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margaret bourke-white



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margaret bourke-white

About ten years ago an architect who happened to be an old crony of one of this magazine's staff members, dropped into our offices just as an issue was about to be laid out. It consisted mainly of office interiors—and at that moment all the photographs were fanned out on two large tables. Our visitor slowly moved along, examining them at leisure, after which he paused, and sighing slightly, made a remark which didn't seem particularly clever at the time; we realize now that a significant fact had been pinned down for the first time. What he said was:

"Funny, isn't it? There's a family resemblance among them, though each job was done by a different designer. You'd think they would try to pick out some other make of furniture just to avoid looking alike. But you can't blame them, I guess. How many good designs are there? And of those, which can you afford on a contract job with a limited budget? Let's face it, there's Knoll and maybe the Eames chair and that's it."

In the intervening decade, tremendous changes have occurred at Knoll's and around it. Then as now Knoll's consisted of a furniture division, of a Planning Unit to design interiors, and a newly-launched textile division. But compared with today's collection, the furniture models of 1947 were limited both in number and in stylistic idiom. The contract field served by the Knoll Planning Unit has expanded hugely, and high-budget jobs calling for sumptuous furnishings have ceased to be the exception. Knoll's business has multiplied; so have its competitors.

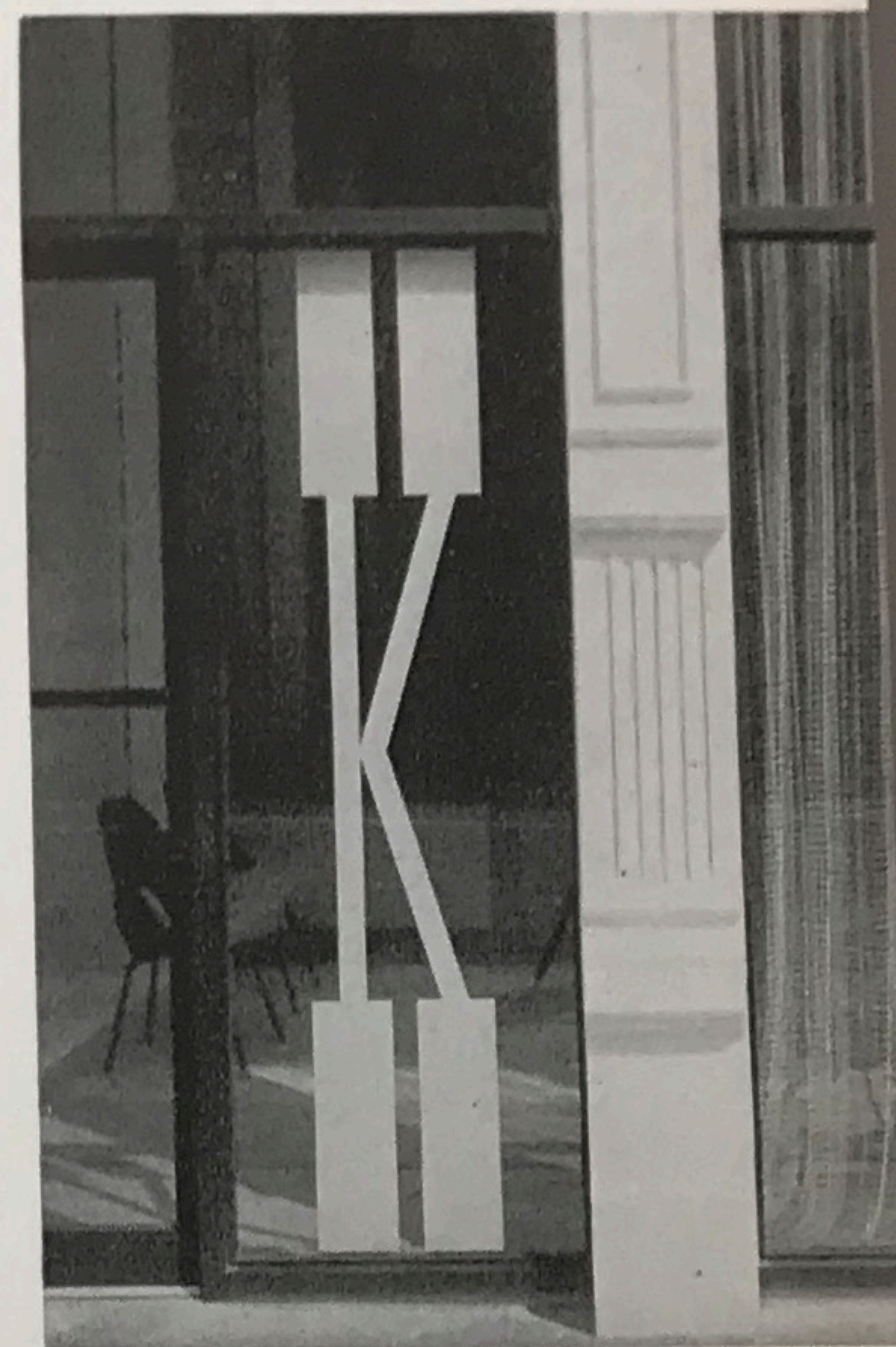
Nevertheless Knoll's *relative* position remains the same. This is not a matter of mere physical growth, though Knoll showrooms are dotted around the country and there are eighteen showrooms abroad. None of Knoll's rivals can claim as many of the great names of the design world among its roster of product designers; none can count on as impressive a turnout of architectural V.I.P.'s when it sends out an invitation for the unveiling of a new design; none can claim as many milestones in modern furniture (esthetic or structural); and last but by no means least, none arouses such a storm of fury among the avowed enemies of modern. To friend and foe alike, Knoll is a symbol of the modern movement.

