

Stage setting by Gae Aulenti

for the greatest modern furniture collection of them all

Knoll's newest showroom is a barrage of fascinating innovations in interior architecture, space planning, partitioning, detailing

What does a move mean? In distance, the recent move of Knoll International's New York showroom from 320 Park Avenue to 745 Fifth Avenue entails less than half a mile, though an admittedly important half-mile in customer convenience. The move is more than an advantageous relocation, however; it is also a three-fold expansion to 15,000 square feet, reflecting Knoll's energetic program for the development of new designs, entire new lines. But the most dramatic message the move transmits is the company's impatience with its old image. The new showroom is Knoll's formal entry into the seventies, its symbolic casting off of the airy, punchy-hued, puritanically ascetic "Knoll look" which elicited gasps in the forties, admiring sighs in the fifties, and yawns in the sixties.

A change was needed. Being first—being the fountainhead, the original—confers a competitive advantage in the market-place, but in time the advantage can become a disadvantage. The Knoll firm, founded by the late Hans Knoll in 1938, pioneered the concept of an international collection of modern furniture designed by the major architects/designers of our time. After Knoll's untimely death the torch was carried by his widow, architect-trained Florence Knoll (née Schust, and now Mrs. Harry Hood Bassett). Since her retirement it has been held—if anything higher and with more dynamism—by the Knoll teams of executives and designers headed by president Cornell Dechert and marketing vice president Robert Cadwallader. They shrewdly value the Knoll reputation for an array of furni-

ture in which each design or group is the best of its kind—literally a collection of classics. (One is amazed, in this regard, to realize the age of some of the hottest Knoll items such as Mies' ubiquitous Barcelona and other chair groups dating to 1925, Harry Bertioia's graceful wire mesh collection of 1948, Eero Saarinen's laminated wood chaise of 1944, his womb group of 1946, and his pedestal group of 1958, not to mention Florence Knoll's square-tufted upholstered—between 1948 and 1954—which have become the "good bread" filling out innumerable types of interiors.) Knoll's executives were too smart to risk losing what they had. But they were irked by the realization that revered classics tend to be taken for granted.

Even more serious, practically and economically, was the fact that the Knoll image related to an era before the collection began to diversify into complete specialized groups planned for such contract installations as libraries and offices . . . and before the collection began to GROW, GROW, GROW . . . through Knoll's acquisition of the distributorship of Hans Wegner designs made by the Poul Hansen cabinet works of Copenhagen (September 1969 INTERIORS) . . . through Knoll's purchase of the Gavina factory in Milan which makes furniture of plastic, chrome, leather, and stretch-fabric-covered upholstery forms, designed by such as Breuer, Takahama, Castiglioni, Scarpa, Magistretti, and Tippet (March 1969 INTERIORS) . . . through the steady flow of new designs from the Design and Development staff headed by Albinson, as well as com-

missioned designs by outsiders here and abroad.

Image-maker Aulenti

Gae Aulenti, chosen to take over Florence Knoll's tasks as showroom designer, is almost as charismatic as Florence Knoll, twelve years younger, loaded with even more professional honors. Belonging to the glamorous circle of Milanese architects, she holds an assistant professorship at Milan University, has designed important department stores, hotels, offices.

Her unusual ideas on interior architecture were tested on a smaller scale in Knoll's Boston showroom about two years ago. The most iconoclastic idea in both is the 45° angle of the planning grid, which Mrs. Aulenti prefers "for mystery" and "for surprise" over the square old on-the-square grid. Instead of decorating conventional rectangular volumes, Mrs. Aulenti prefers to design spaces as hollow sculptures. Her carpeted floors rise up to form steps and platforms. In the Boston showroom, ceilings occasionally send down similar sculptural projections. For display purposes in the Boston showroom, furniture and other objects are placed in the smallest hollows left between the sculptural, projecting ceiling and floor.

