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In Person

DESIGNING A WORKPLACE REVOLUTION

BY STEVE ADAMS | COMMERCIAL RECORD STAFF

Monika Avery

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Age: 43

Experience: 18 years

Monika Avery has spent 18 years tailoring commercial real estate interiors to the needs of clients in the life science, higher education, manufacturing and professional services sectors. At Glastonbury-based architects S/L/A/M Collaborative, Avery's past projects include redesign of Pfizer Inc.'s 200,000-square-foot "Workplace of the Future" and the interior master plan for The Hartford's 1-million-square-foot corporate headquarters. The projects enabled the companies to use their real estate more efficiently while adding more flexible workspaces.

Q: What originally prompted your interest in the architectural field?

A: I knew very early what I wanted to do as a profession. As a 10-year-old child in my hometown of Zabrze, Poland, I was inspired by my neighbor, an architect who passionately designed buildings which improved the lives of others. I went into the profession because of her. I was inspired by this very confident woman and her work.

Q: When did your family move to America?

A: In the late 1980s we moved to Hartford. I worked for a construction company when I was college. It was an educating experience but very dry. I worked on contracts, getting to know the legal side of the profession. I debated general architecture but I knew very early that I wanted to focus on interiors because I felt we spend so much time inside, that's where I would have the most impact. We spend 90 percent of our time



inside, according to the U.S. Green Building Council.

Q: Which industry sectors have been the most aggressive about adopting nontraditional workspaces?

A: The biggest impact on our world today is the competition for talent. It's a reality for many industries and sectors. One of the factors they are competing over is the workplace experience. It's based upon human needs, and they vary demographically, culturally and geographically. It's important for a design firm to really tune into that. People want to be engaged and have a sense of purpose in our work life. Many of our clients understand this: from fintech, insurance to technology companies. Even law firms will get there. Functionally we can work from anywhere; the point now is to create community in the workplace and space to create that community.

Q: What questions do you ask clients to gauge their needs?

A: We consider our clients to be partners, so we take the time to really listen. It's less talking and more listening to understand their business goals, their brand, their culture and really co-create with them the right space that is tailored to make them successful.

Q: How does that affect their requirements for square footage per employee?

A: Our own project benchmarks in terms of the workplace range from 80 to 180 square feet per person. What affects those numbers most significantly are the amenities and outdoor spaces. A lot of our clients who are tenants want to outsource amenity space, as it is often the most expensive to build out and the least used. This in turn is an opportunity for landlords to amenitize their properties to attract tenants and engage communities. Most end users don't want to build out a meeting space with 50 seats when they know it will be used once a year.

Q: Which amenities seem to have been the most effective and which haven't lived up to expectations?

A: Generally employees expect the residential and hospitality lifestyle to permeate the workplace. This is a reflection of work-life integration, where work happens anytime, anywhere. We come to the brick-and-mortar office for in-person communication, collaboration and community. A barista, concierge, change ambassador and wellness coach are a few community-creating jobs which did not commonly exist in the workplace a decade ago. Aside from a variety of meeting spaces, amenities which offer serviced food and beverage are very much in demand.

This goes back to the hospitality factor. People want to be taken care of. They want a good cup of coffee and to take that not back to their desk, but an attractive space where they can engage with others. Amenities spaces related to wellness, such as meditation and yoga rooms, are becoming the norm as well. ■

Avery's Top Five Audible Listens::

1. "The English Spy," by Daniel Silva
2. "Black Widow," by Daniel Silva
3. "The War of Art," by Steven Pressfield
4. "Rediscover Catholicism," by Matthew Kelly
5. "So, Anyway," by John Cleese