

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

INTERIORS

SPECIAL FEATURE

A WORLD OF DETAILS

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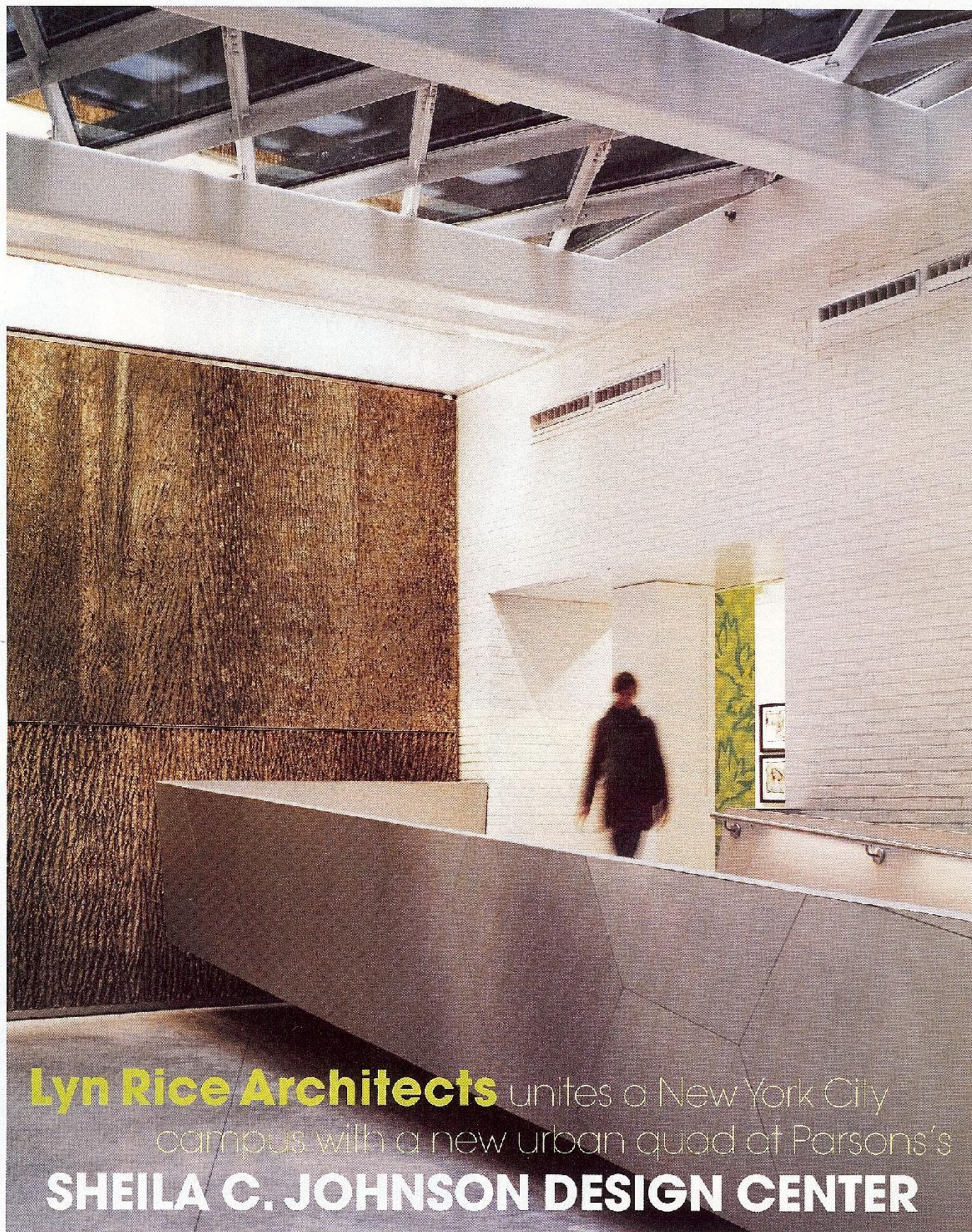
