

# Learning From Plans To Retrofit One Of America's Oldest Skyscrapers

The architects M Moser are renovating a floor of New York's iconic Woolworth Building. Just because it's old doesn't mean it can't reach the highest standards of 21st-century office design.

1/13 [Photo: Arturo Olmos]

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**BY ADELE PETERS**

3 MINUTE READ

When it was built in Manhattan in 1913, the Woolworth Building—at the time, the tallest building in the world and one of the most technologically advanced—used the early 20th-century version of healthy office design. Every office was within 10 feet of a window for natural light, and a unique air circulation system brought cool air up and hot air down to keep the spaces comfortable. Inside an office on the 24th floor, one new tenant now plans to design a healthy space that is state of the art for the new millennium.



**Christine Bruckner** [Photo: Arturo Olmos]

At the Fast Company Innovation Festival last week, global architecture firm M Moser shared a look into what will become its newest office—for now, a raw, unbuilt space—and explained how it will meet the “platinum” rating for the [WELL Building Standard](#), which scores buildings on features like how a space promotes fitness and nutrition and the quality of water, air, and light, all of which impact both employee well-being and productivity. For the firm, every office is an opportunity to push healthy office design as far as possible.

“Now, whenever we move or revitalize spaces, we treat them as a lab,” says Christine Bruckner, director at M Moser Associates. In the Woolworth Building, as in the company’s offices in Hong Kong and London and others in progress in San Francisco and Guangzhou, the company will use movable vertical walls of plant species known to purify air, and place them strategically in sight of desks, based on research that shows that [productivity and mood improve when you can see greenery](#) at work. The walls, made by a company called [Naava](#), also have built-in fans to circulate air.



The Woolworth Building, circa 1913. [Photo: Library of Congress/[Wiki Commons](#)]

The space will also be designed to encourage movement and minimize the time people spend sitting at desks. Lighting, air quality, water quality, and acoustics will be optimized. At the Fast Company Innovation Festival, the architects and several partners demonstrated tools that it will use to monitor the space, such as air quality sensors, and some of those that it will use to improve it, such as a nearly silent air purifier from the Chinese company [Broad Group](#) and Naava’s green walls.

For M Moser, this type of office renovation lets its architects get firsthand experience with the spaces that it recommends to clients. But the spaces also serve as a showcase of the possibilities in older buildings.



[Photo: Arturo Olmos]

There are obvious challenges in retrofitting old office spaces rather than building from scratch. “You’re dealing with old electrical issues, you’re dealing with old plumbing, you’re dealing with old HVAC, you’re dealing with the fundamentals of a building,” says Bruckner. “And when you’re a tenant, you don’t get to design what serves you.”

There are also advantages: The Woolworth, like many older buildings, has windows that can be opened when pollution levels outside are low. More modern buildings are often sealed shut. Because the new office happens to be on the same floor as the original office of F.W. Woolworth, the five-and-dime kingpin who financed the whole building, it also has unusually high ceilings. The building lobby, with a cathedral-like design, arguably also might improve employees’ moods as they wait for an elevator.





**Russ Drinker** [Photo: Arturo Olmos]

Bruckner makes the case that more companies should consider renovating old buildings, even when they're less spectacular than the Woolworth, in part not to waste existing materials. "I think people that already recognize that this is a special space because of its role in history," she says. "But many older buildings that don't have quite as remarkable a history or a lobby, they're just knocked down. There's a lot of what's called *embodied energy* in every built item, and that embodied energy needs to be recognized. There should be a benefit given to people when they're working with existing buildings and giving them new life."

There's no reason, the architects say, why older buildings can't be retrofitted to the highest standards for health. And when that happens, it can transform the experience of being at work. "We want to create spaces where at the end of the day, you are in better shape than when you started the day," says Russ Drinker, global director of architecture, sustainability and environmental wellness at M Moser.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a staff writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to some of the world's largest problems, from climate change to homelessness. Previously, she worked with GOOD, BioLite, and the Sustainable Products and Solutions program at UC Berkeley. [More](#)

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