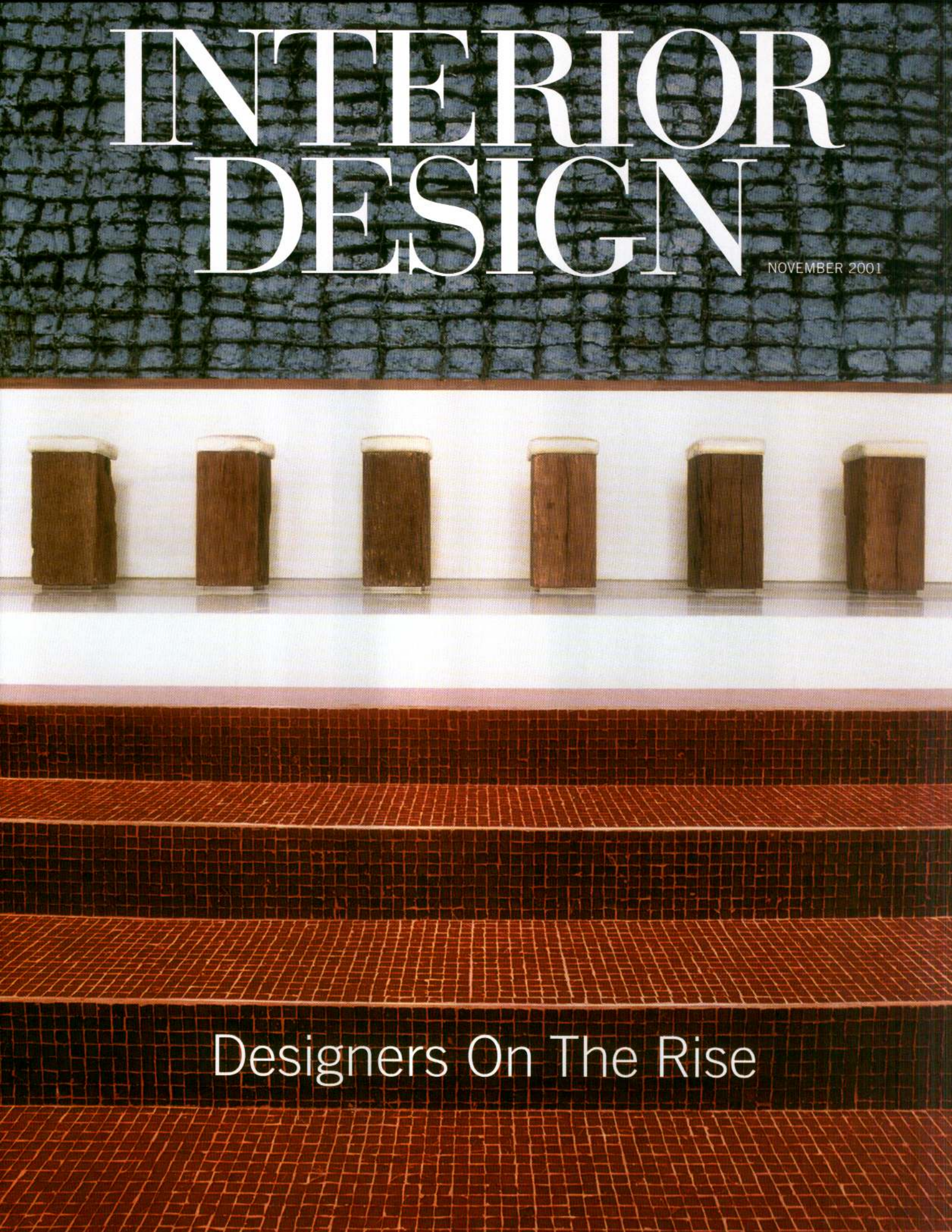
