

Showrooms That Went Beyond // Krueck + Sexton

by John Morris Dixon

The design of showrooms for interiors products can never be routine – either in the process or the outcome. The client is, after all, in the business of selling design, and designers play key roles on both sides. But a few showrooms by the Chicago architecture firm **Krueck + Sexton** in years past went beyond what's expected from such commissions, yielding museum-worthy examples of environmental art.

In the early 1980s, **Thonet** decided to offer unconventional experiences to visitors at Chicago's Merchandise Mart. As a highly influential worldwide producer since the 1800s, the company was seeking to cele-

brate its historic role in a distinctive way. Thonet commissioned five innovative Chicago architects of the time to create relatively low-budget exhibits featuring the company's furniture in spaces of 400 to 500 square feet each. And rather than emphasizing the company's extraordinary range of products, each was asked to choose at least one of them and build its display around that.

Senior partner **Ron Krueck** – of the firm that was then Krueck + Olsen – chose the very simplest of the company's widely varied products, the café chair that was familiar worldwide. Singly and in sculptural clusters, the chairs were arranged to “dance”

among translucent and perforated screens illuminated in soft colors. According to partner **Mark Sexton**, the design was inspired by painter Barnett Newman's hard-edged rectangles of flat color and by the early Modernist El Lissitzky's innovative exhibition concepts.

The firm's 2001 work for **Herman Miller** was very different in scope. For that company's expansive Merchandise Mart showroom, the firm was to create an environment for changing product displays. The showroom's distinctive program called for a carefully planned sequence of experiences for prospective purchasers and specifiers. An initial greeting or hospitality space would offer only “framed vistas” of the products displayed. From there, visitors would be guided to conference rooms for discussions of their needs, then taken on a broader tour focused on their particular interests.

Given the extensive area of Herman Miller's Chicago space, the relatively low suspended ceiling was a prominent liability. Krueck + Sexton redesigned that ceiling as a gently curving gridded canopy and modulating light source. The frequent disruption of the showroom for repainting or recovering of surfaces was minimized by a concept the architects called “painting with light,” using sources of colored illumination controlled by ranks of dimmers (the most advanced technology for the purpose at the time). The primary design inspiration here was the work of Charles and Ray Eames, not only their exemplary shaping of

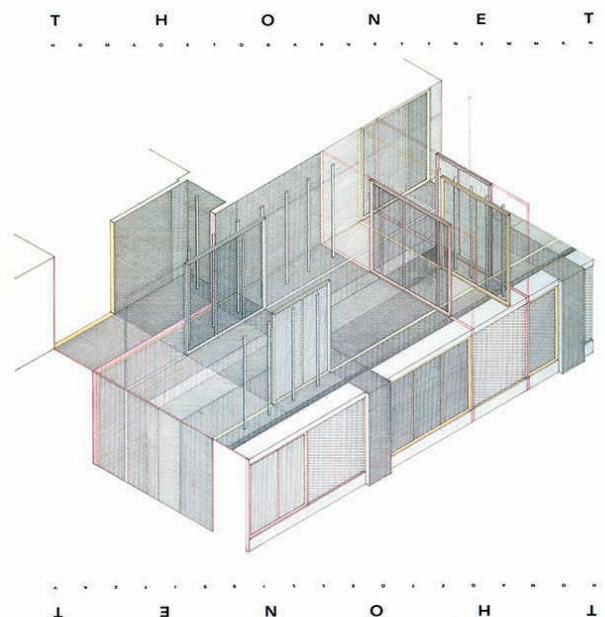
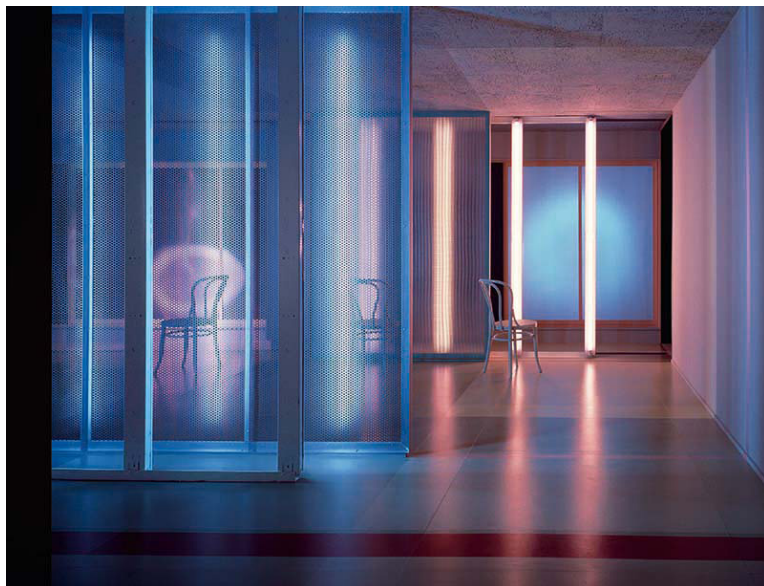


