



Ahead of the Curve

From a high-rising school to a cutting-edge cupcake shop, Chicago design heats up in unexpected places

By Thomas Connors | Photography by Andy Barnes

When Columbia College's new Media Production Center sprang up on a less-than-stunning strip of State Street in February, it was a reminder that engaging architecture isn't reserved for high-profile museums and tony hotels. Designed by Studio Gang, the nearly bunkerlike building combines a certain showiness (a façade with colored glass evoking a TV test pattern) with a let's-get-down-to-business bluntness (a concrete box of sound stages). The interior—composed with an eye to cinematic concerns, such as framing and depth of field—emphasizes the collaborative nature of media work, with various classes sharing the same work areas, and a public space defined by an amphitheater-like staircase that encourages lingering. But college students aren't the only ones getting the good design treatment these days. Take Muchin College Prep, a Noble Street Charter School at 1 N. State St. in the heart of the Loop.

The city's only high-rise high school (it's sited on the seventh floor of the former Mandel Brothers department store, designed by Holabird & Roche in 1910), Muchin's bright, dynamic digs are the work of Wheeler Kearns Architects. It's a wonder kids get to class on time when the corridors are so inviting. Energized with large blocks of blue, yellow and gray linoleum and lit by eye-easy aluminum pendant fixtures, these wide-open spaces sport smart seating (Panton chairs by Vitra and Frank Gehry's "Left Twist", "Right Twist" cubes from Heller) and large-format cityscapes by photographer David Weinberg.

Light in various guises was key to the project. The center of the floor is marked by two donuts,

