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# The Future of Practice + DESIGN VANGUARD



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PHOTOGRAPHY: © NICK MERRICK

BNIM OFFICE AT CROWN CENTER  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



BNIM Offices at Crown Center | Kansas City, Missouri | BNIM

# A Modernist Reconstruction

A firm's transformation of its own new space in an Edward Larrabee Barnes building leads to a more productive studio.

BY CHARLES LINN, FAIA

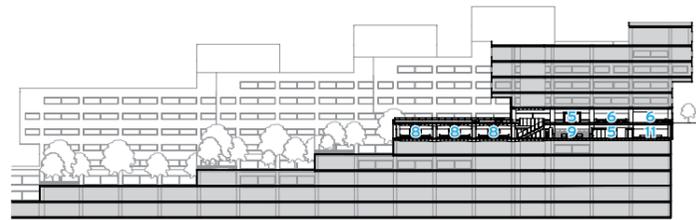
Ever since BNIM's predecessor firm, PBNA, was founded in 1970, its principals have committed themselves to helping revive Kansas City's deteriorating downtown by keeping their offices there. For years they were the only tenant in the Kansas City Power and Light building, a once-glorious 1931 Art Deco office tower. "There was nothing there but feral cats, pigeons, and us," says BNIM principal Steve McDowell.

But while being in an old building was cool, it didn't allow the flexibility and ease of communication that a modern architectural practice demands. At the Power and Light building, the principals were grouped on a mezzanine that was separated from the studios, which were stacked on floors above and below them. Communication was poor. Reconfiguring the office layout would be painful. And while BNIM was known for designing connections to nature for its clients' buildings,

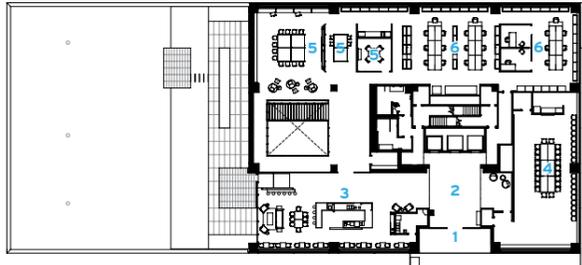
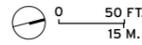


**SPARE SPACE** The architects made the most of the minimal tenant-improvement allowance by keeping the interior raw. The only big move was the removal of a 24-foot-square section of the concrete slab to join the floors (left). The balustrades are sheet steel discolored by laser cutting. The office entrance (above) is on the upper floor, where a small reception area and coffee shop welcome visitors and employees.

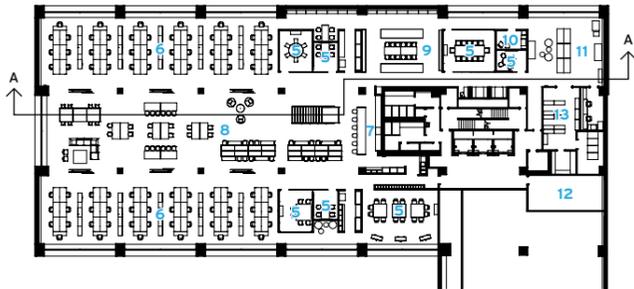
PHOTOGRAPHY: © MICHAEL ROBINSON (OPPOSITE); NICK MERRICK



SECTION A - A



LEVEL-FIVE PLAN



LEVEL-FOUR PLAN



- |                   |                     |                  |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| 1 ENTRANCE        | 6 STUDIOS           | 10 WELLNESS ROOM |
| 2 LOBBY           | 7 KITCHEN           | 11 MAKER SPACE   |
| 3 COFFEE SHOP     | 8 THE BOULEVARD     | 12 WORKSHOP      |
| 4 CONFERENCE ROOM | 9 MATERIALS LIBRARY | 13 STORAGE       |



