



(Above) Exterior of mansion. (Below) A restored 12-foot high stained glass window adorns the grand staircase. This photograph was taken in 1892 (courtesy photo).



Where

*By Naseem Stecker
Photography by Carrie Pickett*

AWYERS

Work-In Grand Style

Historic Hecker-Smiley mansion brings elegance to downtown Detroit law office



Who:
Charfoos and Christensen, P. C.

Where:
5510 Woodward Avenue, Detroit

What you see:

A French Renaissance Chateausque style mansion. Built over a century ago by railroad magnate, Colonel Frank J. Hecker, the 28,000 square foot, 49-room building has only had three owners and was at one time headquarters of the Smiley Brothers Music Company. The current owners, the law firm of Charfoos and Christensen, bought the property in 1991 and embarked on a major renovation project that involved a team of 28 subcontractors working seven days a week for ten months to restore the mansion to its former elegance and splendor.



(Top left) The grand staircase. (Above) Office set-up.

The results are inspiring: yards of gleaming woodwork, restored marble and onyx fireplaces, elaborate parquet floor designs, a 12-foot stained glass window, elaborate plaster work, graceful arched doorways, as well as extensive carved mahogany and oak paneling. During the renovation, stonework was tuckpointed, the roof was rebuilt, and the heating and cooling system was redone with 28 zones. A 5,721 square-foot carriage house at the rear of the mansion, once used as a private recital hall where singer Paul Robeson and pianist Arthur Rubenstein performed, has also been renovated by the law firm into a mock courtroom.

The National Park Service recognized the firms' efforts with a 1994 Historic Rehabilitation Excellence Award. That same year, the firm also received a Historic Preservation Award from the *ABA Journal* Law Office Design Competition.

The suggestion to buy the mansion came from attorney and partner, Douglas Peters. "I come from a small state, New Hampshire, where people reuse old houses instead of tearing them down. When this place came on the market, we jumped on it immediately," Peters said. "Our law firm has been in Detroit since 1929. A lot of law firms were moving out to the suburbs; we wanted to make a statement that we were going to stay in Detroit and part of that statement is amplified by our being in a landmark home."

All the partners in the firm have a corner turret room and separate office along with period-style furnishings. Persian and antique carpets adorn the walls and floors, as well as old photos and other antiques.

"Even though we have to rough it, we get by," Peters joked. "We only have 11 bathrooms and 13 fireplaces!" ◆

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.



The Hecker-Smiley mansion has an Indiana limestone exterior and gray slate roof. Round corner towers, filials, and other ornate features give the building its grand appearance.