

# A Floor-to-Ceiling Revolution

Opposite and below left

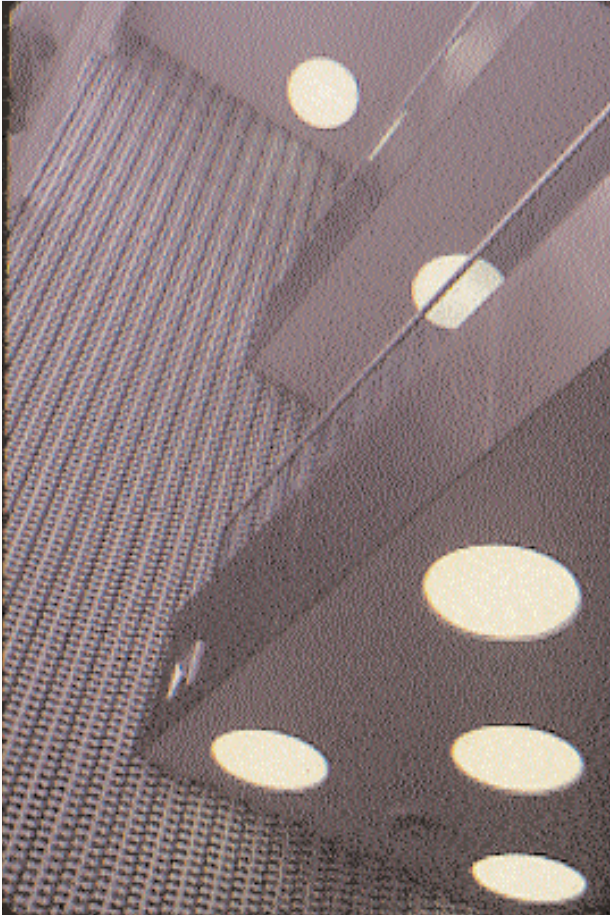
The elevator lobby of a Miami office building features architect Laurinda Spear's Linework range of textured vinyl wall coverings for Wolf-Gordon, a us supplier.

Below right

The verticality of lobby walls in the office building is enhanced by the modified stripes of the pattern shown here in a colour named 'vence blue'.

Pattern above

Marybeth Shaw hopes Flexuous, a field pattern by industrial designer Karim Rashid, will find a mass audience through her company's commercial clients.



Craig Kellogg describes how, in an industry dominated by neutral wall treatments, a trained architect is leading a splashy wallpaper revival at Wolf-Gordon, and along the way commissioning designs from the likes of Miami architect Laurinda Spear and industrial designer Karim Rashid.

People – especially architects – delight in hating wallpaper. When renovating an old building they rip it down, and for new construction they are loath to install it in the first place. As things now stand, nearly everyone lives and works in painted rooms. This wasn't always the case, however. As few people seem to remember, Le Corbusier created several collections of geometric wallpaper designs in his day. Surprise! The patterned wall coverings from the Bauhaus were bestsellers.

You really have to think back a few decades to find fabulous new wallpapers readily available in the us. As late as the 1960s they were an affordable luxury that conferred a certain kind of respectability on a home. Though wall coverings were expensive to buy and install, people felt they

needed them. And for adventurous middle-class decorators the parade of ever-newer patterns offered instant access to avant-garde designs.

But as papered rooms slipped from fashion, manufacturers became increasingly conservative in their offerings. The range of patterns narrowed, and weak pastels or soft textures supplanted boldly coloured modern designs. The bland new papers – printed on vinyl, actually – were ideal mainly for hotel corridors and care homes for the elderly. Generally, however, architects would specify them only in hospitality situations – limited to areas that demanded extreme durability and fire resistance.

**Below left**

Laurinda Spear's versatile top seller, Bamboo, in a colour named 'rainforest', served as the backdrop for the staged promotional photograph of a work station.

