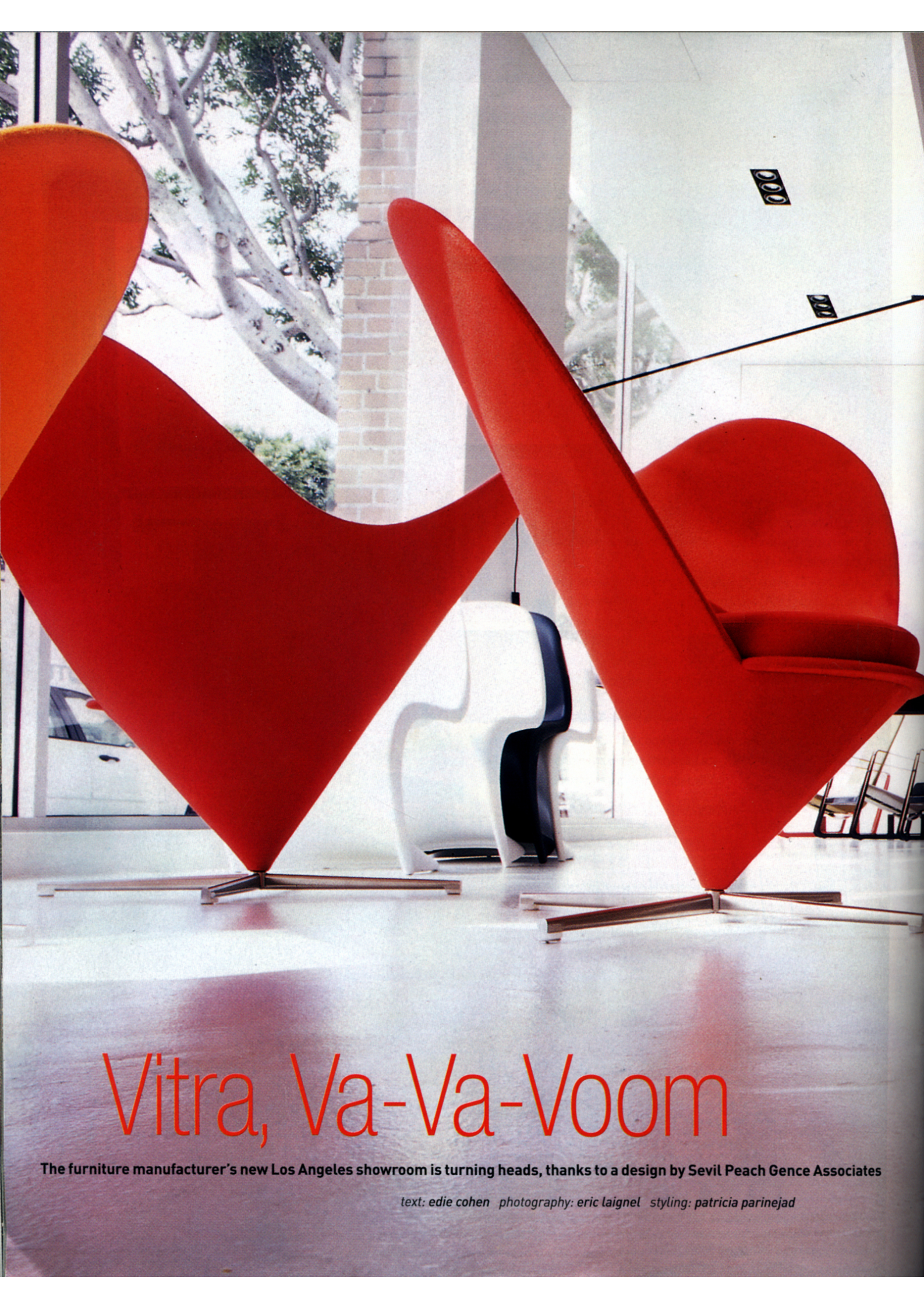


# INTERIOR DESIGN

JANUARY  
2003

redesign  
a brand-new  
slant



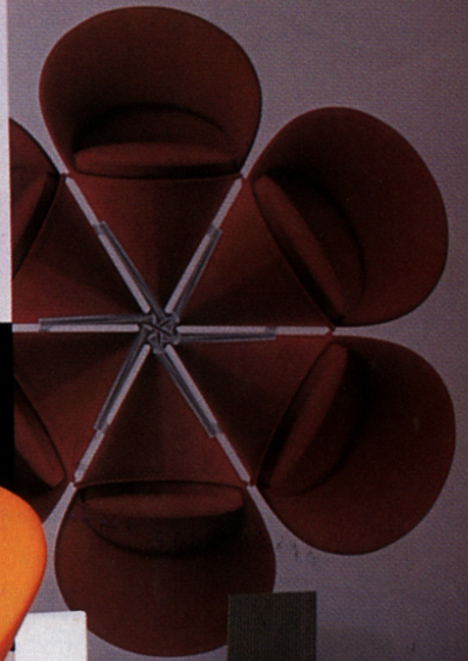
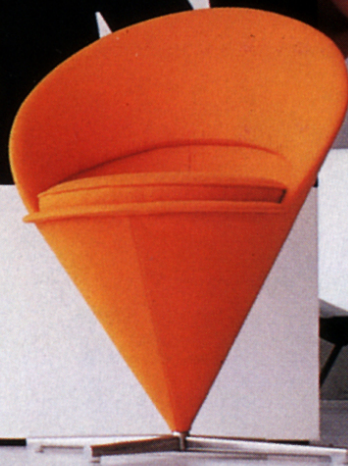


# Vitra, Va-Va-Voom

The furniture manufacturer's new Los Angeles showroom is turning heads, thanks to a design by Sevil Peach Gence Associates

*text: edie cohen photography: eric laignel styling: patricia parinejad*

# PANT ONT



By opening a Los Angeles showroom, Vitra has strengthened ties that date back more than half a century. The City of Angels, in fact, holds the key to Vitra as we know it. Visiting from Switzerland in the early 1950s,

## “Sevil is an emotional designer”

chairman-impressario Rolf Fehlbaum’s parents, Erika and Willi, became entranced by the furniture of Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson. Soon after,

the family obtained rights to manufacture Eames and Nelson furniture for Herman Miller in Europe; in 1986, Vitra secured rights to market some of the classics under its own name. A subsequent collaboration with Frank Gehry, who built the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, reinforced the L.A. bond.

Thus it seemed predetermined that Vitra, seeking an L.A. site, would find one just miles from the Eames and Gehry offices.

