

INTERIOR DESIGN[®]

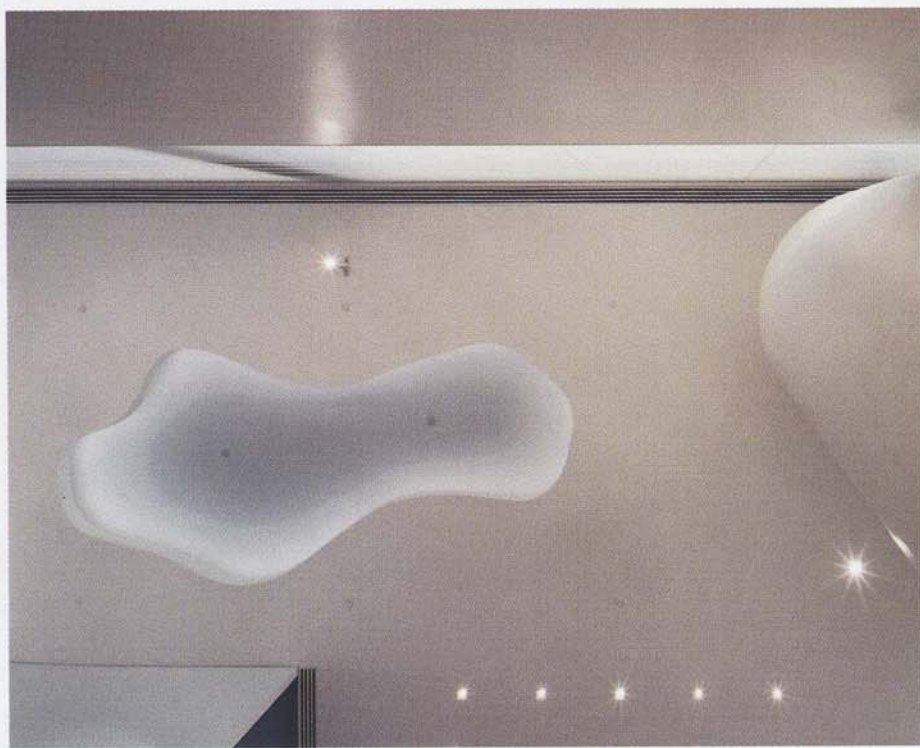
MARCH 2001

The International Center of Photography

Photo Op

Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects carves out a

new niche for the International Center of Photography in midtown Manhattan.



Above: An amoeboid "cloud" hovers above the double-height staircase of the renovated ICP.

