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Breaking the Grid With 3-D Thinking

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With most of its planes askew, the Gemini Learning Center looks like it was built by a crew of carpenters that lost its levels. Not so. This is ROTO Architects' model of the multiple forces that are at work in a complex business organization, pushing and pulling on one another in an organic growth process. The center's architecture helps managers learn to think about business transformation in several dimensions.

Change comes barreling down on executives and corporate managers in the form of globalization, re-engineering, restructuring, downsizing, mergers, buyouts, and more. Staying in business is all about coping with change. Unfortunately, the multi-layered implications of these metamorphoses are not always understood by number-crunchers who easily comprehend the two-dimensional, gridded-off world of the spreadsheet. Gemini Consulting, a 450-person firm, uses its Gemini Learning Center to train business people to make and rapidly implement plans for coping with such multi-dimensional change.

"The objective was to come up with an environment that would encourage people to think in terms of the third dimension," says Michael Rotondi of ROTO Architects. "We began to talk with our client about how a complex, hierarchical organization translates itself into a business, and about the paradigms out of which companies are transformed. If you looked at a company's social, political, and economic forces, and were to model them on a computer, you would have all of those parts moving in relation to other parts to make a whole.

"What we talked about for this interior was making a space that abstractly represented a constantly moving, three-dimensional diagram of a complex organization—at some point you would sort of hit the 'pause button' and build it. But when people walk through this space, they don't say, 'Gee, this is like an organization,' but rather it is as if all of a sudden everything begins to move along with them in the new way in which they begin to think—in three dimensions. It was supposed to be a dynamic organization of a plan, but the same dynamic order occurs in section."

"The floor plate wasn't ideal," says partner Clark Stevens of the center's location in a 1960s spec-office building next door to Gemini's headquarters. "But they wanted to keep this near the main office, so they had to live with the floor plate and a space that was split by public spaces. That was one of the problems—how to get these parts to work as one." But these spaces were not isolated entirely because, while privacy was desirable, the sense that work was going on "behind closed doors" was not. One of the devices used to allow a fleeting glimpse of the training rooms to passersby were screens made of dried tree trunks, part of an organic "growth" theme carried on by the use of vertical-grain fir panels and found in the gray-green wool carpet the color of a forest's floor used throughout the center. Custom deep-purple chalkboards are placed in breakout rooms for making quick notes about material developed in training.

Training rooms were intentionally laid out so there was no preferred seat in the room, and no one would be behind anyone else. "The theory," says Clark, "is that no one can hide, everyone's got to get up and participate—if they have a thought, they're right there. The little tables in these rooms, designed in conjunction with Krohn Design, needed to be mobile, fun, and not seen as a barrier; this is why they're made of glass." Each can be moved like a wheelbarrow, and has a port so a laptop can be linked to the building's central data system. Additional ports are located in the floor. The desks also connect back-to-back to allow four people at one desk to work on a small-group project. *Charles Linn*

