

# Walking the Walk

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## Concrete Association's Offices Celebrate the Material's Inherent Qualities

by Denise Liebowitz

"We love our space!" declared Nicole Maher, chief operating officer for the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association (NRMCA). This much enthusiasm for a workplace defined almost entirely by concrete might, at first, seem like an over-abundance of professional fervor. However, the unabashed embrace of exposed concrete in an office interior has resulted in an environment that is remarkably warm, luminous, and welcoming. Preconceived notions that concrete is dense, dull, and cold are swept away in a design that showcases the material's versatility, strength, and beauty.

Having decided to sell the downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, building that had long served as its

**Project:** National Ready Mixed Concrete Association Offices, Alexandria, VA

**Architect:** Winstanley Architects + Planners

**MEP Engineer:** Vanderweil Engineers

**Furniture, Fixture & Equipment Consultant:** B-More Consulting

**AV Consultant:** RJC Designs

**General Contractor:** McCloud Builders

headquarters, the NRMCA was searching for a new home. It chose an Old Town Alexandria office building on the Potomac River where its sister organization and close collaborator, the National Stone, Sand and Gravel

Reception area.







Corridor with displays about the history and mission of the organization.

Association, was already located. As luck would have it, the 1980s building was constructed of concrete. Perfect.

"The space had amazing waterfront views, lots of floor-to-ceiling windows, and regular round concrete columns set in a 20-foot grid," recalled **Leejung Hong, LEED AP**, principal at **Winstanley Architects and Planners**. The 10,000 square-foot space on the second floor needed to house 26 employees: the engineers, architects, education, and advocacy professionals who provide services to the concrete industry. Remarkably, in an age of open office plans, shared workstations, and co-working spaces, the association opted for a private office for each employee. "The staff played a big role in this decision," said Maher. "We polled them and 100 percent—even the young ones—said they wanted a door on their own space. When COVID arrived we realized even more what a good decision this had been since private offices really helped with social distancing and the return to the workplace."

The entry lobby shares a glass wall with the adjacent conference area and both spaces enjoy a stunning water vista. A minimal reception desk, handsome coffered ceiling, polished original concrete slab flooring, and thoughtful lighting combine to make a calm and stylish entrance. "The view is the wow moment," said Hong. She explained that the walls,

which look for all the world like industrial concrete, are actually a kind of architectural stucco material thinly applied to moisture-resistant drywall. "These are all high-quality finishes but minimal material and color palettes."

From the lobby an interior corridor wends its way to the individual offices. "The design is like that of a town with narrow streets and piazzas and courtyards as public spaces," explained Hong. The celebration of concrete continues in these interior corridors. The architect noted that in addition to the original structural columns of the building, her team added a number of faux columns underscoring the industrial character of the design. Overhead lighting is suspended from grids of rebar in a further homage to the utility and beauty of reinforced concrete. Light bounces off the soft gray finish of the walls and floors and a carefully lit wall display relating the history and mission of the association adds further interest. "Nothing feels dark in here," said Maher. "The color doesn't feel cold or harsh—it's kind of a warm gray mauve-y tone and not the stark white you would otherwise have in a standard office."

The association's 26 private offices open off these enclosed corridors and are entered through glass doors. Located along the perimeter of the building, most of the offices boast a large span of windows and

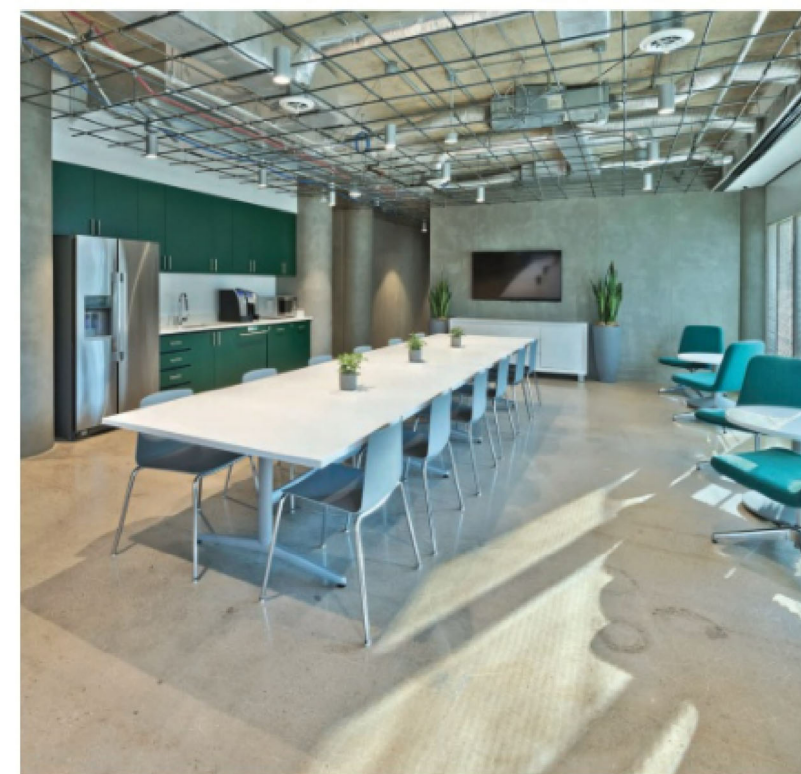


"Piazza" where corridors meet.

open views. These highly functional private spaces have plenty of light and are equipped with adjustable desks, small conference tables, and neutral furnishings. The concrete walls, floors, and ceilings of the lobby and corridors are not seen in these offices. There is, however, a hint of the association's embrace of its industry: the undulating shades of the plush gray carpeting in each office could remind some of freshly poured concrete.

The interior corridor terminates in the far corner of the building at a café that provides a collaborative gathering area and where a wall of windows pulls in abundant natural light. Due to the grade of the site and the building's construction, the café actually sits at ground level and opens to the sidewalk connecting the office and its employees to Old Town.

"I had never done a project like this," said Maher. "It was all new to me. Leejung was extremely patient and took time to explain everything. Sometimes I would have to say 'you guys have gone into architecture-speak' and they would pare it back so I could fully understand what I needed to. They were totally organized and gave me the freedom to engage the staff in many of the decisions. We had fun!"



Café.