FLORENCE KNOLL, DESIGN AND THE MODERN AMERICAN OFFICE WORKPLACE

BY

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Still in contact with people from her Cranbrook years, Shu introduced Hans to Eero Saarinen and to Harry Bertoia. Saarinen was the son of Eiel and Loja and was following in his father's footsteps as an architect with a strong foundation in broad-based design including, most importantly, furniture design. Bertoia was a sculptor most interested in the potential of material and form, although through his parallel acquaintance with Charles and Rae Eames he explored furniture design as well. Hans knew not only designers, but influential businessmen, such as the eminent journalist Howard Meyers who had met Hans and Jens Risom in 1941 and, a Hans Knoll biographer reported, "became attached to them as if he were their godfather and introduced them to many good clients" (Izutsu 93).

Fig. 5. Hans Knoll and Florence Schust Knoll in an undated photograph (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 1).

curved plastic moulds, such as Eero Saarinen's iconic "Womb" chair (1946) and Harry Bertoia's eponymous wire chairs (1952).

Fig. 7. Eero Saarinen's Womb chair became such a design icon that it was featured in the 1962 Easter issue of the Saturday Evening Post. Through the lens of today's sensitivity this illustration appears ironic: Rockwell's idealized "mom" taking her brood to church while "dad lounges in a chair brought to market by a woman, the kind of professional woman Rockwell would not have painted (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 3, slide 24).

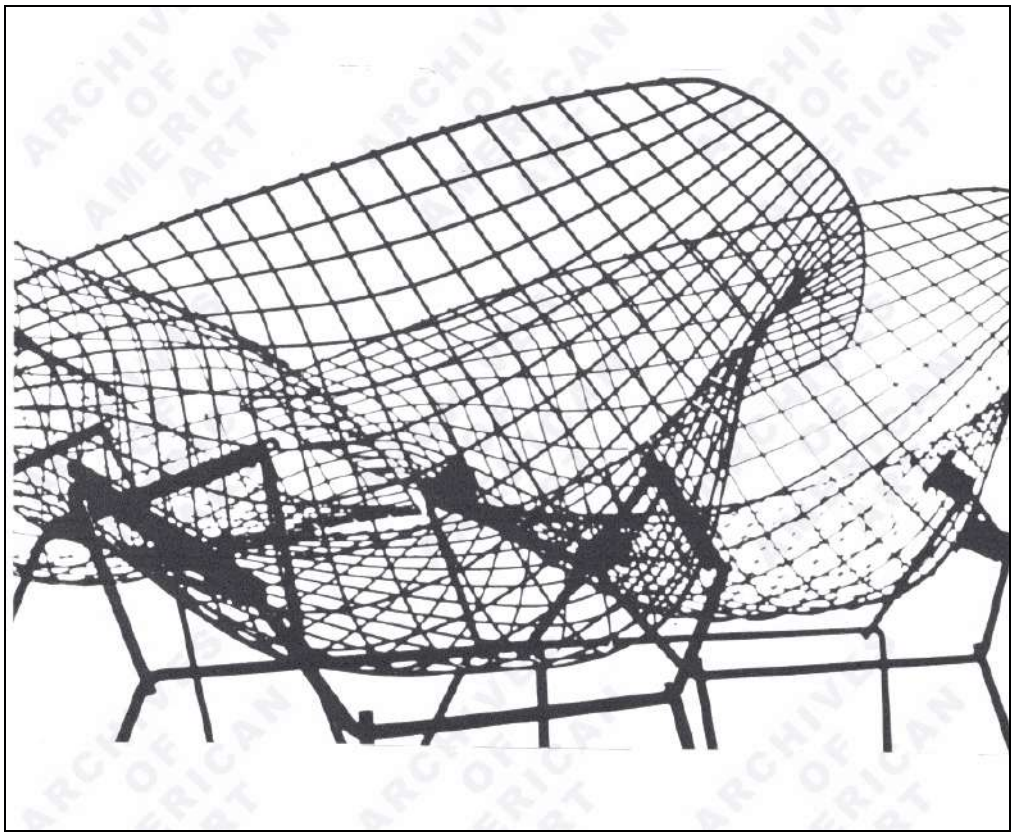

Fig. 8. Harry Bertoia's wire chairs (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 1, slide 49).

