Design: For those who sit and wait

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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Design

SLS/Environetics designed this reception room for Muzak's corporate offices in New York. The multiple circular patterns (the room itself is round) and the polished aluminum walls, ceiling and furniture reflect SLS's belief that its designs should express the client's image.

For those who sit and wait

By Ada Louise Huxtable

It's too bad the archeologists of the future won't be able to dig up our corporate reception areas. They probably tell more about us than the giant buildings that contain them. Ostensibly, these way-stops to the inner sanctums of big business are for direction of traffic flow. Actually, they are indicators of the psychodrama of the business world, from the uses of power to the institutional put-down.

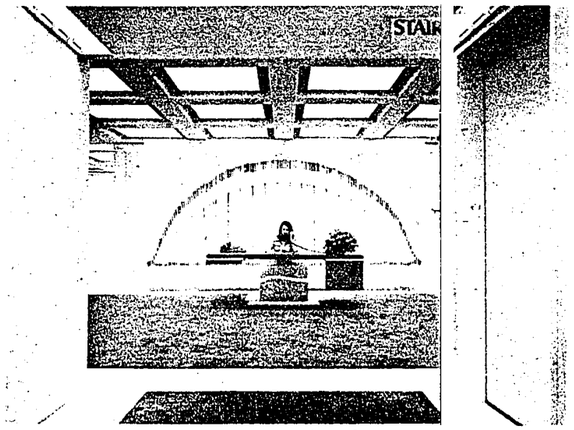
No other kind of "designed" space so clearly reveals the official values, standards, mores, rituals and images of modern society. This special world that the architect or designer creates, rich with inference and innuendo, teeters between reality and dream. It owes something to Hollywood, the Bauhaus, the International Style, Dale Carnegie and Freud. It is sleek, posh, imposing and impersonal, rigidly ordered and hierarchical. It is also terribly expensive.

It is not everyman's, or the little man's, ambience, and it is not meant to be. Materials, colors, lighting, scale, arrangement—all of the tools employed by the arts of design—are allied to the skills of manipulative psychology to create a cool, evocative picture of what it's like at the top—or what it's supposed to be like at the top. Corporate reception areas are an untapped mother lode for the behavioral scientist. As the status symbol of capitalist society, this may be a whole new socio-esthetic art form.

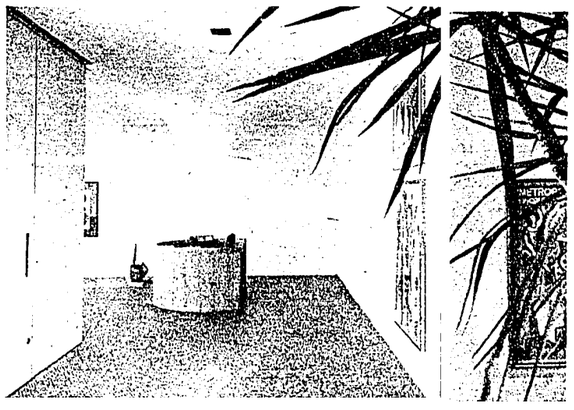
Let us consider an archetypal example. The headquarters of the XYZ Corporation are on the 54th floor of a glistening new skyscraper. Glass doors open off the elevator lobby to a richly carpeted space bathed in even light. There is a votive object discreetly placed in the visitor's line of vision. It is the "receptionist island." This is a commanding custom desk of many possible shapes and forms which may totally enclose or appropriately screen the receptionist and her discreet electronic connections to the offices inside. What it does, more than anything, is enshrine her.

This is clear from the subtle richness of her setting. The desk is undecorated; there is no distraction whatsoever from the best possible slab of chrome-trimmed marble, bronze, teak, lacquer or other unostentatiously ostentatious material. If these are not exotic enough, it can be Carpathian burl (usually reserved for conference tables in the ultimate boardrooms). Some desks are wired to glow. Some are backed or topped by a luminous aureole or nimbus.

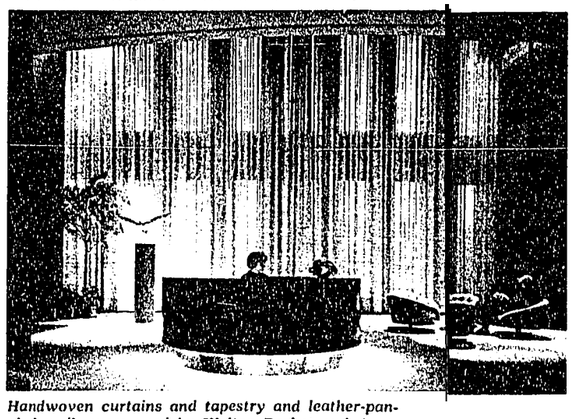
Some part of the wall is book-matched grain of rich woods. And there is always an impeccably arranged, not-a-leaf-out-of-place, seasonal floral offering. Clutter is sin. Everything is correct and costly. But nothing must be overtly sensuous or extravagant. Deep carpets have been known to be countersunk into the floor. The receptionist herself is equally impeccable; architects are not loath to suggest clothing colors (they would obviously prefer to have her cus- *(Continued on Page 76)*