Thonet showroom at Chicago's Merchandise Mart, designed by Krueck + Sexton in the early 1980s. Photography: Hedrich Blessing

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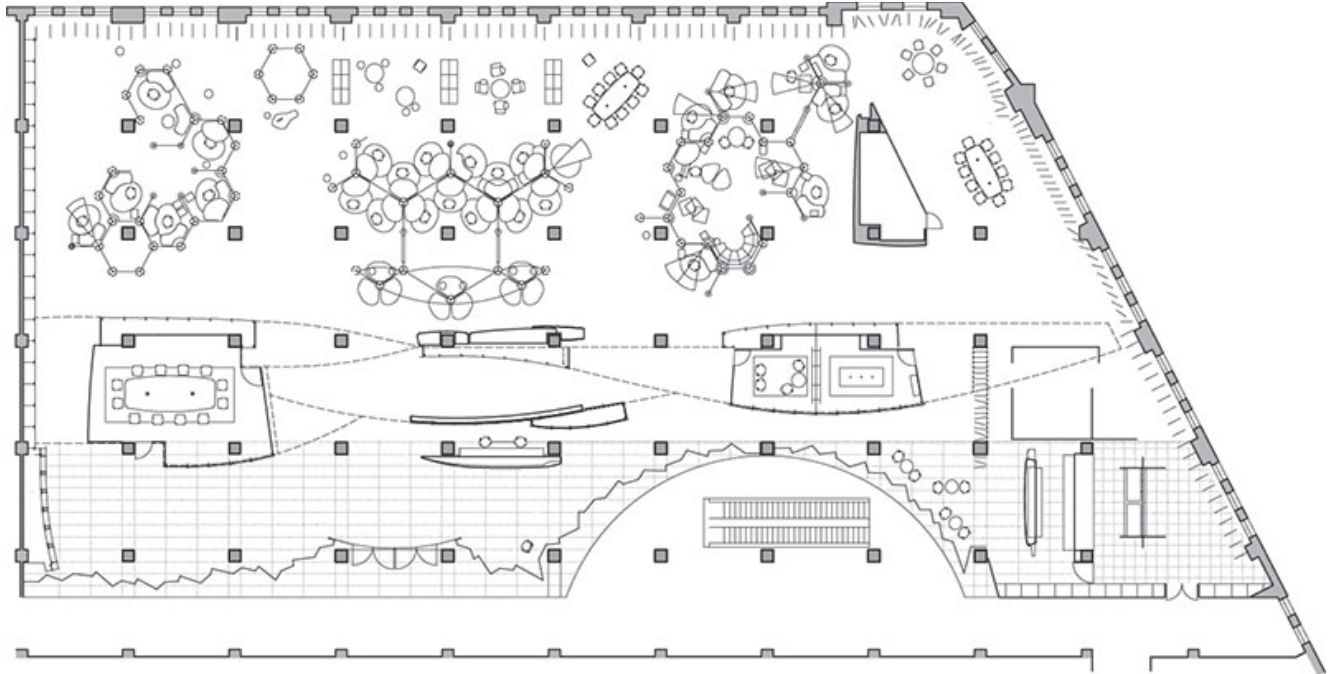
materials in Herman Miller's furniture, but their pioneering works in photography, theater and film. The architects went on to design the company's showrooms in other cities from coast to coast, many of them accomplished in stages over a period of years – as was Chicago's – to avoid substantial shutdowns.



