

INTERIOR DESIGN



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Design Giants
The Definitive Annual Survey

Gensler designs the six uppermost floors at the Park Avenue Plaza to accommodate the consolidated offices of Swiss Re New Markets.

Top of the Line

EVEN BEFORE THE DECISION MAKERS from Swiss Re New Markets and Gensler had ever met, the forces of fate, it would seem, conspired to make such a coming-together inevitable. The former, a division of globally active Swiss Reinsurance Company, Zurich, that provides specialized financial services to large corporations and underwriters, resolved to consolidate its scattered New York offices at one good midtown address. To this end Swiss Re management had, together with real estate brokers, been exploring site options and, at the same time, sounding out a few professional design firms about handling the job. But while the search for a suitable building seemed infinitely open-ended, requested and unsolicited recommendations for a top-notch design shop invariably zeroed in on a single name and sentiment: Gensler, word had it, would do the best work. Obviously such unanimity merited exploration. Thus Gensler was called, Gensler developed a working program, and Gensler was awarded the 180,000-sq.-ft./six-story design job. Three of the four team leaders—design director Donald G. Brinkmann, project director Gilbert R. Oberfield and senior designer Stephen J. Beacham—acted as spokesmen; Robin Kleher Avia was the project principal.

As told by the threesome, there was much to be done in preparation for the collective

move. The site search continued under the aegis of client and designer teams, a protracted endeavor coinciding with changes in givens as well as goals. At the initial planning stage about two years ago, for example, staff count came to under 100, and the spatial target was roughly 60,000 sq. ft. As it stands now shortly after settle-in time, close to 350 employees occupy six floors, each providing 30,000 rentable sq. ft. This at the Park Avenue Plaza on Manhattan's East 52nd→

Below: Looking down corridor leading to conference center; cover shot looks in opposite direction.

Opposite: Elevator lobby illustrates asymmetrical use of different materials, here white plaster vs. English slate on facing walls.

GLASS BLOCKS: PITTSBURGH CORNING. STONE WALLS: DESIGN SUPPLY; BURLINGTON STONE. LIMESTONE FLOORS: DOMESTIC MARBLE & STONE. CARPETING: EDWARD FIELDS (EXECUTIVE SPACES); PRINCE STREET (STAIRCASE); SHAW COMMERCIAL (ELSEWHERE). DESK SYSTEM: HALLER. PLASTER WALLS: TERRA FIRMA. CUSTOM DESKS: CRAFTWOOD. LIGHTING: ZUMTOBEL; SPECIALTY LIGHTING. LOUNGE FURNITURE: CASSINA. MILLWORK THROUGHOUT: PATELLA. LIGHTING CONSULTANT: H.M. BRANDSTON & PARTNERS. MEP: ROBERT DERECTOR ASSOC. ART CONSULTANT: VICK CORPORATE ART ADVISORS. FURNITURE CONSULTANTS: BUSINESS FURNITURE; AFD CONTRACT FURNITURE. CONSTRUCTION CONSULTANT: GMO INTERNATIONAL. CONTRACTOR: PLAZA CONSTRUCTION.

PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK MERRICK, HEDRICH BLESSING



Street, a selection jointly endorsed after perusal of several alternatives. Perhaps most persuasive if not decisive was the availability of six contiguous floors, the 39th through 44th, filling the structure's entire top portion. Also enticing were: the uppermost level's exceptional ceiling height of 10½ ft.; the uniformity of the floorplates, allowing flexibility for standardization throughout; the presence of only one support column; the existence of a ten-floors-through stairway (capped by Gensler so as to seal off the connector at the 39th level); and far from finally, the cachet of occupying coveted premium space in a centrally located building offering superb views.

Apparently acting on the theory of we know our business and you know yours, the client pretty much relied on Gensler for overall design strategy including space planning,

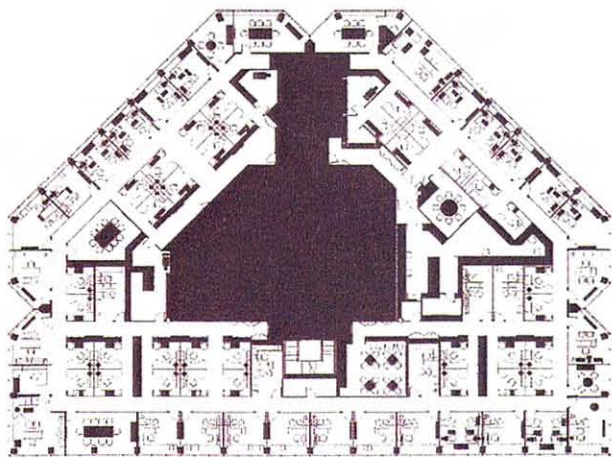
development of work standards, aesthetic interpretations, and all the other extras in-between. The designers, broadly briefed on Swiss Re's operational ways but unrestrained by strict instructions, early on built a full-scale mockup covering about a quarter of a typical office floor found in another building. Types of furniture, carpeting, door specimens, glass-block dividers, lighting fixtures, color schemes—you name it, it was there for client inspection and evaluation. From looking at photographs of Zurich headquarters and listening to knowledgeable sources, the designers had learned that the Helvetian hosts liked contemporary industrial/high-tech interiors with metal and glass elements, in white and black with polished stainless-steel trims. Accordingly in top executives' quarters, frequented also by visiting Swiss brass, the style is strong, architectural, cool and elegant. Not