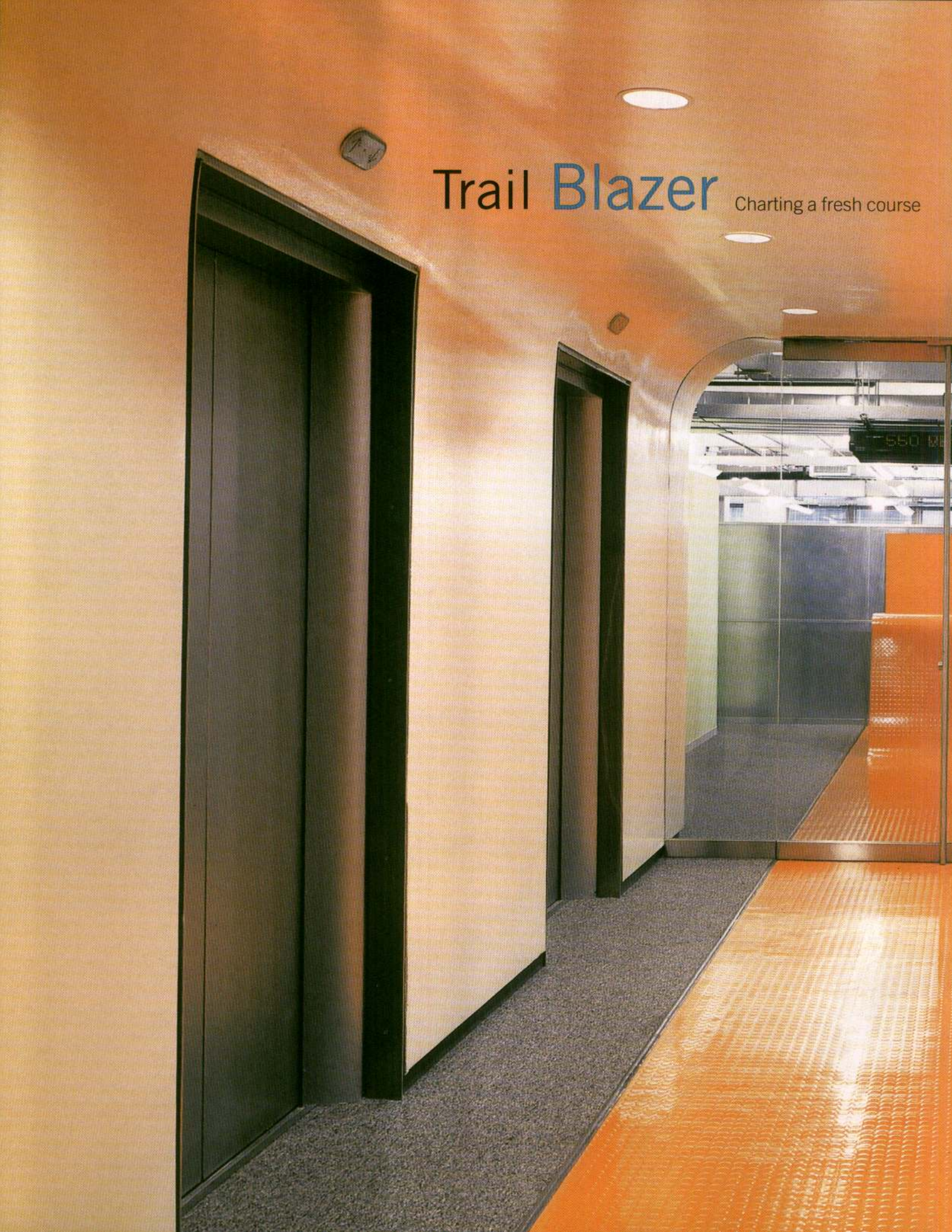
INTERIOR DESIGN

