

By **Gregg F. Witt, SIOR**

Association Office Design

for the **Future****Michael Berger**

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Born in Chicago and raised in Illinois and Oregon, Michael earned his M Arch degree from Tulane University in 1993, having studied in Venice and served as president of the Architecture School student body. Michael returned to Chicago to pursue a career in Interior Architecture and Design and has earned a reputation as a leader in the field of corporate environments, executing projects for clients such as Braintree, Rocket Fuel, Sara Lee, Uber and United Way. Michael joined GREC in 2015 as director of interior design and workplace strategies.

**Diana Pisone**

Principal,
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Diana Pisone has more than 20 years of interior design and architectural experience and is especially known for her ability to allow aesthetics and function to work hand in hand. As team principal at Ted Moudis Associates' Chicago office, her primary responsibility is to serve as a liaison to the firm's clients and provide superior customer-driven design services. She also helps develop the next generation of designers as a part-time faculty member at the Illinois Institute of Art.

**Liz Potokar**

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With more than a decade of experience, Liz Potokar's work covers a multitude of market sectors. Her passion lies in developing creative workplace environments that embrace a company's brand and culture. Her list of corporate clients include Association Forum, The Society of Thoracic Surgeons, SRAM, Gyro Advertising, Condé Nast + Pitchfork, Roche Pharmaceuticals, and Volkswagen Credit Inc. Liz's work has received two AIA Design Excellence Awards, two IIDA Red Awards for Best of Show and a Best of NeoCon Showroom Award. Liz has a Bachelor of Science degree in Interior Design from the University of Cincinnati. She has earned her National Council for Interior Design Qualification certification, as well as her LEED accreditation.



Recently, several Chicago-based associations have relocated from long-term homes to newer and more forward-thinking office headquarters. Having been in their locations for 10 to 30 years, C-level leadership are seeing their organizations housed in dated facilities which no longer support their mission and are a detriment to attracting and retaining talent. There is a desire by many to make significant and important adjustments to their workplaces, which will resonate for the next 10 to 20 years and support a new generation of staff and style of work.

To gain insight into what associations are seeking in their new office designs, we connected with three architects from Chicago firms, each of whom have designed new offices for several associations. Michael Berger, director of interiors at GREC Architects, Diana Pisone, principal at Ted Moudis Associates and Liz Potokar, senior designer at Gensler, discussed the ways designing for associations differs from corporate and technology clients, incorporating and enhancing an association's brand and mission through creative design, and embracing new technology and a changing workforce.

FORUM: There is a perception that associations use their office space less efficiently than many corporate or entrepreneurial tenants. Do you agree and if so, why does this appear to be so?

Pisone: We agree with this statement. In many of our dealings with associations, they are utilizing larger workstations and private offices and usually have a higher percentage of private offices than a traditional corporate office environment. Due to each work space having a larger footprint, a less efficient square footage per person is realized. In addition to this, many associations are more paper intensive than other organization types, and they often take pride in celebrating the history of their organization and thus retain paper copies of periodicals and other trade magazines and research work.

Berger: This comparison varies based on what user-type they are compared against. Versus technology clients, associations are commonly

less efficient. They are comparable to financial services but are more efficient than law firms.

Potokar: Associations tend to fall higher on the scale of square feet per employee than many other corporate offices, just shy of law offices and financial corporations. More often than not, they require a higher ratio of built offices to open workspace. Some associations have yet to let go of larger workstation footprints that other client types are comfortable reducing.

FORUM: Do you see any difference in the way associations are approaching their workplace strategy today versus five years ago?

Potokar: Associations are incorporating more collaboration spaces than they had before. As offices adapt to newer technology, it's easier for employees to work away from their desk. Giving employees the option of choice in where and how they work has been a trend among most corporate clients and is making its way into association design.

Pisone: Yes, they are aware of the direction that workplace design is moving and want to be a part of it. Most are making better use of collaboration areas. Some associations are reducing the percentage of staff within private offices and looking for efficiencies in other areas (storage, paper, etc.).

Berger: This question cannot be answered universally; some clients are moving to a more mobile work style, while others are sticking with a 'traditional' approach with office-heavy settings with L- or U-shaped stations.

Facing page: Association Forum office

“Association headquarters will look different going forward, with the result being new and exciting headquarters spaces that enhance the organization’s brand, attract and retain talent and support the mission.”

FORUM: In your recent association projects, how have these groups looked at workplace strategy and how are their new spaces different from their previous space?

Berger: The innovators—those who are embracing new ideas in workplace strategy—are in the minority when it comes to association office design. Most are holding fast to larger assigned workstations, with a comparatively greater proportion of people retaining offices. There are fewer association clients looking to be on the leading edge of space utilization benchmarks.

Potokar: Recent projects have shown association clients reducing workstation footprints. In taking that space away from employees, we encourage clients to give back by incorporating more informal collaboration spaces, whether it be phone rooms, huddle rooms, open collaboration areas in the open office or cafés with ample seating options. These types of spaces allow employees to find a spot to meet away from their desks.

Pisone: We have noticed that the associations are recognizing technology and making it an important factor in their space usage with more technology driven meeting spaces.

FORUM: How does the association’s brand factor into the design of the new space? What are the most interesting things you have done in your association clients’ space design?

Pisone: The brand of associations comes into play with the design. It has rarely been a direct interpretation, but more realistically it is a fluid dialogue between the brand and the architecture,

and a recognition and celebration of the association’s history. For some clients, we have highlighted this through a gallery wall leading to their library and for others, more recently, this recognition has taken the form of a digital celebration of history and branding. For some associations, their donor recognition is an important value to emphasize. In one case, we created various locations for identifying donors at different levels such as stone thresholds at the boardroom with engraved names, removable horizontal metal strips with etched names in the elevator lobby, and applied frosted glass distraction markers holding the names of donors. Each location had a different donor level associated with it.

