

Feature

NYC Brick & Mortar: Trend Breakers

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While various law firms in New York have over the past two years taken less space per lawyer and set up shop with smaller partner and associate offices, some firms have bucked those trends. This is the final article in a four-part series that looks at how law firms in New York are addressing the question of brick-and-mortar space.



Law360 (September 6, 2018, 10:44 AM EDT) -- While various law firms in New York have over the past two years taken less space per lawyer and set up shop with smaller partner and associate offices, some firms have bucked those trends.



[Abrams Fensterman](#) over the past two years has grown from 1,500 to 27,000 square feet and increased its square footage per lawyer from 500 to 750 square feet and partner office size from 120 to 150 square feet. (Photo: Abrams Fensterman)

This, the final article in a four-part series on how law firms in New York are addressing the question of brick-and-mortar space, looks at some of the firms in New York City that are outliers to those broader trends.

For this series, Law360 surveyed a range of law firms, from the largest U.S. firms to boutiques, and firms of all sizes participated. Ten firms provided data.

[Arent Fox LLP](#) has been one outlier, bucking, for one, the overall trend of reducing square footage per lawyer. While the average mark among law firms that participated in Law360's survey decreased over the past two years, from 875 square feet to 829 square feet, Arent Fox's footprint per lawyer rose from 713 square feet as of June 1, 2016, to 791 square feet two years later.

Although, during that period, the firm moved from 86,215 square feet to 75,937 square feet, the new space had significant differences in partner and associate office size as compared with the old space.

In the former space, average partner offices were 248 square feet, and the new space brought that number down to 190 square feet. But associate offices in the new space are actually larger than they were in the old space: 150 square feet versus 130 square feet.

Those extra 20 square feet per associate are partly what pushed the square footage per lawyer up to 791 square feet.

That uptick in square footage at the new digs, though, is due in part to a conscious decision to have fewer lawyer offices at the new space, which has roughly 100 attorney offices versus about 120 lawyer offices in the former space. However, firm Chief Operating Officer Kurt Salisbury told Law360 the data the firm provided did not reflect the fact that some of the offices in the new space are shared offices.

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Arent Fox Downsizes But Associates Get More Space

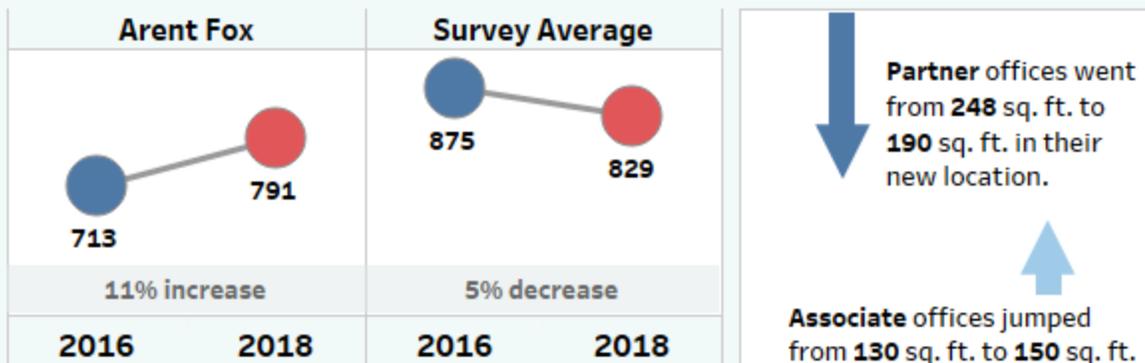
The firm dropped its total square footage by more than 10,000 sq. ft. but its square footage per lawyer ticked up thanks in part to fewer lawyer offices at the new space.

More Legroom

While most firms in our survey decreased square footage per lawyer, Arent Fox saw an increase of 78 square feet per lawyer.

Rebalancing Office Sizes

Arent shrank partner offices and increased the size of associate offices.



"Everyone is in it together. There's a view that we are all one. No one is greater than another," said Andy Silfen of Arent Fox, speaking about changes in both partner and associate offices that have resulted in less variance. "It's a better use of the space. There's a new vibe here. Everyone feels very energized. It's all glass now, with lots of natural light."

In addition to shrinking partner offices and enlarging associate offices, Arent Fox also decided to do away with corner lawyer offices, using corner spaces instead for common areas.

