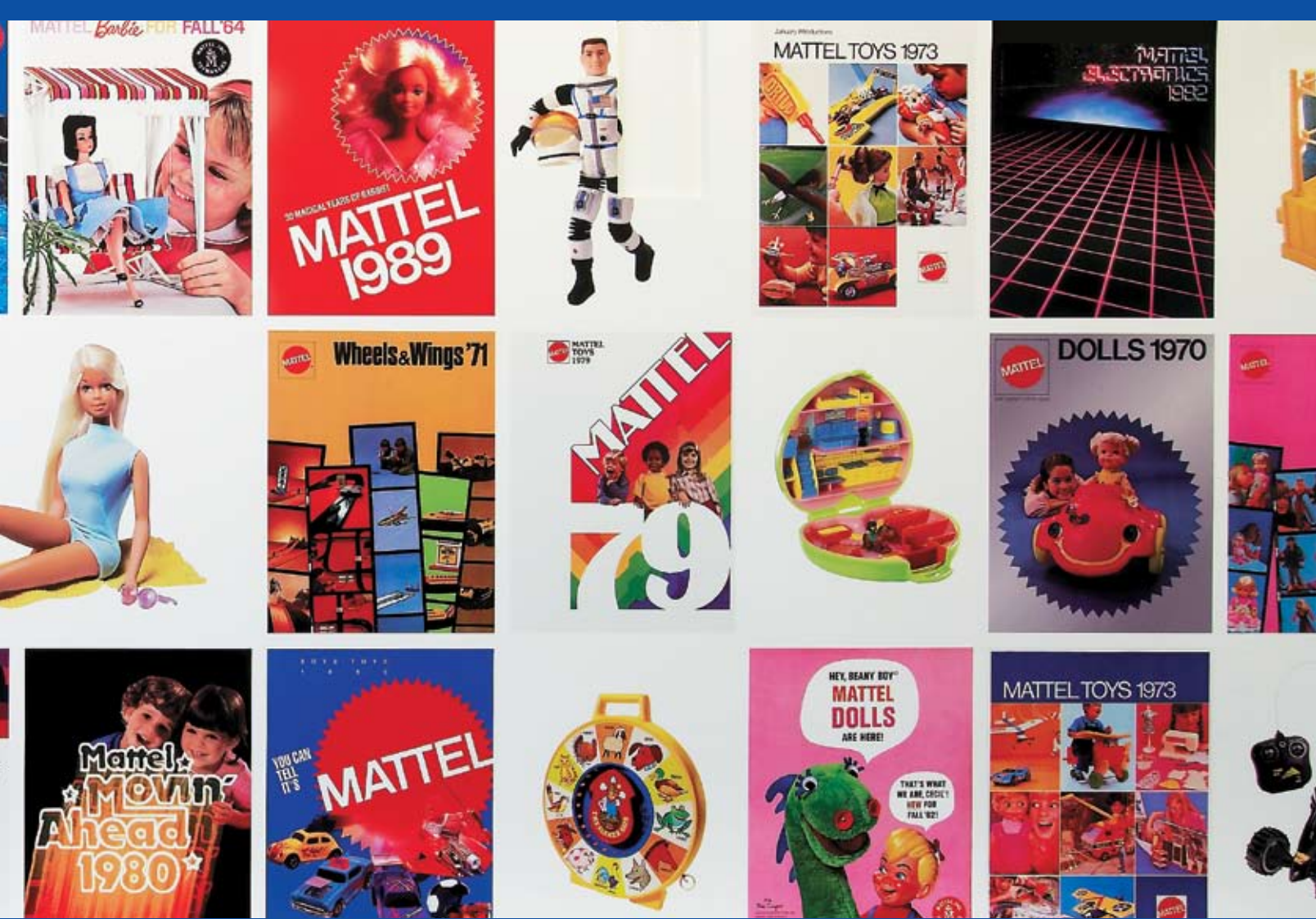


# babes in toyland

Work and play merge at Rottet Studio's Mattel facility in Los Angeles







text: *edie cohen*  
 photography: *eric laignel*



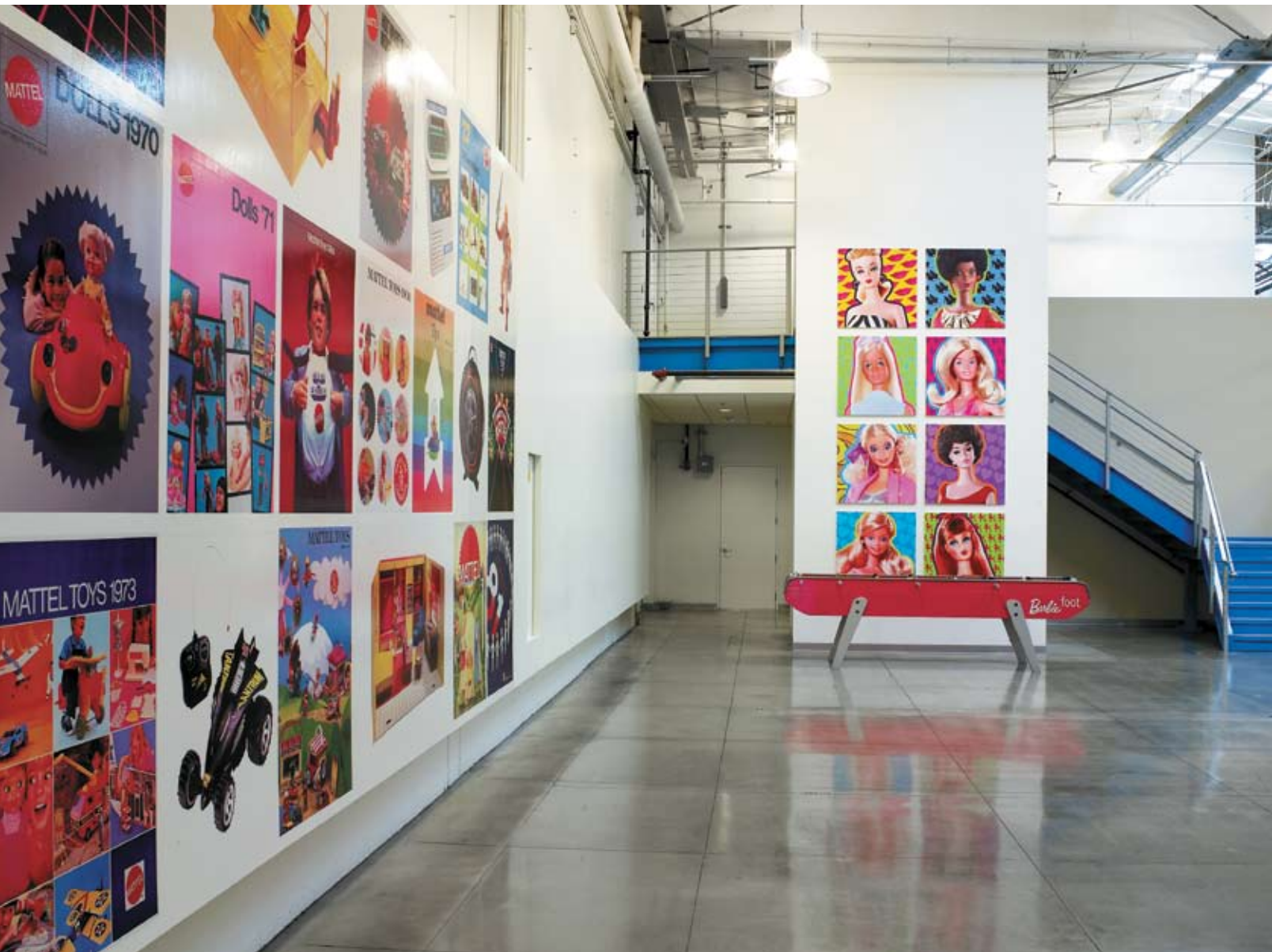




**She's the object** of adoration and enmity. At 51 years old, Barbie is still the world's best-known doll. And it turns out that her home, neither a tidy dream house nor a sporty camper, is a cavernous industrial building in El Segundo, California. Mattel's design center is where she, Ken, and their au courant wardrobes and accessories keep company with Hot Wheels, Matchbox miniatures, and toys developed under the Fisher-Price and Masters of the Universe names.

