

Cove lighting blurs the line between floor and wall (right). White displays feature artful signage (below). Offices line the east corridor (opposite).



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# Interiors

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*The success of an interior design is often determined by an architect's ability to define and facilitate a transition – spatial, visual, historical, even conceptual. In the case of the Bernhardt Design Showroom, Rottet Studio eased a shift to a downsized area, creating an artful gallerylike venue. At DirectTV's Washington, D.C., office, Huntsman Architectural Group created a flexible space that balanced the cutting-edge nature of the business with the city's Neoclassical tradition. And for Yoga Deva, Blank Studio concealed the harsh reality of its Arizona locale, crafting a cool, soothing, energizing setting. Unique in approach, each firm met the client's needs via spatial arrangements, materials, and light.* Linda C. Lentz

## Rottet Studio scales down the **Bernhardt Design Showroom** with infinite serenity

By David Sokol

**L**ike a fortress, the Merchandise Mart Chicago looms calmly over the city's namesake river. The world's largest commercial building, it is also its largest wholesale design center and can evoke an ant farm as hyperactive as it is labyrinthine. This is especially true during NeoCon, the annual mid-June industry event when manufacturers, buyers, designers, and architects converge to share ideas and see thousands of the latest interiors furnishings.

Within this context, it's essential that a showroom be designed to create excitement. So when Bernhardt Design—a producer of contract case goods, seating, and textiles—was muscled out of a third-floor space boasting an expansive river vista, it was the merchandise that motivated the first design decision of Lauren Rottet, FAIA, when her firm was asked to shape the company's smaller, 7,000-square-foot new home. "With showrooms and retail in general, the attitude is, 'Look at the product,'" Rottet says. While she notes that Bernhardt Design creative director Jerry Helling would have been happy with only one piece of product in a beautiful space, the NeoCon throngs have taught her to highlight the newest furniture without distractions.

David Sokol is a contributing editor at *RECORD* and author of *The Modern Architecture Pop-Up Book*.



Rottet's goal for the showroom, now located in the building's northeast corner, with half the square footage of the former space and a cheek-by-jowl view of neighboring buildings, was to hide the unappealing outdoor scene while at the same time making it feel larger than its actual footprint. The architect, who founded Rottet Studio after stints at firms like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and DMJM, admits to claustrophobia. "I started out doing base buildings," she says of her early career at SOM. "And being outside is so free. Inside, without landscaping or the movement of the sun, things become static. So my philosophy on interiors is to make a space feel as kinetic as the exterior."

To achieve this, she divided the showroom's rectilinear plan into thirds. These long corridors—housing furniture vignettes and back-of-house office functions—run north to south, and are connected by passageways on either end; a band of white resin demarcates the perimeter. Upon entering the showroom, one's eyes immediately focus on the recently introduced chairs, tables, and case goods installed at the end of the western corridor. Here, two consecutive bays—framed by three-quarter-height partitions mounted on debossed, sliverlike plinths—conceal other inventory. Opposite, the party wall cant outward to reveal the glow of integral lighting, which imparts a near-spiritual feel to the journey from front door to product on display.

An accent wall draws attention to the display at the showroom's northern end. The surface comprises 15 white, powder-coated, 59-by-106-inch aluminum panels animated by random square perforations and backed with fabric scrim. This element conceals 11 dingy windows and a bleak cityscape beyond, with only daylight punctuating the diffuser. "You get the feeling of the change from night to day and rain to sun," Rottet says, adding, "I find that when people cannot orient themselves to the outside, it's disconcerting." Two rows of T5 fluorescent lamps ceiling-mounted between the panels and windows amplify the daylight, lending the holes the appearance of constellations. In the reflection of the white-resin edge, the pinpoints double in number.

The architects continued this sense of infinity throughout the project. Ceilings suspend from steel cables that are barely visible through the black-painted plenum. LED strip lighting tucked amid plinths and partitions blur the distinction between floor and wall. Knife-edged partitions, though large enough to contain closets, appear weightless. These asymmetrical, tapered corners repeat on the ceiling planes, as well as the edge of the solid surface and Siberian marble coffee bar, located in a niche in the room's northwest corner.

Such continuity, combined with a pale color palette, creates what Rottet calls a "relaxed museum" environment. "Instead of pounding the person with product, the showroom invites someone to come in, enjoy the space, have a glass of water." Bernhardt Design's limited product displays—including Shift, a Rottet-designed office system—reinforce the claim, and should help make the place a welcome refuge for overwhelmed NeoCon attendees. ■

**Project:** Bernhardt Design  
Showroom, Chicago  
**Architect:** Rottet Studio—Lauren Rottet, FAIA, principal in charge; Kelie Mayfield, principal/lead designer; Chris Evans, project architect.  
**Architect of record:** Austin AECOM—Les Okunowski  
**General contractor:** Bear Construction

**SOURCES**  
**Paint:** Sherwin Williams  
**Surface materials:** Pionite (plastic laminate); Corian (solid surface)  
**Stone:** Coverings Etc.  
**Lighting:** Fawoo (LED light panels); Lithonia (behind accent wall); Nippo (base cove); Lucifer (task/downlights)  
**Carpet:** Bloomsburg  
**Furniture/custom millwork:** Bernhardt Design



The accent wall reappears in a conference room vignette at the showroom's southeast corner (top). The middle corridor displays office systems (above).  
1. Entrance  
2. Displays  
3. Conference room  
4. Workstations  
5. Sample display  
6. Coffee bar  
7. Storage



The window display and conference room vignette are situated east of the entrance (above left). A marble-clad coffee bar is tucked to one side of the northern accent wall (above). Furniture is displayed along the illuminated wall, with a binder/sample display adjacent to it (below).