NOVEMBER 2001



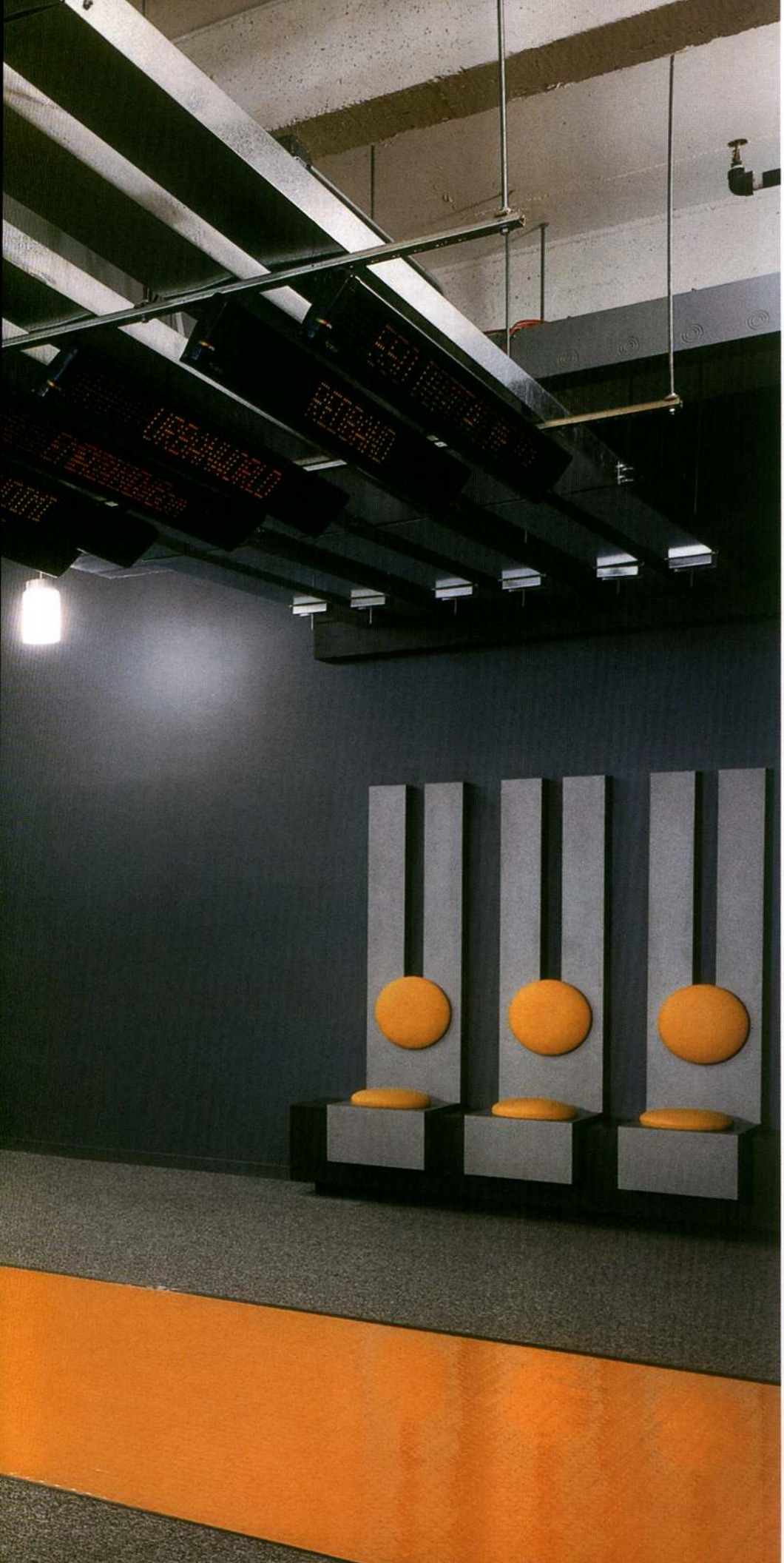
Designers On The Rise



Trail Blazer

Charting a fresh course

for Sony, Stephen Yablon creates a winsome workplace in New York.



STARTING ONE'S DESIGN career by working with I.M. Pei and then Gwathmey Siegel, collectively covering well over a decade, one may, if so inclined, boast of having earned the design industry's most prestigious credentials. But any claim to personal/professional fame will be minimal. For while apprenticeship with internationally renowned mentors may be regarded as a passport to success, a guarantee of name recognition and upward mobility it isn't. Working independently and earning the imprimatur inherent in editorial coverage by a major design magazine are better means of making a name for oneself.

Such is the case with Stephen Yablon who, having gone through the above-cited training, founded his New York-based business six years ago. He's been busy handling varied assignments for respected clients, culminating in the New Technology Holdings installation for Sony; representing the client was Robert Zelony, director of facilities planning for Sony Music Entertainment. He and Yablon have known each other since Gwathmey Siegel days, when the designer worked on the renovation of the AT&T Building for Sony. Did Yablon, Zelony is asked, stand out in any way then? The reply is a resounding *yes*, followed by: "His work is fantastic." How the designer's talents helped extend the project's success will emerge at the conclusion of this report.

The brief called for incubators, those nurturing training grounds for would-be entrepreneurs in the new-media and technology fields, on a 21,000-sq.-ft. full floor in a commercial high-rise directly opposite the Sony Building on Manhattan's Madison Avenue. Space planning followed the norm set by bays, making it possible to string six open-plan incubator pods along the avenue side. Private offices hug other perimeters; two conference rooms, a lounge, and support areas are strategically integrated. An unexpected early challenge arose with the updating of mechanical equipment: The building supplied HVAC services during fixed hours only; on weekends, all appliances registered OFF. →

Previous spread: Rubbery flooring runner bisects entry areas and wraps reception desk, climbing up the wall at the terminus. Lobby walls are coated with shiny white epoxy ordinarily used on machine-room floors.

Left: Suspended LED signage, easily removed, makes fun of the here-today-and-gone-tomorrow adage.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL MORAN

Left: One of six incubator rooms, looking to the Sony Building, originally the AT&T headquarters built, complete with infamous Chippendale top, by Philip Johnson in 1984 and converted to its present status by Gwathmey Siegel, in the early 1990s.

