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Does SF need another co-working space? The women-first Wing founders are betting yes.

Maghan McDowell | Oct. 9, 2018 Updated: Oct. 25, 2018 3:57 p.m.



The concept of a “wing” invites a number of clever tie-ins: The notion of flight, for example, or protection. Taking someone under one’s wing, a supportive “wing-woman” or even a “hive” make sense. All of which the Wing embraces. Earlier this month, the women-focused work and community space opened its first West Coast location — a West Wing, if you will — in San Francisco.

The Bay Area outpost is in an overhauled 8,000-square-foot space on the second floor of 115 Sansome St., a Financial District Beaux Arts building built in 1912 as the headquarters of the Standard Oil Co. Its neighbors reflect the changing tides of San Francisco. Blue Bottle Coffee, on the first floor, took over the original location of Cable Car Clothiers, which had provided three-piece-suits to local financiers. Next door, Equinox now occupies the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange building, while the Mills Building now houses mobile gaming company Pocket Gems and poverty-fighting nonprofit the Tipping Point, among others.



The five Wing locations (three in New York, and one in Washington, D.C.) have about 6,000 members, and although the exact qualifications are private, it is looking for diverse members who advance its mission in unique ways, according to a spokesperson. A single location membership is \$2,350 a year (\$215 a month) — less than co-working spaces such as WeWork or Bespoke, and comparable to women’s wellness clubhouse the Assembly.

The Wing’s timing is remarkably prescient. Its inaugural location, in Manhattan’s Flatiron district, opened in October 2016, three weeks before the presidential election. In San Francisco, it opened three days after the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. When visitors walk in to its new lobby, the first conference room is named for Dr. Christine Blasey Ford.

“I think we saw something a little ahead of its moment,” says co-founder and chief executive officer Audrey Gelman during a walk-through of the new space. “It’s been interesting. That day changed a lot, but women have been facing a lot of the same challenges for decades, and arguably centuries. It just happens that they now happen to be on the front page of the New York Times, and people care about them.”

There is an undeniable comfort in recognizing yourself in those around you; maybe, in fact, this is what it has felt like for men at work until relatively recently.

“Even now we hear from a lot of women in tech and venture in San Francisco who feel like they are not in the rooms where decisions get made, and I think our message is like, let’s create new rooms,” Gelman says.



San Francisco bespoke suitmaker Emily Meyer joined in New York to meet clients for fittings, which is an intimate and personal process. After the election, Meyer says, the Wing became a sanctuary.

“When the elevator opens, you can exhale. There are no existential threats,” she says, admitting that in the beginning, she was skeptical. “I thought, ‘Is there going to be another cool group here? Is this going to be a club full of Instagram influencers or people who are very fake?’ I was completely uprooted in thinking that. Everyone is supremely authentic, and I am praying that translates to San Francisco.”

The founders emphasize a “come as you are” ethos.

“I’ve seen members in face masks,” co-founder and chief operating officer Lauren Kassan says. “But also a conference call closing a massive deal,” Gelman continues. “You are on guard in a weird way when you’re out in the world, and we wanted a space where women could toggle between the personal and professional more easily.”

In addition to expected elements (desks, conference room, phone booths, a cafe), the female design team added features that are made to be female-friendly, not just aesthetically but conducive to work. In addition to guest speakers, manicures, a women in tech breakfast, and a “weed and wellness” talk are also planned.

A basket of blankets awaits in a corner near plush velvet chairs in shades of apricot, mustard and burgundy. A beauty room is stocked with complimentary products from Chanel, Glossier and Carol's Daughter, while showers and lockers invite a quick change between gym and meetings. For those with babies in tow, a mothers' room is decorated with Maison C wallpaper's custom Coven design of nude women dancing. There's also a lending library selected by the Strand Bookstore. An art gallery, curated with Lolita Cros in participation with San Francisco's Jessica Silverman, sells works by female-identifying artists from California.



Gelman's original vision formed when she was traveling as a political consultant, pretending to be a guest in a hotel so that she could work and change. It expanded with the help of Kassan, who came to appreciate a community approach through her work with fitness-booking service ClassPass. The programming reflects a "safe space" mentality, with support circles on topics such as postpartum depression, addiction and sexual abuse.

Historian Alexis Coe brought "thousands of pages of ephemera" from 19th century women's clubs, which partly informed the branding of the Wing. Men, Gelman says, "were comfortable to use (men's clubs) for business and cigar-smoking, and women were never comfortable with them limited to that. The women's clubs created the modern library system and played a pivotal role in the suffrage movement."

