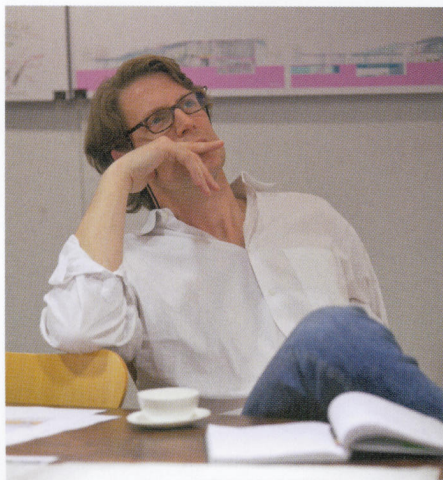
# DESIGN TO THE LETTER

Thank-you letters from past clients inspire Von Weise Associates in the workplace redux for Stowell & Friedman's law offices

By Tina Vasquez

**Von Weise Associates** isn't the architecture firm you reach out to for the best deal. It's not the firm that will come in and simply make your office, home, or hotel "nice" or "edgy." Instead, it is the kind of architecture firm you go to for a decidedly more intellectual approach to projects. Such was the case with the workplace design for **Stowell & Friedman**, a civil rights law firm engaged in workplace discrimination litigation, where Von Weise Associates used specific aspects of the firm's work to inform elements of the space.

"Our designs are inspired by the interplay between the people who will be interacting with the space and the inherent qualities of the materials being used," says **Chip von Weise**, who founded the firm in 1999 after he earned a master's degree in architecture with distinction from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. "We don't have an aesthetic we apply to each of our projects. Our design process is informed by the client, and when brainstorming concepts, we exemplify their desires through the design goals. We want to have a genuine exchange and collaboration; it's not about the client buying a commodity."



The people who seek out Von Weise Associates' services are interested in the intellectual content of architecture. They are the clients that tend to embrace change, and it just so happens that those people are also very interested in being responsible stewards of the environment. The core mission of Von Weise Associates is to have integrity. "We're responsible to the client, to the people who will be in the space each day, and we're responsible to society," von Weise says. "We want to minimize the impact on the environment whenever we can."

Many of the firm's clients don't go into their projects with the intention of being green, but the suggestions Von Weise Associates makes are ideal for the space and more often than not just so happen to be environmentally friendly.

On the Stowell & Friedman project, von Weise wanted to make the most of the building's natural sunlight and suggested open office areas, but the lawyers at the firm were concerned with privacy and uncomfortable with the idea. Fortunately, this wasn't the end of the conversation, and, as usual, the committed design team discovered the perfect solution: the offices would be open but still maintain privacy. How? By using glass that was custom film-printed with handwritten letters from former clients expressing their thanks to the firm for taking on their cases.

"We'd never done anything like this," von Weise says, "but we fell in love with the idea after seeing a photograph of the letters on the firm's old website. When we asked about it, they presented us with a glorified shoebox filled with the letters."

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More than one hundred personal letters from past clients were printed on a glazing film to create the Stowell & Friedman office's privacy screens.







Eight colors were used in each office space, which tie into the eight different colors used in the Stowell & Friedman logo, on the firm's business cards, and in the design layout of its website.

We didn't know how to utilize them at first, so we hung up the photograph of the letters in our design studio for inspiration."

But there was also a much bigger idea at play. Von Weise wanted somehow to include the nature of the law offices' work, which is trying to balance the rights of individuals against the rights of the larger community. To communicate this push and pull, Von Weise Associates used various techniques, such as layering and carving, to explore the tension between the individual and the collective, or as Von Weise says, "between things that are both one thing and many things at the same time."

This attention to the client resulted in a space that not only reflects the delicate work taking place, but also one that tells the story of who Stowell & Friedman is. "We didn't just design a 'nice' office," von Weise says. "We created a space that was interesting and unique that exemplified who they are as a firm. The relationship we were able to build was one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had with a client." **gb&d**

Von Weise Associates balanced the personal notes on the glass with a collage they designed composed of more than 50 newspaper and magazine articles reporting on cases involving Stowell & Friedman.