Below: Corridor between support-staff work stations, left, and incubator spaces opposite. Rounded form shields coat closet.

Opposite: Looking to small meeting room, fronted with lights attached via Kindorff beam clamps to underside of ductwork.

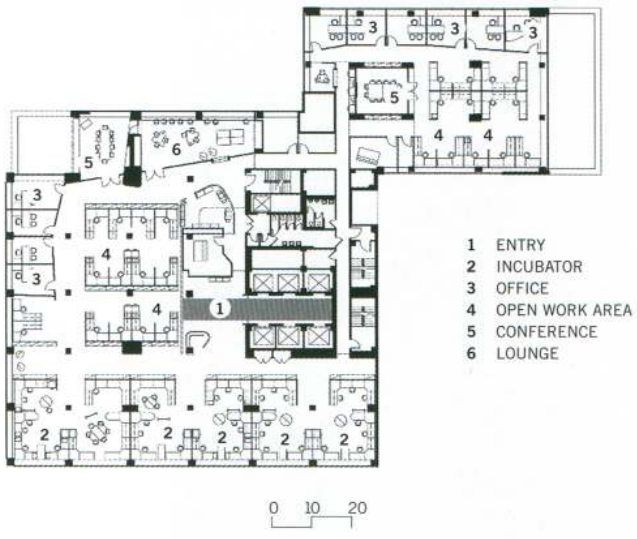
CARPETING: **DIMENSION**. RUBBER FLOORING: **PIRELLI**. ELEVATOR CEILING, WALL FINISH: **DEX-O-TEX**. LIGHTING: **LIGHTOLIER**; **SHAPER**; **LEDALITE**; **DAC**. RECEPTION CHAIR, WORK STATIONS, FILES, COUNTER TOPS: **STEELCASE**. VINYL UPHOLSTERY: **DESIGNTEX**. CABLE TRAYS: **WIREOLD**. LED DISPLAY UNITS: **MULTIMEDIA**. HARDWARE: **BLUMCRAFT**; **DORMA**; **LCN**; **SCHLAGE**. PLASTIC LAMINATES: **NEVAMAR**; **ABET LAMINATI**. SHEET METAL WALL, CUSTOM ELEVATOR INDICATOR LIGHTS: **CARROLL WELDING**. MILLWORK: **NJS CARPENTRY**. MECHANICAL ENGINEERS: **LILKER ASSOCIATES**. FURNITURE DEALER: **WALDNER'S**.GENERAL CONTRACTOR: **N.T.X. CONSTRUCTION**.

Yet to the creative types recruited for incubating jobs, schedules regimented by the clock are all but unknown. Thus to keep everyone content whenever, it was necessary to organize and coordinate new and old sets of cabling, wires, ducts, electrical/lighting conduits, etc. It took a big time chunk from Yablon's fast-track schedule, but it actually saved money to have installed the second set rather than buy the landlord's HVAC services. That done, creative work could absorb the design team's full attention.

The project team consisted of architect Brad Farwell, designer Tom Abraham, and the protagonist. An articulate raconteur, Yablon, in his account, conjures up visions of a tripartite chorus performing solo, duet, and *a tutti* renditions, this while everyone madly sketches to substantiate words with visions. So the streams-of-consciousness output gradually coalesced into a viable scheme, incorporating, inter alia, the idea of connectivity. Runners of rubbery flooring material snaking across the reception area were, for example, inspired by long flat cables inside computers. Elevated cable trays similarly are adaptations of telecommunication entrails. Noteworthy is a thin sheet-metal wall that originates at the mechanical/telecom space; a second long wall, this one acid-green, forms the background for private offices, conference rooms, and lounge. Subtle spoofing is a submotif, apparent in the suspended six-pack of easily replaced LED signs composing the incubator firms' name directory—a prescient reference to the impermanence of the dot-com business. Futuristic forms, such as the elevator lobby's epoxy-coated tube, reportedly hint at the naïveté of technology enthusiasts. Colors concentrate on mustard yellow, cool greens, and many grades of gray. Indisputably the show-stealer is a stylistic bench fashioned of plastic laminate after telephone jacks. Padded vinyl cushions serve as seats and backrests.

The economic timing for incubating ventures was not, as hindsight verifies, the best. Which doesn't bother the client at all. Noting that few pioneers remain and that most occupants are Sony staffers, Zelony says, "Our people like the place. It's flexible, cost-effective, and useful." The job took six months.

—*Monica Geran*



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