The firm was established in 1938 by Hans Knoll, 24-year-old son of a successful German furniture manufacturer. Young Knoll, who had settled in the United States with this intention the year before, had been born in Stuttgart in 1914, educated in Switzerland and England. In 1941, when the Hans G. Knoll Furniture Company was holding forth from a one-room office-showroom in New York, Knoll met a pretty brunette from Michigan named Florence Schust, who was working in the New York office of Harrison & Abramovitz, and who was a graduate architect. Knoll told her of his ambition to develop a company that need not struggle with established firms for an existing market, but that would create its own market, one for which no vocabulary of furnishings as yet existed: the new architecture.

The war was on and materials and labor were scarce. Miss Schust asked a young architect, Eero Saarinen, to try his hand at a chair that would sidestep the shortages. He responded with a series of models whose frames were cut out of

*The widow of the late Hans Knoll maintains her firm's position not as mere manufacturer or design office, but as a collaborator and symbol of the modern movement*

## Florence Knoll and the avant garde



morlev baer



out of laminated wood, whose seats and backs were interwoven strips of canvas. The side chairs were perky, the lounge and reclining chairs, which had a bold body curve, powerful and striking. They were easy to make, sold well, and were noticed. Leather-stripped and upholstered versions followed. Soon Florence Schust left her job to join Knoll as a partner and to establish and head the firm's interior designing operation, the Knoll Planning Unit. In 1943 she and Knoll were married.

During the next eight years the New York showroom was twice enlarged and moved, a textile division and an international subsidiary were organized, and Hans Bellman of Switzerland, Franco Albini of Italy, Pierre Jeanneret of France, Harry Bertoia, Isamu Noguchi, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe of the U. S., and Ilmari Tapiovaara of Finland were added to Knoll's roll of designers. Florence Knoll designed quite a bit of furniture but did not emphasize it, since the pieces were usually bread-and-butter items for which her jobs with the Planning Unit revealed the need—basic upholstered chairs and sofas, small stool-tables, a convertible sofa-bed, and the like. Later a group of combinable desk components for offices was developed.

In 1951 a larger New York showroom was opened at 575 Madison Avenue. It is now the hub of an international enterprise with showrooms, salesrooms, and factories throughout the United States and 18 foreign countries including Belgium, Canada, Cuba, France, Germany, India, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, and Venezuela.

It was during negotiations for the Cuban Company in October 1955 that Hans Knoll was killed in an automobile accident. His company, however, is progressing on schedule. Its international activities encompass the sale and franchised manufacture of Knoll furniture and textiles, and the design of interiors for U.S. embassies and corporations.