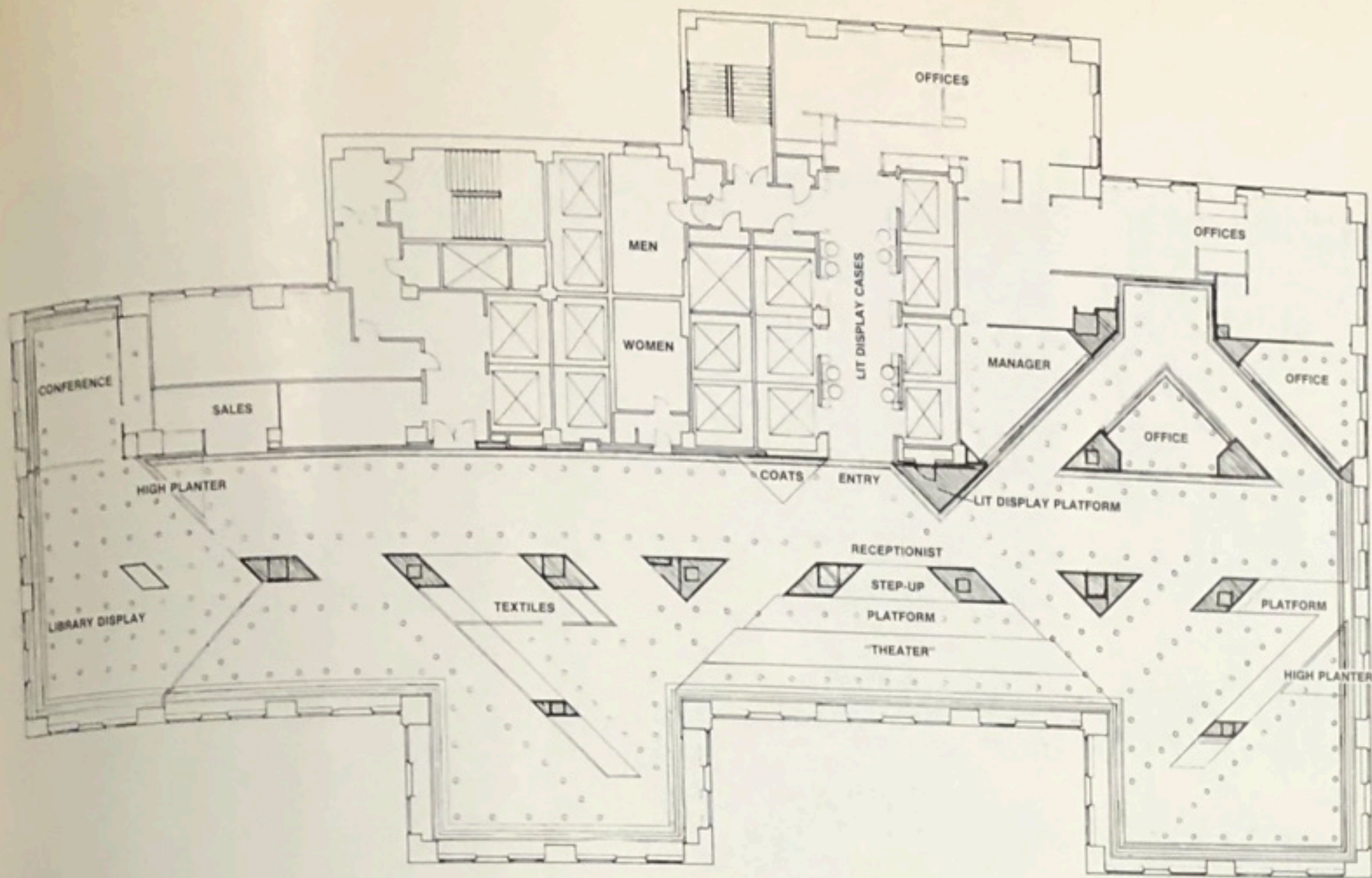
The ceiling projections were not used in the New York showroom, but the carpeted floor does behave according to her system, rising up to form a kind of step-stage flanked by two carpeted volumes triangular in plan. Pieces of furniture stand on the steps, and the receptionist's desk is stationed at the base. Entering from the elevator corridor, the visitor finds the stage straight

ahead, with the main showroom aisle to his right and left. He is also aware of being in a very large space with window and sky views that can be glimpsed down diagonal aisles visible between what appear to be spaced walls reaching from floor to ceiling. These walls are the fronts of enclosures, either triangular or parallelogram, aligned to create a diagonal aisle grid organizing the space without hiding every window. Here is a furniture showroom which capitalizes on the drama of the city. The roofs of the Plaza and Central Park itself are part of the scene.

Furniture intended for special attention occupies the step-platform stage with graphic panels concerning the designers forming a backdrop. Other furniture is displayed on carpet-covered platforms and step-platforms positioned on the angular grid. Many more of the fabulous pieces are simply lined up along the aisles or arranged in natural groupings, to be examined by the visitor as he explores.

All color comes from the merchandise, graphics, people, and the view; the plushly sumptuous showroom is mainly silvery gray, darker gray, and white—the color of interesting reflective see-through partitions made of white-painted wood, mirrors, glass.

The angular enclosures serve a multiplicity of purposes, always hiding building columns, and—depending on their size—acting as closets (with doors hidden in their carpeted walls); as fabric storage shelves; as offices, conference rooms, special areas. Because the 45° grid is tied in with lighting, electrical outlets, and air conditioning, total flexibility is possible within the system.—O.G.



Plan: Windows look to 58th Street and Fifth Avenue (the short facade). Inner offices and utility areas are on a square grid. Where the layout is diagonal are showrooms and other areas accessible to customers. Elevator corridor opens to both sides.

Center photo: Display of glass accessories does not cut off visitor's window view as he enters showroom.

Bottom photo: Forty-foot-long elevator corridor is dark interlude before the many-windowed, tight-filled showroom. Luminous round glass cylinders displaying jewel-toned Venetian glass desk accessories by Angelo Mangiarotti are the sole light source.