These new forms required new ways of manufacturing with a resulting alliance of concept and production that became the hallmark of Knoll. "The wire furniture was very difficult to make," recalled Richard Schultz.

> It was like jewelry. It is very interesting to see those pieces, what they were designed to accomplish, why they have the shapes they do. If one wire is out of place, it stands out. So one of those pieces can't just be knocked out. It has to be made meticulously, like a piece of jewelry … making those chairs is a good example of method being imposed by form (Schultz).

design of the past. The showrooms "were important because we had to do a lot of convincing," recalled Florence Knoll Bassett in 2001. "At the time there were very few clients who were interested in these ideas. They thought they had to have traditional furniture from Grand Rapids [Michigan]. These showrooms were what really convinced them" (Makovsky *Shu U* 97).

In the beginning of the 1940s, the idea of modern furnishings had only just begun to permeate thinking about environments for business. Remembering the time and the efforts of architects who wanted to design with a modern sensibility, Olga Gueft wrote in 1966,

> Between 1941 and 1946, the professional could cover the entire market in only two hours. During the first he could visit Dunbar, which had designs by Edward Wormley; Widdicomb, which had T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings; and Herman Miller, which had Gilber Roohde and Paul Laszlo.
>
> Architects pressed for time skipped this hour and went only to H G. Knoll's, which had designs by Jens Risom, Hardoy (With Kurchan and Boet), Pierre Jeanneret, Franco Albini, Raph Rapson, George Nakashima, Andre Dupre, Ilmari Tapiovarra, Abel Sorenson, Richard Stein, Eero Saarinen, Hans Bellman, Harry Bertoia and Florence Schust, as well as a small lamp by Noguchi, and a line of fabrics by such people as Viola Grasten, Astrid Sampe and Arne Jacobsen (Itzutsu 99).

fishnet panels screened out the concrete "views," while permitting filtered light to enter the space. A black panel was thrown in capriciously, as she loved to play with color. Even the restroom doors, which opened into the showroom, received a novel touch: door handles were removed and the entire wall was paneled. Two bright stripes of color marked the location of hidden finger holds for the doors; until someone actually used the doors, no one knew they were there. To this setting, she added the furniture and accessories. A Mies van der Rohe grouping greeted visitors in the first setting, while a reflecting pool greeted visitors in the next. Each setting had a different treatment: Calder mobiles, sculptures by Bertoia, and paintings by Miro and Klee contributed to the open feeling.

The Knolls were equally fastidious about the design of their own offices. Hans's office was only twelve feet square in size, but was very striking. It featured a black wall behind the desk, a color Florence chose to highlight Hans's ruddy complexion, and (golden) bamboo blinds and raw silk curtains to match the color of his hair (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 1). Light filtered in from a large side window, giving the office the illusion of much larger space than it actually was. This office was used to educate clients just as much as the showrooms were.

Fig. 12. Hans Knoll's office was designed to highlight his complexion. He is flanked by a Bertoia sculpture (Rouland and Rouland 4).