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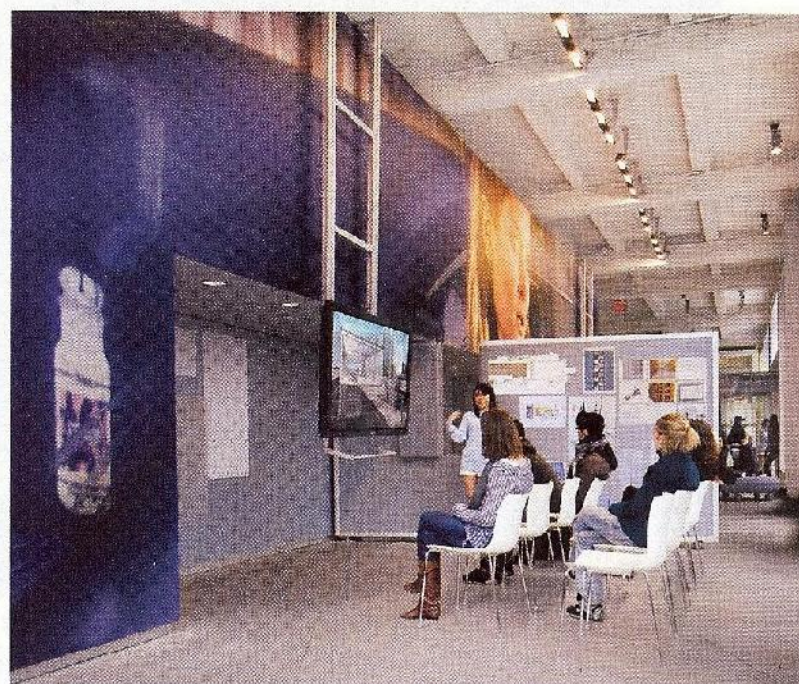
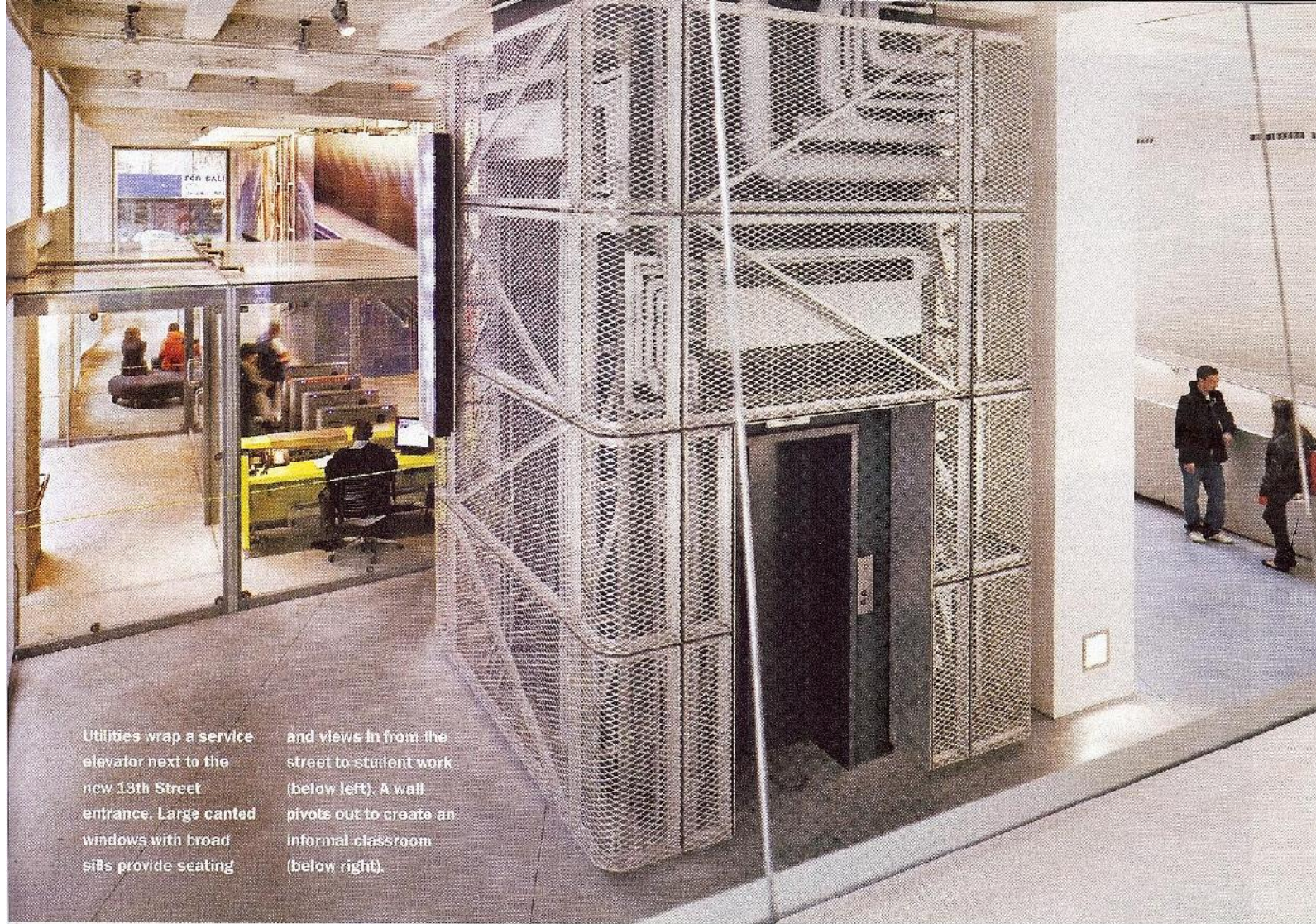
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The diamond pattern of the quad's glazed roof is half the size of that in the space's poured-concrete floor. Beams correspond to the column grid of the north and south buildings.