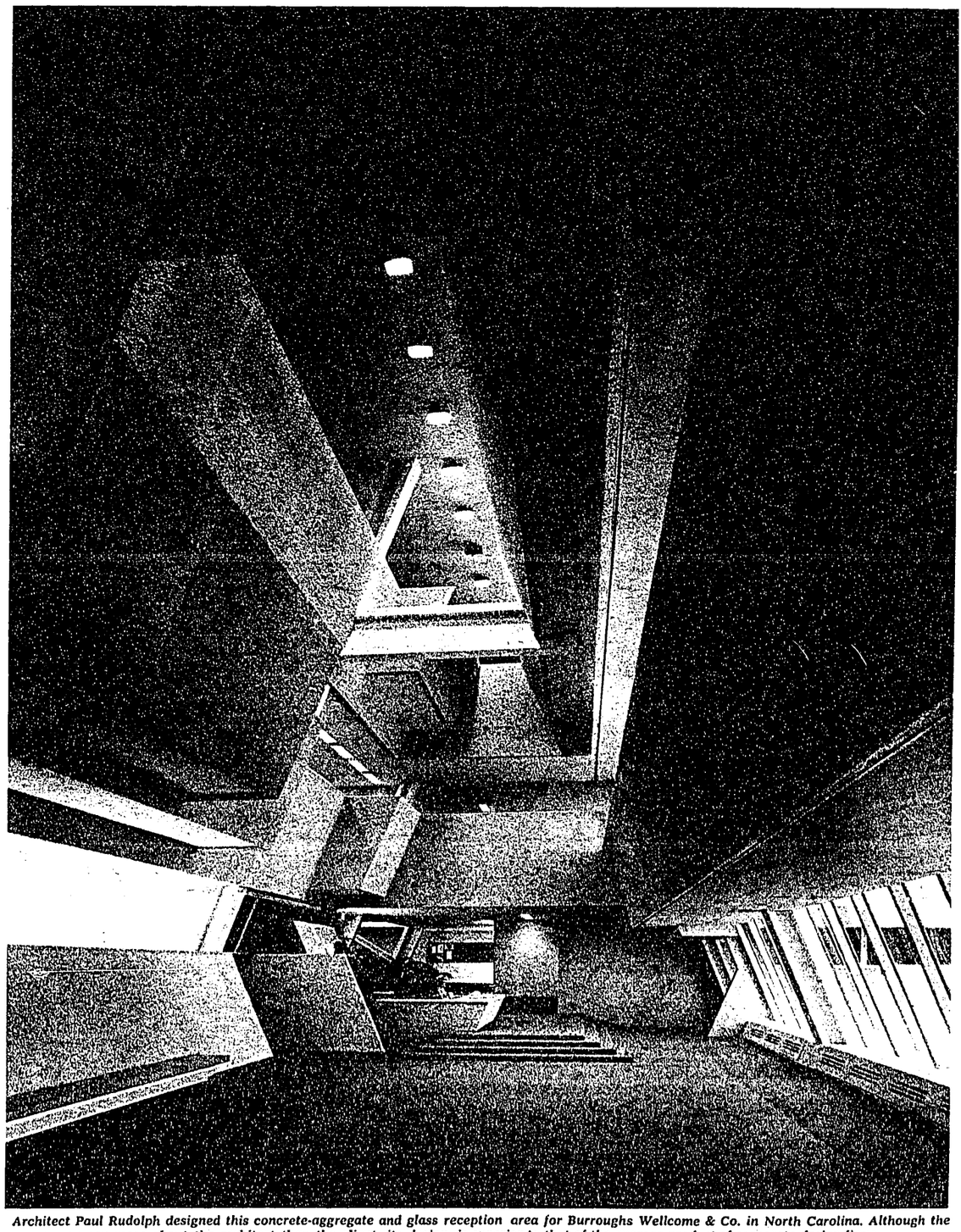
The archetypal receptionist is here enshrined at a leather-topped oak desk in front of a white wool tapestry. The room is a Warren Platner Associates design for Milwaukee's Mortgage Guarantee Investment Corporation.



Luss/Kaplan's reception area for Globus, Inc.—an investment-counseling firm in New York—has a floor made of imported ceramic tiles, an English-oak desk and an original bronze and marble sculpture.



Handwoven curtains and tapestry and leather-paneled walls were used by Welton Becket and Associates for Exxon Corporation's two-story-high reception area in its Rockefeller Center offices.



Architect Paul Rudolph designed this concrete-aggregate and glass reception area for Burroughs Wellcome & Co. in North Carolina. Although the space may say more about the architect than the client, its design is superior to that of the average product of corporate-design firms.

