INTERIOR DESIGN

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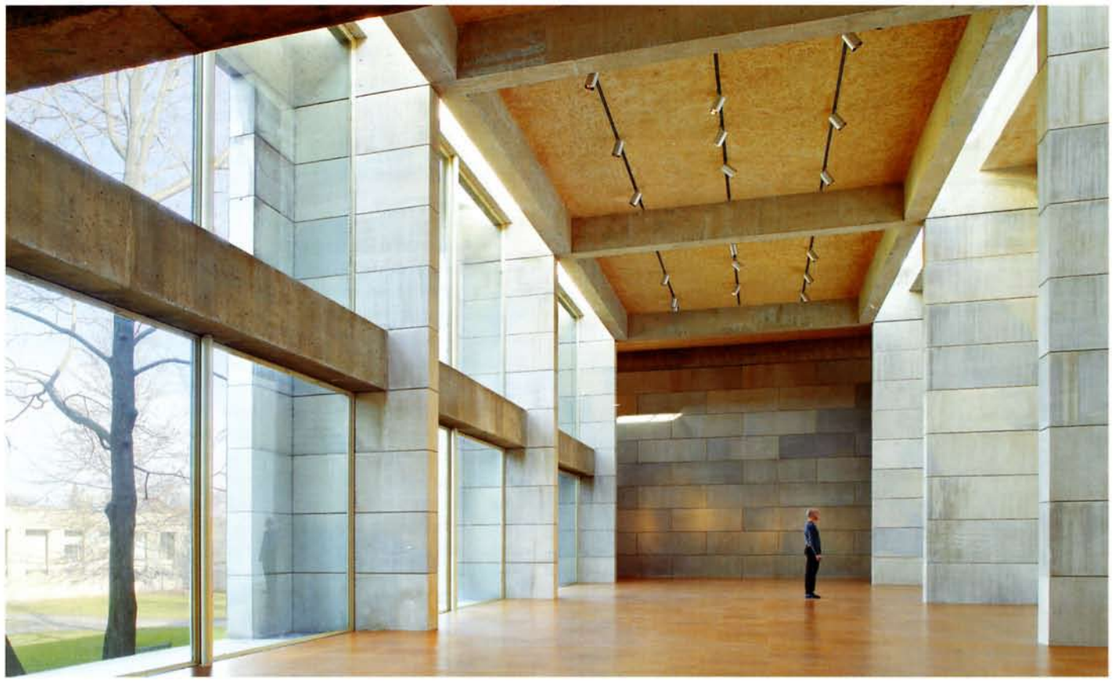
Belmont Freeman Architects



state of the art

To meet the needs of experimental media, Wesleyan University renovates its Kevin Roche gallery

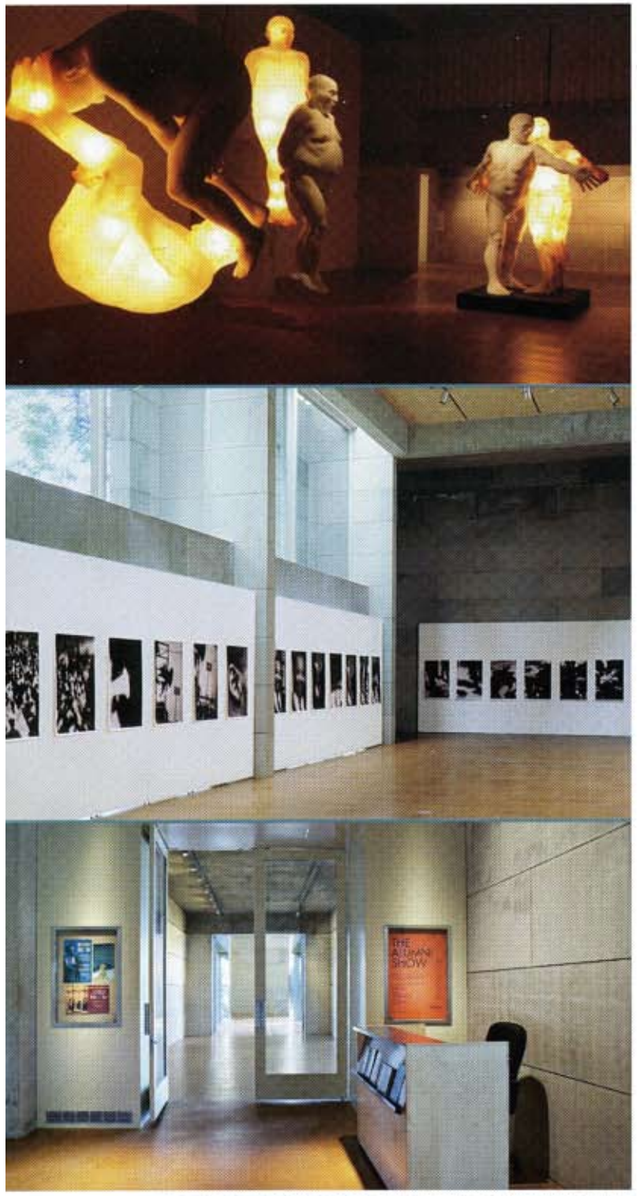
Top: The limstone-block Kevin Roche building now features a floor tiled with 24-inch cork squares.