CREDITS
 Gae Aulenti, architect-designer.
 Jose Raul Bernardo of Museum Planning Inc., project architect.
 Massimo Vignelli of Unimark International, graphics.
 V'Soske, Inc.: all carpeting

guest photos

Knoll International

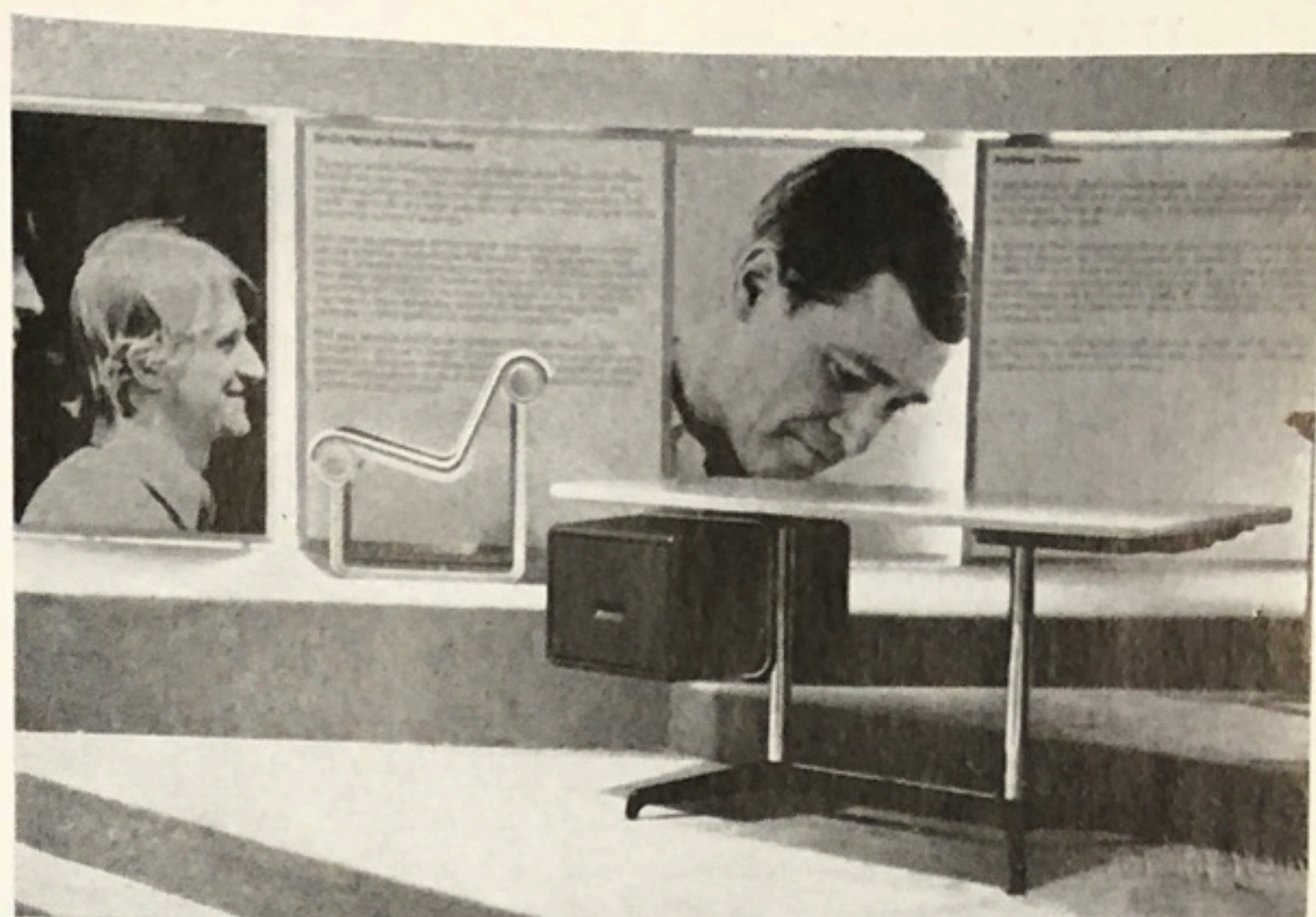
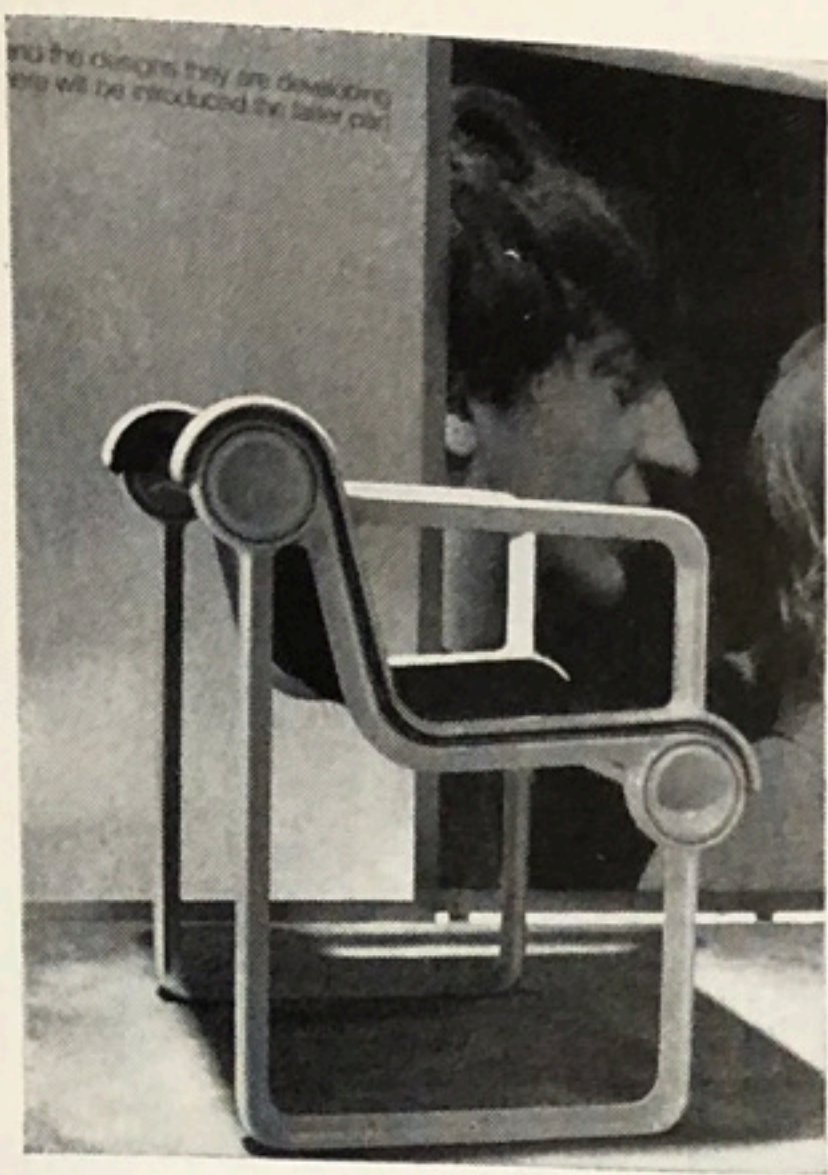
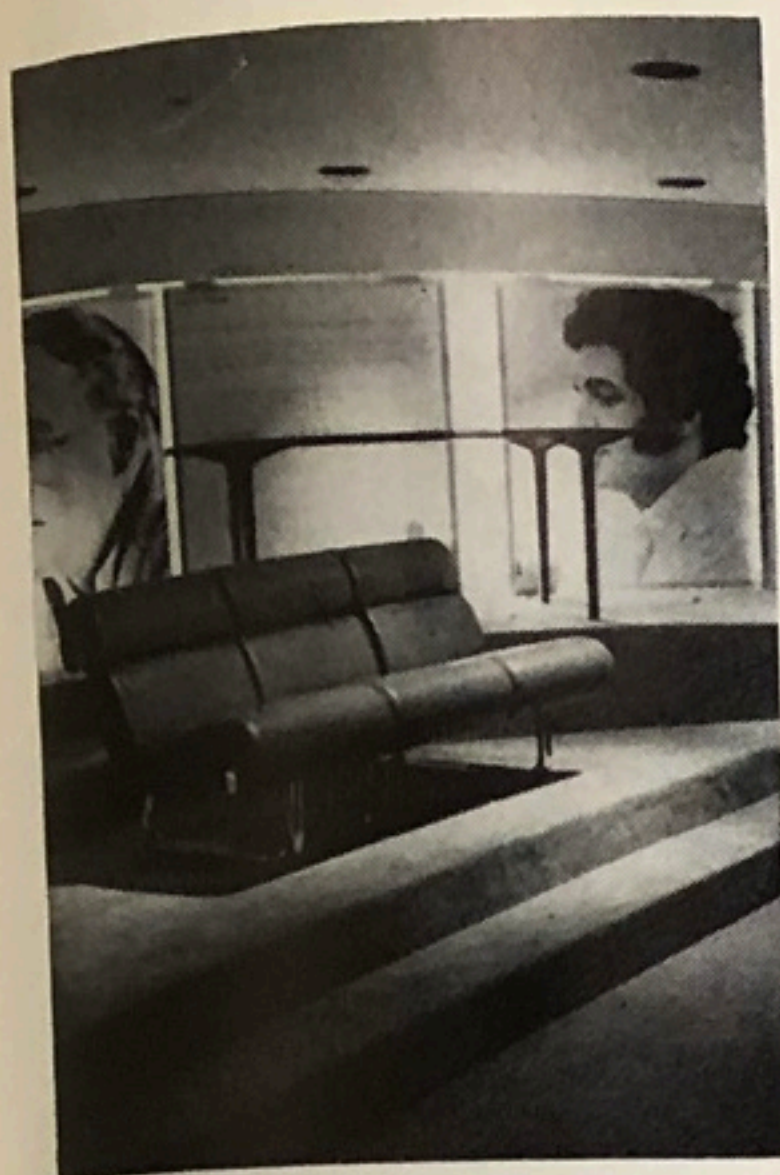
guest photos



