

MAY 2004

# Interiors

 **sources**  
intelligent design strategies



LAUREN ROTTET



# ARCHITECT



Lauren Rottet says the firm's "smart and ambitious" management team continually challenge each other to do their best work. She is shown here with, from left: Vano Haritunians, AIA, associate principal/technical director; Naomi Asai, associate principal; and Richard Riveire, AIA, principal. Not pictured: Alice Hricak, associate principal.

Blending her distinctive artistic philosophy with the realities of workplace requirements, **Lauren Rottet** contradicts the conventional notion of static workplace design by creating award-winning spaces that attend to the physical and emotional needs of their occupants.



**G**rowing up near Houston, TX, Lauren Rottet, FAIA, would gaze dreamily at the buildings sprouting up downtown and contemplate all of the beautiful things she was sure must be inside those tall towers. One day, her curiosity got the better of her. She convinced her dad to let her skip school and together they went downtown to explore. Rottet still recalls soaring up in an elevator, cautiously stepping out and finding . . . well, nothing too spectacular.

"I was so disappointed," she says. "I don't know for sure what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't as boring as what was there." That ho-hum discovery is the antithesis of—and the inspiration

# +artist

**RIGHT + BELOW** DMJM Rottet's design concept for the Los Angeles headquarters of Paul Hastings was based on a modern, neutral palette and angled planes of drywall that reflect and enhance natural light. The main reception area exemplifies the design approach—the two-story atrium space is filled with natural light that provides a perfect backdrop for dramatic views of the city.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK HERRICK/HEDRICH BLESSING



for—the award-winning work that Rottet (pronounced Ro-TAY) does today. As principal of DMJM Rottet, she oversees the interior architecture and interior design on a variety of projects, ranging from high-end law offices to not-for-profit government facilities. After meeting the programming needs on a project, she strives to counteract the “static nature” of an interior.

“The exterior of a building is constantly undergoing visual changes,” says Rottet. “It looks different during the day than it does at night, and then there are bright, sunny days or cloudy and rainy days. All of these change a building’s appearance. However, interiors—and especially corporate interiors that are lit artificially—tend to be visually static. My job is to create the illusion of change so that these interiors are not boring to look at or work in.”

Sometimes the illusion is as simple as a glass wall that reflects the images of people walking past. Other times the illusion is what Rottet calls a “spatial warp,” an architectural trick that seemingly extends space beyond the point where it actually ends. In any case, no one steps off the elevator into a space that Rottet has designed and thinks, “ordinary.”

Of course, banishing boredom in a corporate interior must require a big budget, right? Not necessarily, says Rottet, who explains that DMJM Rottet distinguishes itself from the competition with its variety of projects large and small, high-end and low-end. Not one of them, regardless of dollars per square foot, is dull. In fact, she insists

"I have a very **artistic philosophy** when it comes to design. Take a rock, for example. It is so benign, so unappealing. However, if you **place it in the right kind of light and play** with the shadows it creates, a photograph of that rock can be very beautiful."

**RIGHT** Overlooking New York City's Bryant Park, the new Bernhardt Design showroom provides a bird's-eye view of the trees and festivities taking place outside this Midtown location. The "living room" showcases new lounge seating collections and functions as the central gathering space for parties and informal meetings.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL WARCHOL



that the size of a budget does not determine how much attention a client receives from a DMJM Rottet design team. If clients are open to new ideas, then the design outcome will be more than they expect regardless of the budget. (Even with a sizeable budget, Rottet says she is "value conscious" to the point of being teased about her frugal nature.)

"I have a very artistic philosophy when it comes to design," says Rottet. "Take a rock, for example. It is so benign, so unappealing. However, if you place it in the right kind of light and play with the shadows it creates, a photograph of that rock can be very beautiful."

Rottet applies this same artistic philosophy to a low budget project. A coat of paint and the right kind of lighting can make drywall beautiful. A view is always free. The key, according to Rottet, is to figure out what to focus on and what to ignore. Take what is there and make that attractive and special.

