

Kaiser, Laura Fisher. "LSM's Hudson Yards HQ for Milbank Mirrors the Law Firm's Ethos," *Interior Design*, 13 October 2020.

# INTERIOR DESIGN



After 150 years on Wall Street, Milbank was one of the first large companies to commit to 55 Hudson Yards. Executives at the international law firm, which is headquartered in Manhattan, jumped at the chance to lease nearly 300,000 square feet across 10 floors while the 51-story tower by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates was still under construction (at the time pursuing, and ultimately attaining, LEED Gold certification). Almost immediately, LSM was called in to help make one of the project's most consequential decisions: where to incorporate two terraces that came as a custom option. "It was really brilliant the way KPF designed the building as a curtain wall that could accommodate terraces," LSM founding partner and *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Debra Lehman-Smith begins. But the clock was ticking. The glazing was already up to the 18th floor on the SoHo-inspired, matte-aluminum window frames, getting closer with every passing week to Milbank's offices, which start on the 30th floor.

In the old days of white-shoe firms, a terrace might be the kind of perk reserved solely for the executive floor. But that was not in keeping with the sense of togetherness for which Milbank was striving. So LSM proposed placing the two double-height terraces on the 36th floor, on the east and west sides of the building, to create what Lehman-Smith calls "one really great amenities floor" that all 700 Milbank employees could access.



Practice floors, featuring such art as Eric Fertman sculptures and hubs with GamFratesi chairs, are located off the open amenities stair. Photography by Eric Laignel.

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Staff and clients step off the elevator into an extended garden aerie that feels more posh hotel than venerable law firm, complete with a full-service restaurant, a coffee bar, conference rooms, and a concierge to greet them. But what's noticed first are the astounding views of the city to the east and the Hudson River to the west. "When you're out on the west-side terrace and you're enveloped in one of those beautiful orange sunsets over the Hudson, you feel like you're on the prow of the Love Boat," Lehman-Smith notes. Used throughout the day by employees and clients, and then into the night for firm functions, the landscaped terraces are outfitted with graceful domed heaters and seven-foot-high wind guards, so they can remain comfortable well into the colder seasons.

But the terrace volumes cut into the footprint of the 36th and 37th floors. To compensate, the LSM team made the 20-foot-wide reception area feel more expansive by employing a simplified silvery palette of mirrored and stainless-steel finishes, which maximize natural light and reflect the views. Additionally brightening the envelope is gleaming-white Italian marble flooring. Farther into the floor plates, LSM conceived glass office fronts and hid perimeter columns and storage, allowing daylight to reach all workstations. Because the upper floors of the base building have no corner columns, the architects expressed the diagonals of the corners by incorporating angled luminous ceiling planes and cladding the concrete ring beams with aluminum-framed panels finished in a mirror film. The Mylar-like material connects the eye with the city below and "makes the 10-foot ceilings look huge," Lehman-Smith explains. "It's like a halo."



In a partner's office, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe guest chairs stand on custom nylon carpet. Photography by Eric Laignel.

The two stories of the amenities level, which are sandwiched between practice floors above and below, are linked by another custom feature, an inviting stair. In practical terms, the stair, an open freestanding construction of white marble treads and risers, enhances vertical organization and visual transparency, as meeting spaces are organized around it for easy access to other floors (which are connected by other stairs in gray marble). More importantly, the connector symbolizes and facilitates the firm's radical shift away from a culture of "closed wooden doors and internal conference rooms that people booked for two weeks but never used," Milbank partner and executive director David Wolfson states. "At our old office, you could come in and never see anyone. This building and the design process here really helped us understand who we are and build a culture of intimacy and collaboration. We now have a space where colleagues and clients want to spend time with each other."

The amenities stair also provides an opportunity to use site-specific commissioned artworks—a constant in LSM projects—as a wayfinding system. A tree-slice sculpture by Michel François indicates the 37th floor. In a litigation hub, a 5-foot-tall red neon "M" by R & R Studios flashes LEDs every time Milbank wins a big case. In the restaurant, Clifford Ross's black-and-white photograph of the Atlantic Ocean serves as a metaphor for the work—and the times. Like most of his wave images, it was shot in the midst of a powerful storm, with Ross tethered to ropes

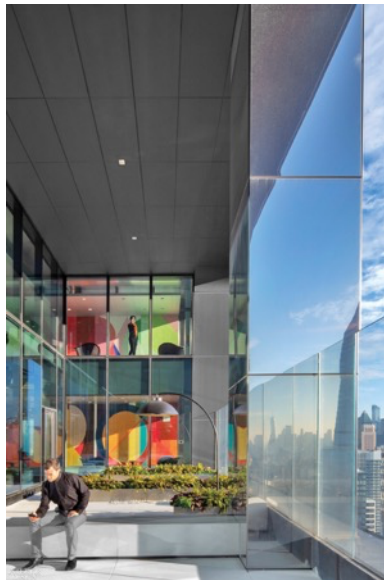
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held by assistants on shore, as he waded into the roiling water to capture the ocean at its utmost dramatic visual moment.



The west terrace offers a choice between Lievore Altherr Molina's sofa or an Arik Levy dining table with Eames chairs. Photography by Eric Laignel.

LSM had just installed the last tile of Pae White's massive colorful mural of an abstract alphabet in reception when the COVID-19 shutdown forced all Milbank employees to shift to working from home. Fortunately, as part of the process with LSM, the law firm had done a comprehensive analysis of its business, and then streamlined and futurized its entire operation, from IT platforms and file storage to work teams and branding, which made the transition to remote fairly seamless. "Don't get me wrong," Wolfson adds. "I love spending more time with my children, but I really miss our new office." Hopefully soon, employees will be running into each other on that stunning stair and grabbing a coffee on either of the terraces.



The seven-foot-high tempered-glass wind guards make the east terrace usable nearly year-round. Photography by Eric Laignel.