Mrs. Knoll is not inclined to talk about the events which placed her in so strategic a position to interpret the requirements of the architectural avant-garde. Even were it appropriate to this magazine, we could not do the story romantic justice here, because the details are not available. But the facts which can be outlined are pertinent, and explain much:

As a child, Florence Schust was sent to the Kingswood School, Cranbrook, at Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and was a pupil there when she lost both parents. To distract her and mollify the blow, one of her teachers invented a project for the child. She asked her what kind of house she would like to live in when she grew up, and persuaded her to design it down to the last stick of furniture. The child was delighted and spent two years' spare time on design and model. Before they were finished, she had decided to become an architect. She had also become a general pet and informally adopted daughter of Eliel Saarinen, the great modern architect from Finland who had come to teach at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, and to design its new campus. With Eero Saarinen,

en, Eliel's son and her elder by a few years, she listened to endless discussions about architecture and the arts and moved within the Saarinen circle at the time when Carl Milles, the sculptor, was doing the fountain sculpture for Cranbrook's campus. She went from the Kingswood School to the Cranbrook Academy of Art, visited Finland with the Saarinen's, and under their sponsorship completed her architectural education at the Architectural Association of London—which provided a thorough academic and technical training, and Illinois Institute of Technology, where she studied under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It is not far-fetched to say that Florence Schust was brought up by modern architecture. The Knoll's never deviated from their original idea of building an alphabet of furnishings for the new architecture, not even while diversifying and enriching that alphabet.

As the war receded into the past, Knoll furniture was augmented by expensive models, some of extremely luxurious materials such as marble and teak, and by designs of a boldly curved, almost baroque quality, such as Eero Saarinen's famous upholstered plastic and metal "womb" chair of 1946, and Harry Bertoia's lyrically beautiful wire-frame chairs. Meanwhile Mrs. Knoll obtained the rights to several of the great classic designs of the modern movement: Mies' ineffable, regal "Barcelona" chair—whose diabolically difficult chrome cantilever and sumptuous hand-tufted leather lifts the retail price to something in the neighborhood of one thousand dollars, the Stam variant on Breuer's steel-tube-spring cantilevered chair with rattan seat and back, the disarming bentwood and rattan side chair of Joseph Frank, etc. Few items are dropped from the catalog, and then only for specific reasons, not part of a policy of obsolescence. The alphabet is broad but classic, impersonal, timeless. It is part of the setting of modern architecture, which is why its impersonality is an advantage. The individual adds his own heirlooms, his colors, fabrics, and plants—and need not resent a perfect impersonal chair any more than he resents a perfect, impersonal window frame. It is this Knoll "impersonality," which explains the absence of such extremely individual expressions as the ultra-refined Finn Juhl school of Danish joinery, or the high-flavored elegance of the Gio Ponti style in Italy, or some of the cosier Swedish effects. Expensive or inexpensive, hand-made or machine-made, Knoll furniture is intended for more universal application.

What elegance and technological invention this strict approach allows is demonstrated on the opening pages (98-99) of our current Furniture Report, presenting Eero Saarinen's new pedestal chairs of molded plastic and spun aluminum. These are Florence Knoll's triumph as much as his, the latest triumph of a creative personality who as liaison between the architects, their corporate clients, and the intricately involved producers of furniture and interiors, is the most inspired catalyst of the avant-garde in our field today.

—O.G.



