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Law firm  
Sacramento

California architects Carver + Schicketanz transformed an old car dealership into a cozy legal office that's also the perfect venue for entertaining influential policy makers

By Tim McKeough  
Photography by Robert Canfield

## The soft firm

**Above** For two Sacramento lawyers, an office filled with stuffy leather chairs and wood panelling was just not their style. Instead, they set up shop in an old car dealership and invited architects Carver + Schicketanz to warm up the place.

**Opposite** Designer Mary Ann Schicketanz brought in thick area rugs by Christopher Farr to cover the concrete floors. The rolling chairs are by Gerard van den Berg for Montis, and the photograph on the far wall is by Robert Kelly.

Transforming the second floor of an old Chevrolet dealership into an office space is challenging but doing so in a building designated as an historic landmark makes things more difficult. Add clients who want their professional office to double as a space for entertaining, and it might seem nearly impossible. But that's just what the Sacramento law firm of Dickstein & Zerbi asked Carver + Schicketanz Architects to do. "We wanted our office to reflect the original architecture as well as that we're an unconventional firm," says Howard Dickstein, noting that his office represents Native American tribes and a large part of the job is negotiating with political players. "If you're confident, you don't need an office that fits into any preconceived image of what it should look like."

Beginning with a building originally constructed in the 1920s, Carver + Schicketanz set out to deliver on the clients' wishes by combining "a contemporary approach with warm, friendly materials," says architect Mary Ann Schicketanz, who has been working with Rob Carver for the past two decades (their current office is located in Carmel, California). The four-storey building had already been stripped to a shell of raw concrete and steel-framed windows by a developer. Both the clients and architects wanted to keep the industrial look, but the acoustics were an issue. "We had enormous sound problems, because the space was all hard surfaces," says Schicketanz. "You couldn't even make a phone call."

To absorb sound within the 465-square-metre space, heavy area rugs were laid over the concrete floors, and seat



**Right** The custom metal shelf above Dickstein's rotating desk rides on a pulley system, allowing his books to be at arm's reach when he needs them.

**Below** Absorbing sound in the open space was a major challenge. Screens were added to help dull the noise of phone conversations. The screens and work surfaces are covered with leather tiles by Edelman.

**Bottom** Everything in Jane Zerbi's office is within easy reach, to accommodate her back problems. The custom-made desk comes with a built-in lectern so she can work standing up as well as sitting.



cushions were placed along the window ledges. Four legal assistants work in an open space, with individual offices for Dickstein and his partner, Jane Zerbi, located in adjoining rooms. To address the noise issue within the open area, aluminum panels stuffed with soundproofing material were positioned near the telephones at each workstation, effectively buffering chatter while creating visual separation.

Carver and Schicketanz had previously designed three residences for Dickstein, so they knew their clients well, which is reflected in the custom-built furniture found in their respective offices. Zerbi has back problems, so her workspace is designed to keep everything within easy reach, and because she alternates between sitting and standing while working, her desk is designed with an integrated lectern that allows her to work comfortably on her feet. Meanwhile, Dickstein's rotating desk allows him to change it almost instantly from a workstation to a meeting table, and a custom metal shelf above his desk rides on a pulley system, providing quick access to books.

Flexible components don't end in the offices. Since Dickstein and Zerbi frequently entertain clients, a long island made of wenge wood in the open area acts as an oversized filing cabinet during business hours, and the concrete top doubles as a bar for after-work events. With comforting textiles and soft furnishings throughout, the environment feels more like a loft apartment.

"We had a fundraiser with a couple hundred people here for Senator Barack Obama recently, and the space worked very well," says Dickstein. "He started his remarks by saying, 'My staff is now asking me why we don't have offices like this.'" **AZ**

Law firm, Sacramento

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you don't need an  
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preconceived image

