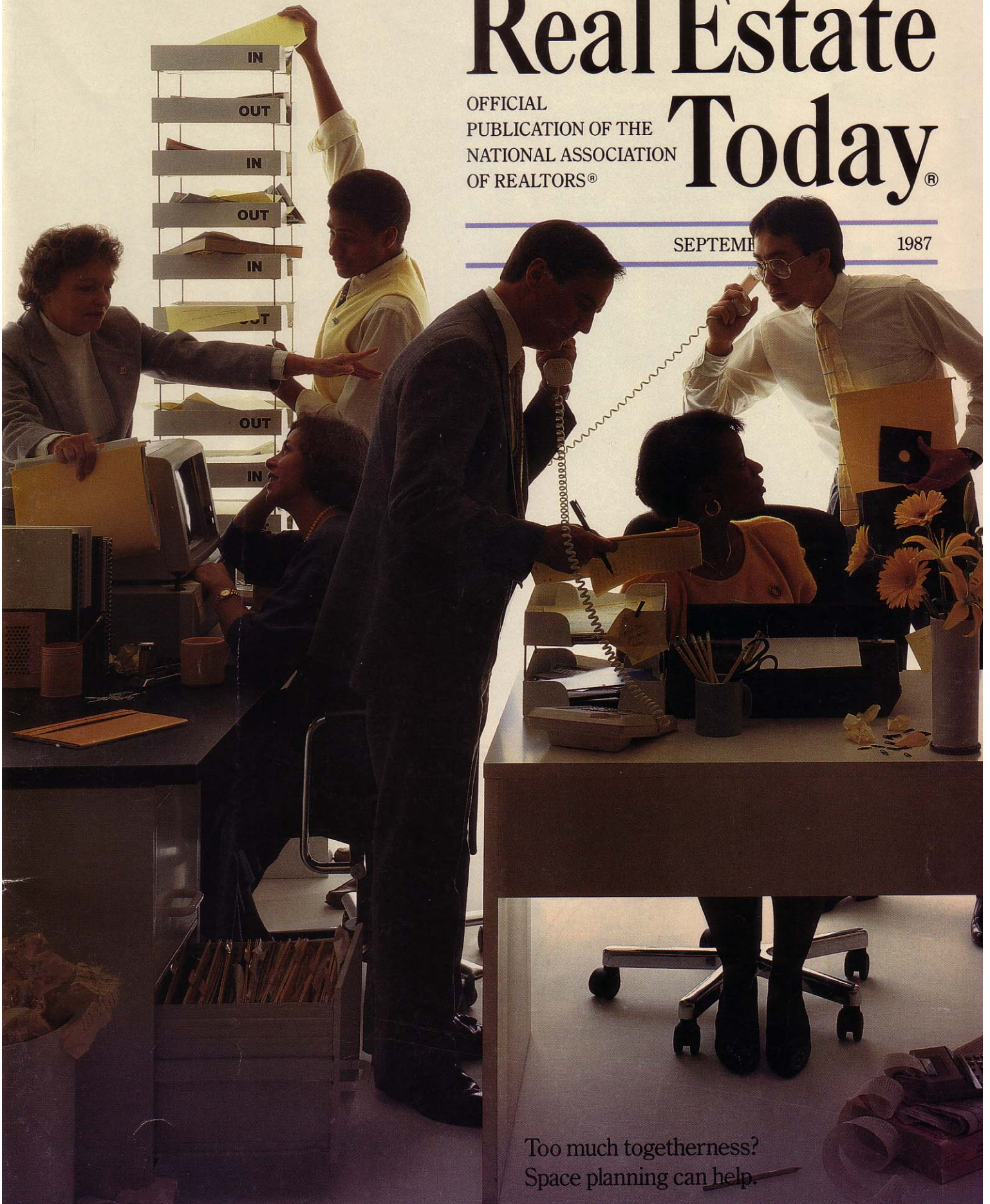


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Too much togetherness?
Space planning can help.

SPOTLIGHT ON LEASING A NEW OFFICE

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Houston, Texas

A dramatic set can inspire great sales performances.



Opening a new real estate office is a lot like opening a new play. The salespeople and support staff are the actors, and you must create an exciting set for them and direct their efforts to achieve success.

After 17 years as a manager of a real estate company, I decided to open my own office. The first steps were setting my priorities and asking for help from friends who had owned real estate companies. They assisted me with business details, provided information on lease negotiation, and advised me on selecting a capable certified public accountant, thus helping me avoid some of the pitfalls of opening a new business.

