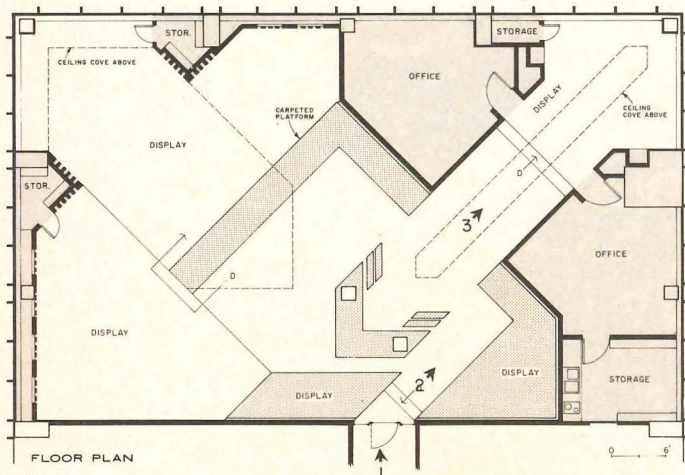


1. Down the off-white, narrow building corridor, the visitor proceeds toward a chrome-framed glass door with a tubular push-pull bar (above). It announces the beginning of something different and special. Chunks and slashes of glossy red, matte white, and woolly chocolate brown show beyond.



# Alienation Reveals the Familiar

Map numbers refer to photographs



**K**noll International — font of Bauhaus furniture in America, sire of the most exquisitely orderly interiors of the past quarter century — has espoused this decade's diagonal disorder. Order moves on to new orders. All-at-once-ness produces a new clarity.

The occasion of the firm's new image is its recently opened showroom in Boston. There, not far from Government Center — with the "Action Architecture" of its City Hall and the soft-focus monumental cubism of its Health Center — the showroom hides in an ordinary, rigid office block, tucked away like a web of tangled arrows on one end of the fifth floor.

Although bright and crisp, the tangle is immediately disorienting. There is a method in its perverse obfuscation.

Italian architect Gae Aulenti, who designed the space, has delighted her clients with this new-image showroom and with the reactions of visitors and customers. They should be delighted — not only because of the manipulation of masses and forms but also because the showroom provides the furniture displayed with a setting that, mystifyingly, forces one to see the long-familiar classics with the fresh eye of rediscovery. It is as though one were viewing the old favorites with the naked excitement that they created for many of us in the early 50's. The effect is a slow-burn startle.