Built in the 1940s as an Air Force recruiting center, the two brick structures—one behind the other in the heart of Santa Monica—were separated by a sorry alley. To spearhead the transformation of the cut-up 7,000-square-foot space, Fehlbaum called in Sevil Peach Gence Associates. The British firm had designed Vitra showrooms in Amsterdam and Berlin, among other locations, as well as refurbishing part of the Nicholas Grimshaw building on the company’s Weil am Rhein campus. Rockefeller/Hricak Architects brought local expertise to bear in the creation of a light-filled, lighthearted environment costing a moderate \$121 per square foot.

Interestingly, neither Fehlbaum nor Turkish-born designer Sevil Peach and her British partner, Gary Turnbull, addressed design with a capital D at the start of their conversation. They discussed feelings instead. Fehlbaum on Peach’s strengths: “She’s an emotional designer. She comes from a sunny country, and she cares for people. You feel it when you enter one of her spaces.” Peach on her own goal: “A cheerful interior with an intangible spirit.”

The site fairly screamed for cogent connections and the maximization of Southern California’s daylight and outdoor space. To these ends, Sevil Peach Gence cleared out the front building’s maze of rooms and unveiled a timber bow-truss ceiling in the rear one. Amplifying the connection between them, she enlarged the facing openings and transformed the alley into an enticing patio with wooden decking and an overhead trellis. A →

