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# Lawyers in Love

The legal eagles at 254 Commercial Street really dig their new digs.



PHOTOS: CYNTHIA FARR-WEINFELD, BEFORE PHOTOS: COURTESY, PIERCE ATWOOD

From left: Pierce Atwood's Tara Jenkins, Barbara Wheaton, Colleen Ippolito, Nolan Reichl, and Jessica Grondin soak in the sun from the law firm's 5th floor deck overlooking the Old Port from Merrill's Wharf. "Being here is invigorating," Wheaton, a tax attorney, says. "We feel like a part of historic Portland—we just didn't at Monument Square. It's one thing to walk around Commercial Street, but to see what's behind the wharves really gives a new perspective."

BY DAVID SVENSON

No one loves a lawyer joke more than a lawyer, and the love affair Pierce Atwood—Portland's largest law firm—has for its new location at Merrill's Wharf has given rise to this one: "Looks like the top four floors of the (formerly) dark and scary Cumberland Cold Storage building

# TALKING WALLS



"The table, chairs, and credenza here are pieces created by Thomas Moser many years ago. We had [them] refinished prior to our move to Merrill's Wharf," says Maggie Callicrate, chief operating officer at Pierce Atwood. "I love walking up to the building in the morning when the light reflects off the water."





are going to be marine-use after all. Did somebody say, ‘Shark Tank?’”

Depending on which side of waterfront politics you stand on, Pierce Atwood’s tenancy here is the last chapter of a restoration story that adds \$12 million to the value of the building, according to community development meeting minutes.

Anyone who’s strolled across the Old Port knows the “before” pictures of this former wreck of a warehouse were unnerving at the least. “There’s no doubt in my mind there were animals in there,” Dennis Keeler of Pierce Atwood says. “I didn’t see any personally—I sort of let that part be.”

Built in 1900 to house the Twitchell-Champlin Company, the 117,600-square-foot brick structure worked well as a spice mill and can-



nery in its earliest years.

In 1962, George Lewis bought the building and converted it to Cumberland Cold Storage—a staging area for frozen food, particularly seafood, on its way to grocery stores.

In 1986, Coleman Burke purchased the warehouse from Lewis for his Waterfront Maine development company.

“George probably wondered why Burke bought it at that point,” Anthony Gatti, partner at Waterfront Maine, says. “It was pretty run down.

“We started the self-storage concept in 1986,” says Gatti of their changing the name to Cumberland Self Storage for residential and commercial items. “It was very rustic, very industrial.” Gatti says.

“When it was a freezer, it hurt the bricks inside, and they started falling out.

“For Pierce Atwood, we did a lot of cleaning. Trash was all on the floor, and insulation covered the walls. It was clean, just not in the best of shape.”

The use of the building today by Pierce Atwood heralds a new function of waterfront real estate on Merrill’s Wharf. In 2010, the city council altered the conditions of the original, 1992 “Waterfront Alliance Report.” Previous stipulations for the Waterfront Central Zone (from Maine



MERRILL’S WHARF FROM WATER. KURT ROSCILLO

# TALKING WALLS

Though completely modernized for Pierce Atwood, the building maintains much of its original character. "It's always easy to raze something and building something new, and don't we all love it," Robert Caulfield says. "But it's nice when you blend the old with the new. You have to remember history and pay homage to it."



Wharf to Deake's Wharf) encouraged properties to be used for maritime purposes. The updated requirements now demand only 55 percent of the first floor to remain dedicated to marine businesses.

As a result of this reshuffling, Pierce Atwood shares the waterfront property with a handful of non-marine companies. On the first floor, there's Federle Mahoney Law Firm and Stillwater Yoga, while Onpoint Health Data, Selkirk Partners, and Compass Health Analytics fill out the second floor. Thanks to the new ruling, all these companies are well above the water line.

Architect Robert Caulfield, a partner at designers Visnick & Caulfield, says the interior was far from being Class A office space. "Floors sloped, ramped, and had rotted away. There were no passenger elevators—just one for freight—and no restrooms. No egress stairs. The power supply was inadequate, and there was no air conditioning."

Its cinder-blocked windows and crumbling bricks were punched out and refinished. Throughout the years, the only thing





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## TALKING WALLS



This freezer door reminds us of the chilly past.

preserved in the chilly hollows of coolers was advancement.

"This is probably the most challenging project I've been involved in," Caulfield says, "because the structure was essentially a series of little cabins throughout, like metal closets."

Similes for the nearly cornerless space—336-foot long, 60-foot-wide—include Caulfield's: "like a football field." Design associate Sherry Niazmand, says, "Gloria Pinza, a managing partner at Pierce Atwood, asked me, 'Can something be done with a building shaped like a bowling alley?' Absolutely!"

To break-free from the linear confines of right angles, curves are used all over. Circular light fixtures glow in bending hallways, somehow still suffused with a sense of the building's history. "We had to use ladders to move up and down floors," Niazmand says. "But we mixed the old with the new. Timber beams are exposed along with the brick. And to work with the Historical Society, we even had to fake some of the windows. The whole design is revolutionary."

Is this a revitalization of the Old Port? "No," city councilor Kevin Donoghue says. Commercial Street "does not want for vitality... The re-use of the upper floors for office space has long been permitted by zoning and is an exceptional phenomenon, in that it was a reuse of an historic building. Nobody disputes this is valuable land. We dispute for what it is most valuable: maritime uses or others."

One thing's for certain: Pierce Atwood's occupation of 254 Commercial Street saved the building. Was something in the works for the brick colossus? "Nothing likely," Donoghue says. ■

For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/04/atwood-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/04/atwood-extras).



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