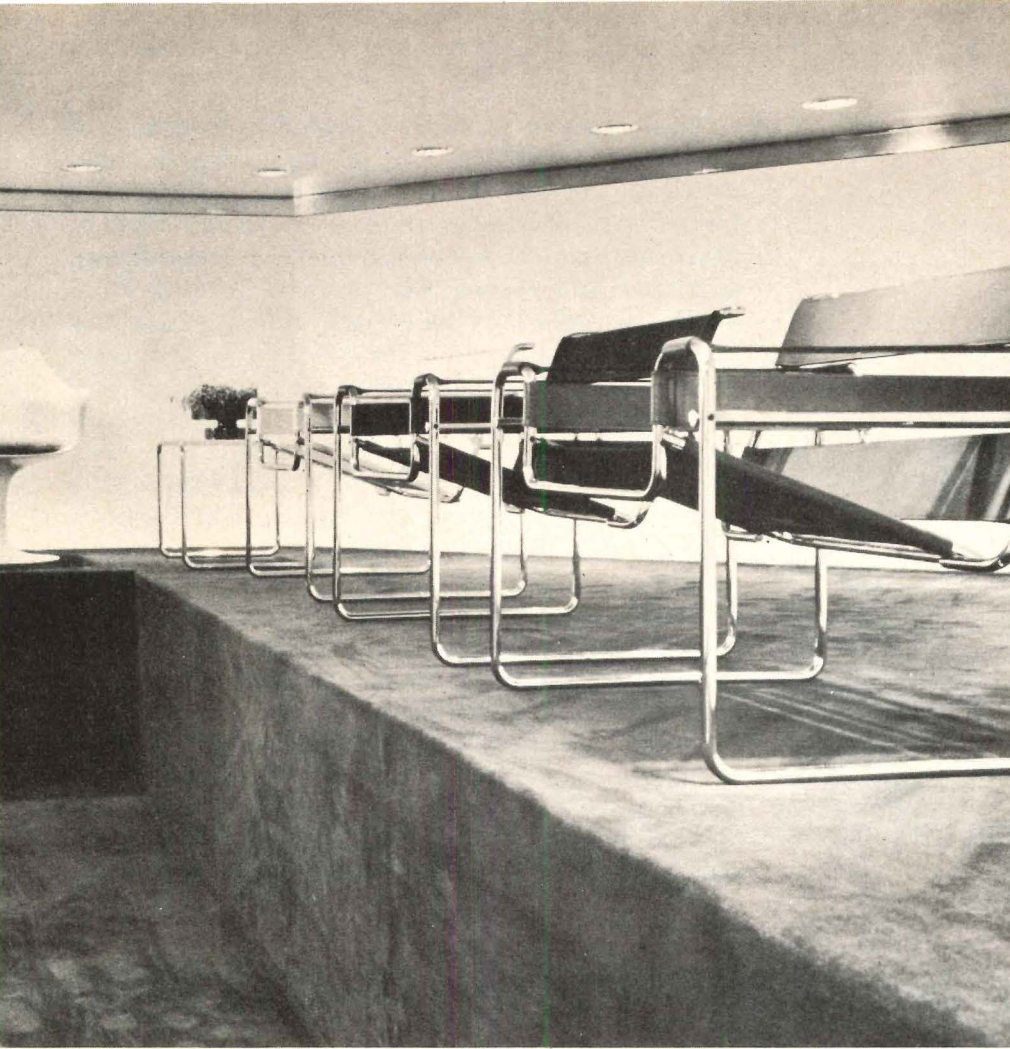


Photo: Idaka

**2.** Inside, hung from the ceiling and slashed below by a lighted horizontal void, a massive form of white immediately blocks the entry. As a circulation indicator, it forces one to turn sharp right, forces the visitor to mount several brown-carpeted steps, to proceed further into a corner that is barricaded by a waist-high platform used for chair display (left).

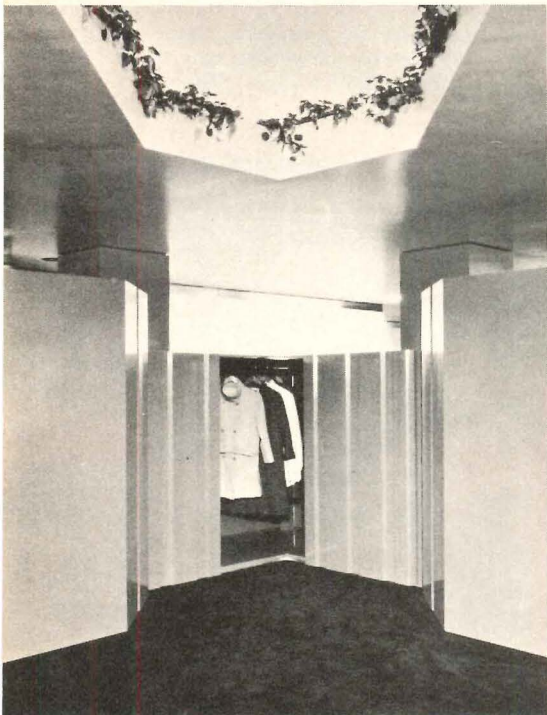
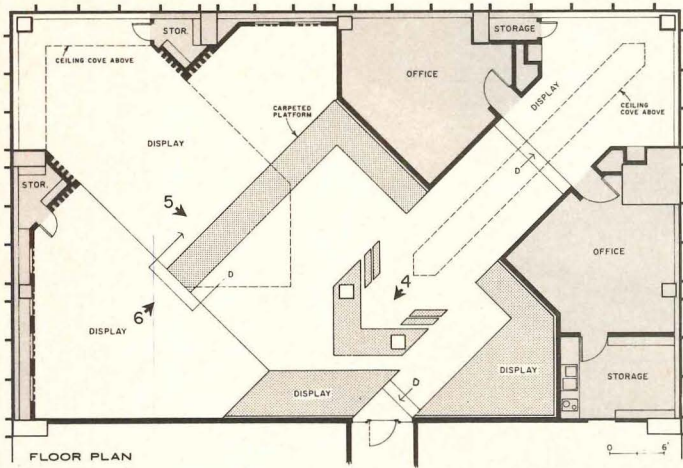
**3.** At this corner, the circulation pattern takes a 90° turn to the left—and the space explodes: To the right, a wide gallery shoots over a reception desk and down a few steps, arrow-like into a windowed corner display area (below).



