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## Architecture firm begun in Elmhurst moves to Jamaica

*Graf & Lewent, known for redesigns of boro airports, says 161st Street spot has better commute*

By Ivan Pereira

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*The architecture firm Graf & Lewent has opened a new office in downtown Jamaica. Photo by Ivan Pereira*

A Queens business that has been helping to redesign and update the borough airports is bringing that energy and excitement to downtown Jamaica.

The architecture firm Graf & Lewent Architects moved from the Elmhurst location it had been operating out of since its inception in 1989 to 90-30 161st St. in March and has already made its mark in the neighborhood.

Its offices stand out from the rest of the neighborhood, which is filled with buildings that date back to the 1950s, and have a stylized modern look with glass walls and new lighting that allows pedestrians to get a good look at the 17 architects at work.

Howard Graf, the co-founder and partner of the firm, said he wanted to create a welcoming atmosphere not only for his staff but for the community.

"Most people are working on drawings, but it's something fun to watch," he said.

Graf said the move was made because of the geographical advantages it gave the firm. Not only has the office's proximity to the Long Island Rail Road and subway made it easier for the architects — 13 of whom live in the borough — to commute, but it also gives them faster access to their work.

Graf & Lewent's specialty is in designing spaces for LaGuardia, Newark Liberty and John F. Kennedy International airports. Over the years, it has made everything from conveyor belts to cafés and waiting areas at the airports.

Access to the AirTrain is beneficial for the staff and their clients, according to Graf.

"This particular location not only gave us access to the places we need, but also allows us to expand and grow over time," he said.

The Greater Jamaica Development Corp. helped to sway the group to come to the downtown area. Andy Manshel, the executive vice president of the nonprofit community development group, said it was looking for a well-established firm to set up shop and reinvigorate the area.

Graf & Lewent's offices complement the art studio chashama that is located next door, according to Manshel.

Like the architects' space, the chashama studio has a glass wall and is open late at night for visitors.

"It's a big difference to walk down the block and have the lights on and see the art gallery and architects instead of a business with a rolled-down gate," the vice president said.

Graf said he and his staff have been taking in the sights and sounds of the downtown area over the last few months and have been enjoying the exploration.

"A lot of neighborhoods have a lot of pluses and this neighborhood has a lot of them," he said.

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