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## San Francisco firm moves into old law school building

By Erin Lee  
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**S**AN FRANCISCO — With the end of their lease nearing, attorneys at The Veen Firm PC had set out to find a new space to purchase, but they weren't feeling optimistic about their options. Their laundry list of needs was specific: a location close to the city courthouse, 10,000 square feet, ample parking and an accessible entrance for clients with disabilities.

But within a month of searching, they received a breathless phone call from their broker. A building was opening up in the Lower Haight, and it happened to be the site of San Francisco Law School.

"Some things are just meant to be," said trial team leader Anthony L. Label.

The deal closed in the fall of 2015. After a 10-month leaseback to the law school and seven to eight months of construction, the personal injury firm moved into its new office this March and hosted a grand opening on Dec. 6.

San Francisco Law School, which is state-accredited and part of Alliant International University, had occupied 20 Haight Street since 1968. Alliant also had a main San Francisco campus off The Embarcadero, and as part of the law school's vision of integrating with the university's psychology and business programs and expanding offerings, the school wanted to join the main campus. The law school moved in the summer of 2016.

"It was important for all of us to be at the same location so we could be communicating with each other and sharing speakers and resources," said Katherine Van Tassel, who became dean in June.

Working with the law school on the transaction was easy, said firm founder and principal William L. Veen. The firm was leaving its former offices on 711 Van Ness Avenue, now occupied by an ophthalmologic practice, in the face of doubling rent. So Veen was looking to purchase to avoid encountering similar issues in the future.

"We decided rather than be at the mercy of San Francisco's volatile rents and landlords, we'd buy something and have more control over overhead and have more control over our destiny," Label said.



Courtesy of The Veen Firm PC

From left, Elinor Leary, William Veen, Anthony Label, Clifton Smoot, Steven Kronenberg, Kimberly Wong, David Winnett, Alexandra Hamilton and Annie Wu of The Veen Firm PC



Courtesy of San Francisco Law School



Courtesy of The Veen Firm PC

Once the firm bought the building, it leased the location back to the law school for the remainder of the academic year to ease the transition. After months of delays and permitting issues, when they broke ground, they had to gut the building down to its concrete shell, Label said. The design was created by Hilary Hubbard of Hubbard Godfrey Architects Inc.

As with many real estate projects, remodeling the offices took more time and effort than expected, and they encountered problems along the way. The structure was built in the 1950s, so the entire heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system needed to be replaced and the contractors had to remove asbestos.

They had originally planned to remove the carpet so the floors would be finished

concrete, but when they began to pull up the carpet, the decades-old glue was so strong that the concrete was being damaged.

"When the walls started coming down, there were things that used to be unseeable that became readily apparent," said trial team leader Elinor Leary. "But you adapt."

"It was sort of like taking a second job," Label said. "We thought it would be a lot of work, but it was really a lot of work."

The interior layout of the building is completely different from that of the law school. The attorneys work collaboratively in teams, usually on complex personal injury trials, so they wanted a space that enabled an "open door policy" environment, Veen said.

They replaced the existing "dark and maze-

like” corridors, as Leary described it, with an open floor plan. The offices for the partners have glass walls and no blinds – a purposeful move that facilitates the flow of natural light and creates the sense of more open space.

“We didn’t want a bunch of offices with blinds shut down,” Label said.

The original windows were small and suspended in the concrete walls, but the architects found the shell was structurally sound enough to support large windows, flooding the space with light.

The office also features a mock courtroom where the attorneys can vet their cases with a sample jury, as well as three conference rooms for depositions.

The kitchen and break room also can be opened up and connect to an adjoining large

conference room, a space the firm plans to use to entertain guests and host functions such as continuing legal education events.

The location is on a side street off bustling Market Street, offering easy bus and public transit access — a perfect balance between being near the courthouse and easy for clients and attorneys to get to, but without being on the main thoroughfare, Veen said. The firm had previously rejected several locations because they were only accessible by car, Leary said.

The office also has ample parking, hard to find in the city, and disability access, which is especially important for a personal injury firm.

When the dust settled in March, the firm moved all of its equipment, computers and

furniture in just one chaotic weekend, Veen said.

As the finishing touches are put on the office, including more than 40 pieces of original artwork, the partners are looking for a spot to hang a plaque commemorating the San Francisco Law School’s long legacy in the building.

“It’s heartwarming to feel that you’re continuing on the tradition of legal practice in a building that once educated many lawyers in our community,” Label said.

Veen started the firm in 1975, renting a desk in another firm’s office for \$50 a month. It’s been gratifying to watch the firm grow and develop into what he had envisioned, he said. “It feels like we’re embarking on a new adventure.”