But while many law firms are decreasing their square footage per lawyer by simply signing new leases for smaller amounts of space, there too have been exceptions to that in New York.

[Fox Rothschild LLP](#) over the past two years has grown its footprint in New York by more than 5,000 square feet, from 48,500 square feet to 56,133 square feet.

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Fox Rothschild Grows But Maintains Efficiency

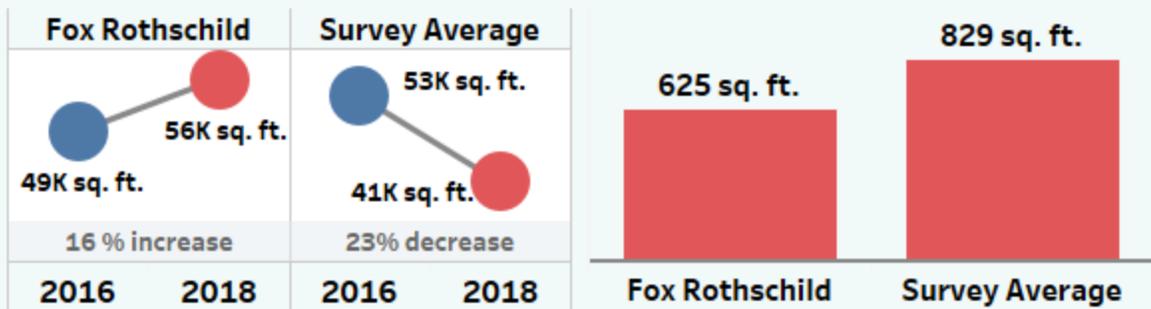
The firm recently took an additional more than 7,500 sq. ft. but maintained a low square footage per lawyer.

Larger Footprint

The recent trend has been for law firms to reduce their square footage when leases come due, but Fox Rothschild moved the opposite way.

Staying Small

Although Fox Rothschild took more space, the firm maintained a square footage per lawyer well below the average among firms in our survey.



And the big outlier has been Abrams Fensterman Fensterman Eisman Formato Ferrara Wolf & Carone LLP, which two years ago had 1,500 square feet. Now, its Brooklyn office has 27,000 square feet, and the firm has become the largest law firm in Brooklyn.

"Two and a half to three years ago ... we had to make a decision whether to end the lease early in [Manhattan] and find space in Brooklyn," said Frank Carone of Abrams Fensterman, who was born in Brooklyn, as were both his parents.

"The opportunity was there. Let's embrace who we are. Let's focus on our strengths. We are Brooklyn. That is our law firm," he added, recalling how the firm felt at the time.

And along with bucking the trend of taking less space, Abrams Fensterman has moved the opposite direction in other areas. The firm's square footage per lawyer steadily increased over the past two years, from 500 two years ago to 666 last year to 750 this year. Partner offices have grown at that firm as well, from an average of 120 square feet two years ago to 150 square feet.

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Abrams Fensterman Broke Most Trends

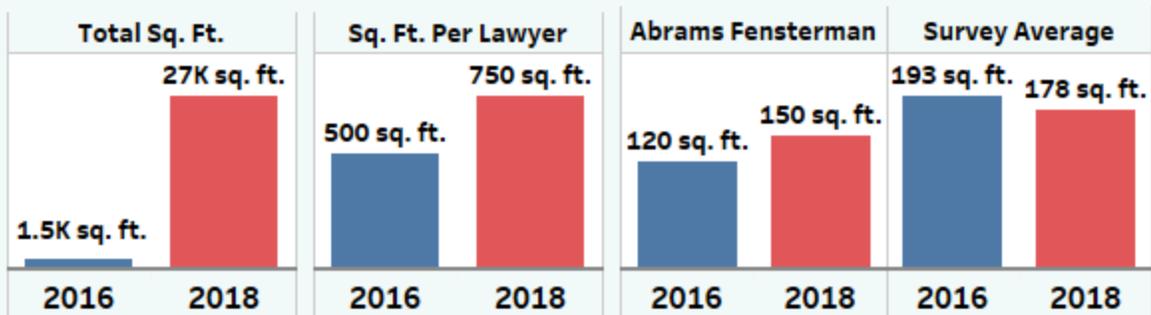
Abrams Fensterman leased massive amounts of space and pushed its square footage per lawyer up each year.

Planting Roots In Brooklyn

The firm made a massive move into the Brooklyn market, increasing its footprint there 17 times over while taking 250 additional square feet per lawyer.