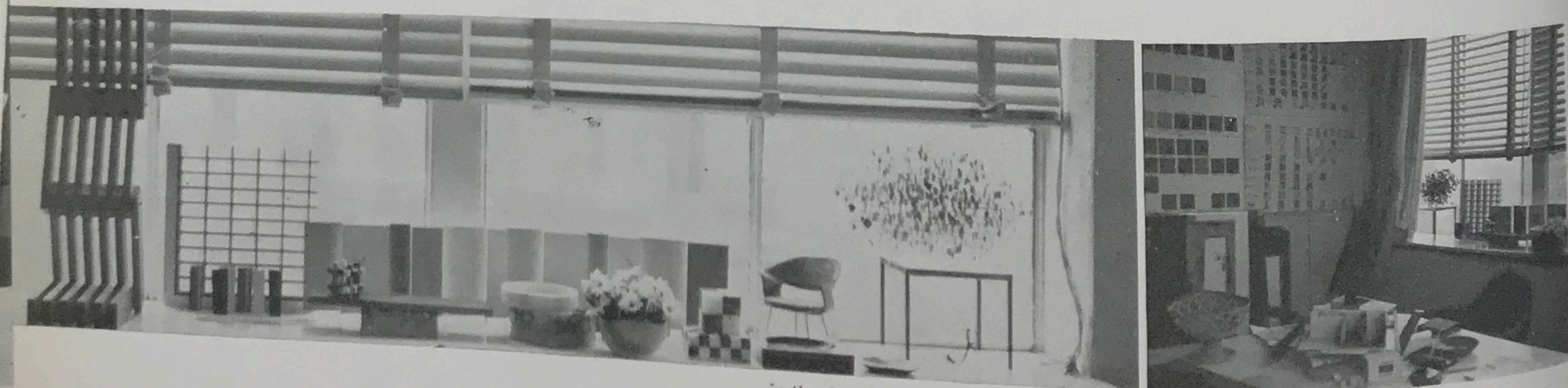
Models are a standard study device in the Knoll Planning Unit, the Knoll division which designs interiors, and which Mrs. Knoll has directed since organizing it more than 16 years ago. (Similar projects abroad are carried through under the aegis of Knoll International, Ltd.)

As various design solutions are tried out, favored ones are repeated in larger and larger models to prevent mistakes in the conception of scale, and are sometimes tested as full-sized mock-ups on major assignments. The suspended screen (above), life size in our photograph, can be seen in two smaller versions at Knoll's New York office.

Mrs. Knoll's own fondness for models can be deduced from the two views of her office at the bottom of this page. At left is her window sill, holding two versions of the same overlapping panel screen, a familiar Saarinen chair, a checkerboarded marble cube, a sculptured metal cloud by Harry Bertoia, and a bowl of flowers, normal size. Photograph at right shows miniature display board of upholstery fabrics. Opposite page: A residential interior by Mrs. Knoll, the Gordon house in Texas. Architects are Boulton & Barnstone. Sliding doors join living room to denlike library, or segregate the two spaces. Chairs and glass table by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; structural T bench and table by Mrs. Knoll; sofa by Mrs. Knoll.

The classic twentieth

fred winchell



both photographs by jack youngerman



Florence Knoll



*The classic twentieth century interior adapts to diverse architectural contexts, sumptuous as well as modest*

fred winchell





At left: Favorite Knoll insignia and framing members establish identity in the new showroom inside the 18th Century Palazzo Belgioioso in Milan. Hemisphere dotted with K's shows location of Knoll headquarters in the Old World. Maps and the K (which also appears as a three-dimensional panel in Knoll reception areas and on advertising and printed matter) were designed by Herbert Matter.



**MILAN**

photographs on this page by casali

Butterfly ceiling shown in photograph below is assembled of suspended prefabricated elements and incorporates spotlights, was tried out by Mrs. Knoll for the first time in the Milan showroom, used again at Dallas. Some panels are painted, others covered with silver foil, and emphasizes. White nylon net curtains to cast a veil over architectural irregularities of fenestration, and area rugs are other typical organizing devices which Mrs. Knoll employs. Chairs at left are Harry Bertoia's wire frame models, launched in 1951. Below are side chairs by Eero Saarinen (1947) and in the right foreground Knoll's relatively recent structural T-frame series.