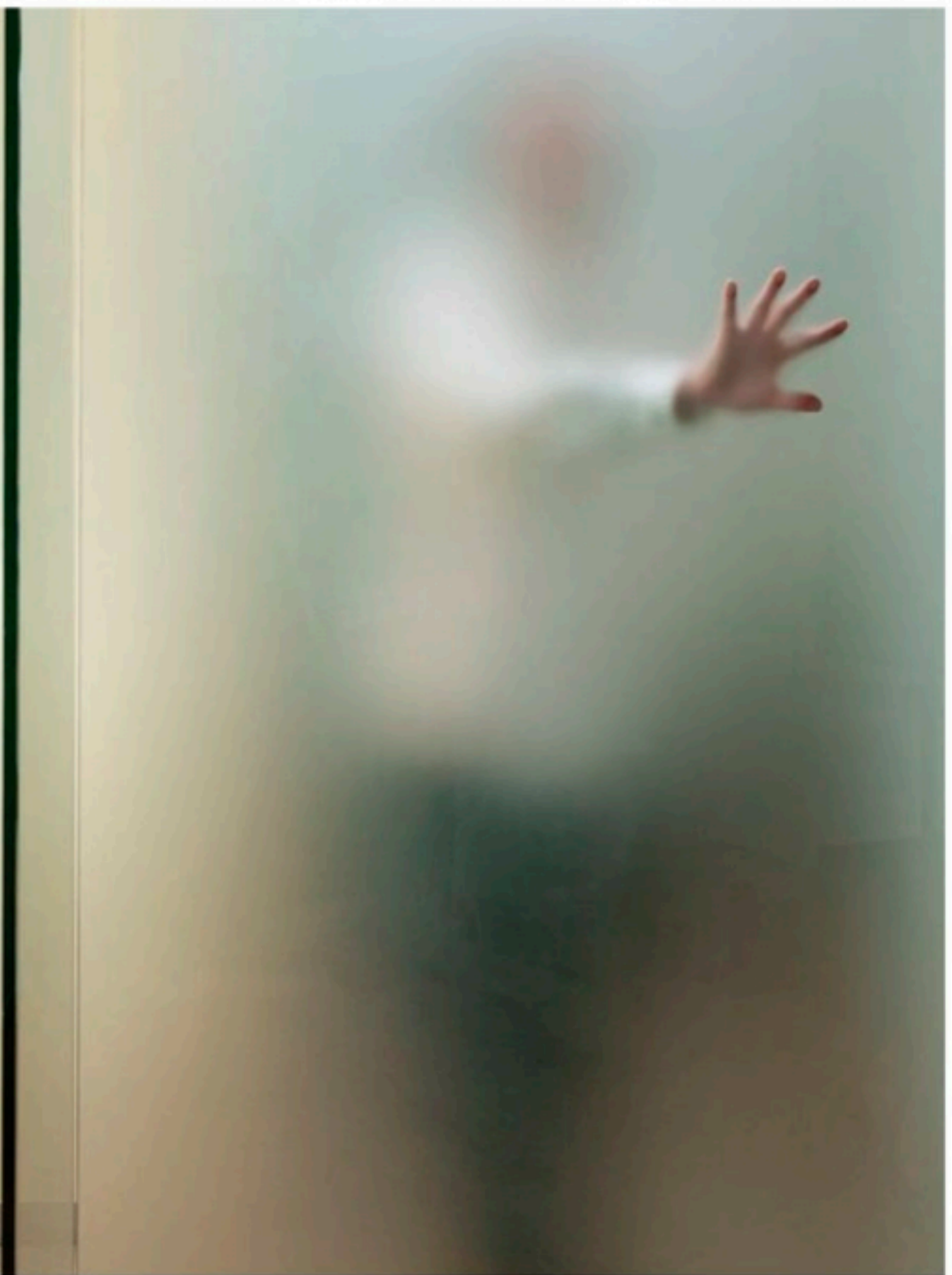


NOT TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL

From top: Frank Gehry cubes for student lounging at Muchin College Prep; vibrant yellow lockers and blue Panton chairs give the corridors a jolt of instant design cred.

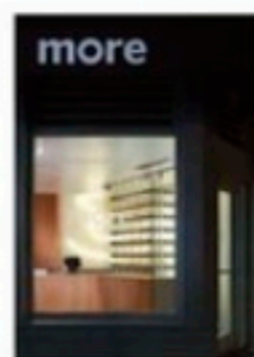
or cores; one contains science classrooms, the other houses offices and service spaces. "We wanted to treat these two cores differently, as a way of locating yourself in the space," notes Wheeler Kearns principal Joy Meek. "One is ringed with bright blue student lockers and is lit from the ceiling with long, fluorescent lights. The other core is wrapped in a metallic fabric and a translucent polycarbonate surface, with the lighting coming from behind the polycarbonate surface." What's more, the school is equipped with a system that dims the lights in the corridors when students are in classrooms, then increases the brightness once the bell rings and students pour into the halls again.

While many of us look back fondly on our school days, no one gets a warm and fuzzy feeling going to the dentist. But for the patients of doctors Steven A. Koos and Goran Kralj, owners of Ora Dental Studio on South Michigan Avenue, the prospect of a little poking and prodding is less daunting thanks to an inviting atmosphere. Standard-issue seating has been replaced with streamlined pieces that look like they belong in a luxury automobile. In addition to following LEED and GGHC (Green Guide for Health Care) protocols, the facility CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED has been fashioned throughout with an unusual attention to color, texture and material. "It doesn't smell like a dental office; it doesn't look like a dental office," says Koos. "Patients are anxious when they come to see us. So we wanted to create an environment that offered some sense of serenity."

To achieve that goal, Koos and Kralj turned to designer Paula Feigum. "To create a sense of calm and serenity," she relates, "I began with a very neutral envelope and from there layered textures with materials that are as interesting to the eye as to the touch." Those included one wall clad in Bali pebbles (a mesh-backed product from Ann Sacks) and another finished with composite panels from modularArts that create a wavelike relief effect. Feigum specified deeply grained Oberflex veneers for the cabinetry she designed and covered the floors with a woven vinyl product from Chilewich. In most areas, stylish sconces and pendants intended for residential use—sourced from Lightology—add to the welcoming ambiance. Handsome, buffet-like casegoods perched on polished metal legs in the exam rooms are a far cry from the clinical cabinets common in most medical suites.



LESS IS MORE
From top: The clean-lined, gridlike cupcake shelves at More; More's eye-catching, spare façade by David Woodhouse Architects.

Knowing there's such a spa-like dental office in town makes it a mite easier to indulge at More, Patty Rothman's minimalist cupcake "boutique" on East Delaware Place. With recipes developed by award-winning pastry chef Gale Gand, the goodies here are, as architect David Woodhouse says, "Not your grandma's cupcake." And thanks to his perfectly measured design, this tiny shop is not your run-of-the-mill bakery, either.

"One of the things we wanted to do," he explains, "was get the product up at eye level. And because these cupcakes use the best ingredients, we wanted to convey that with something that was sensual—like butter, like icing, like sugar." Woodhouse did just that, jettisoning the standard, low display case and creating a tall, sexy grid in which the cupcakes are displayed like precious gems. On the wall, a neon swirl in a butter cream color underscores the lusciousness that fills the shop. Polished concrete floors and bamboo paneling add warmth to the space, while providing a neutral backdrop to the artfully displayed cupcakes. And while those goodies certainly grab the eye, like a blue Tiffany box, Woodhouse's pristine packaging creates a tasteful sense of anticipation ■

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