Lyn Rice Architects unites a New York City campus with a new urban quad at Parsons's
SHEILA C. JOHNSON DESIGN CENTER



Parsons The New School for Design, housed since the 1970s in a cluster of four early-20th-century buildings on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 13th Street in Manhattan, had long been suffering from a kind of cognitive dissonance.

The physical space occupied by the school—which offers 22 programs, ranging from architecture to fashion design—did not align with the ideals embodied in the institution's teaching. The best thing that could be said about Parsons's street-level public and circulation areas (that serve the classroom floors above) was that they "had character." A cramped warren of segregated spaces connected by back alleys and service areas, the school was, mildly put, difficult to navigate. And with its compressed lobby areas, students often could be seen lining up for class out on the sidewalk. The school "did not display or speak to the work that was going on inside," says Lia Gartner, New School vice president for design, construction, and facilities management. Nor was it effectively connecting with the city, a rich resource that Parsons values as an extension of the classroom.

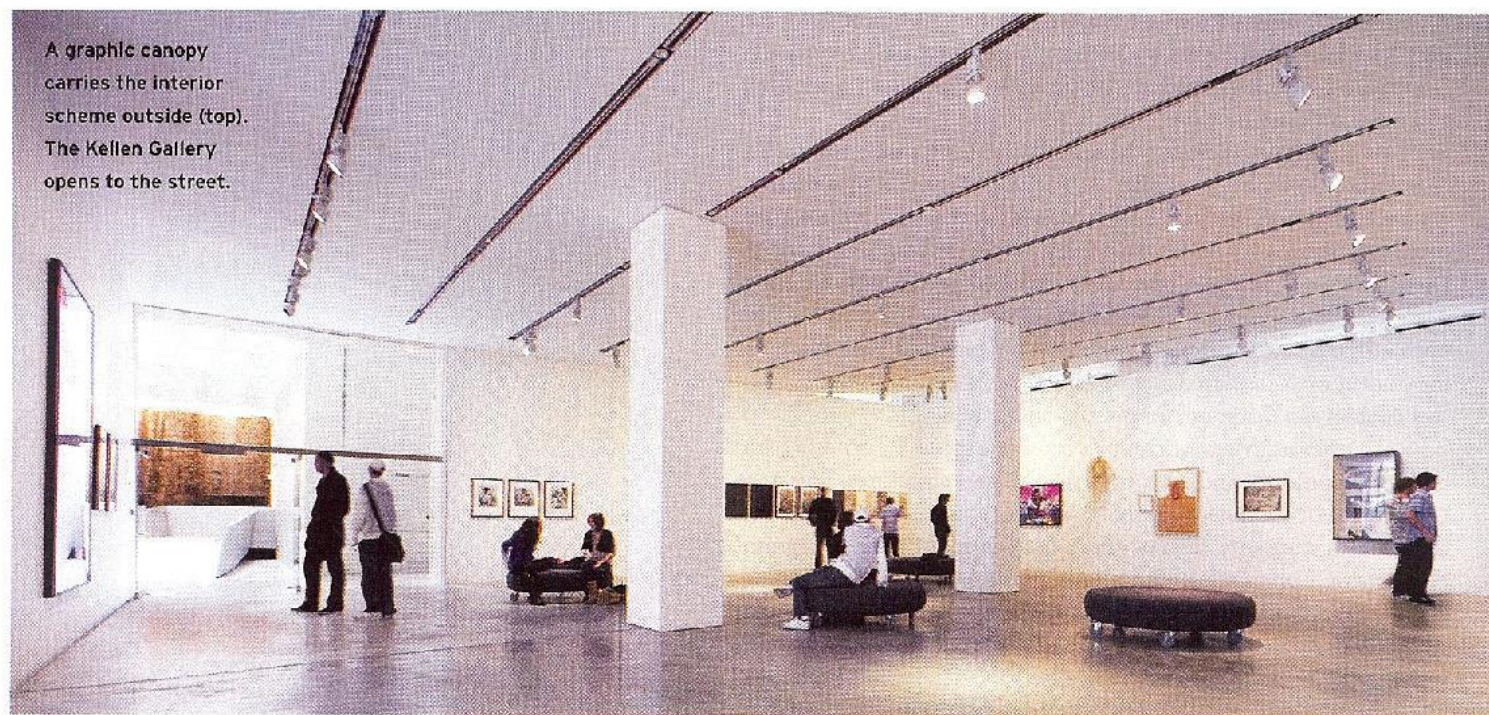
Prompted in part by funding from Sheila C. Johnson (a philanthropist, chair of the Parsons board of governors, and trustee of the New School), in 2003 the school invited a select group of architects to reimagine the ground level joining the mid-rise buildings. The goal was to improve circulation, create a nexus for bringing together students and faculty from different disciplines, and connect the school with the city while demonstrating the importance of design and communicating the school's identity.

"The idea of reconnecting to the city drove the project," says Lyn Rice, AIA, principal of New York-based Lyn Rice Architects (LRA),