A glide system which carries interchangeable fabric or graphic panels brilliantly exploits the showroom's extensive window perimeters. At left end of photo above are various textured and lacy case-ment cloths—an ideal display for Knoll Textiles. At right end of photo above are decorative graphic panels hiding the uninteresting building across the street. All graphics, decorative and informative (like designer data panels which form a back-

drop for the step-platform stage near the entrance) are by Massimo Vignelli of Unimark. In the foreground are upholstered units by Takahama (covered in stretch fabrics and made in Milan in Knoll's Gavina factory). At rear left is Richard Schultz's weatherproof, lightweight leisure furniture, with white woven nylon see-through "caning" trimmed with leather straps. Not far away is Schultz's small wood-topped petal table, still a smash.

...the center photo:
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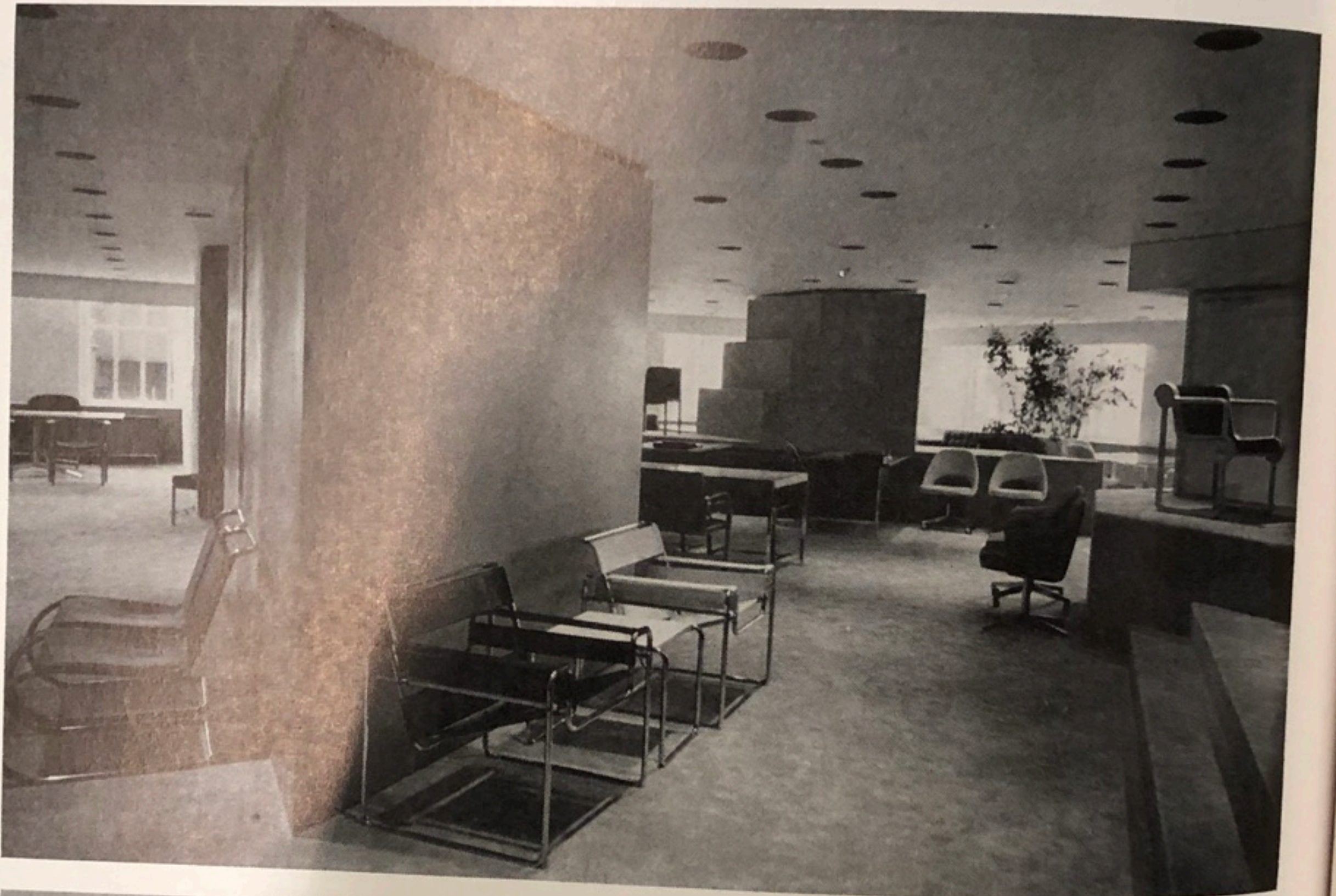
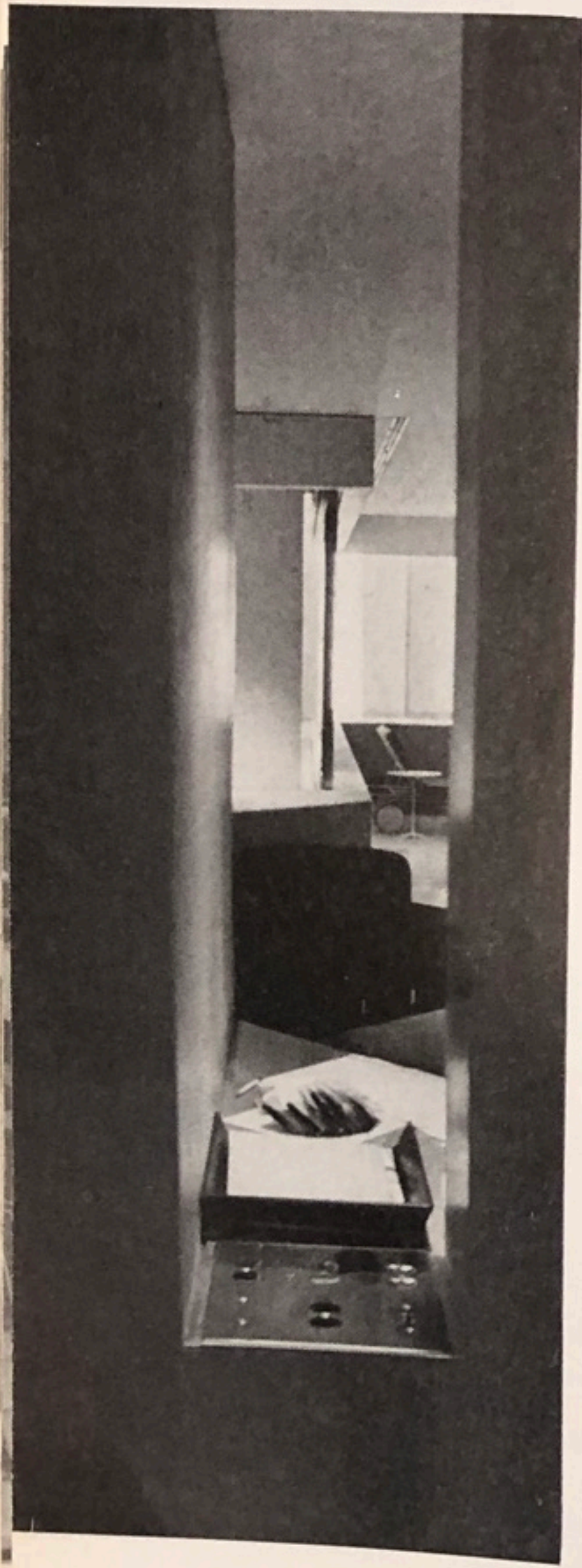
Large center photo:
In the windowed south and west sector of the showroom where the view includes the Plaza Hotel, Central Park, and the sky, the windows are mostly left clear of panels, except where the sun strikes hot. The same silvery gray carpet which covers the floor also covers the window bases, with openings for air vents and electrical outlets. The light gray is continued on the dull-finished metal