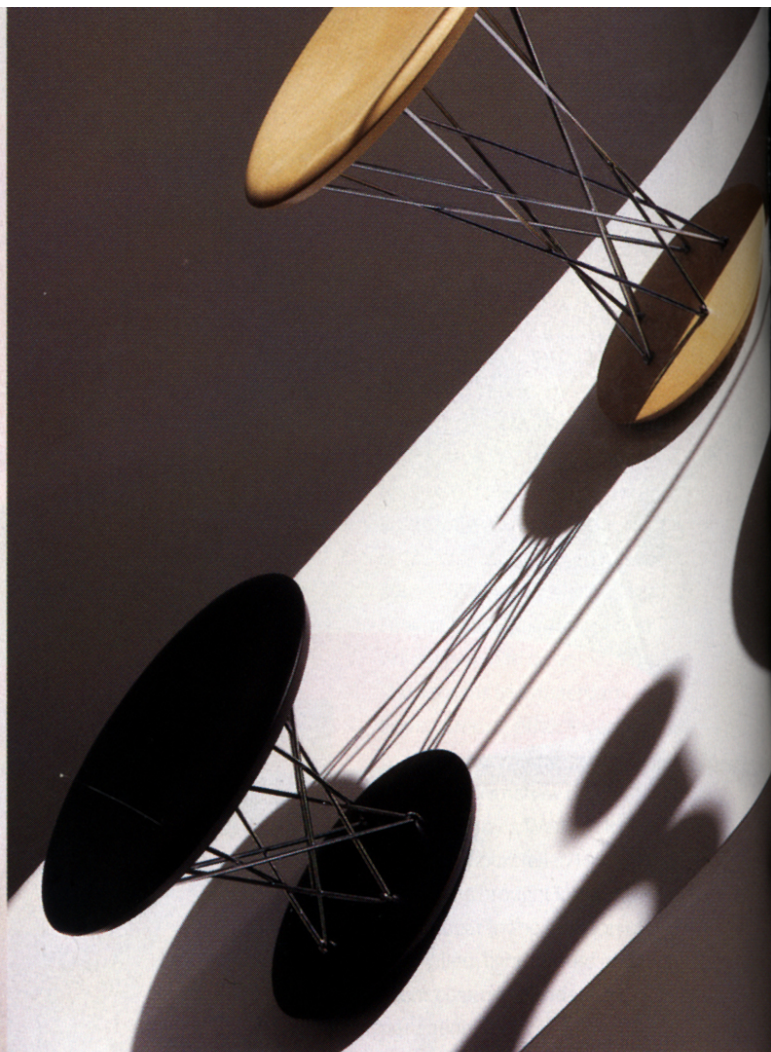
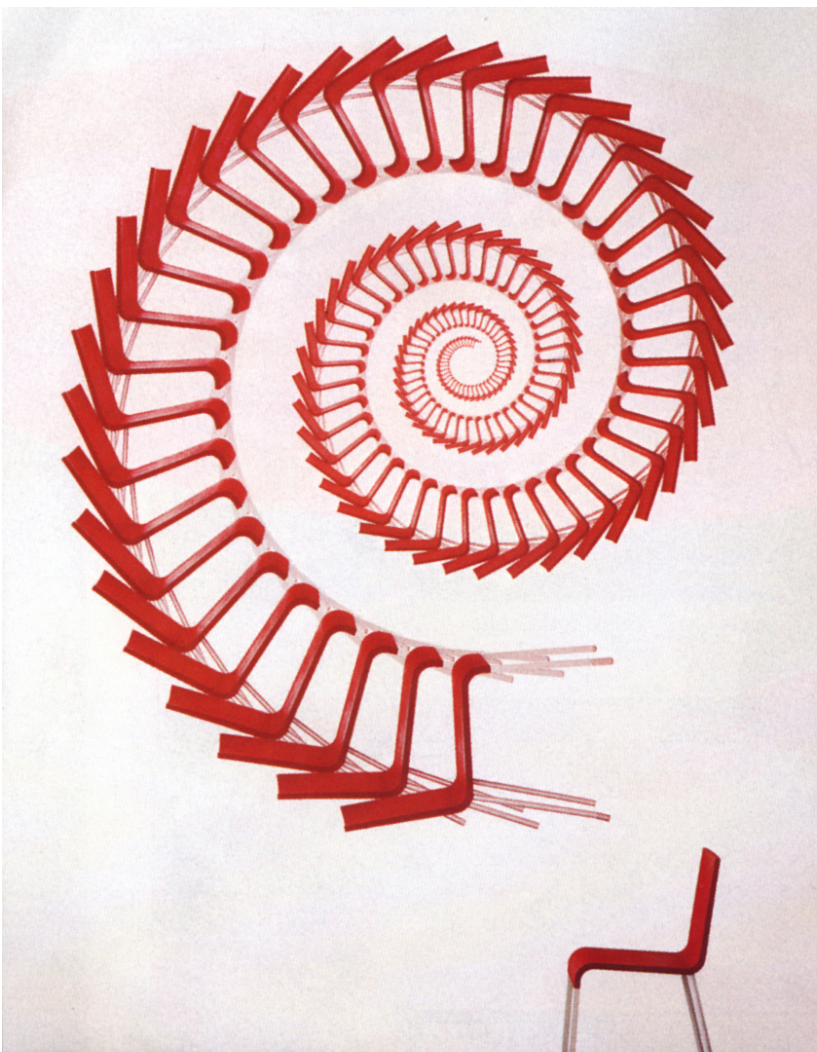


**Previous spread:** Verner Panton’s Heart Cone (1959) and Cone (1958) chairs stand in sharp relief against the epoxy-painted floor at the Vitra showroom that Sevil Peach Gence Associates designed in Los Angeles. The giant “Panton” panel, the front building’s sole divider, separates Verner Panton’s pieces from Jean Prouvé and Frank Gehry chairs beyond.

