

## Q&A with Marci Auston, President of Slate

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Slate delivered many thoughtful design details for Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck's new office at Block 162.

Marci Auston is the president of [Slate](#), the largest office interior solutions company in the Rocky Mountain region, and part of the ownership team at Denver-based Elements, which supports placemaking in commercial environments through thoughtful design, consulting, furnishings, and construction services.

Drawing on three decades in the industry, Marci is responsible for supporting the company's mission of providing future-focused workplace solutions that engage people and empower organizations.

**You've been working in this market for quite some time. What are some of the more notable ways you've seen the approach to the office evolve?**

The office has evolved in so many exciting ways over the years, but I think the biggest evolution we've witnessed — and helped support — is the shift to people-focused office design. It used to be that there were far fewer models for an office set-up. Cubicles and private offices gave way in many cases to open offices, which evolved again to more tailored set-ups with amenity spaces for employees to touch down. Now, we're seeing offices that are designed more like neighborhoods and communities — providing freedom of choice for employees and catering to how they specifically work best. And the result is typically a happier, more productive workforce.



Marci Auston

In my opinion, this whole human-centered approach is what keeps things interesting. It's about making the office a place where everyone feels supported and seen, and that's really the key to a successful return-to-office strategy.

**What inspires you about the built environment?**

The office can be an incredibly powerful tool for organizations, but when it's at its best, it can also be a source of inspiration for people. As companies look to bring employees back to the office or look to optimize their hybrid model, the environment they create needs to be a magnet — a place that draws people in. This human-centered approach to design is what energizes me. By weaving community into the fabric of the built environment, genuine connections and a strong sense of belonging can naturally flourish.

When we're working with a customer and we're able to help them see how the design of their office can support and empower and engage their employees in ways they never imagined possible — that's such a great feeling! I also find inspiration in creating adaptable spaces with an eye toward the future. Offices are not meant to be static because we are not static beings, so it's important to be able to work alongside our customers to help them plan for and manage change so their environments can remain effective for them.

**Tell us about a favorite recent project.**

I am extremely proud of our team and what they delivered at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck. This was our first big project after OfficeScapes and Elements merged in 2022, and it represents so many firsts for our newly combined — and now renamed — studio. We delivered on so many meticulous and thoughtful details, and the office design integrated insight-led furniture applications to support Brownstein's hybrid return-to-office strategy.

Interestingly, they thought they would have more employees opt into a flex schedule than they did. Most of their people came back to the office, and I attribute that to the project team creating a place where Brownstein's employees can do their best work. It is truly a showcase of human-centered design.

**After a tumultuous few years in office, what is your best advice for successfully designing a**

## **modern work environment?**

Forget cookie-cutter offices!

I've been working in the industry for 30 years now and can confidently say that the future belongs to workspaces that are customized to their audience. What that mix looks like will vary from company to company, but the point is to know what that looks like for your people before you ever go into the design process.

You might find that the junior staff working from home want to come in, be mentored, and have collaboration opportunities. You might find it's more difficult to get senior management back in as they might have a comfortable home office set-up and need a compelling reason to be in the office. You might find frustrations with the way things worked in a previous office set-up, and you might not like everything you hear, but there is tremendous value in listening.

The other piece I'd advise companies consider is not just what's good for productivity, but what is good for growth. In a conversation I was having with a manager at a company, they noted they were far more productive at home because they kept getting interrupted by questions from their staff when they were in the office. My question was, "What are all those people doing when you're at home?" So much of the benefit of being in the same place is the ability to get quick questions answered as well as to expand understanding, brainstorming and problem-solving. What might be great for one person's productivity might be stunting another's growth as they're developing as professionals. But you'll never know unless you dig in.

Part of the reason we see so much value in being part of the Elements family of brands is that we can pull together all those tools for listening, along with all the other elements you might expect from a furnishings company so you're getting actionable data and then the tools you need to execute on that data.

## **What's the biggest mistake companies typically make when implementing a return to office and how can they avoid it?**

The biggest speed bump on the road to return-to-office is when companies ignore what their people truly need (or they neglect to ask).

Who wants to put on hard pants and suffer through a commute for a below-average office experience? Probably no one. You need to earn their commute.

Making assumptions about what employees need or want to be effective, neglecting to effectively communicate the true "why" behind the return, or failing to address employee concerns can all lead to resentment. Listen to your workforce, invest in an inspiring office space, communicate your priorities for being in-person and check back in with all levels of the organization to see how it's going. This is still relatively new territory for everyone, and what worked for one big tech company might not be a fit at all for your law firm. It all comes down to your people.

## **What is the biggest lesson you learned in 2023 that you and your team are bringing into 2024?**

I am more hopeful than ever about the impact we can make on people and our community. Place is more powerful than it's ever been. We didn't have it for several years, and look where that got us. Disconnected, isolated, and languishing between what was and what could be.

As we settle in with our new realities, we are reinforcing that every decision made needs to be people and team-driven. We're adopting this internally while also coaching our clients on how that translates to their space. We have a unique perspective on the heels of our merger, which only reminded me how important our culture and people really are. When you create places that bring good people together, good things are possible.

**You're helping to envision people-focused design for offices of all shapes and sizes. What are some of the more interesting trends you're seeing? What can we expect to see more of in the coming years?**

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, at Slate, the focus on human-centric design puts us at the forefront of emerging trends transforming workplaces into vibrant communities.

First, the idea of the office as a microcosm of a thriving neighborhood is something I'm particularly interested in. Not unlike the 15-minute-city concept, you're bringing together everything employees need in a workday under one roof: work, food and beverage options, services they need, leisure activities, and more without the hassle of leaving. Just like the best cities cater to our diverse needs, these office neighborhoods foster engagement and a sense of belonging.

Second is the idea I mentioned earlier of considering productivity vs. growth when it comes to the purpose of the office. The massive shift in how we've all been working over the last several years has created tremendous opportunities for examining which environments are best for which tasks and which environments create productive, happy employees. But where we still need to explore more is which environments are most conducive to growth – both professional and organizational. We expect to see a greater focus going forward on environments and work models that support the whole picture.

**Considering the growing demand for sustainability metrics built into the office design and functionality, how are furniture dealers becoming more effective partners in realizing sustainable solutions?**

Sustainability is huge! This is top of mind at Slate, especially after the merger of Elements and OfficeScapes.

We are specifically rising to this challenge by partnering with manufacturers like Steelcase, our leading manufacturer partner, that prioritize revamping product lines to include eco-friendly materials (with certifications like LEED or GREENGUARD for responsible sourcing and low emissions) and distributing high-quality furniture across Colorado and Wyoming that lasts and minimizes waste.

We also help our clients optimize office layouts to reduce furniture needs in the first place by offering asset management and redeployment services. Personally, I am extremely passionate about this topic and am using my position on Steelcase's Dealer Council to lead a national workstream on sustainability to drive positive change within the industry.

Finally, education is key. As dealers, Slate is becoming experts in sustainable furniture and can guide our clients towards eco-friendly choices. By advocating for sustainable practices throughout the industry, we can help transform from product sellers to trusted partners in creating a greener work environment.