reveals which conceal air conditioning equipment and are grooved to receive the bottoms of the sliding panels. Here Max Pearson chairs surround a chrome and black-glass Andre table, Italian-designed. Photos at top: New furniture prototypes shown during opening week on the step-stage near the showroom entrance. At left is Richard Schultz' steel-and-leather modular lounge seating. At

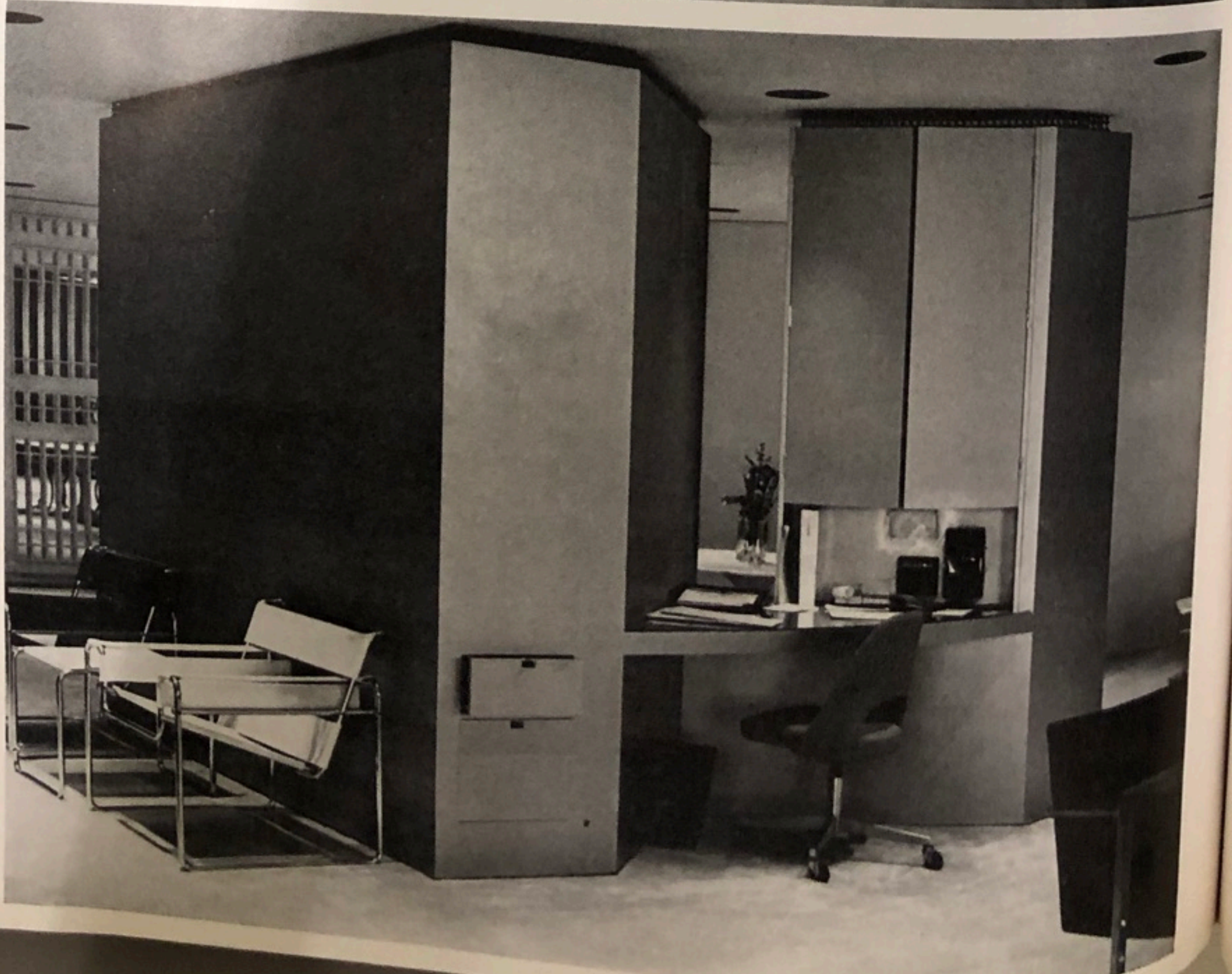
center is plastic chair by Andrew Morrison and Bruce Hannah. At far right is injection-molded plastic and die-cast aluminum desk by Andreas Christen. Forming a back-drop to the stage are slidable panels by Massimo Vignelli—silkscreened photos of the designers with accompanying text in red. (Unfortunately faces do not match furniture in these photos, except for Christen shown with his desk at right.)