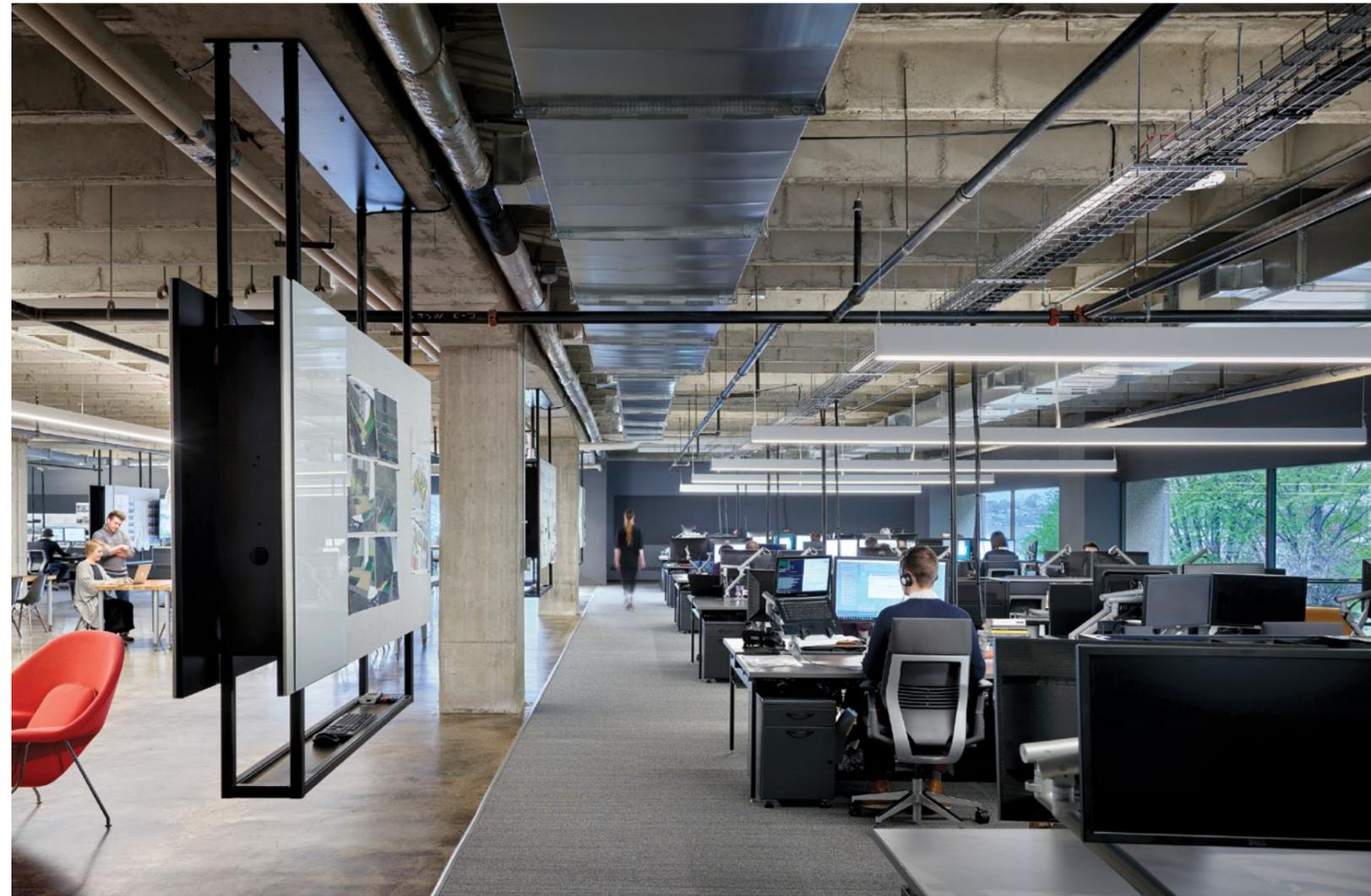
ful mixed-use development built by the Hall family next to their Hallmark Cards headquarters. The concrete structures are clad in tan precast panels that frame enormous panes of tinted glass. After more than 45 years, their facades remain unsullied by corporate-tenant signage or other alterations.