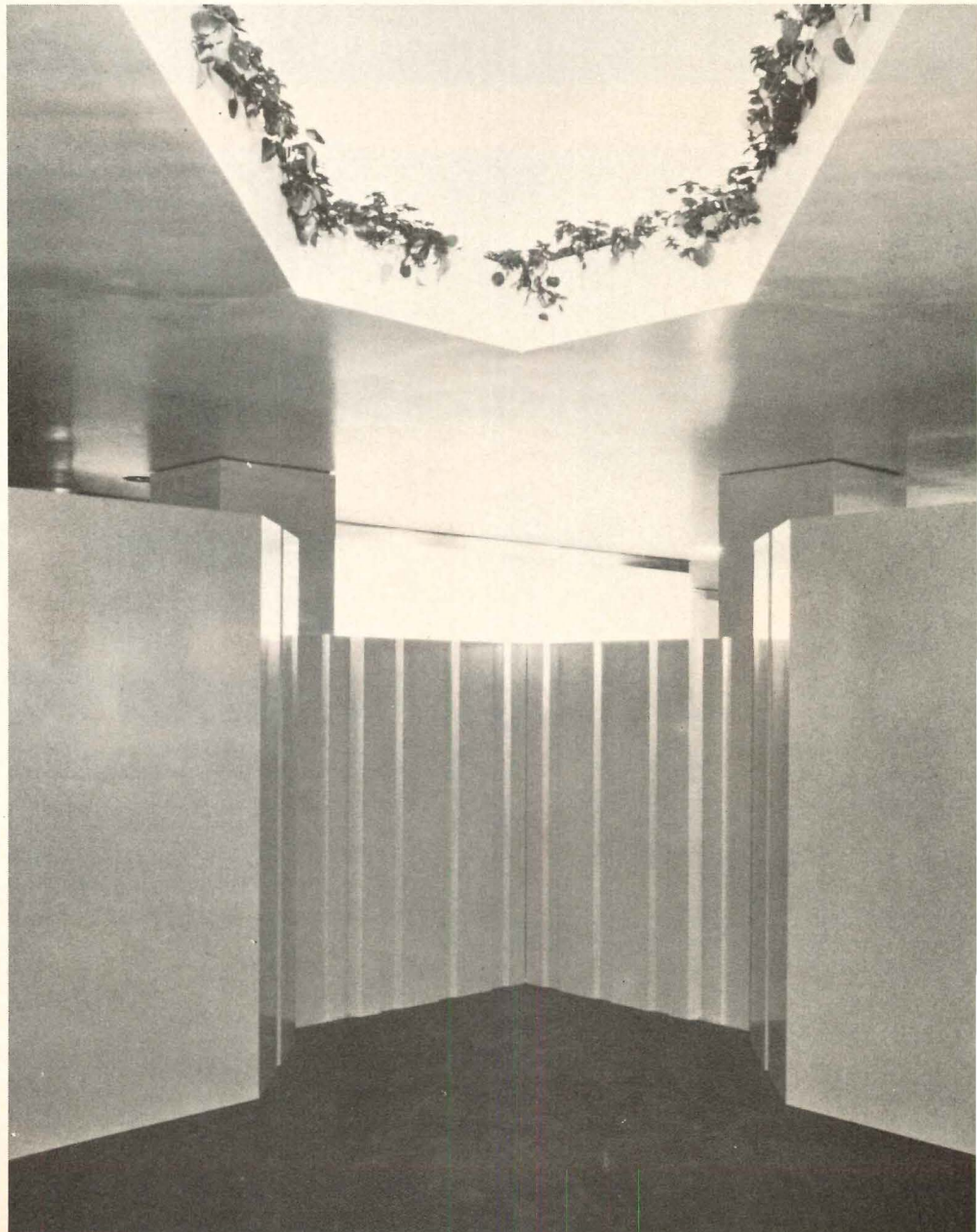
What operates in the new design is the effect of alienation created by juxtaposing a literally diametrically opposed style and approach as the setting for the old and familiar. It is the same technique of alienation that we have seen used by other Italian architects in art museums — such as Carlo Scarpa's and Franco Albini's steel I-beams and wood scaffolds as the mounts and easels for Renaissance paintings. In their work, the steel I-beams associate the viewer so inseparably with today that the paintings read more strongly as artifacts also existing today and independent of their Renaissance associations. The confusing contradiction forces a new and fresh vision. And that is the goal of art.

Surely no other showroom in several years has so effectively yet subtly forced the visitor to see its displayed items as clearly and objectively. In terms of the art of architecture then, the design fulfills its applied program perfectly.

As pure sculpture, the design is less startling than one might have hoped — it might be more strongly diagonal, more confusingly ambiguous, less open after the closeness of the maze-like entry, and less obviously indebted to Frank Lloyd Wright in its vine-



4. To the left, this central point leads into another arrow-shape, which is formed by a head-high, free-standing, glossy red closet unit (closed at right; open above).