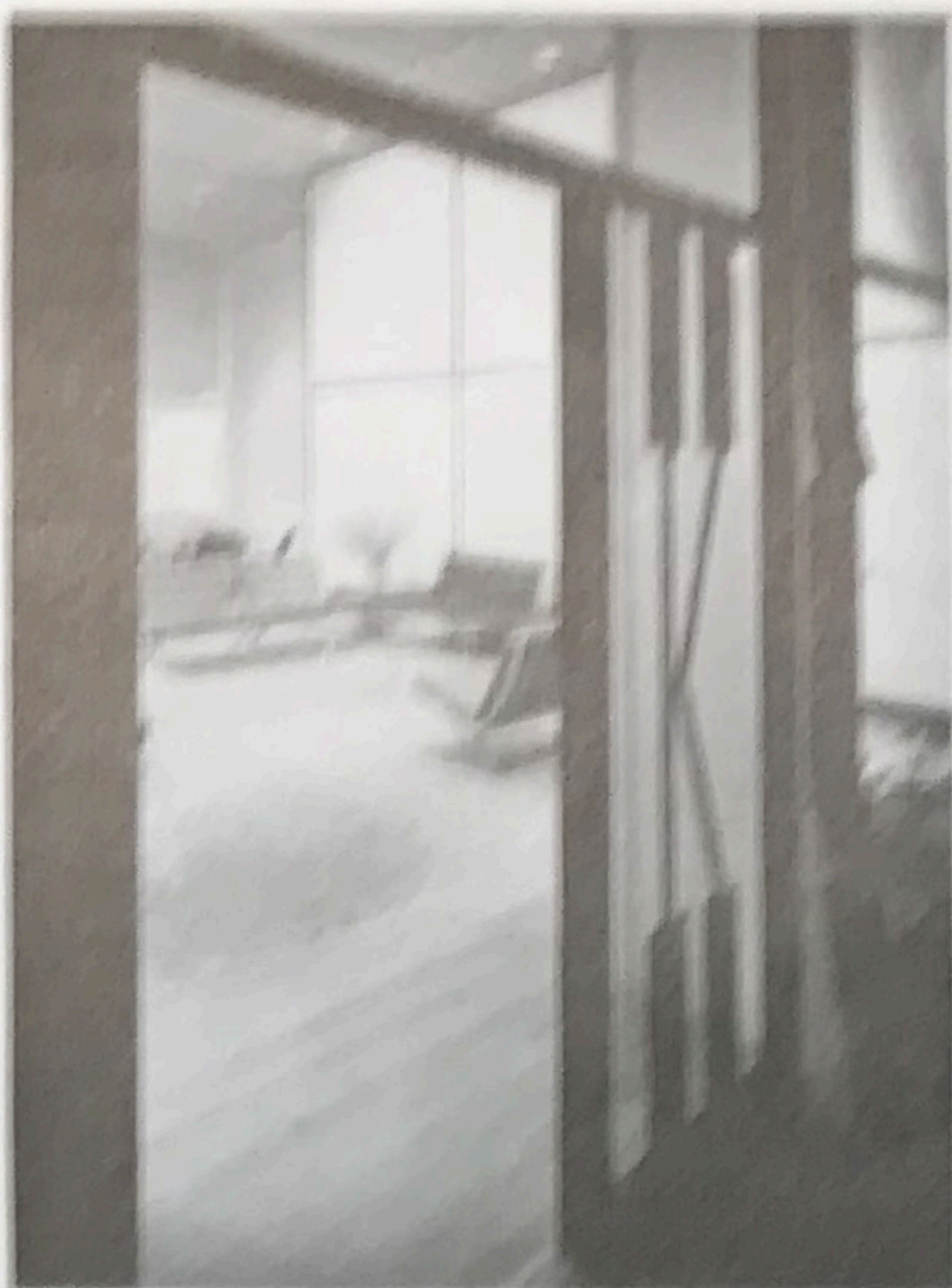
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photographs on this page by morley baer