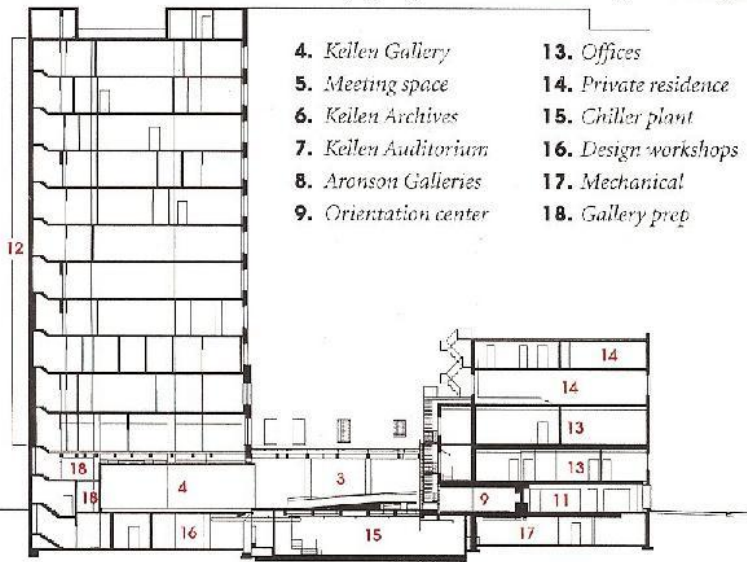
who collaborated with his associate Astrid Lipka, AIA, on the 32,800-square-foot job. But before any of the loftier goals could be achieved, the messy deed of uniting the various buildings had to be tackled. "It was like a veterinarian operating on four distinctly different animals simultaneously—without anesthesia," says Rice, referring to the complications of uniting the four structures: the mishmash of building modifications made over the years, the preponderance of nonaligning levels from floor to floor and nonaligning structures from building to building, and the accumulation of partitions and layers of finishes.

To introduce a geographic center and crossroad of circulation, the architects carved an "urban quad" out of the complex's core. To do this they removed a one-story maintenance shop in the middle of the site, excavated down to install a new chiller plant, and topped the new common space with a 1,600-square-foot glazed canopy that filters light in and provides views of archetypal "back-of-house" New York City: chimneys, fire escapes, and water towers. Utilities (some of

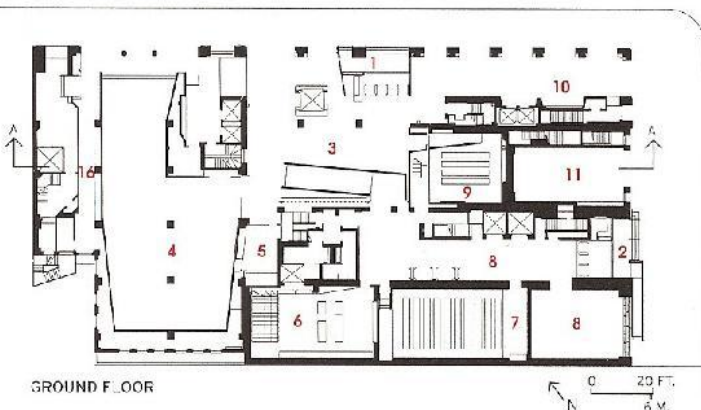


A graphic canopy carries the interior scheme outside (top). The Kellen Gallery opens to the street.

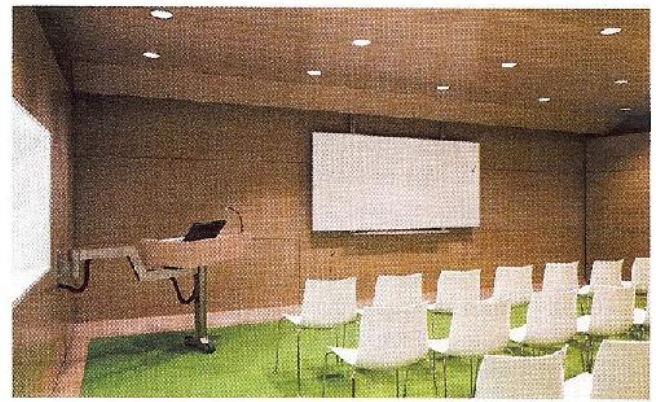
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|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. 13th Street entrance | 10. Student critique area |
| 2. 5th Avenue entrance | 11. Future design store |
| 3. Skylight Quad | 12. Design studios/offices |
| 4. Kellen Gallery | 13. Offices |
| 5. Meeting space | 14. Private residence |
| 6. Kellen Archives | 15. Chiller plant |
| 7. Kellen Auditorium | 16. Design workshops |
| 8. Aronson Galleries | 17. Mechanical |
| 9. Orientation center | 18. Gallery prep |