**R**ottet's penchant for art goes back to the University of Texas at Austin where she initially planned a double major in art and pre-med. The unusual thing about Rottet's art, however, was that it mostly consisted of drawings and paintings of buildings.

So, with the encouragement of her then sweetheart, now husband, Tim Rottet, she switched her major to architecture and found its requirements of art, science and math to her liking.

From Austin, Rottet spent two years working for Fisher Friedman Architects in San Francisco, CA, doing upscale apartment and condominium projects. In 1980, she and Rottet were married and together they moved to Chicago, IL, where a job with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) was waiting. Two record cold winters convinced these Texans that Chicago was not their kind of town, and Rottet transferred to SOM's Houston office and then to Los Angeles in 1987. Working at SOM, Rottet discovered her niche in commercial interior architecture. For her, the challenge was more interesting than designing a building's core and shell. Furthermore, with interior architecture she had the chance to prove her rock-is-art theory of design.

"I was doing some incredible high-end projects in L.A.," Rottet explains. "But I really wanted to show that good design was possible with a tight budget and a not-so terrific space. Along comes this project to renovate a bank call center. There were no windows in the building and we only had \$14 per square foot. It was time for some creativity!"

We bumped up the ceiling and I was fortunate to find a talented artist who painted the walls. The result proved to an L.A. market accustomed to high-end costs that any project can be improved with good design."

In 1990, Rottet resigned from SOM and together with colleagues founded Keating Mann Jernigan Rottet, which grew from a staff of six to almost 60 in four years. In 1994, when the architecture and engineering firm of Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall acquired KMJR, Rottet assumed the direction of DMJM Rottet, a specialty interior design practice with offices in Houston, Los Angeles and New York City. Concerned about whether or not this specialty would get lost within the large architectural giant, Rottet commends her parent company for having the foresight to separate the firm by name and practice.

Today, DMJM Rottet employs some 50 architects and designers. Rottet takes pride in knowing that her colleagues are smart and ambitious. In fact, she believes the key to hiring the right person is finding someone who isn't just smart, but is smarter than you are.

"I wouldn't want to work with someone who doesn't challenge me," she says. "I'd rather work alone in that case. With a colleague who challenges you and pushes you farther, the work is so much more exciting."

DMJM Rottet's new hires usually find their work particularly exciting because they are thrust into the job through the backdoor—so to speak. According to Rottet, new employees start out at the construction site and then work their way backwards through the design process. This way, they understand the true ramifications of



**ABOVE + BELOW** For International Lease Finance Corp. (ILFC), a large owner of commercial aircrafts serving the airline industry, DMJM Rottet was charged with creating a space that reflects the spirit of flight. Thus, elements designed for the space include a curved cantilevered interconnecting staircase, an aircraft cabin showroom and finishes and furniture that reflect the art deco influences prevalent during the beginnings of commercial travel.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** DMJM Rottet's office in Houston combines studio space with gallery and showroom areas, and takes advantage of the street-level exposure to display the firm's works in progress, as well as other noteworthy design endeavors from both DMJM Rottet and the local artist community.

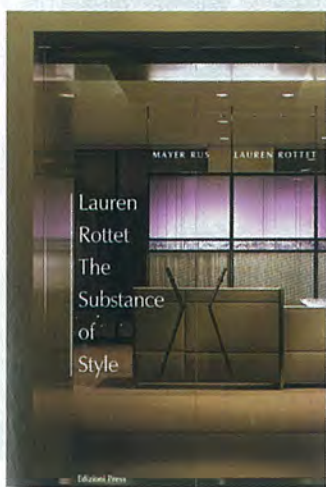
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fabrics, work surfaces and component parts that are changeable. She has designed seating collections for Bernhardt and Brayton International, casegoods for Steelcase Wood and Halcon and commercial carpets for Lees. In 2003, Rottet's Abacus collection for Halcon received a Good Design Award from the Chicago Athenaeum and her Shift collection of casegoods for Bernhardt earned a Best of NeoCon Gold Award.

