

Freeman & Pizer

Simplicity rather than high drama characterizes the annex offices of the New York City Opera.

Stated bluntly, the New York City Opera would be "the greatest client imaginable...if only they had money," according to Freeman & Pizer principal Belmont Freeman. Housed in an overcrowded warren of windowless offices in the basement of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, the opera company had decided to shift some of its support departments (marketing, education and touring company) to an off-site annex. The new space, located just one block from the eminent mother site, encompassed some 2,500 sq. ft. in a former industrial building that counts among its current tenants the offices of Robert A.M. Stern. The paradox of the assignment to convert the very raw space—it had been a garage—into a suitable office dwelling involved reconciling the client's renowned cultural profile and acute artistic consciousness with a budget that seemingly prohibited all but the most basic design maneuvers. The tricky job of manipulating that withered budget to elevate the design beyond mere fulfillment of code requirements fell to Freeman & Pizer.

Simplicity of plan and execution, relates Freeman, was the key to tackling the space. The client's program required a mix of private offices, flexible work stations, meeting space and a telemarketing facility that, for acoustical reasons, is the only fully enclosed room in the suite. Taking advantage of the garage's lofty openness and gener-

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Left and opposite: A freestanding wall of clear lacquered corrugated steel, affixed with a standard billboard light, defines the reception zone at the pivot point where the entry sequence segues into the office wing.

Photography: Arch Photo, Eduard Hueber



ous influx of natural light, the architects left most of the function areas open to views of Lincoln Center to the east and the Hudson River to the west. A partial-height wall of clear and sandblasted wired glass panels, framed in stock metal channels, screens a row of private offices and conference room. White-washed waferboard, used as accent panels on the screening wall, reappears in the form of open work stations lined with cork. A freestanding wall of corrugated steel defines the reception area and anchors the row of semi-enclosed offices.

Having removed non-essential conduit and piping from the ceiling plane, the architects were left with what Freeman describes as "a blessedly regular system of structural bays and concrete beams." With the help of lighting designer Ann Kale, those bays were lit with standard industrial fluorescent fixtures inverted and mounted on the sides of the concrete beams, a strategy that reportedly provides uniform indirect lighting for the various spaces throughout the office.

Asked about his client's reaction to the palette of quotidian industrial materials, Freeman explains that initial skepticism soon gave way to acceptance. "The New York City Opera is seen as the more nimble, more progressive and less affluent cousin to the Metropolitan Opera," he says. "The design helps to define that difference." And then, of course, there is the matter of the budget. The entire project, including construction, newly-added HVAC, carpet and all built-in furniture, came in at \$150,000, or just \$60 per sq. ft. **MAYER RUS**

Opposite, above and below: Open work stations and partial-height walls capitalize on views and natural light. Industrial lighting fixtures were mounted on the sides of the ceiling beams.

Right: Conference room attains a measure of semi-privacy via a wall of clear and sandblasted glass panels.

Carpet: Shaw. **Resilient flooring:** Allstate. **Lighting:** National Lighting (general); Abolite (conference room pendants); Columbia (billboard); Luxo (task). **Hardware:** Schlage. **Reception seating:** Palazzetti. **Conference chairs:** Thonet. **Mechanical engineer:** Atkinson Koven Feinberg. **General contractor:** PL Construction.



The progressive design helps differentiate the City Opera from its high-toned cousin, the Met.

