

## Cool Spaces in Urban Places *By Tracy Certo*

When Paul Rosenblatt, AIA was looking for office space for his new firm, he knew what he wanted: great daylight, high ceilings, open space in an interesting building and an exciting location.

"I fell in love with this one mess of a place," Rosenblatt says. "We developed design for the space, they built it to our specifications and it's completely transformed."

He found the space through Cool Space Locator, a firm started in 2001 with a mission to revitalize neighborhood development by filling the upper floors of buildings in urban business districts. Rosenblatt's architectural firm, Springboard, is now located in the Terminal Buildings on the South Side in a space with a floor-to-ceiling wall of windows, exposed brick walls and coffered ceiling. There's even an old stamped metal door with counterweights on a rolling track. "It's pretty much everything we wanted," says Rosenblatt who admits to pinching himself every day when he walks through the door.

With testimonials like this, it's understandable that the nonprofit firm Cool Space Locator has yet to advertise or market its services. The two-person firm is headed by CEO Deborah Baron, a commercial real estate broker who has "never ever lived in a suburb", and her partner, President Kyra Straussman. Their ultimate goal? "No more empty buildings in the urban core," says Baron with confidence.

"More broadly," she clarifies, "we exist to reenergize urban development in urban neighborhoods by bringing non-retail businesses to utilize upper floors in buildings that are on and off the main street."

The organization, which is unique as far as they know, was started as a collaboration by the community development corporations from East Liberty, Oakland, and the South Side. Funded initially through an innovation grant from Pittsburgh Partnerships for Neighborhood Development, the group now receives funding from other sources as well, including R.K. Mellon Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh, the Mayor's office and Councilman Bill Peduto.

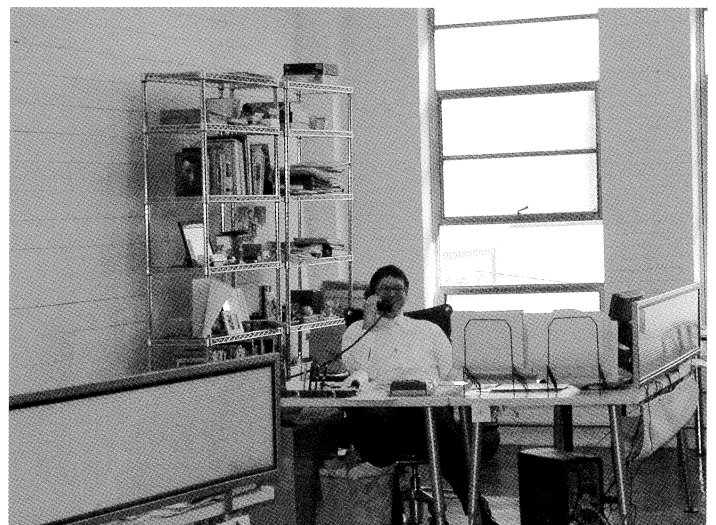
Not only are the spaces for businesses very appealing, Baron says, but they're also cheap, ranging from a low of \$8 to a high of \$18 a square foot. Acting as real estate brokers, Baron and Straussman take clients through every step of the process as they help them evaluate options and expose them to nontraditional office buildings. It's a way for clients to get the chance to contribute to the community and in turn, get more than a parking lot outside the front door.

From all indications, it's proving successful. "In two and a half years we've had as many clients as we can handle," says Baron. "We never advertised, never did any market-

*"We exist to reenergize urban development in urban neighborhoods by bringing non-retail businesses to utilize upper floors in buildings that are on and off the main street."*



**Garfield Street. Clients want to be in a great building in a great neighborhood.**



**Paul Rosenblatt, AIA, fell for a "mess of a place" that was completely transformed to everything he wanted.**

ing and we don't even have a listing in the phone book." Since they rent space from the SSLDC, a group that helped incubate the organization, they also use their phones.

In a span of a few years, Cool Space has assisted approximately 140 companies, ranging from a helpful phone call to thorough involvement, placing 21 into new spaces.

Clients—such as design firms, tech firms and nonprofits—have located to the Pink Building in Lawrenceville and the Terminal Buildings on the South Side, as well as downtown, Allentown, East Liberty, and the North Side.

Baron is paid like a typical broker, by the building owner when a tenant signs a lease. They don't charge a commission to the client.

The size of the company, whether it's one person or one hundred, doesn't matter, says Baron. "If they are committed to being in an urban area and recognize that they can have an impact by where they locate—sprawl or urban revitalization—then we'll take them as a client."

Finding clients is one thing; finding spaces is another matter. Most of the buildings the organization was interested in were not being tracked by the national database called Costar. In most cases, says Baron, you can enter search criterion such as "5,000 square feet at \$20 a square foot or less" and it spits out options. But not in most of her cases. So Baron struck a deal with the database firm: Cool Space Locator would help populate the properties if the database company would maintain the listings for them.

"We hired interns and sent them out the first summer in East Liberty, Oakland and South Side and identified every building. As we've continued, we worked with other communities which lacked this intensive update. Now the North Side buildings are in there and Friendship and Garfield." Currently they're working in Homestead where they have shown space but haven't had much success in leasing.

"What's hot is the product *type*. People want space that looks good and is authentic to the building. They like to see a building that's been restored with respect to that building," says Baron.

"This was a real revelation to us. We thought they were going to say, I want to be in Lawrenceville. Instead they say, I want to be in a great building in a great neighborhood. Show me what's out there."

In demand: Open spaces and lots of light, for starters. Historically appropriate space, authentic details such as exposed brick walls and a sense of action outdoors. "They want to be able to walk out the door and have things there—places for lunch, people around," Baron explains.

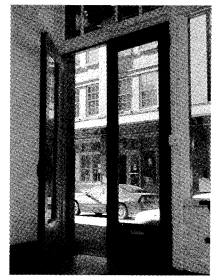
What clients don't want are dropped ceilings and garbage on the floor. "It's a turn off and we see that all the time," laments Baron of the latter. Baron says she sees potential everywhere but unfortunately many of her clients do not. Their experience led them to the URA to pitch an idea for a new program. "Commercial building owners don't clean up buildings like residential owners," says Baron. Now through the URA, business owners can take out a no-interest loan and use the money to fix up the property to make it more appealing to potential tenants. The owners can pay back the loan when they get a tenant. "This is something the banks won't do," says Baron. "We're hoping that can have an impact."

She admits they are always looking at ways to have a bigger impact. "We aren't going to transform the urban environment one transaction at a time." At the same time, she realizes their potential to create change in the process. "This was a new realization for us. We know what businesses are looking for and we can provide that info to CDCs and property owners. If you want to provide space for businesses, this is what you need to do. We hope to grow that toolbox so we have more impact."

Although they have found their niche in the market, the volatile economy makes it more challenging. It's hard to measure the impact, says Baron who adds, "According to Grubb and Ellis, there's a ten-year supply of office space on the market right now."

For Baron, the question is: "How can we create a tipping point in the market that redirects the typical consumer of office space toward urban spaces?"

To the self-described frustrated painter, it's a goal worth pursuing. She is full-steam ahead, and grateful for the opportunity to make a difference in urban neighborhoods. "Talk about being able to live your passion," she exclaims. "How much better can it get?"



*What's in demand?  
Open space, lots of  
light, historically  
appropriate space  
and a sense of  
action outdoors.*