My goal was to provide a setting that would enable salespeople to work effectively and make them look forward to coming to the office. But first, I had to answer some questions: What concepts and plans would ensure success in what many people said was a down market? And what should I emphasize at a time when large companies were closing branch offices, and small companies were closing—all at an alarming rate?

Defining Needs In answering such questions, I decided that a real estate office can function and be successful even if it lacks extensive financial assets. However, if a company lacks productive salespeople who recognize their interdependence, the office will be short-lived. But how could I attract such salespeople? And after having recruited them, how would I motivate them? I realized that the appearance and image of the office could help me recruit and retain top-producing salespeople. So in addition to being functional, the office must be pleasing to the eye, causing people to remember it as uniquely attractive.

Furthermore, I recognized that salespeople have the right to comfort and a degree of privacy while conducting business. A manager doesn't motivate salespeople but rather creates an atmosphere where they can motivate themselves.

Site Selection After having defined my market area, I began looking for a location in a re-

tail center that would help me accomplish my goals. When I had narrowed the list of possible sites to two centers, I asked the advice of a reputable contractor who had remodeled my former office. He helped me evaluate both locations and determine which would better meet my needs. One center was attractive from a layout, parking, and economic standpoint, and it was also central to the market area I had targeted. However, its largest tenant was a discount clothing store, and the rest of the center was a little down-at-the-heels. So I settled on a more expensive location a few blocks away. That center was newer and better maintained and offered the potential for a more creative buildout or office completion.

The space was in a tri-level center that offered a flexible arrangement of leasing street-level space in increments of 5' x 40' and additional space above or below street level. I had determined that to meet my budget, I needed 20 salespeople, each of whom would produce a minimum of \$2 million annually. Therefore, I concluded that I could afford between 2,500 and 3,500 square feet.

Next, the contractor recommended an innovative architect. I got references from the architect and checked them carefully. My check revealed that his clients had not only been happy with his work but had also found him to be creative and cooperative.

The Floor Plan The next step was to arrange a meeting with the five salespeople I had recruited, our soon-to-be office manager, and the architect. I required a floor plan with an open-office arrangement because I believe that salespeople must be able to communicate readily with one another. From the beginning, advisers had pointed out the pitfalls of providing small private offices as rewards for productivity. For instance, it's easy to move someone in but hard to move that person out when another salesperson has earned the private office.

By asking questions, the architect soon knew what salespeople wanted: an arrangement that provided privacy but facilitated communication, accessible storage space for supplies and files, room for a visitor's chair, small private conference

*Behind the reception area
are two kiosk-type
conference rooms.*

rooms, and a workroom with computer terminals, printers, screens, a copy machine, a machine for duplicating keys, a postage machine, and any other necessary equipment. They, too, wanted an attractive appearance.

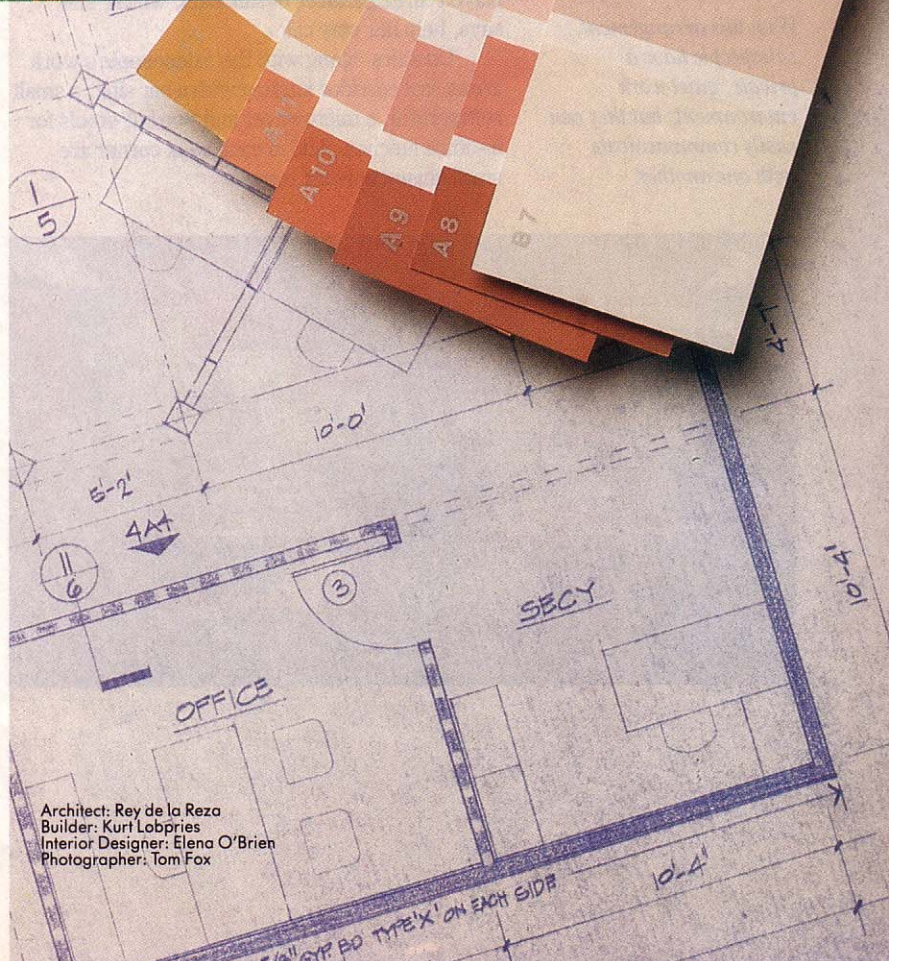
The architect said that he could provide work spaces that would be quiet but would still allow salespeople to communicate easily with co-workers. After two meetings, he reviewed preliminary sketches and determined that we would need 3,100 square feet. He recommended 1,000 square feet at ground level for the reception area and 2 kiosk-type conference rooms, and 2,100 square feet on the second level for 20 stations for salespeople, 2 secretarial areas, and a small private office for me.