In the early 1980s, Thonet commissioned five innovative Chicago architects of the time to create relatively low-budget exhibits featuring the company's furniture in spaces of 400 to 500 square feet each, in its showroom at the Merchandise Mart.

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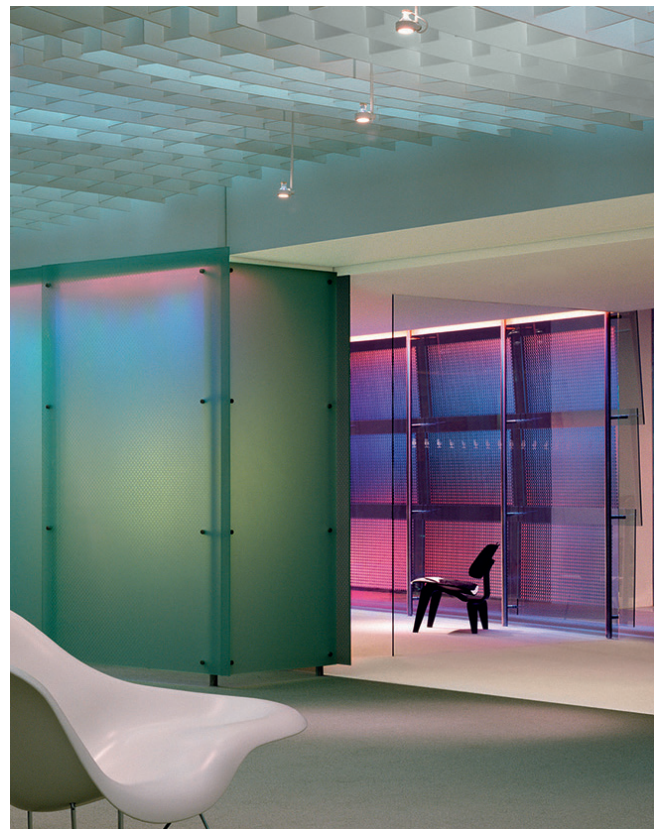
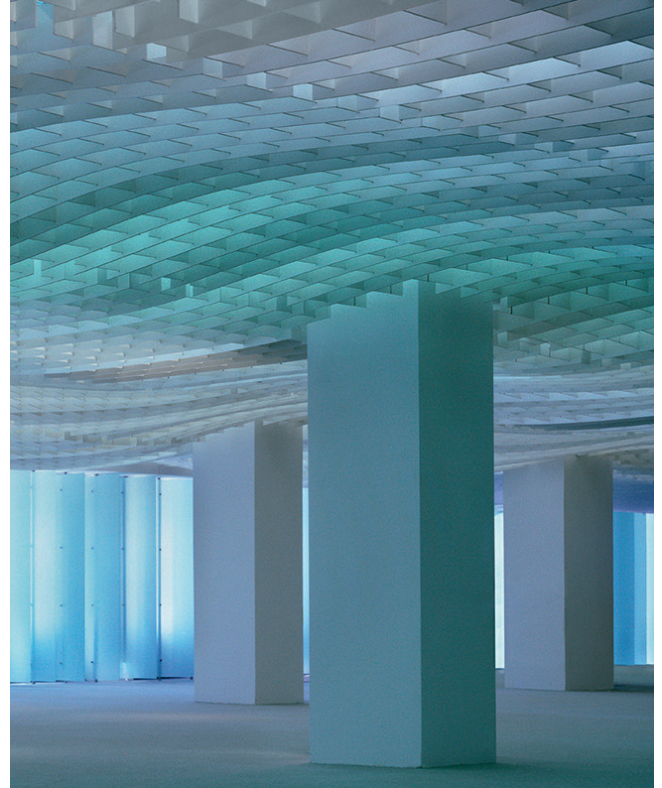
Herman Miller Chicago National showroom, designed by Krueck + Sexton in 2001.