The idea for Shift came about while she was designing furniture for DMJM Rottet's Houston office. She wanted furniture that was sculptural and provided flexibility in the materials that could be chosen for the work surfaces. Thus, a metal edge allows stone, metal, glass, leather, wood or—as with Rottet's own desk—Plexiglas to fill the work area. In addition, the pieces have cantilevered ends that, in function, provide convenient open storage space for papers and, in form, lend the furniture a more volumetric and dimensional appeal.



Shift and other Bernhardt lines are on display in showrooms that Rottet has designed. At Chicago's Merchandise Mart, Rottet contradicted the typical showroom look.

"At the Mart, the mentality is 'Don't look out the window at downtown Chicago and the river, just look at my furniture,'" Rottet quotes to paraphrase a thought. "The windows are covered and

**ABOVE** The new Korea Development Bank headquarters occupies a prominent site on Seoul's Youido Square. The new one million-square-foot building houses executive offices, three banking halls, a 15,000-square-foot state-of-the-art trading room, a 600-seat auditorium, a 750-seat dining hall and executive dining facilities, and a 15,000-square-foot library.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIMOTHY HURSLY

**LEFT** Rottet's ideas about designing corporate interiors are collected in her book, *Substance of Style*, which includes 17 of her projects. Architecture critic and author Michael Webb wrote in his review of the book, "Rottet's corporate interiors are the spatial equivalent of Armani suits, guaranteed to flatter their occupants with their tailored lines, understated elegance and impeccable details."

the focus turns inward. For Bernhardt, however, we took a Southern hospitality approach to selling furniture. We opened the windows and placed a bar and lounge there. People walk up to the bar, see the river, relax and relationships develop that then lead to sales. We used the same idea for Bernhardt's New York showroom, which overlooks Bryant Park at tree level. The view becomes part of the interior's visual composition. Much better than having the view end at the walls."

Wouldn't that be boring? ●

**Lauren Rottet** | DMJM Rottet

515 S. Flower St., Eighth Floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90071  
(213) 593-8300  
www.dmjmrrottet.com

808 Travis St., Ste. 100  
Houston, TX 77002  
(713) 221-1830

their design decisions and they are better equipped to listen to a client because they have seen the tools of design.

**U**nder the umbrella of DMJM, Rottet has had many opportunities to work with a significant national and international clientele and to sharpen her business and analytical-thinking skills.

"At the end of the day, corporate design is about helping a client do business," Rottet explains. "It is a creative process, but it also must be methodical and analytical if you are going to truly satisfy a client's needs. I like working within those parameters."

Another reason Rottet gravitated to corporate interiors is simply because she likes discovering what people do all day. In fact, she still loves the programming process of a project, and tells the story about a meeting she and her team held when working with CalTrans, the state of California's department of transportation. During the meeting, in walked some of CalTrans' employees carrying their orange work suits and muddy boots. What did they want out of the project?

"They needed a place to store their clothes," Rottet recalls with a laugh. "I love that kind of thing. I want to know what people do and how I can design a space that works with them, not against them."

With this in mind, Rottet is keen to develop office space that supports and even improves the function of a business and the morale of employees, too. For example, DMJM Rottet has worked with law firms nationwide. Over the years, Rottet has observed attorneys doing more and more of their own administrative tasks, such as printing, copying and scanning. Thus, in designing a law office, locating support equipment where it is easily available, but not ugly and visible, has become important. Moreover, to avoid a bottleneck of work, Rottet and her team accurately calculate how many of each machine is required for the number of employees.