far from fitting the same description but warmed up with light beech woods are spaces for the American workforce, a nuanced variance specified by the Swiss in deference to cultural tastes. Both design variations blend into each other, producing a sort of compromise that keeps everybody content. Glass blocks appear in two guises, clear so as to spread natural light in general work areas and sandblasted to retain privacy in "high-end" enclaves. The general impression is one of light and airiness, a perception underscored by white plaster walls and limestone →

Opposite and below: Executive's private office looks to secretarial desks (below). Corbu lounge seating and Eames task chairs typify Swiss propensity for contemporary style.

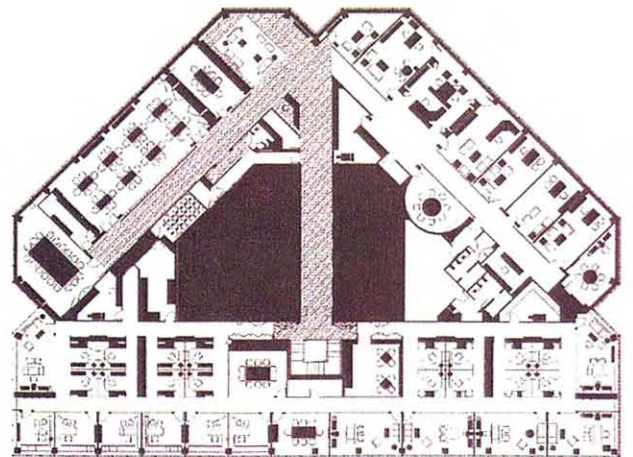
TABLE, FURNITURE SYSTEM: **HALLER**. CHAIRS: **HERMAN MILLER**. LOUNGE FURNITURE, OCCASIONAL CHAIRS: **CASSINA**.





43RD FLOOR

0 10 20 40



44TH FLOOR



floors; a darker accent comes from English slate (see cover) borrowed, so to speak, from the building's elevator lobby.

Flexibility and standardization may well be the two most important factors in Gensler's master plan. All that needs to be said about the former is that just before move-in time, the designers were able to switch a large work group from one floor to another without upsetting anything or anyone. As for the latter, the organization chart leaves nothing to conjecture: work stations, set up in clusters of four, measure 80 sq. ft. each; double and single offices, 180 sq. ft.; and executive quarters, 300 sq. ft. Layout drawings indicate placements of main pieces; dimensions of all elements are calculated to the fractional inch. Universality is the rule and, reportedly, even the top man is not exempt from the norm.

But the most impressive achievements are found in the fine detailing, perhaps better categorized as precision engineering, that are integrated into the design scheme. This is Brinkmann's domain, and there is unspoken pride in his descriptive account. He points to the juxtaposition of textured glass-block walls held away from wood walls washed, in turn, with light that brightens the central gap and sets aglow the layered composition; the asymmetrical use of materials as in white plaster and English slate on facing walls; and more. The proverbial full-service work performed by Gensler extended to graphics, desk accessories, table-top settings etc. right down to Ghüderchübel, which, according to those who should know, means waste bins in Zurich.

—Monica Geran



Above: Stairs, originally going down to 34th floor, were plugged up at base level of Swiss Re New Markets's six-pack building portion. The structural riser was stripped and re clad with honed and hammered stone.

STONE: NEWEL POST, STRINGER: DOMESTIC MARBLE & STONE. RAILING: W&W.

Left: Typical office filled with custom furniture made of beech.

GLASS FRONT: W&W. CUSTOM WORKWALL: TELLA. DESK CHAIR: HERMAN MILLER. GUEST CHAIR: ICF.

Opposite: Corridor, its right side bordered with wood and sandblasted glass-block layering that screens off executive conference/dining facilities.

LIGHTING: BALDINGER. TABLE: SERENISSIMO THROUGH M2L. WOVEN LEATHER: BARKSDALE RUDD.