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Who designs the showrooms?

Showrooms for interiors furniture and furnishings may be designed by in-house staffs, by interior design firms, and – as in these cases – by a firm that designs whole buildings as well. Among the latter, many firms bring strong interior design skills to interiors, while others don't. In the instances discussed here, the clients seemed intent on introducing new perspectives.



Herman Miller Chicago National showroom, designed by Krueck + Sexton in 2001.

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As for this architecture firm's applicable skills, its partners believed from the outset in the continuity of design at all scales. One of their first works was a widely admired house that was designed down to the smallest detail, inside as well as outside. That led them to commissions for a number of notable apartments in Chicago, which are well represented by the **Stainless Steel Apartment** of 1992. Among its recent whole buildings is the 2014 Federal office building known as the **Grogan Dove FBI Building** in Miramar, Florida. Their work of recent decades has also

included other commissions not customarily carried out by architects, such as the design of exhibits for museums and corporate offices.

Even farther afield from conventional practice, the firm has designed the structures needed to realize artist **Jaume Plensa's** remarkable spitting-faces artwork in Chicago's **Millennium Park**, 2004. Krueck + Sexton's self-effacing role was to solve the daunting structural and technological problems presented in constructing the twin 50-foot-high, minimally detailed monoliths it required. These towers are as

close to invisible as possible during the day, and their hand-made glass block envelopes glow softly after dark.

As these works of Krueck + Sexton demonstrate, the design contributions of any one individual or team are never sharply circumscribed. ■

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PO Box 967

Cedar Hill, TX 75106

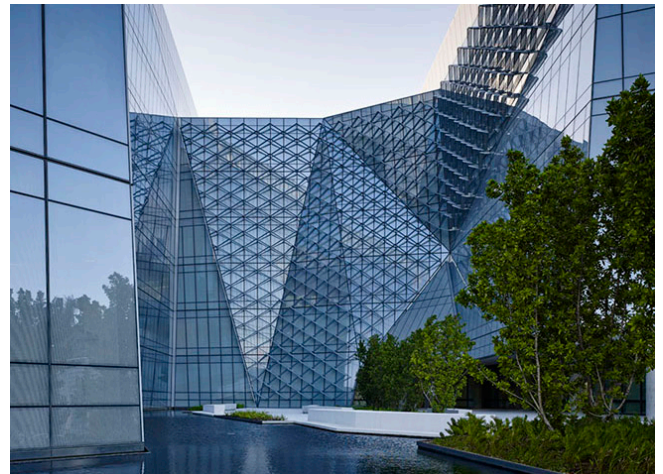
972.293.9186

bob@officeinsight.com

www.officeinsight.com



The Stainless Steel Apartment, Chicago. designed in 1992.



*Grogan Dove FBI Building in Miramar, Florida. Completed in 2014.
Photography: Hedrich Blessing*



Crown Fountain. Krueck + Sexton designed the structures needed to realize artist Jaume Plensa's remarkable spitting-faces artwork in Chicago's Millennium Park, 2004. Krueck + Sexton's self-effacing role was to solve the daunting structural and technological problems presented in constructing the twin 50-foot-high, minimally detailed monoliths it required. These towers are as close to invisible as possible during the day, and their hand-made glass block envelopes glow softly after dark.