SECTION A-A



GROUND FLOOR



A bamboo-lined orientation center (above) occupies the complex's only wood-framed building. Student-designed wallpaper

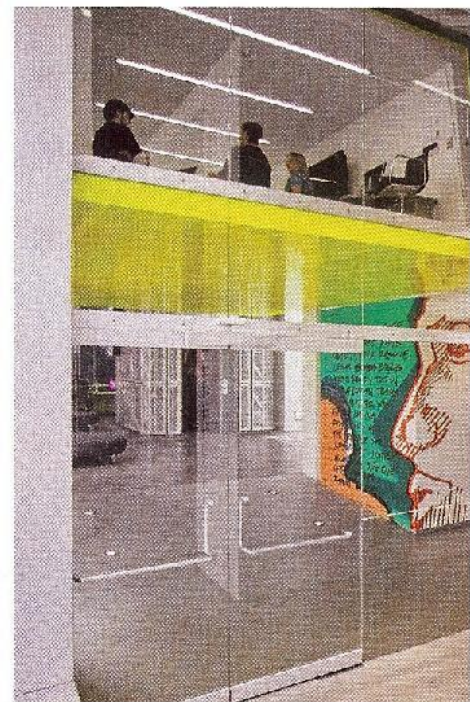
covers the main elevator bank (below). The Kellen Gallery looks out to the quad and into an elevated meeting pod (bottom).



which had previously lined or occupied interior walls) now wrap the quad's service elevator, and an aluminum ramp cocked on an angle creates a focal point and leads to passenger elevators, gallery spaces, the archive, and the auditorium.

Rather than defining the school's identity for them, the architects (who, through OpenOffice Arts + Architecture Collaborative, worked together on Dia:Beacon) helped the students create it themselves by putting their work on public display. Along the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center's perimeter, the architects lowered the sills, inserting deep-set, aluminum-encased, steel-framed windows canted outward to open up the facade and expand views both out to the sidewalk and in to the student work displayed in an exhibition area (among other places) that doubles as a classroom for pin-ups and critiques.