A 1970s concrete building might seem like the last place an architecture firm whose principals helped found the U.S. Green Building Council would move. But, inside, Barnes's panoramic 26-foot-wide windows, which fit within the structure's generous 30-foot column spacing, offer spectacular views to the mature trees and gardens out-

its own office was surrounded by streets and grim parking lots.

When the building's owner decided to turn it into condominiums, the firm moved to another downtown building. And after the potential renovation of that space fell through in June of 2016, the architects decided to look for one beyond the downtown for the first time. With a lease expiring and seven months to find a new location, design, build, and move into it, they settled on two floors in a 1971 five-building concrete office complex designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes that is part of Crown Center.

Barnes's buildings were the first constructed at this highly success-



BEFORE AND AFTER BNIM's offices are indicated by the ochre-tinted section of the photo of the 1970s late modern complex (opposite, top). The space was originally filled with workstations that blocked views to the grounds outside (opposite, bottom). Now "the Boulevard" bisects the ground floor, where everybody can see out (above).

side, and of Crown Center's 10-acre public plaza and fountains.

"Having a strong eye-level connection to nature made the difference in this tenant space," says design team member Rohn Grotenhuis. "We preserved and enhanced this condition with the openness of our layout, dark color tones, and lower lighting levels. It's a little like a secret garden. A visitor doesn't expect that indoor-outdoor connection in this Brutalist building."

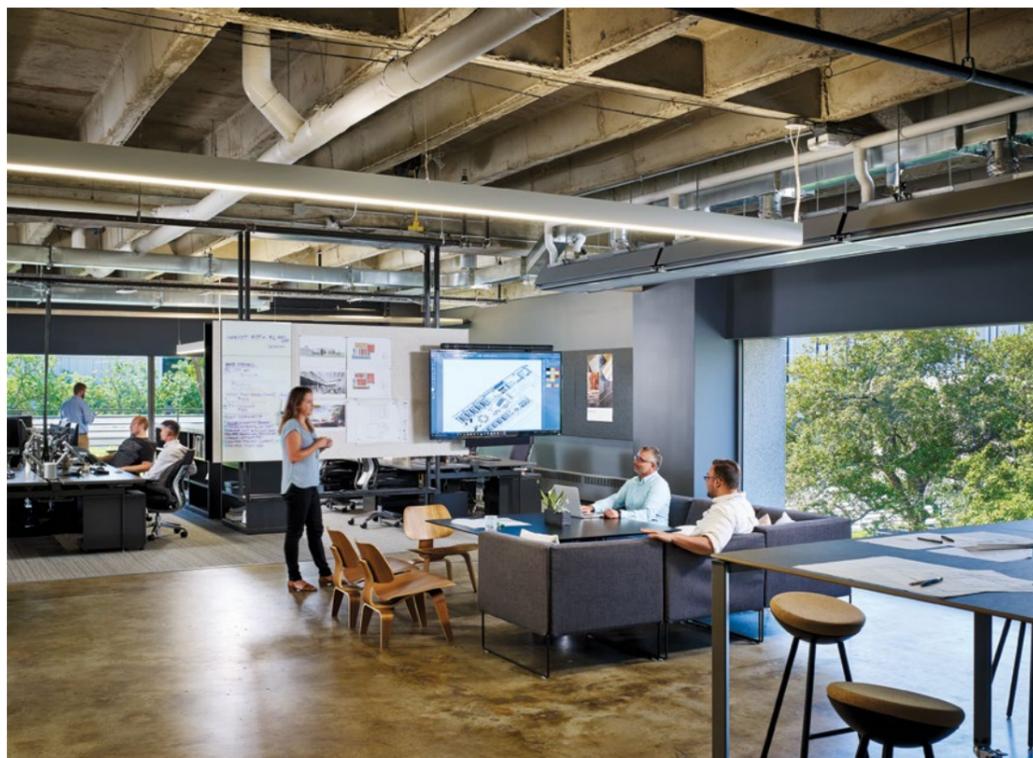
The construction budget set by the owner's tenant-improvement allowance was minimal, as was the compressed schedule, so the architects went minimalist too, polishing the concrete floors and exposing the concrete pan-joint structure, ducts, electrical, and cable trays. The sole big move was cutting a 24-foot-square hole through the slab separating the two floors and connecting them with a stair. A long, open space called "the Boulevard" extends from the bottom of this stairway toward one of the sweeping views of the trees and plaza. Here employees meet at custom-made farmhouse tables to eat, work, and gather for informal conversations.

