

Chicago's coolest offices

By Kevin Davis

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The Powerhouse Building in the West Loop was vacant for decades, a historic relic that fell into disuse and disrepair. Once home to massive coal-fired burners and generators for the Chicago & Northwestern Railway terminal, the building was a jumbled, crumbling, smoke- and coal-stained mess. Developers didn't know what to do with it or how to make it commercially viable.

Now it's home to two of Chicago's coolest office spaces and is a designated landmark listed in the National Register of Historic Places, all thanks to Structured Development, which took on the renovation project in 2005.

The company decided not only to refurbish the 1909 building but to move its offices there from a warehouse loft at 656 W. Randolph St. "What we had before was a mishmash of rooms. It did not represent who we were," says Jeffrey Berta, the company's director of program development.

Structured Development wanted to preserve as much of the interior and exterior of the Powerhouse as it could while providing modern amenities. The firm hired Hartshorne & Plunkard Architects for the overall design renovations and Valerio Dewalt & Train for the interior.

Construction crews cleaned the grimy exterior, divided the interior into three levels, replaced windows and masonry, and created new entrances and underground parking. The renovated building has 33,000 square feet of retail and office space, including Structured Development's headquarters, along with Powerhouse Restaurant & Bar, Wight & Co. and the Flexion Rehabilitation Center.

One of the first things visitors notice is the proximity to the Metra tracks and the constant train traffic.

The semi-private offices are encased by glass with open doors and take advantage of natural light. Exposed walls showcase the original yellow brick and terra cotta. Being able to see the Ogilvie Transportation Center's train yard, as well as the Lake Street el, helps remind people that they're in the city. "You're working but still attached to the outside world," Mr. Berta says. The constant sound of the trains, he says, adds a level of character. "It has atmosphere."

On the mezzanine level is a lounge and small kitchen space and flat-screen TV for informal meetings or relaxing.

Emily Nelan, senior program manager at Structured Development, previously worked in an office cubicle at another firm. She feels more freedom now and enjoys watching clients react to the trains. "I don't find the trains all that distracting," she says. "People who ride the train like to look in here at us and our clients."

Structured
Development's
space plays
up the original
structure's
arched

windows.

STEPHEN J.
SERIO



PRIDE OF PLACE

Across the hall is the Chicago office of Wight, an architecture and design company whose headquarters are in Darien. Managers of the Chicago office, which has 20 employees, thought the space in the Powerhouse building was perfect.

"In the design field, you have a certain pride about where you work. As soon as you walk in, you get a certain energy," says James Mark Jr., vice-president of architecture for the Chicago office. "It's a reflection of what we are trying to create for our clients."

Wight's layout couldn't be more different from Structured Development's. Light streams from the windows on the west side of the office, which has 25-foot-high ceilings and a mezzanine space used for a library and lounge. Steel girders are exposed, and some duct and pipe work is hidden by sheer curtains.



Metra trains rumble past the conference room at Wight & Co. Photo: Stephen J. Serio

Off the front entrance is a kitchen with a long tabletop used for informal meetings. "Where do people gather at home? In the kitchen," Mr. Mark says. "Clients can come and hang out in the kitchen. The idea is that you're in our home."

Just like their neighbors, employees at Wight see Metra trains come within feet of the building. "It's very dynamic," Mr. Mark says.

The main work area is furnished with mid-rise, U-shaped workstations that offer some privacy when employees sit down. Engineers, architects and designers work alongside each other. "We purposely commingle employees. Senior people commingle with younger staff," Mr. Mark says.

Architect Matthew Zolecki says he likes to chill out in the mezzanine lounge and meet with clients in the conference room next to the train tracks: "Every time I take clients in there, they get a kick out of it."

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