## PERSONAL Favorites: Lauren Rottet

### BOOK

*War and Peace*

### MOVIE

Too many to name, but anything with the sound of thunder, like a good Alfred Hitchcock movie

### MUSICIAN

Chopin

### RESTAURANT

Ivy on the Shore, Santa Monica, CA

### FIRST DESIGN ASSIGNMENT

Master plan for condominium project for Fisher Friedman Architects, San Francisco, CA

### FAVORITE VACATION SPOT

Forte di Marmi on the Italian Riviera, or Maui, HI

### HOBBY

Design of anything

### MEAL

Arugula and tomato with lemon

### ICE CREAM

Vanilla bean

### COLOR

Silvery blue

As to employee morale, Rottet likes to open up spaces.

"I'm very claustrophobic," admits Rottet. "So, I guess I'm always trying to counteract that in my designs. But along with this open aesthetic, I fully incorporate the image that best characterizes my client."

For the law offices of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker in Los Angeles that image is one of accountability and honesty. Thus, an open aesthetic—moreover, one that is predominantly white in public spaces—was entirely appropriate. The two-floor reception, which also

includes lounges and a conference center, glistens in slightly differing shades of white marble, glass and stainless steel. A 220-foot-long stretch of window wall affords a spectacular view of L.A.'s skyline. Here, Arne Jacobsen Egg

chairs provide seating, although Rottet and Naomi Asai designed almost all of the other furnishings for Paul Hastings.

The stairway linking the reception area's floors is almost imperceptibly askew, lending a sense of motion. Similarly, Rottet toyed with the angle of drywall along the ceiling line, thus creating one of those "spatial warps" she so loves.

"The result is that the space feels even taller and deeper than it actually is," she says.





**RIGHT** DMJM Rottet recently completed BMC Software Co.'s Visitor Center, the third installment to the 30-acre campus in Houston. At the heart of the center is a double-height lobby, featuring a long custom-made white onyx table that is lit from underneath, whimsical cowhide-paneled elevators, leather and velvet lounge seating and a leather-wrapped reception desk.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK MERRICK/HEDRICH BLESSING

**BELOW** Rottet's Shift Collection for Bernhardt won a Best of NeoCon Gold Award in 2003. As the name suggests, shifting planes provide ample work surfaces and cantilevered storage space.



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and **analytical** if you are going to truly **satisfy** a client's needs. I like working within those parameters.”

However, have Rottet's spatial warps and open design helped Paul Hastings do business? You bet, says Rottet. Productivity is up among attorneys, as well as administrative personnel. In addition, when new recruits come through, the space unquestionably helps sell them on the firm.

For the consulting firm of Ernst & Young, the DMJM Rottet team led by Alice Hricak has designed some 60 offices. In fact, the architects helped their client write the manual, *Workplace of the Future*.

“By definition of their work, consultants are not always in their own

office,” Rottet explains. “Most of the time, they are in a client's office. We found that a firm like Ernst & Young can reduce its space, but at the same time, it must increase technology. If you're going to allow employees to work at home or have drop-in spaces for them at the office, then you must give them the technology to make that feasible.”

The list of clients that DMJM Rottet has helped do business reads like a Who's Who of major corporations: The Walt Disney Co., Hewlett-Packard, Marriott Corp., Unocal and Capital Group, to name only a few. Rottet takes particular satisfaction in these large commissions because she knows that her designs are affecting the workday lives of hundreds of people.

Rottet's ideas about designing corporate interiors are collected in her book, *Substance of Style* (Edizioni Press, 2000). As the title suggests, the book is about the substance behind an image. Covering 17 of Rottet's projects that includes banks, law firms, hotels, showrooms and corporate headquarters, the book delves into the process of uncovering a client's culture as a means to providing a unique aesthetic. In the book's introduction, Rottet writes:

*“Understanding a client's culture brings meaning and direction to the design process. Design is no longer arbitrary, but inextricably linked to a designer's ability to interpret or translate the client's identity into the physical space.”*

**B**eyond her designs for corporate interiors, Rottet has also created furniture and other products for the contract market. Ever the artist, she finds inspiration in her imagination (flying bicycles?), as well as out of necessity.

Like her office designs, Rottet's furniture combats boredom with