But what does it say about us that a women-focused club inspired by the 1800s is relevant today, when the times now are so different? "Not that different," Gelman counters. "It's a continuation of the promise of those spaces a hundred years ago."

And business does get done. Members and interior designer Nicole Gibbons launched a startup from inside the Wing, while Jessica Ramos was convinced to run for the New York State Senate and blogger Nikki Vargis launched a feminist travel magazine.

Media coverage has often focused on the founders' fashion-friendly provenance and the heavy use of Millennial pink. (Gelman worked on Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign and, as a best friend to Lena Dunham, inspired her "Girls" character Marnie.) When it expanded to D.C., a Washington Post article asked, "Is 'The Wing' too hopelessly Manhattan for the working women of Washington?"

With the protest-prone Bay Area, the founders seem to be taking a "wait and see" approach.

"We have a mission and a point of view, and if you try to be something for everybody, you are actually nothing for everybody," Kassan says. "It's important to put what we are doing out there and feel confident and good about it."

Both are all too familiar with the heightened level of scrutiny that faces women-led endeavors.

"Everyone is like, 'Yeah, more women need to run for office!' And then the minute they do, they are picked apart to a crazy extent," Gelman says. "It's the same thing with startups: 'It's so abysmal the number of women-founded startups that get funded; there have to be more women.' And you go for it and there is a level of scrutiny that dudes with vests in the tech scene don't face."

In the fundraising arena, the Wing seems to be doing all right. It's raised \$42.5 million from the likes of Kleiner Perkins, BBG and even co-working space WeWork, which has faced criticism for a frat culture.

And the Wing certainly doesn't pussyfoot around the fact that it's by women, for women. Its mission is "the professional, civic, social and economic advancement of women through community. We believe that the act of coming together in furtherance of the Wing's mission creates new opportunities, ideas and conversations that will lead to greater mobility and prosperity for womankind."

In March, the New York City Commission on Human Rights investigated the Wing for a possible discrimination violation, ostensibly because it was a women-focused club — a matter the founders declined to discuss. Although it has previously been reported that male guests, even for business meetings, are not allowed, the official policy is that guests are welcome regardless of perceived gender or gender identity. There are also "many" nonbinary, transgender and gender-nonconforming members, a spokeswoman says.

New member Khalida Ali, who recently moved from New York to work in diversity at Zendesk, hopes that what she learned of the Wing in New York will happen locally. "A lot of my world is centered around tech, so I'm excited to connect with people who are part of a larger ecosystem and other industries. It's been cool seeing how intersectional their work and approach has been, by highlighting and connecting with the women who come from a number of different backgrounds and identify in different ways," Ali says.

The organization has gotten endorsements from a range of local high-profile women. New members include One Kings Lane founder Allison Pincus, Cuyana founders Shilpa Shah and Karla Gallardo, Instagram head of communications Kristina Schake and Uber Head of Strategy

and Leadership Meena Harris, who as founder of the Phenomenal Woman organization was behind the full-page ad in the New York Times in support of Christine Blasey Ford.

“The Wing will build a strong cohort of civic-minded members connected through a commitment to diversity and respect,” wrote S.F. Board of Supervisors President Malia Cohen. “I look forward to seeing the positive impact this new establishment will have on our community.”

New members are bullish. “It was way more affordable for us to become members than to get our own office space,” says Cyo Ray Nystrom, who, with Rachel Washtien, is co-founder of Quim Rock, which makes plant-based vaginal wellness products. As a “female, Millennial, femme-identifying entrepreneur” who is marketing a cannabis-based women’s health product, Nystrom has faced major fundraising challenges. In addition to being surrounded by potential new customers, she hopes that working at the Wing will help her refine her investor pitch.

“It’s interesting that in a members-only club they are using vestiges of the patriarchy — which were for white, land-owning men of a certain station — so when we create spaces that are for women, we need to make sure that we are not making the same mistakes as these old white guys,” she says.

Meyer, the suit maker, adds that, if anything, the last two weeks show a need for something different. “San Francisco and Silicon Valley have always lacked a counter to tech bros and brotopia, and this is it. For that reason, they might not get any backlash.” She concedes that members do need some level of disposable income. “San Francisco is not a ‘Chanel’ city, but we will see,” Meyer says.

A local scholarship program targets those who work on issues such as homelessness, affordable housing, immigration and equality.

If anything, Gelman and Kassan are open to feedback.

“Sometimes, it’s counterintuitive what a city will want more of,” Gelman says. “Our ears are open.”