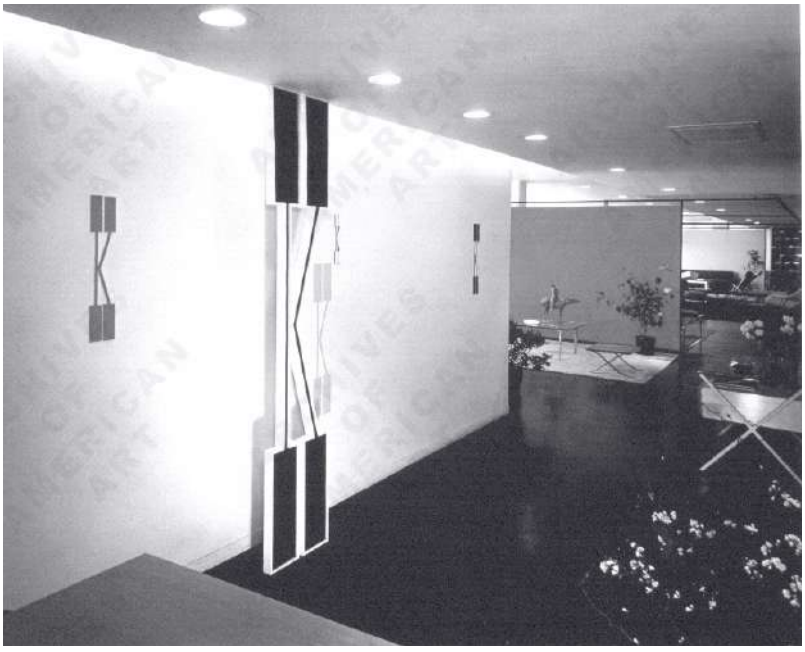

Fig. 13. The Knoll Showroom in New York, 1951.

According to Florence Knoll, "Working with the problems of a poorly proportioned space complicated by two levels of low ceilings and unfortunately placed columns was a serious challenge in the design of our new showroom at 575 Madison Avenue. The answer was a black metal 'cage' that delineated and redefined the space. It also supported the colored panels for the display areas. The blue ceiling also within the framework gave the illusion of height to the existing ceiling. The abundance of natural light from the outer walls was softened with fiberglass panels and mesh" (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 1, slide 33).

Florence's office appeared more functional. Fabric samples covered part of one wall, while the windowsill behind her desk contained some of the models and mockups she loved to use. The models included "...a familiar Saarinen chair, a checker boarded marble cube, a sculptured metal cloud by Harry Bertoia, and a bowl of flowers normal size" as described in Interiors magazine (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 2).

As Knoll's business expanded, showrooms were built in cities as diverse as Los Angeles, Stuttgart, Dallas, and Milan. By 1955, Chicago, Detroit, Miami, Boston, Brussels, Stockholm, Zurich, and Toronto all had Knoll showrooms. The one thing they all had in common was the very visual, very colorful Knoll style which was such a fitting backdrop for the furniture the company produced. Some would call it the "Knoll Look."

problems and to suggest new ways of handling them" (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 1, folder 2).

The showrooms were perfect exemplars of the Knoll look because the clients were imagined and the programming was the Planning Unit's use of an essentially open page upon which they could create different compositions of objects, fabrics, color, and light. Even though the Planning Unit primarily designed office spaces, the showrooms seemed almost residential with their groupings of seating in the sculptural furniture of Bertoia, Saarinen, Schultz, Mies, and others.

In 1956, the Planning Unit completed work for Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, its first very large commission, a complex on 230 acres of rural countryside. Service buildings were grouped around a courtyard designed by Isamu Noguchi, and the entire complex was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), by architect Gordon Bunshaft. One commentator called it "a turning point both for Knoll and for the American interior design world" (Itzutsu 86). Bunshaft recalled it as a "very happy joint venture," and SOM continued to work with Knoll on a number of later projects (Knoll Bassett Collection, box 3, folder 19).

The Planning Unit and the furniture that came of Florence Knoll's own designs and Knoll Associates' relationships with other designers created the unique aesthetic that was the Knoll Look and the companies – Knoll Associates, Inc., Knoll Textiles, Inc., and Knoll International, Ltd. – flourished. Richard Schultz remembered Florence Knoll saying once, "We were going along doing what we wanted to do and we didn't know we were making history." He took the thought a step farther,

marveling that the companies also made money. “The amazing thing was that it survived as a company. Her attitude about product development was ‘we do what we want to do’ – she never looked around and saw what other people were doing” (Personal interview).

In Florence Knoll’s planning, spaces interact in a relaxed but highly rational architectural integration. They are embellished with elegant textiles and accented by vivid color contrasts and artful lighting. She designed much of the furniture her projects required and, although her own designs were frequently cited for awards, she was self-effacing and downplayed the achievement.