Surprisingly, the world's largest maker of playthings staked out a particularly un-designed space for design purposes. The 1954 factory, originally used to manufacture aircraft parts, had become a hodgepodge: no cogent floor plan, no collaborative areas. Rottet Studio changed all that. "We made a miracle of organi-

zation," principal Richard Riveire says, adding that the result, though corporate, still looks "pretty rough, not quite finished." That's definitely a contrast to what he calls the "tight and refined" aesthetic of Rottet Studio's typical finance and law offices. However, the concrete flooring, the exposed 30-foot ceiling crisscrossed by ducts and beams, and the expansive open space all seem suited to the site as well as to the ad hoc process of toy design. ➤







**Previous spread, top:** At Mattel's design center in El Segundo, California, Rottet Studio covered a wall in the reception area with catalog covers from as far back as the 1950's. **Previous spread, bottom:** The 200,000-square-foot workplace is organized into a grid of neighborhoods featuring workstations by Charles Rozier and Robert Reuter.

**Opposite top:** The linoleum-floored main hall separates the boys' side from the girls'. **Opposite bottom:** Stairs ascend to storage on the mezzanine.

**Top:** This Camaro racer belongs to a Hot Wheels designer. **Bottom:** The built-in reception desk combines quartz-composite solid-surfacing and panels of resin-covered plastic laminate. Beyond, aluminum-framed etched-glass panels wall off three meeting rooms.

“It turns out that Barbie’s home is neither a tidy dream house nor a sporty camper”





The project is also one of Rottet Studio's densest. The 200,000-square-foot floor plan packs in 800 employees and more *stuff* than you could possibly imagine, from prototype toys to packaging options and samples, all in various stages of development and review. There's even a room set aside for immense spools of the colorful silky fiber destined for Barbie's famed tresses. In a particularly clever solution, Riveire turned the contiguous tops of eight conference rooms into a mezzanine warehouse. Together, this phenomenal amount of storage accommodates the thousands of SKUs produced yearly, and a virtual back-of-house factory features a chemistry lab, a cutting shop for packaging, a computer-controlled lathe shop, and four model shops. Oh, lest we forget, there's also a café large enough to handle the crowds.

It was business as usual for staff during the project's phased completion, a three-year process that coincided with the emergence of Rottet Studio from DMJM Rottet. First off, Riveire reoriented the building, one of five on Mattel's campus. He moved the main entry from the street to the side, where he installed a ramp that slopes gently up from the parking lot. Aside from fulfilling an Americans With Disabilities Act requirement, the ramp allows full-size cars to drive right into the heart of the building—a customized Camaro, one of Mattel's eight specialty cars, was recently on view. Mannequins can likewise be wheeled in to

show off collaborations with the likes of Christian Louboutin and Miss Sixty.

The ramp terminates at the central corridor, which doubles as an important boundary line. "At Mattel," Riveire points out, "the world is divided into girls and boys." That means two separate realms of *things*. One is all sparkle and glitter, the other action and entertainment. However, the separate sexes do share the services—copiers, coffee stations, and IT support—that line this "main street." It terminates at the "gas station," a built-in vitrine filled with Matchbox cars and flanked by copies of shiny red vintage gas pumps.

Also Mattel red, a banner in reception proclaims inspirational statements attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, and Anonymous. ("Imagination is intelligence having fun.") Representing the history of the company itself, a vivid collage of catalog covers over the years stretches 100 feet long on the facing wall. An Andy Warhol-esque treatment of early logos enlivens a partition. Perhaps in a nod of gratitude to employees for their patience during the prolonged renovation, Mattel has begun displaying colorful artwork by their children above a cluster of discreetly beige armchairs by Harry Bertoia—whose niece, incidentally, works for the company.

Not far from reception, drywall encloses a 100-seat presentation room, an especially valuable addition: This is the first time that employees have had a dedicated gathering place for product-review sessions. More informal reviews take place at the nearby café's cafeteria-style tables lined with acid-yellow chairs. Riveire used minimal materials here ➤





**Opposite:** Thanks to a ramp of polished concrete, cars can drive directly from the parking lot to the presentation room.