**Above:** In this homelike grouping, Jasper Morrison’s leather-covered sofas (1992) are joined by Ron Arad’s T. Rock chair (1998) and Isamu Noguchi’s Rocking stools (1955).

**Opposite:** Ingo Maurer’s XXL Domes and a Douglas fir platform help order the space. On the platform are pieces by Mario Bellini and Antonio Citterio.





*Opposite top, from left: Maarten van Severen's .03 chair (1998) stands below its graphic counterpart. Two versions of Noguchi's Rocking stool.*

*Opposite bottom, from left: Prouvé's Antony chair (1954). Morrison's Ply chair (1989) in two dimensions, backing a trio of Hula Hoop chairs (2000) by Philippe Starck.*

*Right: In the front of the showroom, a vignette assembles Vitra's miniatures collection, George Nelson clocks, the Panton Ring pendant (1969), and Noguchi's Prismatic tables (1957) and Rocking stools.*



more serious connectivity problem was posed by a 28-inch grade change between the two buildings and its Americans With Disabilities Act implications. Neatly resolving the issue, Sevil Peach Gence installed an interior ramp that slopes upward, along one sidewall, from the front building to the back one.

Final aspects of envelope alteration focused on sunshine. The good news was the existing skylights. The bad news was just that: a ceiling randomly punched

with holes backed by plastic. Making the best of the situation, Sevil Peach Gence transformed this minus into one of the project's most charming pluses. Vibrant paint now colors the apertures. Peach and Turnbull also reglazed the facade, working within existing bays, and installed a massive Douglas fir pivot door for the entry. The concrete floor was painted with white epoxy.

In apportioning the interior, Sevil Peach Gence followed natural divisions. The rear building

was given over to contract furniture and office space. The white envelope of the front building made it a natural for showing furniture, but Peach and Turnbull still hadn't resolved display questions. "Two weeks before the opening, I was still playing with the idea of vertical panels as dividers and backdrops," Peach says. "But this building's proportions are so strong that there was no need to do so." At the last minute, the panels came out, with the exception of a removable one between the Verner Pantone and Jean Prouvé areas.

Without partitions, however, Peach lacked easy ordering tools, and she cringed at the prospect of a furniture warehouse—albeit one filled with top-tier products. "I laid out the furniture as if it were in a real home, with a sofa, armchairs, and a rug to make it feel familiar," she says. Ingo Maurer's XXL Dome pendants and a Douglas fir platform also act as organizing devices. So do New York firm 2x4's supergraphics, which translate the sculptural quality of individual Vitra pieces into two-dimensional abstractions printed as wallpaper. The result speaks wittily for itself.

Peach, Turnbull, and Michael Hricak—who oversaw seismic upgrades and, he notes, was "responsible for slipping a perfect design into an imperfect shell"—admit to pleasant surprise at the overall outcome. Says Turnbull, "Although we had to deal with several modifications along the way, it was very gratifying that the showroom design held up to the changes so well." With a jolt of Vitra status, the two buildings have gone from scarcely noticed to car-stopping. ■



**Above:** In the rear building, Citterio's Ad Wall (1998) backs his Visalounge chairs (2002). The flooring is maple. **Opposite:** A sculpture of Pantone chairs (1960) enlivens a corner of the patio.

PROJECT TEAM (SEVIL PEACH GENCE ASSOCIATES): **KEN ALLINSON; SEBASTIAN AVENDANO; DANIEL POEHNER; CRAIG WELCH; FIONA KELLY.** PROJECT TEAM (ROCKEFELLER/HRICAK ARCHITECTS): **ALANA JOHNS; MICHAEL McCORMICK; STAN ANDERSON.**

SUPERGRAPHIC PRINTING (FRONT BUILDING): **MDC WALLCOVERING.** DOME PENDANTS: **INGO MAURER.** PILLOW FABRICS: **MAHARAM.** RUG: **POTTERY BARN.** COATRACK: **ZANOTTA.** RECESSED LIGHTING, PENDANTS: **ANSORG.** PAINT: **FRAZEE PAINT & WALLCOVERING.** STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: **ERKEL, GREENFIELD & ASSOCIATES.** MEP: **MAZZETTI & ASSOCIATES.** GENERAL CONTRACTOR: **R.N. FIELD CONSTRUCTION.**