Florence Knoll

## SAN FRANCISCO

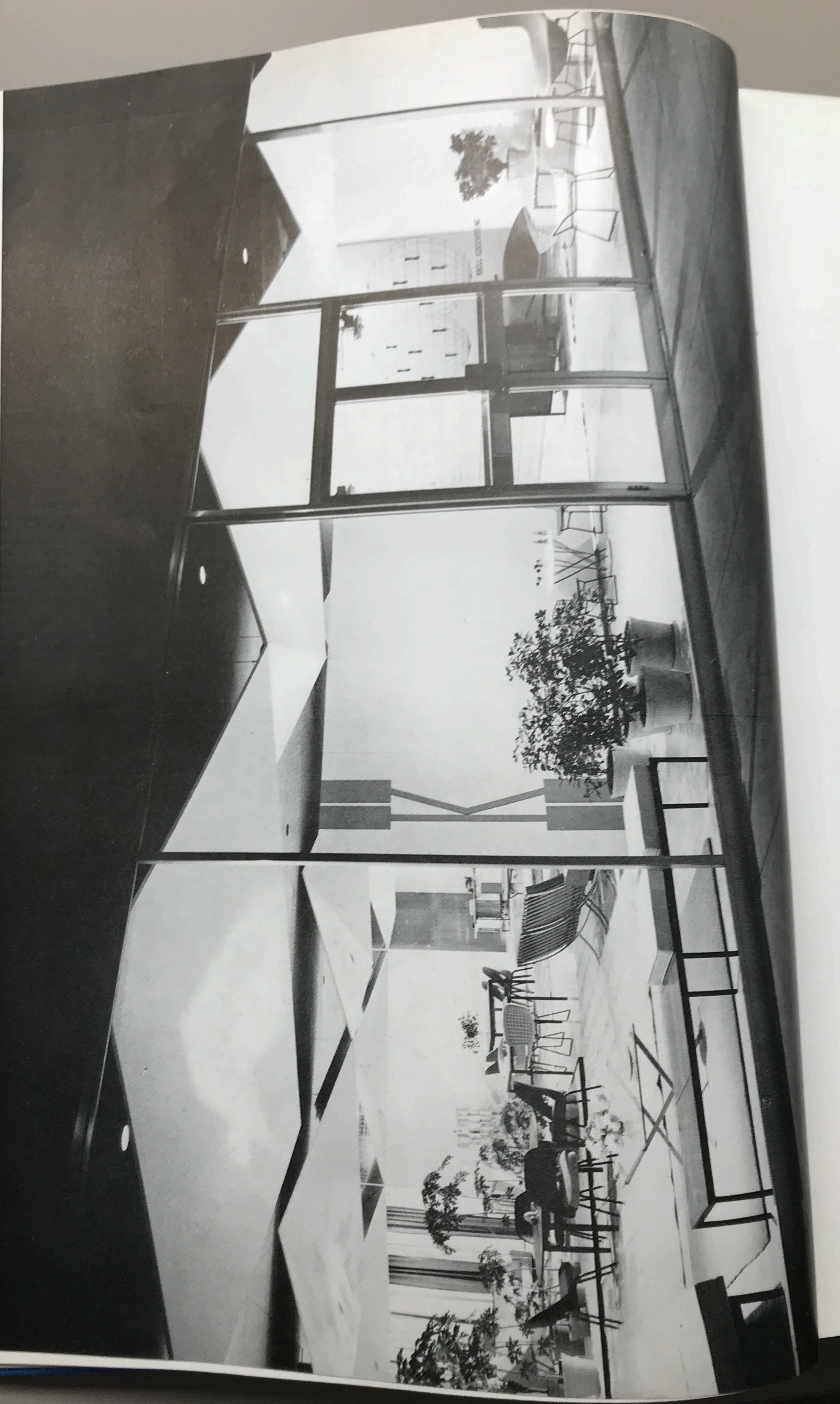
*Setting of the San Francisco showroom is about a century newer than the Milan Palazzo. It is the Golden Era Weekly building of 1897, which survived the 1906 earthquake and fire to be pressed into service as a warehouse. Knoll now occupies two of the three stories. Chief stylistic theme is established by the stripped-down structure—brick and heavy millwork—now painted a spick-and-span white. Shoebox proportions are corrected by an apparently floating balcony and bright-colored panels held free of the beams. Space is also demarcated by changes in flooring, as waxed hemlock gives way to glistening marble chip beds traversed by stepping boards of walnut, and adorned by groups of potted plants.*





On this page and the next: Knoll's Dalias showroom at the Decorative Center. Space was at a premium, and distinctive architectural features entirely absent. Mrs. Knoll devised a ceiling system of suspended butterfly panels to lend rhythmic depths to the space, as well as to help define areas. Some ceiling panels are colored. Color in wall panels is another space-defining device which two-tone effects enrich. On page 66 (overleaf): Knoll's San Francisco showroom in a former warehouse intersected by a balcony and suspended, colored panels.

leoka







color photographs by idaka



On this page and the next: Knoll's Dallas showroom at the Decorative Center. Space uses at a premium, and distinctive architectural features—such as the suspended butterfly panels to lend rhythmic depths to the space, as well as to



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