**Below right and opposite**

Karim Rashid's Replicant pattern in magenta dramatically transformed the minimalist architecture of his own living room, which is a showcase for the furniture he designs.

**Pattern above**

Marybeth Shaw greatly enlarged the loosely woven wool threads designer Petra Blaisse supplied for a pattern called Cord #2. Other photorealistic patterns in the range imply soft fur or felt.



At the beginning of 2001, the Miami architect Laurinda Spear debuted a collection of crisp, modern vinyls with Wolf-Gordon, a major supplier of commercial wall coverings based in New York. The range was anything but bland. In contrast to the company's popular faux rice-paper or simulated stucco textures, Spear's new patterns were suave pop abstractions. The motifs were based on architectural symbols she adapted from AutoCAD drawings, and though they were cleverly transformed with both scale and colour, they were honest and as easy to read as the purest Modernism. 'It was vinyl wall covering with a print on it, not trying to look like something else,' says Marybeth Shaw, Wolf-Gordon's creative director.

Unlike many in the world of wall coverings, Shaw has a masters degree in city planning from MIT, and another one from L'Ecole d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville in architecture. As she likes to say, good design is about 'dignity and improving the condition of how people live. Otherwise,' she adds, 'why would I waste my time with vinyl wall coverings?'

Designers present their patterns to Shaw as small drawings in black-and-white. The colours are decided later. Not every pattern readily translates into a commercial wall covering, but successful patterns break down into rough categories. There are large-scale stripes or all-over textures. Scatter prints must be large enough in scale to avoid being seen as textures. Strong horizontals, which need to be matched during installation, are discouraged.

Shaw decided to render Spear's patterns with saturated blues, reds and jewel tones that required lots of ink. At the mill she found herself saying 'More, more, more, more, more,' because the colours in the first strike-offs were too 'translucent'. The most exciting opportunity in the printing process is that colours may be substituted freely once the patterns are engraved on to rollers. For example, a bespoke pink-and-purple version of Spear's Wave pattern was used for a care home for the elderly. The architectural



Pattern above

Blaisse supplied a small, crudely knitted sample that was photographed and pieced into the repeating pattern Knitte #1.



justification, according to the project's independent interior designer, was that residents would be less likely to bump into walls and injure themselves.

Based partly on Spear's reputation among architects, the patterns sneaked out of the hospitality ghetto. People wanted them for hotels and restaurants, of course, but also for offices and homes. Suddenly Wolf-Gordon salespeople were welcome at exclusive design firms they previously had no access to. Although hiring Spear was an experiment, it proved a sound business decision when it netted designers who 'wouldn't normally use wallpaper'. Flush with success, Shaw asked the industrial designer Karim Rashid to interpret natural themes digitally on his computer. Rashid proposed tessellated topographies, 3-D geometrics and spaghetti stripes. Though the fluorescent inks he wanted weren't technically possible, lime green and Barbie pink were.

For every geometric, considering colour, scale and the relationship of object to background, there is a threshold where the abstractions begin to have some narrative content.

Rashid's patterns exist on the cusp of narrative.

People say his Rosetta paper reminds them of goldfish or flower buds. It's said that Replicant, his giant stripe, looks like a femur. But the heroic scale also gives the pattern its architectural presence in, say, a ballroom. 'A microscopic pattern in a large space,' Shaw says, 'is just going to look like paint.'

The company's newest collection is by Petra Blaisse, a Dutch designer known in architectural circles because of her association with Rem Koolhaas. Her trompe l'oeil patterns include wool threads as fat as caterpillars and photorealistic felt and fur. The startling realism of the patterns, Shaw says, gives them power as architectural tools. Perception and, ultimately, architectural space are tweaked by the illusion of a soft, spongy wall plane with space behind it. In breaking walls down visually, Blaisse has quietly moved wall coverings into the realm of phenomenology. Can mind-blowing patterns from Steven Holl or Zaha Hadid be far behind? 4