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Zashin & Rich embraces Cleveland roots and rock 'n' roll heritage

By STAN BULLARD

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The bank of lights changes constantly and can change at different speeds near the elevator bank.



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Stephen Zashin, the law firm's co-managing partner

Step out of the elevator on the fourth floor of the Ernst & Young Tower in Cleveland's Flats and you will face a wall of coal-black wood. To your right a dozen circular light panels slowly change colors.

Walk left to the reception area and you will see high-energy rock music and dance videos streaming on one wall. A yellow bust of William Shakespeare finished off with Kiss-style makeup sits nearby. On the floor is a barrel-sized child's spinning top. Visitors often take it as a piece of sculpture, according to receptionist Danielle

Phillips, but after they find out it's a Herman Miller "spun chair," more than one has taken it for a spin.

Is this a music recording studio? Or a rock concert promoter's lair or tech space gone over the top with rock 'n' roll? No, this is the new full-floor office of the Zashin & Rich law firm. If it does not seem like a lawyer's office, that suits Stephen Zashin, co-managing partner, just fine.

"Most people do not consider visiting a lawyer's office fun," Zashin said. "It does not have to be that way."

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Just off the reception area is a coffee bar where clients may get their favorite soda or liquor while taking in a look at a battery of black and white photos of rock stars. There's Michael Jackson. There's Devo.

Look closer: All the photos by Cleveland photographer Janet Macoska were taken in local visits or performances.

The north side of the office is devoted to clients and visiting lawyers. Four conference rooms with a dozen chairs around a table in each face east. They're named after the Agora, Euclid Tavern, Peabody's and the Grog Shop. Opposite them are a series of four-seat "huddle rooms" designed so lawyers may whisk their client out of a deposition for a private chat.

The center of the space's north end has an expansive view of Lake Erie. Part of the space is devoted to a 30-seat café that serves as a lunchroom for employees and a place to entertain clients.

On the south side of the space are the lawyer's offices, all with an outstanding feature: no doors.

"I have always hated that lawyers go into their offices and close the door behind them to work," Zashin said. "How can they have creative discussions with each other?"

The open-door offices explain the division between the north side of the office and the south.

"Client confidentiality requires that we not allow opposing counsel here," Zashin said of the work spaces. "They might overhear something or snap a photo with their smartphone."

The approach differs from other law firms in many ways.

"Law offices may be contemporary or traditional, but they are usually conservative," said Al Wiant, vice president of Playhouse Square Real Estate Services who represented Zashin & Rich in its site search. "This is not intimidating but welcoming."

The assignment for office designer Vocon was a departure from what it typically produces for lawyers.

Nick Faehnle, Vocon's project manager on the job, knew that from his first meeting with Zashin.

"He handed me the album cover of 'Never Mind The Bollocks' by the Sex Pistols," Faehnle said.

That set the office's palette: black, yellow and, in the café, pink.

There's also a bit of fun in the design. Where most law firms have traditional mahogany or other fine woods in their space, here it is burned black wood for a gritty feel.

The design has been enhanced by additions that some of the firm's 26 lawyers here (another two are in Columbus) have made to their offices. David Frantz, an attorney, has his guitar on a stand in his office. Down the hall, Patrick Hoban, another attorney, has a firefighter's uniform cap and a helmet from when he was a firefighter before becoming a lawyer.

The boutique, which also has 20 non-lawyer staffers here, combines two practices. Stephen Zashin heads its employer-side labor and employment law practice, which is national in nature. Andrew Zashin, his brother and co-managing partner, heads the domestic relations and family law practice, which is international in nature as some divorcing spouses may take their children out of the country.

The level of detail is striking. The panel of lights next to the elevator bank has another music thread: The lights are actually a dozen drum covers.

The coffee bar also has two dishes of M&Ms. One is filled with gaily colored candies. Brown ones fill the other.

The dishes are reminiscent of the directions that rock star David Lee Roth with Van Halen gave stage managers.

"If the brown M&Ms and colored ones were mixed together," Zashin said, "they knew they had to be more careful of pyrotechnics used in the show. It was a way of checking for detail, just like we are laser focused on our clients' details."