Enhanced Partner Digs

Abrams Fensterman was the only firm among those in our survey that took new space with larger offices for partners.



The firm two years ago was first looking to take between 10,000 and 15,000 square feet at a new office, thinking it might take 10,000 with the option to expand to 15,000. But when the firm found a building it liked, a [Forest City Ratner](#) property, the owners wanted Abrams Fensterman to take significantly more than that 15,000 mark.

And so the law firm took a chance and a year later had 24,000 square feet. While the firm initially thought it would sublease some of the excess space, when it finished building out the space, it realized that even that amount of space was insufficient, so a year later it added another 3,000 square feet.

"It's an art form. You want to utilize the space that you have available in a way that's comfortable," Carone said. "Staff, lawyers, you want them to feel where they can breathe, want to come here, want to spend time here."

"We made a decision to find space here, and strive to be the best in our environment, rather than be another 'also ran' in Manhattan. Today, in retrospect, I think we've accomplished our goal. It was not without its challenges. Finding the space was challenging," Carone added.

Meanwhile, [Locke Lord LLP](#) was also somewhat of an outlier over the past two years.

While the firm's square footage and office sizes remained constant over the period, it has lost attorneys in the New York office each of the past two years. That reduction in lawyer count has meant the firm's square footage per lawyer has gone up, from 872 in June 2016 to 1,017 last year and 1,037 as of June of this year.

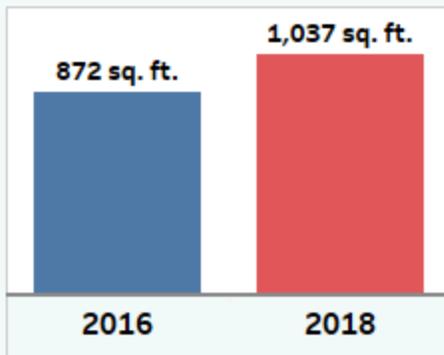
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Locke Lord Loses Lawyers

The firm didn't change its footprint but a loss of lawyers pushed its square footage per attorney up each year.

Reduction In Efficiency

A loss of attorneys pushed square footage per lawyer up more than 150 sq. ft.



Staying Steady And Large

Locke Lord stayed put in the same partner and associate offices and overall space, all of which were larger in 2018 than the average among firms in our survey.

	Locke Lord	Survey Average
Avg. Associate Office	150 sq. ft.	133 sq. ft.
Avg. Partner Office	200 sq. ft.	178 sq. ft.
Total Footprint	54,970 sq. ft.	41,173 sq. ft.

Locke Lord picked up various lawyers from Morgan & Finnegan in 2009 and merged with [Edwards Wildman Palmer](#) in early 2015. The drop in lawyers at Locke Lord in New York between 2016 and 2018 was partly a function of departures of former Edwards Wildman Palmer lawyers and retirements of former Morgan & Finnegan lawyers, Miles Holsworth of Locke Lord told Law360.

"Our overall goal is to head toward that 700 to 800 square feet per attorney range," Holsworth said. "We probably aren't going to do anything here until our lease is up. We did a lot of reconfiguring here in the 2012, 2013 range."

The firm's lease expires at the end of July 2025.

Among law firm outliers, though, [Culhane Meadows PLLC](#) has arguably bucked all trends: The firm has no brick-and-mortar space and its lawyers either work from home or in shared spaces.

Culhane operates in seven cities: New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Houston, Dallas and Austin.

"Everyone makes a choice as to how they want to work. You can work out of your home. You can get an actual office. Whatever you do it's at your own cost," said David Leffler. "A few people have gotten together and they rent out a suite. That's what they've decided to do."

Lawyers in each city get together once a month in a shared office space for a meeting, and meet with clients in shared spaces when needed. But Leffler said he finds clients don't tend to require, ask for, or need many physical meetings.

And he said he expects more law firms to move in the cloud direction.

"Besides having firms coming on as being wholly cloud based, I think traditional firms will start sectoring off certain sections as cloud-based," Leffler said. "Real estate is expensive. It just is. ... That's how I see the migration to this model."

This is the final part of a series of stories that looks at how law firms in New York are addressing the question of brick-and-mortar space. The [prior article](#) in the series looked at how the average size of partner and associate offices has shrunk in recent years.

--Editing by Pamela Wilkinson.