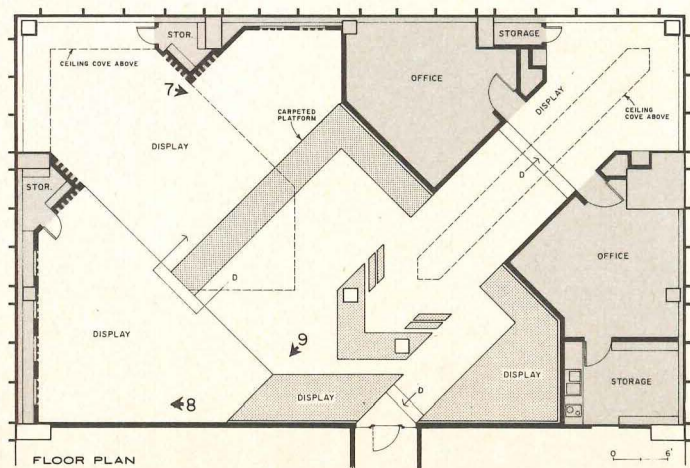


5,6. Straight ahead of this point, the space explodes to the large main display area — across the continuing waist-high display platform, down several steps into a number of seemingly inexplicable corners, and up into a lighted ceiling cove trailing with vine leaves that crisscrosses the circulation pattern. “Am I lost?” asked the new mailman as he got to this central point. “What kind of office is this?”





7. A striped wall motif permits certain areas to accommodate the hanging of fabric swatches in recesses lined with peg-board and hooks.



dripped light coves. Yet had it been stronger as pure sculpture, it could not have fulfilled its applied purpose so successfully. As an importation to this country of the Italian technique of alienation, it provides a beneficial first-hand lesson for our display techniques and for our philosophy of display.

KNOLL INTERNATIONAL SHOWROOM, Boston, Mass. Designer: Gae Aulenti (Milan, Italy). Project Architect: Richard Owen Abbott. General Contractor: Ideal Const. Co. Inc. Interior Designer: Knoll Planning Unit. Area: 3300 sq ft. Photography (except as noted): Jon Naar, courtesy Knoll International.