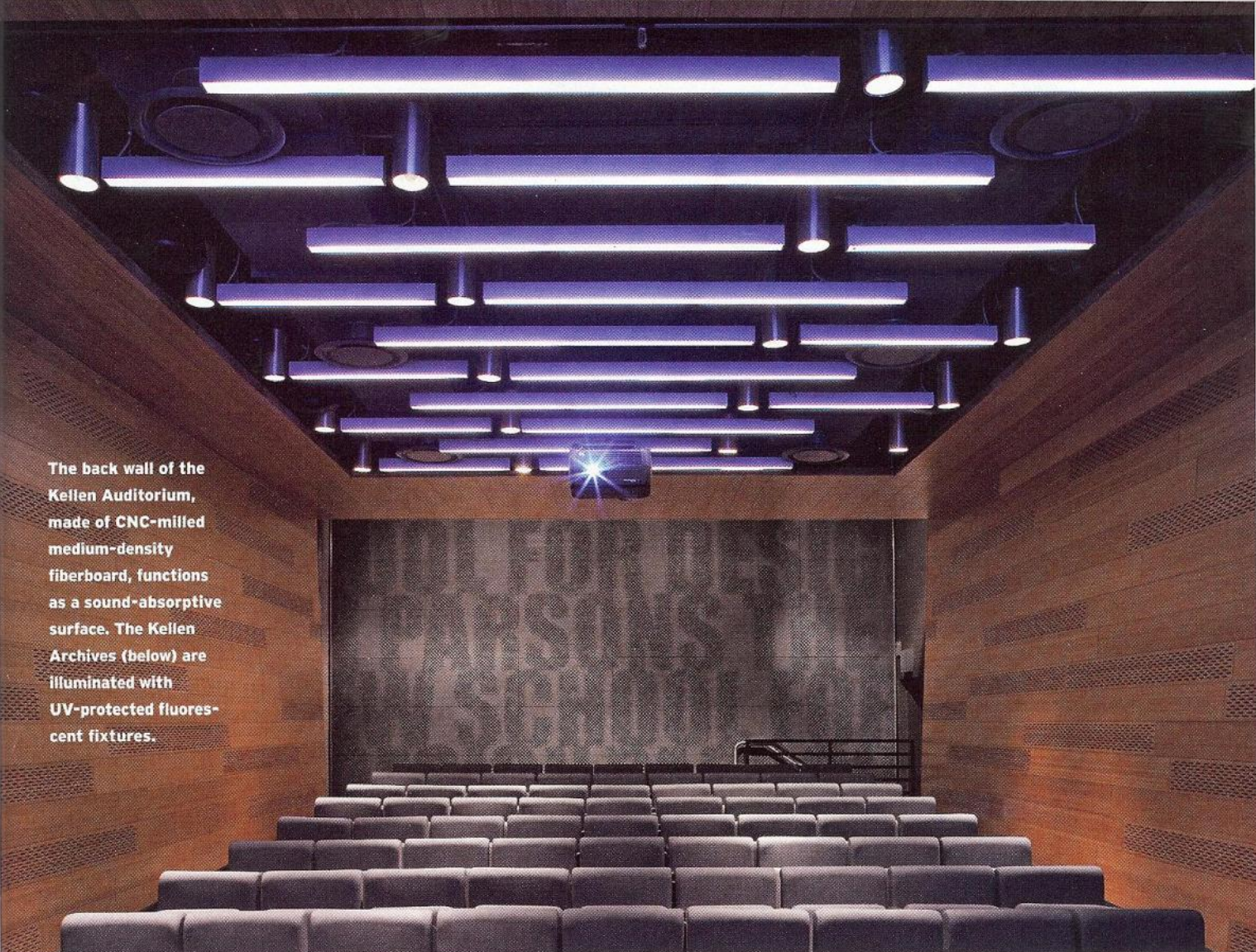
After unifying the complex's discrete spaces by exposing the buildings' concrete- and masonry-encased steel structures, Rice and Lipka added new architectural components as clear insertions, injecting color and texture into the raw shell. Though many of the program elements were preexisting, LRA reinvented each—completely gutting existing spaces and invigorating them with their own distinct material palette. For example, the architects lined the walls of the center's archive with gray felt to modulate acoustics and, to lighten the mood, installed a vibrantly colored central desk and lockers. In the auditorium, a bamboo



A powder-coated
aluminum-clad
meeting pod
cantilevers out
into the quad.



The back wall of the Kellen Auditorium, made of CNC-milled medium-density fiberboard, functions as a sound-absorptive surface. The Kellen Archives (below) are illuminated with UV-protected fluorescent fixtures.



box inserted into an exposed brick structure, the architects added a sound-projecting front wall of slate (the back wall absorbs sound), which doubles as a chalkboard. Near the new 13th Street entrance, an elevated meeting pod, surfaced in chartreuse powder-coated aluminum, cantilevers out over the quad, and an orientation room boasts an exterior wall clad in yellow poplar bark. "It was as if we were working on several projects at once," says Lipka, "unfortunately, all with the same deadline."

Parsons's radical makeover brings the life of the school down to street level and will no doubt have profound effects on what happens on the school's upper floors. And while the complex already provides a venue for a range of activities, from quiet study to critiques to parties, it will be interesting to see how, in the hands of design-oriented occupants, new and unexpected uses of the space will emerge in the future. ■

Project: Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, New York City
Architect: Lyn Rice Architects—Lyn Rice, AIA, principal; Astrid Lipka, AIA, associate
Engineer: Buro Happold

SOURCES

Custom millwork: Legere Group
Flooring: Ecosurfaces; Lonseal; AlumaFloor
Paneling: Highland Craftsman; Teragren; Great Lakes MDF

ONLINE: To rate this project, go to architecturalrecord.com/projects/.