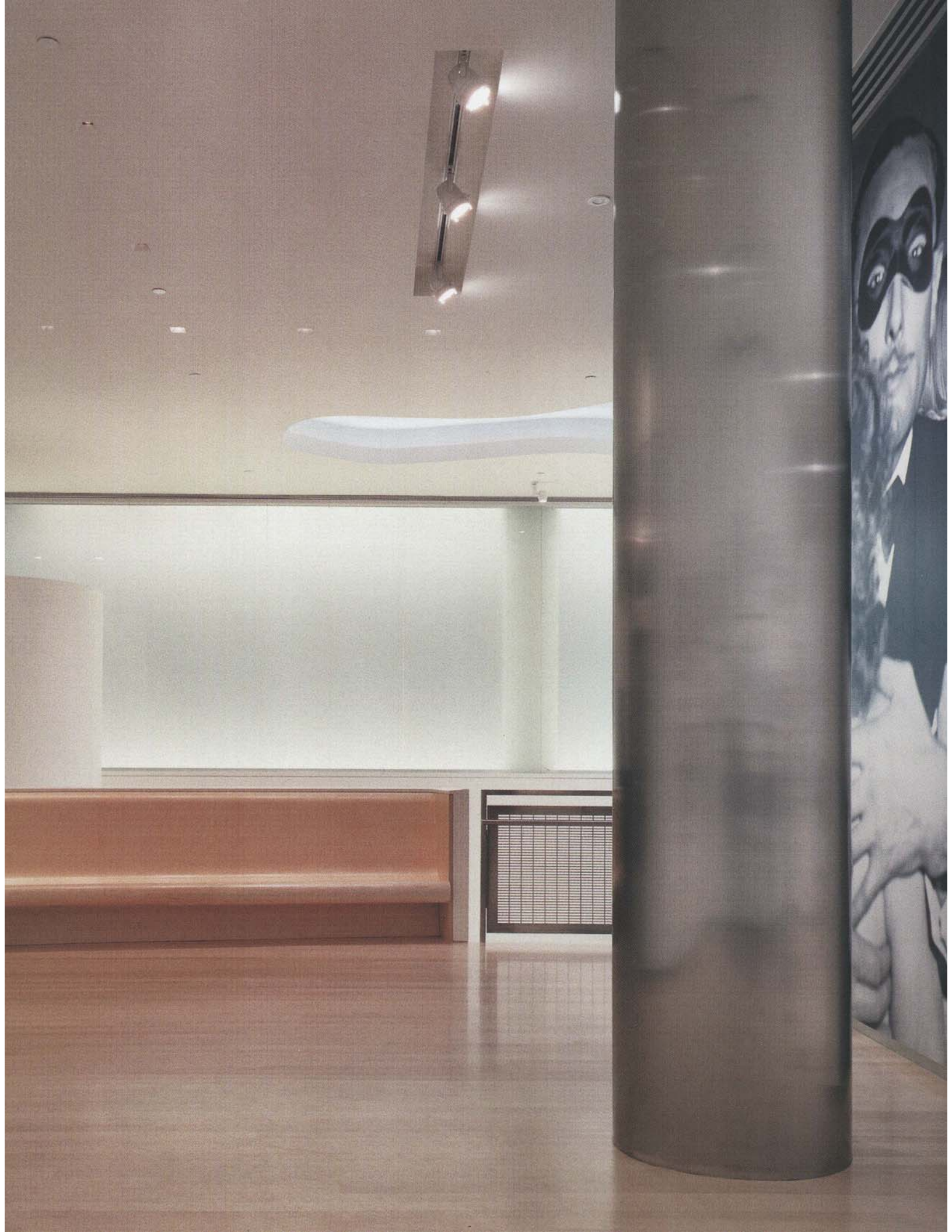
Opposite: The title wall, on which current shows are announced, a maple bench, and a stainless steel column and railing form the entrance to the galleries. The south-facing translucent UV glass wall shields the gallery from unwanted heat and light.

FLOORING: PEISER (WOOD); D. MAGNAN & CO. (TERRAZZO). WOODWORK: RIMI WOODCRAFT. METAL AND GLASS: PRECISION GLASS AND METALWORKS CO. CAFÉ TABLES: ATTA; FALCON. CAFÉ CHAIRS: DESIGN WITHIN REACH. STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT: SEVERUD ASSOC. MECHANICAL: COSENTINI ASSOCIATES. LIGHTING: FISHER MARANTZ STONE. WINDOW GRAPHICS: DUGGAL. GRAPHIC IDENTITY: SIEGELGALE. CONTRACTOR: B&F BUILDING CORP.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WARCHOL

WE ARE A SOCIETY that seems to have moved away from words. Visual culture—some of it high, some very low—is our language of choice these days. We love the Internet and the millions of images it brings our way. We digitize pictures of the kids and the dog for electronic distribution to the in-laws. We are bombarded by visual messages and graphics, from the Starbucks logo found on almost every street corner in the nation to the fashion photography that turns urban buildings into giant signposts. There are few places where this visual bombardment is more relentless or exhilarating than midtown Manhattan. And that puts the renovation of the International Center of Photography (ICP), in an office building on Sixth Avenue and 43rd Street, squarely in the middle of the action, where it can capture—and perhaps make sense of—some of the buzz.

Designed by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, the new galleries (along with café, gift shop, and support spaces) are bright, airy, and, of course, modern. There is no enfilade here, no institutional angst. The renovation, as noted by the New York Times critic Vicki Goldberg, is "a bold and promising bid" to reestablish the ICP as a player in the city's vibrant photography world. Located within the base of an office tower, the 16,600-sq.-ft. exhibition space is a major step in ICP's plans to consolidate its museum, school, and center for photographers and photography into a single, 55,000-sq.-ft. campus. (By July, the center's original home on Upper Fifth Avenue will close. By September, a new school facility, designed by Gensler, will open across the street from the new museum, under →





Grace Plaza in a subterranean space that formerly housed a university library. The ICP's collection of more than 55,000 prints is stored in the tower.)