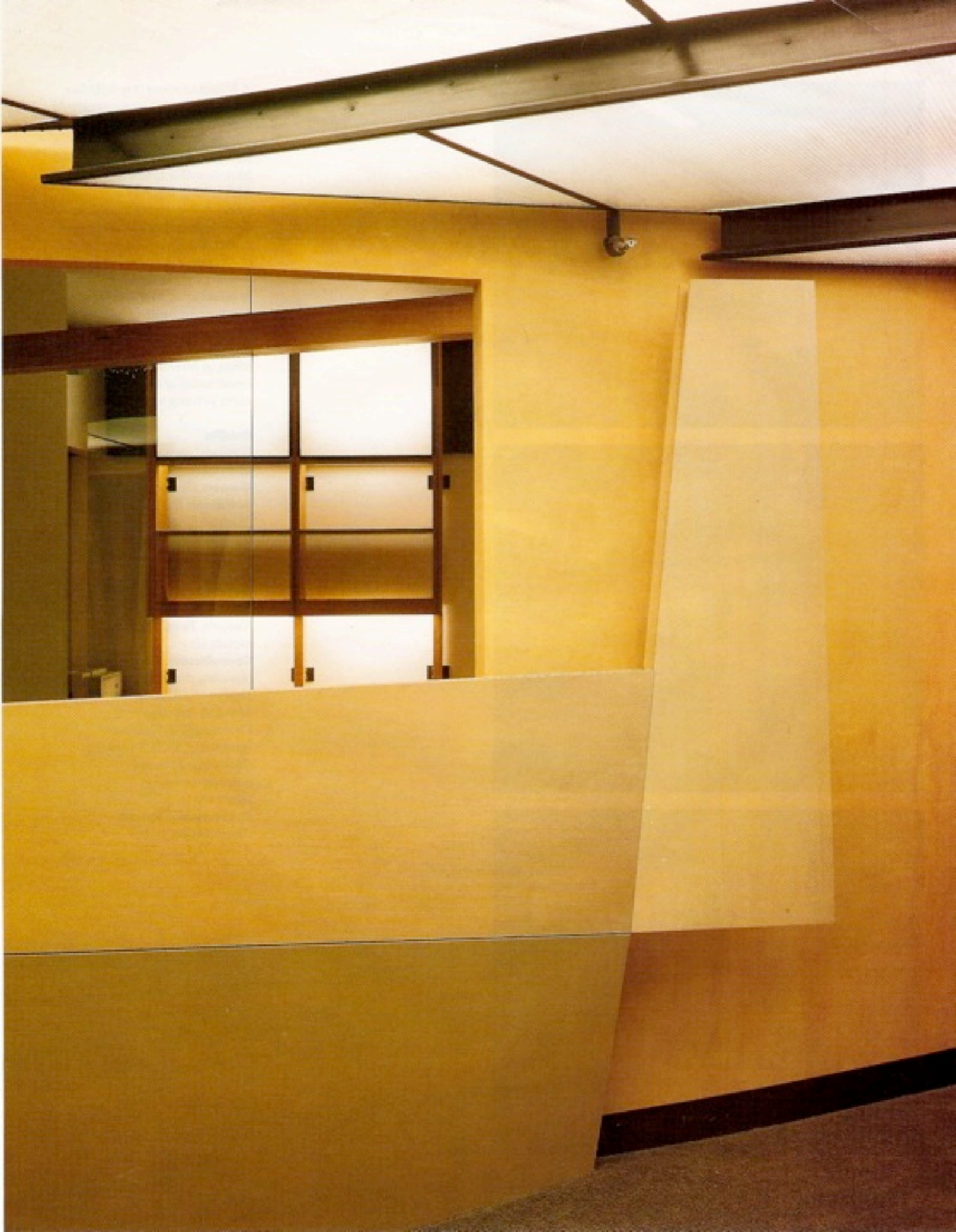




The reception area of the Gemini Learning Center establishes the center's theme of metamorphosis, change, and three-dimensional thinking using "organic" surfaces. The "folded walls" (this page and opposite) developed by ROTO are lightweight and thin in profile, but extremely stiff. They consist of 5/8-inch plywood fastened to welded tubular-steel frames with plugged screws. A screen made of a row of tree trunks (below left) allows private sessions to go on in the training room, without creating a sense of isolation.



1. Reception
2. Office
3. Training room
4. Waiting room
5. Breakout room
6. "Mind gym"
7. Lounge
8. Kitchen





A breakout room (top left) has all of the amenities necessary to continue the intense discussions that go on in training rooms (center left). The training rooms have movable tables equipped with a bit of wheeled whimsy—wheel-barrow tires that allow them to be quickly reconfigured, and custom-made, deep-purple chalkboards. The “mind gym” (bottom left) is an area dedicated to relaxation, and comes with comfortable built-in chairs and high-tech gear that de-stresses the user and provides deep relaxation. A screen (detail opposite) constructed of tree trunks provides privacy without isolation.

Credits

*Gemini Learning Center
Morristown, New Jersey*

Owners: Gemini Consulting

Architect: ROTO Architects—
Michael Rotondi, Clark Stevens,
principals; Tracy Loeffler, Brian
Reiff, Craig Scott, collaborators;
Jim Bassett, Michael Brandes,
Max Massie, team; Richard
Kasemsarn, Jason King, Milana
Kosovic, Yusuki Obuchi,
assistants.

Consultants: Kay Kollar Design
(finishes, furniture); Krohn
Design (furniture);
MB & A (mechanical);
Chermayeff & Geismar
(graphics); WGFS Lighting
(lighting); Johnson
Schwinghammer
(lighting)

Contractor: Clearcut
Construction