Berger: The most common brand solution is one where the ‘brand’ is identified by the history of the organization. Attention is drawn to things such as founders’ walls and past president recognition. We worked with one client that transitioned all of their employees to a laptop/tablet environment, thus requiring a design that created multiple spaces for meeting and interaction. A new CEO coming from a corporate background led the charge to include employee amenities and opportunities for team interaction that was significant departure from their previous office

Potokar: Incorporating brand design is an easy way to enrich a workplace and celebrate a company’s culture. Whether it is through environmental wall graphics, murals or 3D sculptures, branded elements can build upon the mission statement and culture of an association, and bring the brand’s unique personality to life. Understanding culture is important to not only attract potential recruits and new members, but also to instill value and retain pride among employees. For associations with a clear mission, it’s important for their employees to know they are part of that mission.

FORUM: Shared spaces are important to many associations. How are board rooms, conferencing and other common spaces being designed today?

Potokar: Shared spaces need to be the hardest working spaces in the office, serving a multitude of purposes from everyday tasks to conferences to post-work events. They need to be designed with flexibility in mind, as well as integrating technology as seamlessly as possible.

Pisone: The board room is still a relevant space in association design. As much as associations try to encourage staff to utilize this space for internal meetings, there is still a stigma of formality inherently coupled with the “board room.” Thus, other conferencing spaces and styles are being provided throughout (for both spontaneous and planned meetings).

Berger: Multi-purpose rooms, to allow for all-staff meetings, are still very common for association users. These large rooms are handled either within the client’s own space, or in a building common space. Technology is being updated where large flat screens are replacing projection screens. Where association users are behind the trend is in smaller meeting spaces for employee and team collaboration. This is improving, but still has a way to go to catch up with some of the industry benchmarks.

FORUM: Not all association staff members are assigned private offices. How do you determine the appropriate workstation size and layout for your association clients? What is typical today?

Pisone: Finding a common ground within each organization is key so that the space can grow in a flexible fashion. Typical sizes that we are seeing within associations are still larger (at 60 square feet) than the national average (at 36 to



48 square feet).

SmithBucklin offices

Berger: Private offices remain more in this industry than in others. With that said, overall workstation size and footprint are getting smaller than five years ago, which is to say that they are catching up with where other industries have been during that time. Workstation panel height is finally coming down from a standing-privacy height to seating-privacy height, or lower.

Potokar: There’s not necessarily a one-size-fits-all answer here. It is most important to program with the specific client to understand how their operation works, what tasks employees perform and how much storage they need. More and more companies are going digital with filing, which reduces storage needs at individual workstations. In that case, a 6’x 6’ or 5’x 6’ are appropriate sizes for workstation footprints.

FORUM: Construction and other project costs have risen greatly during this current real estate cycle. What budget challenges do you see when designing an association’s space?

Pisone: While every project has a budget, the perception of money spent is a key factor with association design. As the membership (the recognition of, the perception by and the utilization for) of the association is the foundation of the organization, it is always important to show respect with the dollars that are utilized.

Potokar: Designing to a budget will affect the design, but it doesn’t have to affect the impact of the design. We have found that designating areas of priority in terms of finishes and specialty features is one way to maintain high impact in



AMA offices

shared spaces, while balancing the budget out with more simple moves in the work-space.

Berger: Leadership at associations commonly

come from, and have an appetite for, higher-end finishes, either based on the office they came from, or from the expectation of the industries they serve. Addressing costs for desired programmatic elements or finishes thus needs to be addressed early in the programming and design processes so expectations can be set and project parameters properly defined.

FORUM: What other trends do you see affecting the design of association office space?


Potokar: Hospitality is making a move into workplace design. Whether a concierge-style reception or meeting spaces that feel more like hotel lobbies, workplace design is taking cues from coffee bars and hotels alike. This could impact how associations think about their connection to their members—maybe they become a “third place” for their members to escape to from their own office. Wellness is also an important trend and an extension of the sustainability movement. As designers, we not only have a responsibility to the environment, but to the individuals who spend 40 to 80 hours a week in their place of work. Height-adjustable desks, wellness rooms, and access to daylight and nature are easy ways to start to incorporate this trend.

Pisone: While individual private offices are still relevant within association design, we are seeing a reduction in the quantities of private offices as well as an openness to relocating those offices

away from the perimeter glass line of the building. The shared spaces of the office, such as the café, multipurpose rooms and libraries, are utilized a greater level, but this is also due to a stronger focus on mobile technology. Each of the trends we are seeing with association design are directly following the trends of corporate office design, but at a more conservative rate of change.

Berger: Paper storage and retention is still a driver of the use of space. Those sticking with a traditional model are “hanging on” to paper, while flexible environments are looking for ways to handle paper digitally. Those that can embrace the digital solution prepare their organization to be able to welcome the workforce that is asking for a more dynamic and fulfilling environment.

As these professionals shared, the association community is collectively looking at ways to use office design to maximize their ability to pursue their organizations mission. Architects are encouraging the use of workplace strategies found in the corporate world to their association clients. Associations have been slow to embrace these strategies, yet there is change in the way headquarters space is designed. Private spaces are getting smaller, there are more areas to support collaborative efforts and branding has become an essential part of office design.

As more baby boomers are retiring and a new generation assumes leadership, the association community is adapting more of the new design paradigms seen in other industries. Technology and the way people want to work will be additional factors that serve as drivers of change for associations’ offices. One thing is certain: Association headquarters will look different going forward, with the result being new and exciting headquarters spaces that enhance the organization’s brand, attract and retain talent, and support the mission. 

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