

Van Alen Institute Renovation

1999-2000 ACSA Design Award Recipient

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Over the last decade, the Van Alen Institute has become one of the most interesting agencies in New York dedicated to fostering the discourse of architecture. Through sponsoring, hosting and organizing a wide range of public architectural events—competitions, gallery exhibitions, forums, lectures, publications and design charrettes—the Van Alen Institute has become an essential institution of the diverse culture of New York. For example, by sponsoring a series of competitions on the waterfront of New York City, they have brought public attention to the potential of this underutilized space of the city.

As the role of the Van Alen has grown, the board of directors realized the need to transform their space. The Van Alen needed a re-design that would produce a coherent and legible organization of areas, while allowing flexibility between the different programmatic uses. The private office zone needed to be demarcated and separated from the larger public gallery and lecture areas, without sacrificing the open loft feeling of their space on the top floor of a building in the Flat Iron District.

However, as a non-profit agency, the budget for the renovation was tight. To insure that the proposed project could be completed within the limits of time and money, the architects chose to do execute the fabrication of the design themselves. As a result, every piece had to operate on multiple levels to minimize production while maximizing the flexibility of the space. The open gallery had to serve as a lecture hall, as charrette space and as a reception room. The offices had to provide privacy without dividing the space into cubicles. Space for boards and models, and an area for handling mass mailings had to be found without undermining the integrity of the design.

Instead of throwing objects and forms at the problem, the project was approached by a process of 'strategically removal: design through erasure. A single open gallery space was created by demolishing the walls, doors, and frames that had previously divided the public zone into three compartmentalized areas. This revealed a single uninterrupted display wall running the full depth of the building, giving a unified form to the gallery.

Then a series of tactical elements were inserted into the modified context to maximize the possible functional configuration and operation of the space:

- A steel ribbon marks the division between the private and the public zones. This surface begins as a reception desk, folds

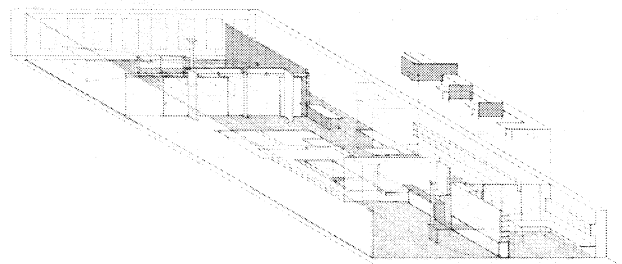


Fig. 1. Isometric of space with tactical elements.

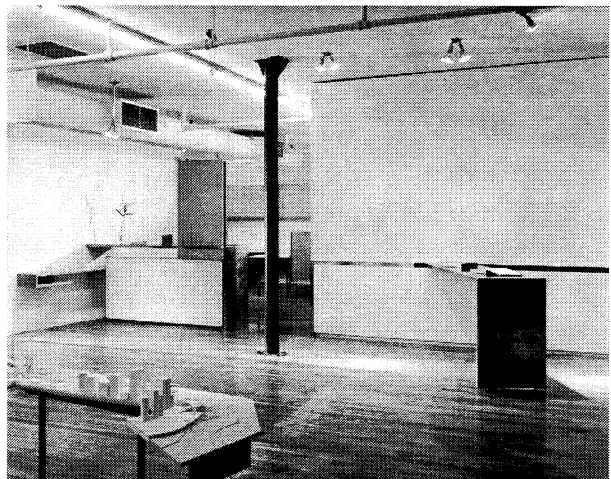


Fig. 2. Front entry steel ribbon separator.



Fig. 3. Reception desk with wrapping shelf.