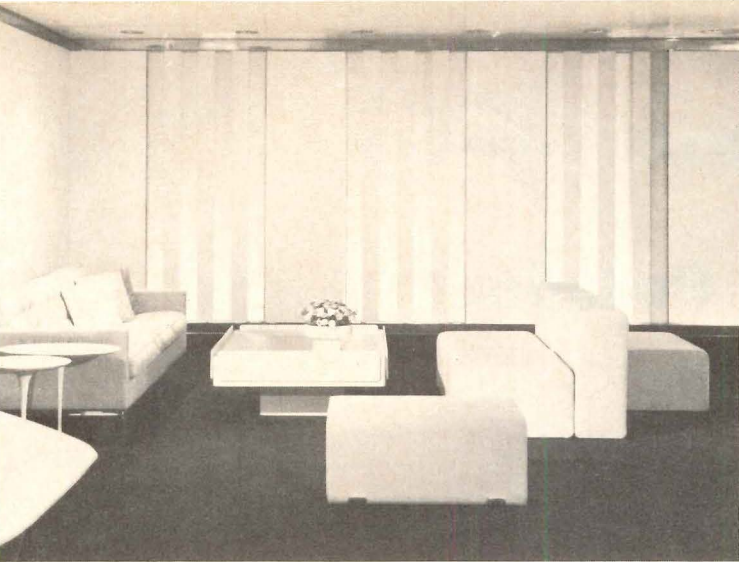
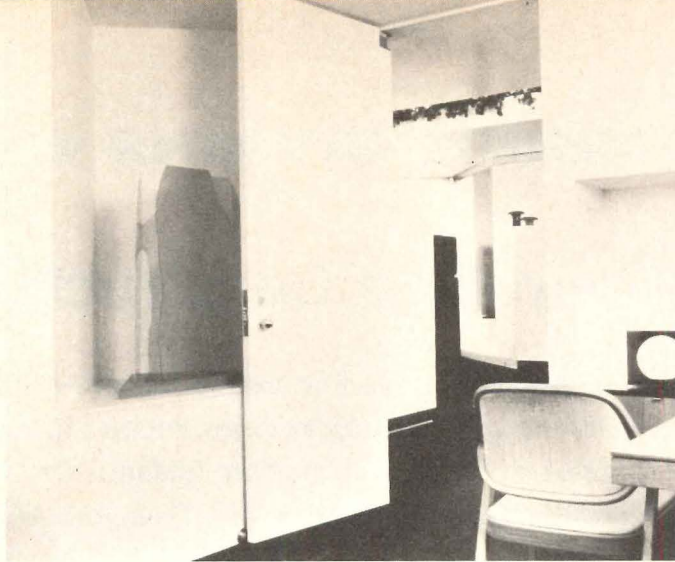
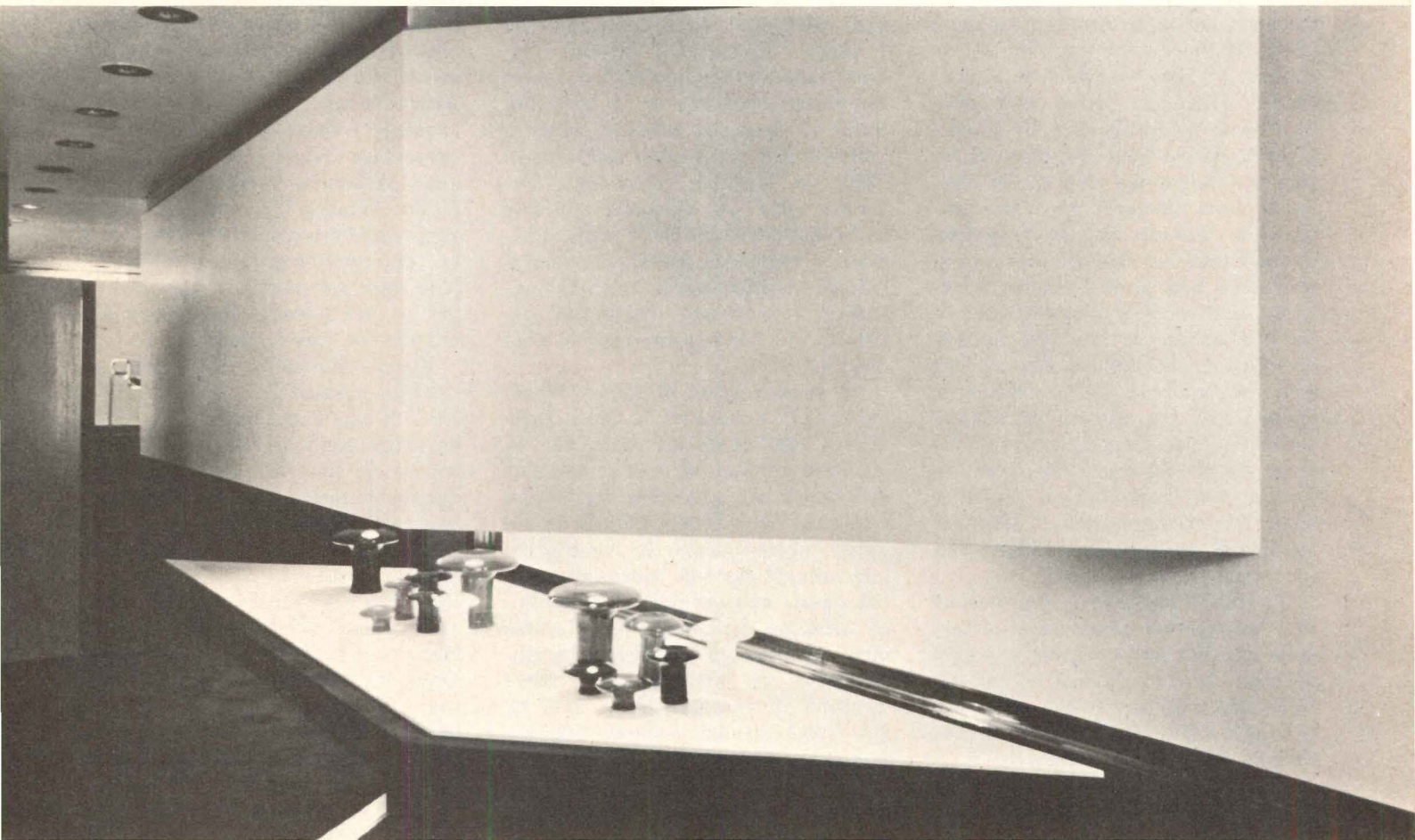


Photo: Scott Hyde



8. Other areas of striped wall are window coverings composed of alternate panels of white-painted plywood and nylon mesh — the mesh used in the manufacturer's outdoor furniture.

The built-out shapes that form extra corners in the space serve both as storage areas for fabric samples and supplies as well as forming interesting display nooks in some of the offices.



9. The massive parallelogram chunk of ceiling-hung white that blocks the entry is a lighted overhang of a low display area.