So how do you design a permanent exhibition space for a rapidly changing medium? According to Willis Hartshorn, director of the ICP, you think long-term: "You have to create a space that has enough flexibility to accommodate different types of work." The galleries are wired for both digital and slide presentations. "Gone are the days," says Hartshorn, "when we were simply hanging photos in frames." The new galleries also had to accommodate large-scale work without forgoing more intimate settings for smaller images.

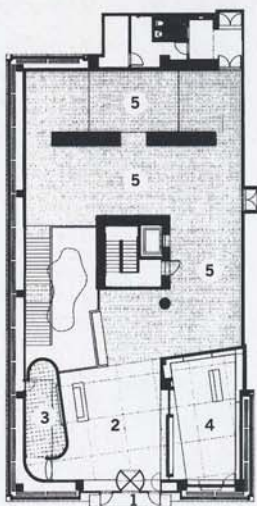
"I try to make spaces that feel like an excavation," says Charles Gwathmey of the new museum design. "It is a reductive approach appropriate to the additive nature of the museum. The bones of the space are always there." This carving-out is most dramatic in the double-height, vertical circulation core, which is placed asymmetrically in the rectilinear interior. Here, the angled and curved volumes of the street-level entry and galleries shape an ever-changing landscape of forms for visitors moving through the museum. The core can be seen from most anywhere in the space, with a cloud-shaped cutout in the ceiling above serving as what Gwathmey calls an "illusory, contrapuntal object."

Gwathmey, who designed the galleries with his partner, Robert Siegel, project architect Celeste Umpierre, and architect Elizabeth Rutherford, believes that "art photography and architecture enlighten and enrich →

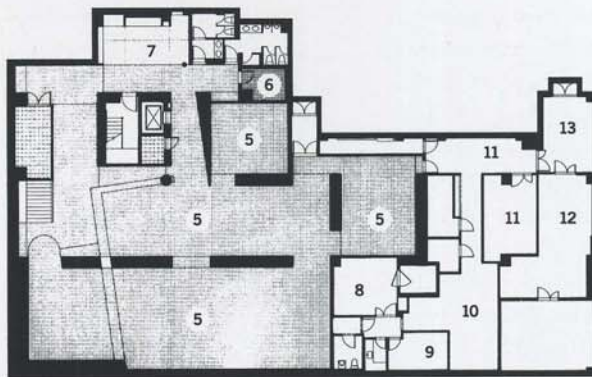


Opposite: From the entrance, visitors can look down into the lower level, where the café offers prime views of the galleries. The lighting plan employs recessed spots for public areas and track lighting for exhibitions.

Above: The two-story, stainless-steel column is one of several reference points, or "memories" in the words of Charles Gwathmey. Patti Smith faces Annie Leibovitz's camera in one of ICP's inaugural shows.



GROUND LEVEL



LOWER LEVEL

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 LOBBY
- 3 COAT ROOM
- 4 STORE
- 5 GALLERY
- 6 PANTRY
- 7 CAFE
- 8 STORAGE
- 9 STAFF ROOM
- 10 STAGING
- 11 OFFICE
- 12 INVENTORY
- 13 UTILITY

0 10 20 40

each other. If architecture is purely background, the experience is limited." A walk through the galleries always winds up back at the core. The circulation is prescribed, as are the views for the 200,000 or so visitors that visit the museum each year. The architects' collage-like composition of walls (some permanent, others temporary) create a logical and flexible series of exhibition spaces.

ICP and its architects also had to address some technical issues: With the increased value of photography—and with so much glass at its street-level perimeter—temperature, humidity, and security controls were essential to the program. Unable to alter the existing fenestration of the office building's skin, Gwathmey Siegel added an inner wall behind the existing windows; the inner wall acts as a seal for the galleries, where a temperature of 68 to 70 degrees and a humidity level of 45 percent must be maintained. The result is deep, full-height exterior display cases. The dual-function window walls provide an opportunity for ICP to treat the street like an extra gallery space, where it can announce its role in the language of the day.

—Abby Bussel

Opposite: Annie Liebovitz photographs are mounted on a floating wall on the lower level.

Right: Among the many prescribed views is the one shaped by a rectangular cut in a lower-level gallery wall. The café tables, which were designed by Gwathmey Siegel, have translucent cast-resin tops and cast-aluminum tripod legs.