IN THE 1960'S, WHEN KEVIN ROCHE was asked to design an arts facility at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, he might have proposed one large building. But when he saw the site, dotted with old oak trees and surrounded by modest frame houses, he decided instead on a cluster of small structures that would punctuate the campus, not dominate it. By 1973, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates had constructed 11 buildings of 14-inch-thick limestone blocks, without steel or concrete framing. This "block on block" technique, practically unheard-of in postwar public architecture, gives the complex a heroic quality comparable to the power of Louis Kahn—and helps explain why Roche won the Pritzker Prize in 1982.

A 30-by-60-foot gallery with a 24-foot ceiling was designed to show paintings and sculpture. "In the 1970's, art hung on the wall or rested on the floor. These days, it's anywhere but," says Belmont Freeman, the architect entrusted with updating the building.

Indeed, the advent of installation, sound, and video art presented the curators of the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery—as it's now called—with myriad acoustical, technological, and space-planning obstacles. There was no way to hang things heavier than a painting without damaging walls. Windows and skylights couldn't be darkened except by taping up sheets of plastic. Limestone walls and the concrete ceiling were "so echoey," says Freeman, that "you could barely hold a gallery talk."

That, among other problems, required Freeman's namesake firm to update virtually all surfaces and systems. However, the point of the renovation was to transform the building without *appearing* to transform it. Because a new smoke-detection system and emergency lighting required conduits overhead, the exposed concrete ceiling couldn't be saved. So Freeman devised a close visual equivalent: Pyrok acoustical plaster, tinted to replicate the original beige concrete and sprayed onto galvanized sheet-steel lath attached to the ceiling. The plaster surface envelops not only the conduits but also Litelab Corp.'s aluminum channels, which serve as lighting tracks, outlets for electronic installations, and a rigging system for suspending heavy artwork. Best of all, the entire intervention entailed dropping the ceiling by only 2 inches.



From top: A 2004 display of Robert Taplin's The Five Outer Planets *would have been much less effective before Belmont Freeman Architects renovated the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, making it possible to darken the space. Ann Messner's photos, installed on MDF panels. The foyer's custom information desk in maple and stainless steel.*

The ceiling's narrow perimeter skylights were stunning architecturally, but they'd been admitting too much ultraviolet radiation—and water. Freeman installed UV-resistant models, raised the surrounding curbs 12 inches to prevent melting snow from leaking in, and designed canvas shades to darken the room for video art. Fabricated by a sailmaker, they're stored in a weatherproof cabinet on the roof and installed with grommets and turnbuckles. "We studied all sorts of motorized shades," says Freeman, "before deciding that the low-tech, cost-effective solution was the best." In a similar vein, hooks screwed into the frames of the window wall support blackout shades of vinyl-impregnated cotton.

The limestone walls posed Freeman's biggest challenge, as decades of picture hanging had left thousands of anchors in the grout. After removing them, re-pointing the walls, and repairing chips, he installed permanent anchors to hold up a system of 8-foot-high MDF panels. Art now hangs on the panels instead of against Roche's limestone blocks.

Roche had covered the floor in yellow carpet. ["Remember, this was the '70's," says Freeman.] And the floor's heating and cooling vents were inefficient, especially when obstructed by the partitions often added for exhibitions. "In the winter," recalls Freeman, "it was too cold to have a design meeting there."

The solution to both chill and carpet? Freeman put in radiant heat, then surfaced the floor in cork tiles—sufficiently conductive, forgiving on the feet, and relatively simple to replace if damaged. The cork floor also makes the gallery easier on the ears, a necessity for audio art, but raising the gallery floor 2½ inches meant that Freeman had to install a ramp leading up to the doors from the foyer. To frame the incline, he built out the door reveal to 3 feet on the foyer side, a move that simultaneously allowed him to conceal new ductwork.

For the upstairs seminar room, he designed a beech-veneered table and lectern while refurbishing the bentwood chairs specified by Roche. To a chapel-like square gallery, Freeman made only minor adjustments.

If Roche was disappointed that Wesleyan didn't ask him to oversee the renovation, he isn't letting on. "I feel very comfortable with the result," he says. "It was sensitively done." Nor is he surprised that an update was needed. "The program has evolved," he points out. And a strong work of architecture can evolve, too.

—*Fred A. Bernstein*

PG.1 CHRISTOPHER WESNOFSKE. FROM TOP: NICK LACY, JOHN GROO; CHRISTOPHER WESNOFSKE