There are no private offices. Conference rooms large and small afford privacy if needed. Desk assignments in the open studio areas are flexible, so that a principal might be sitting at a workstation alongside a young employee, an arrangement that minimizes overt hierarchical office structure and facilitates the sharing of knowledge. Wi-Fi and monitors that anyone can use to stream content mean pop-up studios are created on the fly just by people with their laptops getting together. Business phone numbers are ported to each employee's cell phone, so desktop landlines have been eliminated.

The new environment has yielded almost immediate gains in productivity and revenue for BNIM, which they attribute to better communication and a healthier, more pleasing environment. According to the firm, net revenue per employee increased by 7 percent the first year after their move in January 2017. Net revenue per technical staff member improved by 9 percent. The efficiency of BNIM's work hours improved too, as reflected in a 14 percent increase in net revenue per direct labor hour. Applications from new architecture graduates more than doubled, from 51 in 2016 to 105 in 2017.

The Hall family, which still owns Crown Center and Hallmark Cards, whose headquarters have not moved, built its business based on good design. In addition to Barnes, they hired Victor Gruen, Harry Weese,

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY BNIM (2); © MICHAEL ROBINSON (OPPOSITE)



**SERENE SURROUNDINGS**  
Contemporary furnishings create comfortable meeting areas on the upper (above) and lower levels. 26-foot-wide by 6-foot-8-inch-high windows on the lower floor have the visual effect of bringing trees and the garden into the interior (left and opposite). “The Boulevard” features long farmhouse tables (opposite) made from solid-wood-core doors BNIM salvaged from the demolition phase of a project.

PHOTOGRAPHY: © NICK MERRICK



Warren Platner, and The Architects Collaborative to do the master plan, as well as hospitality, housing, and retail design for the original mixed-use development. And, 45 years later, people still flock to the complex.

Crown Center Redevelopment Corporation still honors the tradition. Having BNIM as a tenant is good for marketing, and they love showing off what the firm did with its space. So BNIM negotiated a special deal with them: for every new tenant it helps bring in, they get a rebate on their own rent. Now the firm regularly hosts “broker parties,” where leasing agents show potential renters what’s possible once the old lay-in ceilings, workstations, and dirty carpet are stripped away. So far, the firm has helped sign one tenant, who took 30,000 square feet, and they believe that more are in the works. ■

*Charles Linn is a Kansas City–based writer and architect and a former deputy editor of ARCHITECTURAL RECORD.*

#### credits

**ARCHITECT:** BNIM – Steve McDowell, James Pfeiffer, Rohn Grotenhuis, Anastasia Huggins, Gretchen Holy, Ashley Perrin, design team

**ENGINEERS:** Henderson (m/p); Antella (electrical, lighting); Structural Engineering Associates (structural)

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Lytle Construction

**CLIENT:** BNIM

**OWNER:** Crown Center Redevelopment

**SIZE:** 22,000 square feet

**COST:** withheld

**COMPLETION DATE:** January 2017

#### SOURCES

**HARDWARE:** Assa Abloy

**CEILING:** Armstrong World Industries; Sound Away

**PARTITIONS:** Maars Living Walls

**WALL FINISHES:** Sherwin-Williams; Unika Vaev

**SURFACES:** Wilsonart; Recycled Surfaces

**CARPET:** Interface

**FURNISHINGS:** Knoll; Herman Miller; Steelcase; Bernhardt; Square One; Watson; Andreu World; Maharam

**LIGHTING:** Ketra; Finelite; Konzept