



THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Workplace design case study: Redeemer Presbyterian Church

April Greene — June 26, 2015

Redeemer Presbyterian is one of New York City's largest and most dynamic churches, with over 5,000 people regularly attending services at one of its three Manhattan locations. According to their vision statement, "Redeemer exists to help build a great city for all people through a movement of the gospel that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, the world."

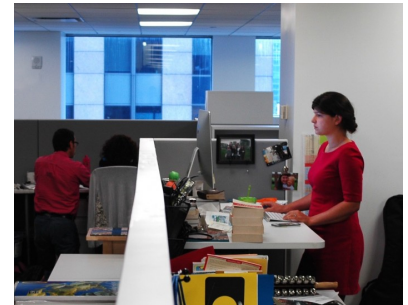
When the 25-year-old church determined last year that they were outgrowing their administrative offices and would need to move, they engaged Pilot Projects to help design a new space that would be environmentally friendly, physically flexible, and complement and help to enrich their culture as an organization.

We were excited to offer them a number of complementary design services, in part because we knew this would be an involved, multifaceted, and educational experience—for us as well as, hopefully, for them.

Redeemer came to us with some defining features we kept central to our process from the beginning:

- A diverse group of people would be using the office, including counselors, clergy, operations staff, and a wide cross-section of visitors
- These stakeholders required their spaces to be varying degrees of secure, welcoming, quiet, open, and changeable
- Their new space (a 40,000 square foot floor plate) was significantly larger than the last (space on two separate floors of a smaller building)
- Sticking to budget was essential—Redeemer expressed a strong desire to be good stewards of their funding
- Some furniture belonging to the previous tenant and some from Redeemer's previous space was available for our use—if we could think of good ways to employ it
- Tastefulness in design, functionality of the space, and overall fiscal responsibility were three of Redeemer's main priorities. We kept these front of mind at every stage.

A selection of office images and views:



The perfect adjustable-height standing desk



An initial floorplan



Some Redeemer employees (with a visitor?) test out a new booth as their office takes shape

With such a mix of inputs to consider, we knew right away that this workplace design was a job for the **Sandbox**, our signature tool for participatory design and culture-building processes.

Through a number of Sandbox events—at which employees buzzed from location to location on the board, moving pieces around and conversing excitedly about what was desired, what was possible, and who needed what—we gained a better understanding of how Redeemer worked and how they wanted to grow. For example, we noticed that the notion of what was "fair" drove many of their conversations, and that a team's leader would often advocate for the perspective of another team member who couldn't be present.

Between researching and selecting standard furnishings, designing custom pieces, establishing offices versus open spaces, reconfiguring conference rooms, and everything in between, our major involvement with Redeemer lasted about a year—though we hope and expect our relationship will continue far into the future.

Here are the top three things we've learned from working with them so far:

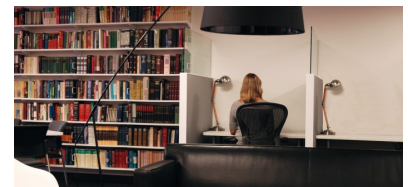
- *Even a large office move can be relatively green.* "I think we're one of the few tenants in this building that have reused what was here already," said Chris Dolan, Director of Information Services at Redeemer. In addition to immediately reusing furniture like conference tables and task chairs left by the previous tenant, Redeemer opted to refurbish other secondhand pieces rather than buying new. For example, having some of their old cabinets repainted gave the office lots of fresh-looking storage units at a fraction of the cost—to both the bottom line and the environment.
- *A truly flexible workspace requires many moving parts.* The "flexible workspace" (filled with adjustable-height desks, movable walls, and generously-distributed power outlets) has been all the rage for a while, but few such spaces actually work as intended. Why? Because it takes more than "stuff" to do the job. An office also has to encourage confidence in its employee-users and set a precedent that this way of working is possible before anyone will turn a hand crank, lift up a modular floor tile, or wheel their desk across the room. Redeemer joined these two parts of the equation together—investing money in the right tools, and investing effort in a cultural shift—to make their flexible workspace really work.
- *Design is a culture-changer.* When we asked Redeemer employees what they noticed about their first days and weeks in the new space, without exception they commented on the new cafe area that includes long "campfire tables" for communal eating and an open kitchen area with an island. "Our old cafe felt very dark and removed," said Josh Simmons, Ministry Manager for the Downtown Congregation. "But here, people are eating lunch together and congregating every day. It's easy to become silo'd at your desk; this space is helping to build camaraderie and community." Knowing that culture and design are inseparable, we advocated for a large cafe and kitchen area that would be



An early neighborhood sketch



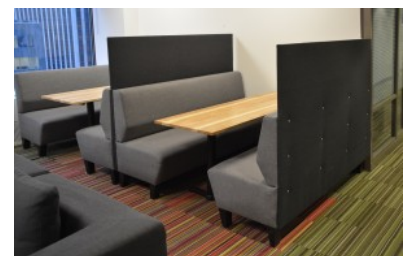
Finished entryway



Phone booths give staff privacy without sacrificing openness



The new multipurpose cafe



Custom-designed cafe booths fit the space perfectly



Early furniture elements ideas

centrally-located, receive natural light, and encourage gathering at large tables. It's great to see these design elements translate into a positive change for Redeemer's office culture.

Why Pilot Projects?

We always want to know if we're meeting our clients' expectations and needs, and have had numerous conversations with Redeemer about our process and progress with them. We're pleased to report it sounds like our goals of helping people create effective and beautiful designs through inclusive processes and culture-forward thinking are working out:

"The old office was not warm or welcoming," said Josh. "Any business wants to be warm and welcoming, but it's especially important for a church. Pilot Projects understood that. And they really got our whole staff involved—not just the top-level management or a few of us. I could tell my input was important to them. When I walk in now, I'm excited to be here."

"We liked the collaborative nature of how Pilot Projects works," said Chris. "Our team members really got ownership over their own space, versus what we would have gotten with a design firm that came in with a cookie-cutter image of the design, or wanting to 'make their mark' on our space. With Scott and his team, we really got to put our own fingerprint on it. The flexibility of our offices is greater, we're wasting less square footage, and our public spaces are more inviting. People stop to look and talk and engage."

"It feels more communal now; more like real New York living. It's changed the culture."

See our [Redeemer Presbyterian Church project page](#) for more info and photos.

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One of many Sandbox participatory design workshops



Laura and Paul enjoy the new space

Photos by Daniel Joo

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