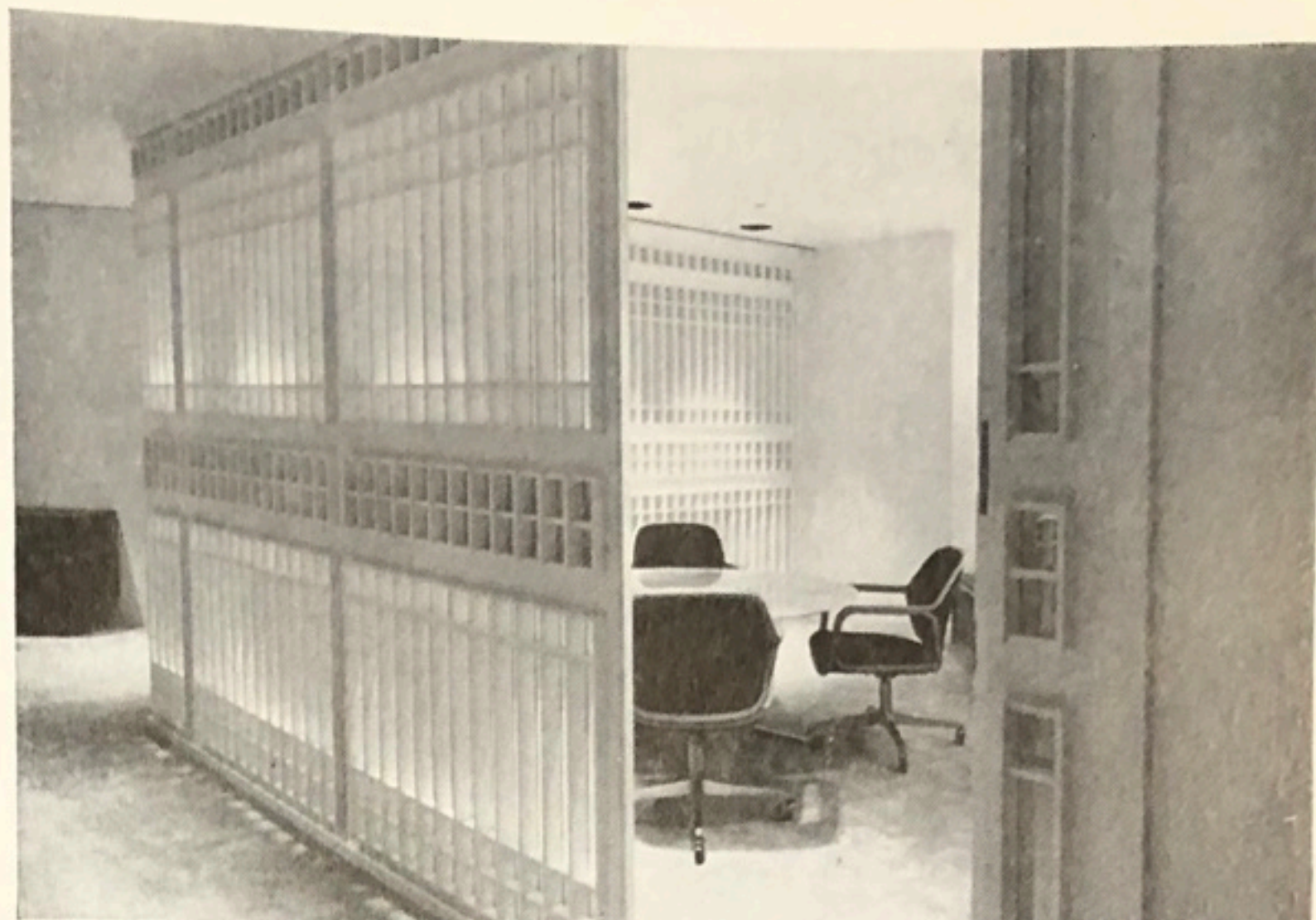
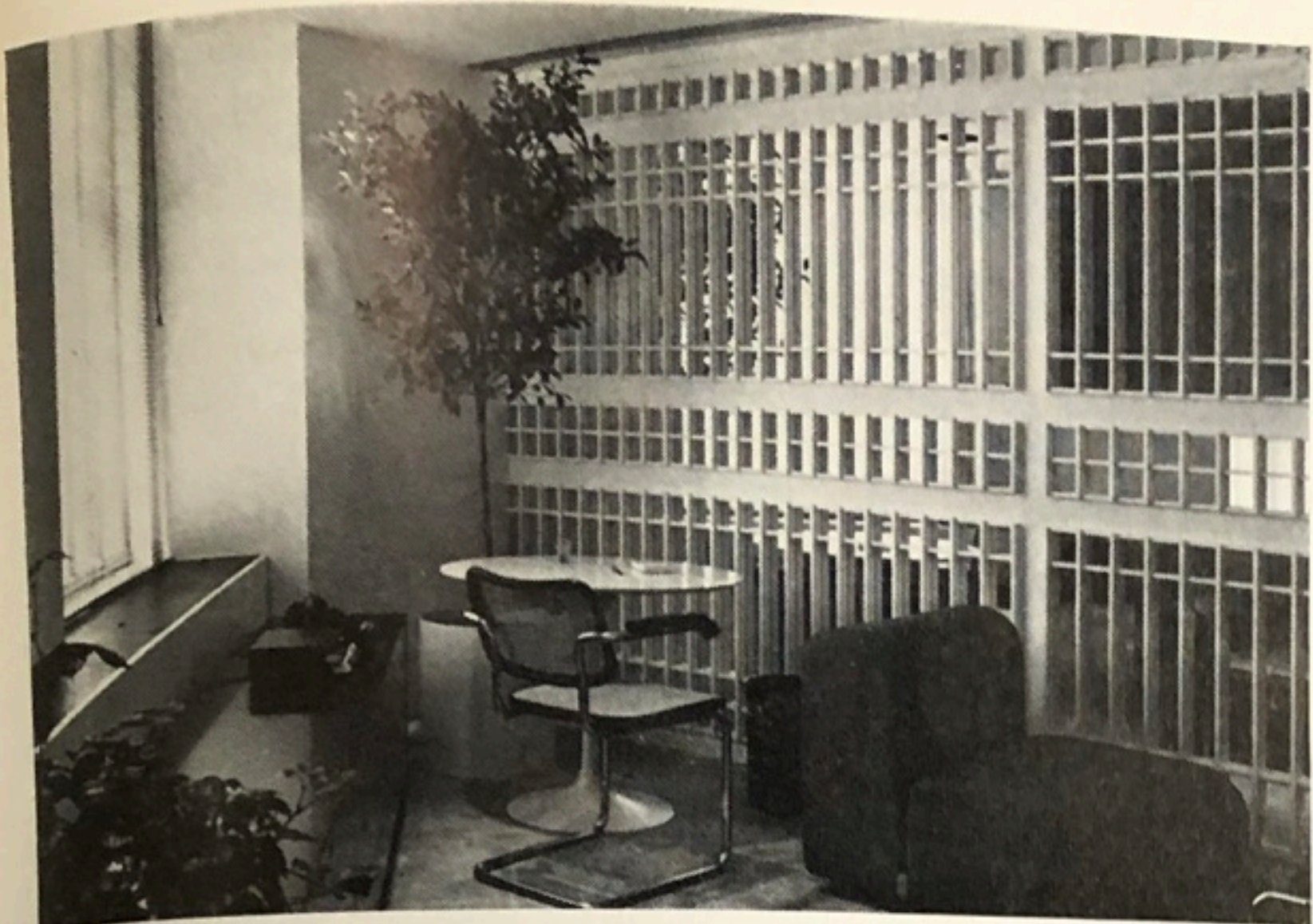
Knoll International

guest photos



Two sales stations for the staff (see plan page 97) align with triangular and parallelogram-shaped closets. Plain in front, they house complete equipment and storage on their working sides. Slit gives the occupant a glimpse of visitors, also holds handy electrical outlets. Gray-finished metal surfaces match showroom's tonality. Black wire grilles between top and ceiling allow air conditioning vents to function.





The partitioning system which Gae Aulenti invented for a series of offices and conference rooms—including the manager's office and the entire library division at the east end of the showroom is so beautiful and ingenious that the only thing wrong with it is that it upstages the furniture. As spick and span as a white picket fence, it consists of beautifully crafted white-painted wood members which are really much more complex in structure than they appear at first glance. Between the members are in-

serted sometimes mirror, sometimes clear glass, sometimes air, according to the amount of privacy, sound control, and sight control required. The usually angled spaces so enclosed appear airy and almost twice their actual size. Among the furniture used in the offices are office credenza units with black lacquer frames, black marble tops, and satiny steel fronts; round Saarinen pedestal tables; the squared-S steel, wood, and caning chairs designed by Breuer 45 years ago; Takahama upholstered units, Breuer tables.