**Top, from left:** A history of Mattel logos. Chairs by Marco Maran in the café. Reception's Harry Bertoa chairs, Warren Platner table, and artwork by employees' children. **Center, from left:** A sliding panel between the presentation room and the ramp. The printed polyester banner behind the reception desk. A replica of a vintage gas pump. **Bottom, from left:** Steel ductwork above the office area. Customized football.



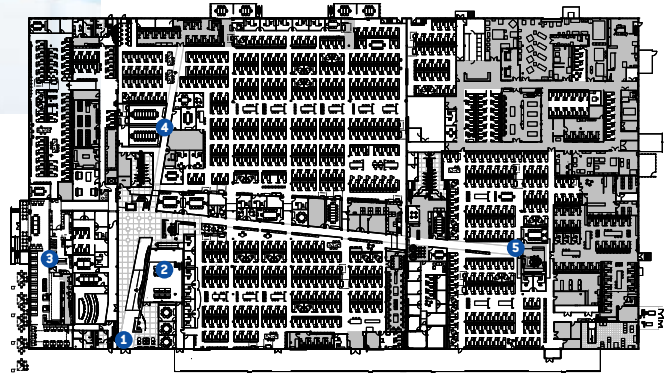


**Top:** The café seats 188 staffers. **Bottom:** This printed vinyl mural was designed in-house.

**Opposite top:** The mezzanine has a prefab steel railing. **Opposite bottom:** At the end of the main corridor, an authentic nosepiece from a Formula 1 race car hangs above a vitrine containing 600 Matchbox cars.

- 1 RECEPTION
- 2 PRESENTATION ROOM
- 3 CAFÉ
- 4 RAMP
- 5 VITRINE

0 20 30 60







for maximum effect. Along the windows, aqua wall covering wraps columns, while resin panels in sea green and sky blue partially shield the room from the busy street outside.

Speaking of high-traffic areas, the office zone is almost entirely open and completely jam-packed. Aside from the mere 25 private offices, some doubling as conference rooms, workstations allot just 56 square feet per person, fortunately with adequate storage units overhead. Sunshine from 126 skylights, some original and some added, helps to dispel claustrophobia. Meanwhile, break-out areas alleviate the crush and offer breathing room—every neighborhood has at least one. Riveire makes an analogy: “It’s how project teams work in our design studio.” And that foosball table by the stairway? The miniature players are Barbies, all dolled up for a match. [▶](#)

#### PROJECT TEAM

**ALICE HRICAK** (PROJECT MANAGER); **PATRICIA MCCAUL** (PROJECT ARCHITECT); **KEVIN ENGELLENER**; **AGNES MICHALET**; **WINNIE WONG**; **LANIMA ECALLA**; **BELINDA HUANG**: DMJM ROTTET/ROTTET STUDIO. **HORTON LEES BROGDEN LIGHTING DESIGN**: LIGHTING CONSULTANT. **J. S. DYER & ASSOCIATES**: STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. **ARC ENGINEERING**: MEP. **DPR CONSTRUCTION**: GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

#### PRODUCT SOURCES

**FROM FRONT CORTET STUDIO**: CUSTOM STORAGE UNITS (OFFICE AREA). **SHAW**: CARPET. **KNOLL**: WORKSTATIONS (OFFICE AREA), CHAIRS (CAFÉ), CHAIRS, TABLES (RECEPTION). **FORBO**: FLOORING (HALL). **AVONITE SURFACES**: DESK SOLID-SURFACING (RECEPTION). **FORMICA CORPORATION**: DESK SURFACING. **TRANSFORMIT**: CUSTOM BANNER. **ARCADIA**: STOREFRONT SYSTEM (MEETING ROOMS). **SITONIT SEATING**: CHAIRS (PRESENTATION ROOM). **WEST COAST INDUSTRIES**: CUSTOM TABLES (CAFÉ). **3FORM**: PANEL MATERIAL. **DESIGNTEX**: WALL COVERING. **DUR-A-FLEX**: FLOORING. **TANDUS**: RUG (RECEPTION). **ILLUMINATING EXPERIENCES**: PENDANT FIXTURES (CAFÉ). **THROUGHOUT BEN JAMIN MOORE & CO.**: PAINT.

