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**The Look of Law and Money**

The 18th century is alive and well and living in Milwaukee, as anyone who has spent time in the lobbies of many of our legal or investment firms may have noticed. I have passed some hours recently in a few of those stately and well-appointed rooms, taken note and wondered: is this typical of local powerhouse interior décor? Are most firms rooted in Colonial Williamsburg or Boston? And why the affinity?

Wisconsin's largest and arguably most influential law firm, Foley and Lardner, sits atop downtown's Firststar skyscraper, looking out over lake and city with the perspective of the undisputed king. It may be the defining law firm in style, as well. Despite the building's towering modernist lines, inside the firm's offices, the look is period Williamsburg. The walls are the characteristic Colonial matte gray-blue. There are mahogany sideboards, sparkling chandeliers and crystal sconces, damask settees, wide-planked floors and Oriental carpets. It would feel user-friendly to George III. The art, too, is Anglophile and impressive. Prints of London line the lobby walls, along with scenes of Kensington, Warwick and Windsor Castles; English genre scenes grace the halls. The museum-like top floor room even sports a Joshua Reynolds (a portrait of the Honorable James Hewil Viscount Lifford).

Built in 1974, the structure was the city's high watermark for contemporary style. Why, with the skeleton of the building so boldly modernist, did the interior office design go Colonial, elegant as it may be? Original instructions from the architect were so strict that no curtains, only blinds, were to hang in the windows, and no room dividers were to carve up the open floors.

One Foley partner offered an explanation. "The north shore, which is primarily the client base for firms like Foley, has a taste for traditional furnishings - the English-Williamsburg-Colonial look. So the law firm, to attract clients, inspires a connection through an aesthetic; it assumes the same tastes. Chicago firms," he says, "are very different - they tend to have a contemporary look."

Many other local firms share the same aesthetic. Also in the Firststar building, the investment firm Robert W. Baird Co. has all-embracing dark wood paneling reminiscent of the interior of an early American ship; naval prints from the same era line the walls. Law firm Godfrey and Kahn strikes an exceptional 18th-century chord in its three floors of exquisite Colonial-era paintings, prints and furniture - a result of Dudley Godfrey's passionate collecting - museum-quality, beautiful and rare. Reinhart, Boerner, VanDeuren, Norris and Rieselbach boasts a post-modern blend of the traditional and new. Exquisite rose-hued Oriental carpets lead to a reading room overlooking Water Street, framed by a huge post-modern arch. Their requisite English prints show more sense of humor than most, featuring likenesses of dogs, the Queen's Derby-winner and Scottish hikers.

Most financial institutions are not, I found, as complete at setting stages as law firms are - with one unique exception. Where Good Hope Road intersects with Appleton Avenue lies Strong Funds, created by Dick Strong. In his totally conceived environment - the

Heritage Reserve - English and Midwestern design traditions successfully intertwine. The place is controlled but beautiful in its landscape, architecture and ambiance. A graceful driveway winds through swaths of green, as on the estate of an English Great House. Brooks empty into pools in dappled groves; the spire of St. Anthony's of Menomonee Falls rises up from the horizon. The land swells gently in its subtle Midwestern beauty. The building itself, a recent product of Milwaukee's Eppstein Uhen Architects, is designed in a handsome Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired style appropriate for a home-grown Midwestern institution. A '90s interpretation of classic Prairie style, it sprawls naturally in its setting, earth-toned and horizontal. Inside there is some continuation of the Wrightian motifs, and references to the 18th century: a massive break-front mahogany sideboard stocked with Chinese porcelains and leather volumes; a grandfather's clock; needlework upholstery; a fine European tapestry; the requisite mahogany... all the discreet trappings of 18th-century merchant-power. The place is stunning, but in the midst of the Frank Lloyd Wright paradigm, why the return to the earlier period and style?

There seems to be a tradition in the United States, perhaps in the Midwest in particular, of aping Europe. In 1921 my grandfather, a self-made industrialist, built his Wisconsin mansion in the English Elizabethan style. He did not choose Frank Lloyd Wright, though he could have. His home was furnished, as these contemporary offices are, with Brussels tapestries and English furniture. And there were many others like him throughout the Midwest. Interesting, that in a country booming with fresh young energy and exuberance, the self-made and successful defined their prosperity using the symbols of the past. Perhaps it came from the Midwest's sense of inferiority, from its need to prove itself in the face of the older, more established order of the East, or in the terms of Europe, where these men's fathers had worked in the fields.

Perhaps it's just the desire to inspire confidence. How better to do that than ally yourself with something traditional, something from the past? In France or Italy today, a banker would have many centuries to choose from. But the only centuries Americans can choose from are the 19th and the 20th, and few like the 20th - too much of the machine-made predominates in that era; we want the handmade to decorate our commercial halls.

Or perhaps it is as simple as attorney Chuck Hausmann suggests: "It may be just a uniform, that traditional look, that refers back to the beginnings of English common law." But his firm for personal injury cases has gone to lengths to create a different ambiance from the more traditional firms. "We have no solid walls separating the lawyers' offices; we don't buzz people in through locked doors. We have no hierarchy. Everyone shares windows in our offices - except the private investigators, and in a perfect world, they're never here!"

Whatever the interpretation, in the silk-stocking institutions of Milwaukee that deal with law and money, Mother England is never very far away. One of the most original and straightforward touches in the houses of power that I visited was the antique ticker-tape machine at Strong's. Mounted on a place of honor, there it was, bold-faced and functional, proudly displaying its American identity - "The New York Quotation Co." - for all to see.