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tom crafted, like the furniture). At a distance away from her desk which the behaviorist Edward Hall could not measure more exquisitely is a group of chairs where one may wait. These are usually placed with rigid formality—four-square or in a circle—a calculated distance apart, fronted by a coffee table of equally costly and immovable correctness. All this furniture tends to be substantial and conservatively avant-garde. It makes a conversation group in which one never converses.

The setting is completed with plants and art. Plants are tidily in planters. They are usually tree-size, like some spectral green presence. Every leaf is polished. In the corporate headquarters that count, they are real. In the lower echelons of business, they are plastic.

Art ranges from original, wall-size abstract paintings from the best galleries or studios to designer-applied supergraphics. Sculpture is always sleek and depersonalized. It may be very good, as long as it does not disturb. There must be no suggestion of passion, or any other kind of disorder. The effect is impressively prosperous and smoothly imperturbable. Rich impersonality is the key to success.

The corporate-design genre began in earnest with the large-scale, postwar corporate headquarters buildings of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, of which the progenitor was the Chase Manhattan Building in New York's Wall Street area. This internationally prestigious architectural firm created the modern corporate formula almost singlehandedly; it is one of the few architects' offices that consistently design both the building and the interiors. Its elegant, Establishment, contemporary style bows only to the traditionalist chairman of the board, for whom some appropriately priceless antiques may be brought into the otherwise unbending setting.

What is essentially the SOM style is now followed by interior designers, decorators and the breed of specialists that has developed to serve the interiors of office buildings. These specialists are usually called space planners, although individually they have adopted some pretty tricky names. The largest in the world (they say) is SLS/Environetics, Inc., which has used modern management and computer techniques to design more than 500 million square feet of office space. That's a lot of space and a lot of business. SLS makes the claim that it determined the office space needs and layout of the world's tallest building, the Sears Tower in Chicago, before the architects (SOM) picked up a pencil.

Among other pioneering names well known in this new specialty are Designs for Business and Gerald Luss, of Luss/Kaplan and Associates Limited. Industrial designers, graphic designers and decorators all have their finger in the profitable commercial-interior pie, also known in the trade as contract business. The large corporate architects' offices that handle quantities of commercial and corporate construction—such as Welton Becket and Associates, to name one firm that practices on the West and East Coasts and beyond — maintain interior-design departments. More often, the client lets the architect do the building and then defects to the pitch of the space planners, as superspecialists. This can be a disaster, as in the less-than-compatible furnishings of New York's handsome new Police Headquarters in Manhattan's Civic Center.

No matter who does the job, however, when it comes to the all-important quasi-symbolic reception areas, there are fairly uniform requirements. The primary functional need is that the design must direct movement (traffic routes) and holding patterns (seating areas). A secondary function is the provision of information. A more recent and increasing concern is security, with a growth in sophisticated security systems to protect people and property.

But above every other consideration there is the overriding concern with corporate image. Nothing could be more illuminating on this account than the designers' own comments, or those made on their behalf by their publicists. The firm of Welton Becket tells us that it has developed interiors for Exxon headquarters in Rockefeller Center "that complement the corporation's principal products—the resources of the earth." The mystique of the process—since there seems to be no mud or oil in evidence and not much else beyond the use of "earth colors" and such élite natural materials as English sycamore — is somewhat elusive. And the claim that the "range of the art work . . . is as universal as Exxon itself" approaches the stupefying.

In no field are the pitchman's claims more extravagant or is the designer's art more accommodating. SLS may "express the client's interest in reflecting the gracious, outdoor 'patio' style of life" in bamboozly kitsch for the Dillingham Corporation in Los Angeles. Or it may shift gears to provide "the stamp of solidity and confidence" in "muted colors and furniture that is strong, forthright and comfortable" to reflect the "conservative but dynamic leadership in the world of business" of Chicago's Esmark Corporation.

But SLS's reception area for the Muzak Corporation must rank as some kind of masterpiece. The design, a set of terribly with-it furnishings arranged in circles in a room with polished reflective walls, is supposed to "instantly suggest the company's projection of itself as specialists in the physiological and psychological applications of music." The space "is bathed in an aura of mood illumination—a bluish translucency of lighting that encircles the visitor and takes him at once into the Muzak world . . . visually producing the ambience of the experience of sound." It is sedate, synthetic jazz.

For Globus, Inc., a New York investment-counseling and brokerage firm, Luss/Kaplan has produced a space that is "starkly simple and understated to the point of no provision for reception seating since visitors are seen by appointment and immediately received into the offices." The reception desk stands alone, isolated and abstract, focused by a white plastic light shaft molded above it—an illuminated altar to the process of making and losing money. One of God's more responsible representatives will see you right away. The modern movement has come full circle from revolution against the Establishment to playing con games with its architectural symbols. It's a long way from Ronchamps. ■