Next, I proceeded with the lease negotiations, and the architect completed his final plans, building a scale model to show us exactly what we were getting.

The developer of the center was, of course, the general contractor. However, for the buildout, we were allowed to use the contractor who had helped me choose the site. Although his bid was slightly higher than that of another, I knew that he was dependable and a true craftsman.

Designing the Interior Next, the interior designer helped me select colors, wallpaper, carpet, and furniture, accomplishing a striking design on a modest budget. I had collected *molas* (colorful reverse appliqué panels depicting life among the Cuna Indians of Panama), which she displayed in different ways throughout the office. She also raided my closets at home for posters and pictures.

For my private office, she selected a functional but attractive desk and credenza as well as



Architect: Rey de la Reza
Builder: Kurt Lobprijs
Interior Designer: Elena O'Brien
Photographer: Tom Fox

Although each salesperson's workstation has been furnished with a desk, ergonomic chair, and file cabinet, individuals have been encouraged to decorate their areas to express their personalities.



With this arrangement, salespeople have a private, quiet work environment, but they can easily communicate with one another.

cane chairs. Each salesperson's station was furnished in an attractive, comfortable arrangement that included a desk, chair, and file cabinet. I then invited salespeople to decorate their own areas themselves to express their personality. One brought in a beautiful Oriental lamp that picks up the peach wall color. Another salesperson has displayed three pictures of sailboats, which, she says, help her stay calm.

Upstairs, along with the salespeople's work areas, is a corridor kitchen with a bar sink, a small refrigerator, a microwave, and two bar stools for in-office lunches. And in each back corner are small unisex powder rooms.

My office has a glass door that is seldom closed; however, even when it is closed, salespeople can still see me, and I can see them. That fits my open management style. By limiting the number of salespeople to 20 and applying minimum production standards, a one-on-one management style is workable.

The appearance of the office has helped me immeasurably in recruiting. Most top salespeople interview with several brokers when they plan to change companies or relocate, and our office design has been a factor in affiliating top producers with us. Our location has worked out well, too. People who visit the center often stop in to see our office and end up buying or selling a house through our company.

The building process went smoothly because I planned carefully and professionals were involved in all the details. I was nothing more than a coordinator: The people who should take a bow are the office manager, the first five salespeople, the architect, the builder, and the designer.

Of course, everything hasn't been perfect. The company has grown much faster than I anticipated: We now have 20 full-time salespeople, 4 full-time and 1 part-time staff persons, and a director of corporate relocation. In addition, we need a quiet spot for a part-time bookkeeper, as well as a room in which to store audiovisual equipment and show training films. So we're currently negotiating for more space.

My play with its dramatic set has been going strong for 1½ years, and I'm anticipating a long run. We're all enjoying the applause. ■

REALTOR® Sartain is president of Nancy Sartain, REALTORS®.

