

A Law Firm That's Young at Heart

By **CLAIRE WILSON**

THE former offices of **Kriss & Feuerstein**, a real estate law firm, were a safe mix of traditional furniture in a modern shell.

But when the firm moved last fall to space that was double the size but in the same building, 360 Lexington Avenue, near East 39th Street in Manhattan, the three partners chose a design that was more modern and younger in feel. "We are a young, modern firm just like our clients — the young entrepreneurs in real estate who are constantly designing their own spaces," said David Kriss, the partner who oversaw the design of the 12,500-square-foot space on the building's 12th floor, one floor below the old space. "We wanted something similar to their offices and homes and the restaurants they go to," he said.

The new space incorporates the elements of the most modern commercial real estate development — white, stainless steel and gray colors and sleek design. They are all the specialties of the designer, Andrés Escobar, the principal in Andrés Escobar & Associates, which is based in Montreal and has offices in Manhattan. The layout of the offices was designed by another firm, DPM Architecture of Manhattan. Building was done by the Wonder Works Construction Corporation, also based in New York.

Mr. Escobar likes to take design details from one environment and use them in unexpected settings. At Kriss & Feuerstein, such features include lighting that changes color, slick lacquer finishes, quirky pendant lights and 1970s-era chrome. The effect is more like that of a media company than a law firm, if not a hip hotel bar.

"It's important that you come into a space and say that there is something there that makes you think, and that there is something different going on," he said.

Mr. Escobar's bright rectangular lobby space is enlivened with a white panel angled into the shape of a check mark that tilts forward and is finished in shiny white polyester resin. Almost the same height of the ceiling, the panel is punctuated by shadow-box cutouts lined in silver leaf and illuminated in blue by light-



emitting diode, or L.E.D., lighting. The firm's name stands out in three-dimensional chrome lettering.

Ceilings throughout the offices are about 9 feet high, and in the elevator lobby are dotted with recessed light fixtures. In a central alcove that is about 10 ½ feet high, 18 gourd-shaped pendant light fixtures, in white ceramic, hang in two rows from the ceiling. Mr. Escobar called this "the illusion of a chandelier, even if they are all individual." The floor is covered with pristine white porcelain tiles, edged with bright chrome baseboards. Elevator doors are painted metallic gray. Most of the walls are covered in a slate

gray paper by Vycon, printed over with a faint mother-of-pearl look. The foil-like effect never has a distinct cast but reflects what passes by or the changing shades of L.E.D. displays created by Color Kinetics. The paper is meant to suggest a luxurious Venetian stucco finish but is more cost effective, according to Mr. Escobar. "It doesn't require a craftsman to put it up," he said.

A glass partition and doors separate the elevator lobby from the reception area, where the white porcelain floor tiles unify the common areas. To the rear, the reception desk is made from glass panels back-



The new offices for the law firm Kriss & Feuerstein, designed by Andrés Escobar, left, include features like lighting that changes color, slick lacquer finishes and 1970's-era chrome in the lobby and reception area. Ceilings are punctuated by shadow-box cut-outs.

painted in white and topped with a white stone composite surface.

A hanging panel over the reception desk is set in an alcove in the ceiling that is reminiscent of late-20th-century loft style. Mr. Escobar carved out the alcove and left the waffle design on the slab exposed around the panel. It is a further example of mixing styles, as well as the designer's taste for conserving existing architectural elements where appropriate. "If there is a texture or architectural feature that will add to the drama of the space, I try to use it rather than cover it up," said Mr. Escobar, whose other recent projects include two Manhattan condominium developments, the District and Harsen House. "Why destroy something like this that is perfect?"

Natural light is incorporated into the design to enhance the work environment but also to save energy, according to Mr. Kriss. Each office along the periphery has frosted glass partitions separating it from the corridor to maximize natural light flowing into the core.

The wall separating the main conference room from reception is entirely of frosted glass, allowing light through but not sound. Inside, Mr. Escobar designed stationary vertical blinds from wide panels of sanded plexiglass. These maximize light while allowing the best views of the former Mobil building on an opposite corner.

Most of the light bulbs are energy-saving,

including some four-watt fluorescents that Mr. Kriss found by searching online. There are motion sensors in most rooms, and the lights go out when the room is empty. In the conference room, a white birch conference table seats about 12. Additional lighting is provided by a string of eight fixtures hanging on a cable the length of the conference table. These look something like jellyfish, according to Mr. Escobar; they are in clear glass with white energy-saving fluorescent bulbs. Carpeting throughout the offices and the conference rooms is a mix of solid gray and a gray and white plaid design.

JUST outside in the reception area, there are glass doors on two telephone booths that were added to the layout to dissuade people from using cellphones in common areas or hallways. That also applies to cellphone use in the cafeteria, a bright modern room with a bold cityscape mural and white and aluminum furniture.

Kriss & Feuerstein has about 25 employees, 10 of whom are lawyers. Clients include the Ashkenazy Acquisition Corporation, Sitt Asset Management and the Cayre Family. According to Mr. Kriss, for whom the hardest part of the move from the 13th to the 12th floor was getting rid of the law library, the new offices reflect what the firm is and what it does, but without necessarily looking like a law firm. "This is a space you like to be in," Mr. Kriss said.