“People ask me if I am a furniture designer,” she has said. “I am not. I never really sat down and designed furniture. I designed the fill-in pieces that no one else was doing. I designed sofas because no one was designing sofas” (Larabee and Vignelli 45-46). She referred to her own line of desks, for which she is well known, as the “meat and potatoes” that had to be provided. “Eero and Bertoia did the stars and I did the fill-in . . . . I did it because I needed the piece of furniture for a job and it wasn’t there, so I designed it” (Larabee and Vignelli 46). While the work of Saarinen and Bertoia is far more sculptural, it’s impossible to write off Florence Knoll’s work as simply “fill in.”

offices of the U.S. Veterans Administration, and U.S. embassies overseas. It was an impressive roster.

In the late 1960s into the early 1970s, Knoll capitalized on its tradition of design successes. According to a retrospective, Knoll Furniture,

> The company used a two-pronged approach: create the design and approve it based on the merits of appearance, function, and appeal (or, buy the design if it meets these criteria); then figure out how to produce it. A good example is a line designed by Warren Platner that Florence Knoll had purchased prior to her retirement. As with the Bertoia chairs, Platner's were steel wire. Platner used parallel lines, creating a graceful form, but the pieces were difficult to produce. A special electric welder was developed to conjure up the final product. Another production problem had been solved, but Knoll was about to enter an era when the old methods of manufacture would be replaced by mass production (Rouland 13).

Other furniture designs that were introduced during this time include Richard Schultz's now-legendary "Leisure Collection," designed when Florence Knoll Bassett "called from Florida to say 'There is no good pool furniture anywhere. Can you design some?'" (Richard Schultz personal interview).

to maximize your contribution? Her genius was that she figured out how to do that – study a company that way – and turn it into material expression of what she learned from a company's people.

Today, after decades of business thinkers deconstructing and reconstructing organizational behavior in terms of understanding "the mind" of a company, it is hard to remember that in 1960 none of that thinking applied to space. By then, theorists were contemplating how work "worked," but Florence Knoll Bassett expressed that contemplation wordlessly and powerfully in interior design.

Her designs influenced both residential and commercial interior designers for years to come. The design approach of studying potential outcomes – end-user habits – is today hard to view as novel because it has become a standard part of interior design, taught in professional interior design education, and expected by clients. To imagine today that sixty years ago, unexamined assumptions about end usage were considered enough background for office design seems startling. Knoll Bassett's approach to the work changed the entire industry of interior design.

She knew she was breaking ground in several arenas, notably bringing avant-garde design into the workplace. But she never considered herself a true furniture designer, stating repeatedly in interviews over time that she had only created the "fill-in pieces" while "star" designers such as Harry Bertoia created the fundamentals of her interiors. However, her legacy includes such eponymous furniture pieces as the boat conference table, a design that allows everyone seated at the table to be seen, as opposed to blind spots of the previously favored rectangular conference table, where

floor. The Target Web site even features text espousing the importance of design in all things:

> Design isn't just for squares, especially when it comes to innovative packaging solutions that are safer, smarter, more efficient, and include a healthy dose of gorgeous. From a snappy cereal box that keeps your flakes fresh, to a prescription bottle that's easier to read and easier to use, when it comes to great design, beauty is more than skin deep (Design for All).

The popular desire for such "designed" goods has roots in Florence Knoll's insistence on the Bauhaus principle that well-designed goods aren't a luxury or even a privilege – they are a right. She sold her clients highly functional, well-designed workplaces, which were well received and viewed as the industry standard and the design standard of the era. If such design were expected in the office, it was only natural for the expectation to extend quickly to the home and eventually encompass goods and gadgets ranging from electronics to orange juicers. The desire wasn't limited to Americans.

> Readers of Canadian Homes & Gardens would have also known, from regular advertising, that the great American firm Knoll was purveying wiry Bertoia chairs and memorable credenzas from a shop uptown at Yonge and Eglinton ("WANT TO COME UP AND SEE MY FLORENCE KNOLL?" a Globe & Mail headline asked over and admiring story about them in 1998) (Holden).

The craving for good design has simply become a cultural expectation of the twenty-first century. One example from hundreds of thousands is a blog named

List of Figures