Setting the Stage

Knoll’s furniture and textile collection looks positively dramatic against a backdrop created by Frederic Schwartz Architect and the City of New York

By Jennifer Thiele Busch
Photography by Chun Y Lai, Jody Kivort
When Knoll established its Manhattan showroom on Wooster Street in the 1980s, it was in part attracted to the location’s status as a hip, up-and-coming neighborhood that reflected the company’s legacy for a progressive perspective on design. And in 2004, as Knoll settles into yet another trendy Manhattan address on the eleventh floor of a building in the Meatpacking District, history is repeating itself—sort of. “We drew circles around areas that made sense for our associates and our customers,” explains Knoll president Kass Bradley of the hunt for a new showroom location. “We didn’t limit our search to that area, though it was high on our list. It’s a cool new spot.” A spot made even cooler for Knoll with a light-inspired design by Frederic Schwartz Architect.

Of course, the economics had to work for Knoll as well, and they did, notes Bradley. In fact, many things came together on this project to help make it one of the more impressive showrooms in the Knoll organization, including the revival of a long standing relationship with New York architect Fred Schwartz, who helped design Knoll’s Venturi Collection under Robert Venturi. “I think the very fact that Knoll moved to that neighborhood speaks to their ability to react to a changing environment and remain one step ahead of the industry,” notes Schwartz of the company’s pioneering spirit.

After that, however, similarities between the new Eighth Avenue location and the old Wooster Street location end. Where the previous showroom on four floors (if you count the basement) engendered a sense of separation and a lack of cohesion, the sprawling floorplate of the new showroom permits a logical and graceful flow from showroom to studio to meeting space to office space. At 60,000 sq. ft., the new showroom is roughly the same size as the previous, but exposed ceilings, soaring windows that invite a flood of natural light from three exposures, and million dollar New York views speak volumes—and create a dramatic backdrop for a furniture collection that includes its fair share of legends.

“The space is spectacular,” notes Schwartz. “But when we first went in it was pretty hard to see that. We totally demolished it.” Schwartz had a tight budget to work with, so he smartly took maximum advantage of the building’s greatest architectural features: its industrial modern character and its glorious windows. “We spent time getting back to the building,” he explains. “Now exposed concrete floors, columns stripped of many layers of paint, and the exposed ceilings remain raw, in fitting contrast to the elegant and refined aesthetic of the Knoll pieces on display.”

Showcasing the furniture and textile collection was of course a main programmatic objective of the space, and Schwartz is proud of the “Chelsea art gallery-like” setting, characterized by “a simple palette of concrete and just the right white,” as well as display platforms that seemingly allow the classic pieces to float above the ground. But for Knoll, an equally important display occurs in the office area. This working showroom takes maximum advantage of the functional and aesthetic strengths of Knoll’s recently introduced Autostrada collection of systems furniture and casegoods, and includes a sizable version of the Crinoline open table, as it is intended to be
used. Living closely with the furniture offers some important advantages, according to Bradley. "We are typical of our clients and customers in that our own people need different planning models for different kinds of work," she explains. "We are using it the way it's being used by our customers, and testing it on ourselves." In doing so, Knoll associates can speak to customers about the products with knowledge gained from firsthand experience.

Also evident in the new location is a deliberate emphasis on branding that incorporates references to Knoll's considerable design legacy. "The Wooster Street showroom did not pay proper homage to the heritage of Knoll," explains Bradley. From the oversized company logo and classic furniture grouping at reception to an enlarged mural of Hans and Florence Knoll and an array of classic pieces (in signature Knoll red) placed strategically throughout the space, the new showroom indeed creates an emotional connection with the history of the brand. The mural of the Knolls was one of the few flourishes Schwartz permitted. Another was a large mural of a New York City view, overlaid with a bold, secondary graphic depicting a city street map. "The history of New York," reasons Schwartz, "is the history of Knoll."

According to Bradley, Knoll's key objectives for the new space were "light and simplicity." Schwartz's design gives them both in abundance. "The furniture and the people provide the color and the drama," he says. Maybe so. But his design has set the stage.
Project Summary

Schwartz's industrial modern aesthetic—characterized by "a simple palette of concrete and just the right white"—serves as a fitting backdrop for Knoll's mid-Century Modern-inspired furniture collections. At reception, a swooping ceiling creates a deliberate break from the great, loft-like feel of the rest of the space (opposite, top).

Classic Knoll pieces on display and used in settings throughout the space help reinforce the Knoll design legacy. This working showroom takes every opportunity to showcase Knoll's products, including the Knoll Textiles space dividers in the Knoll Studio area (above, left) and the dramatic wallcovering pattern that graces a conference room (opposite, bottom).

Nowhere is the wonderful quality of light more evident than in the open office landscape (above and top right), where Knoll employees sit in different types of Autostrada workstations best suited to their job functions.

Who

What

Where
Location: New York. Total floor area: 60,000 sq. ft. No. of floors: 1. Average floor size: 120,000 sq. ft.