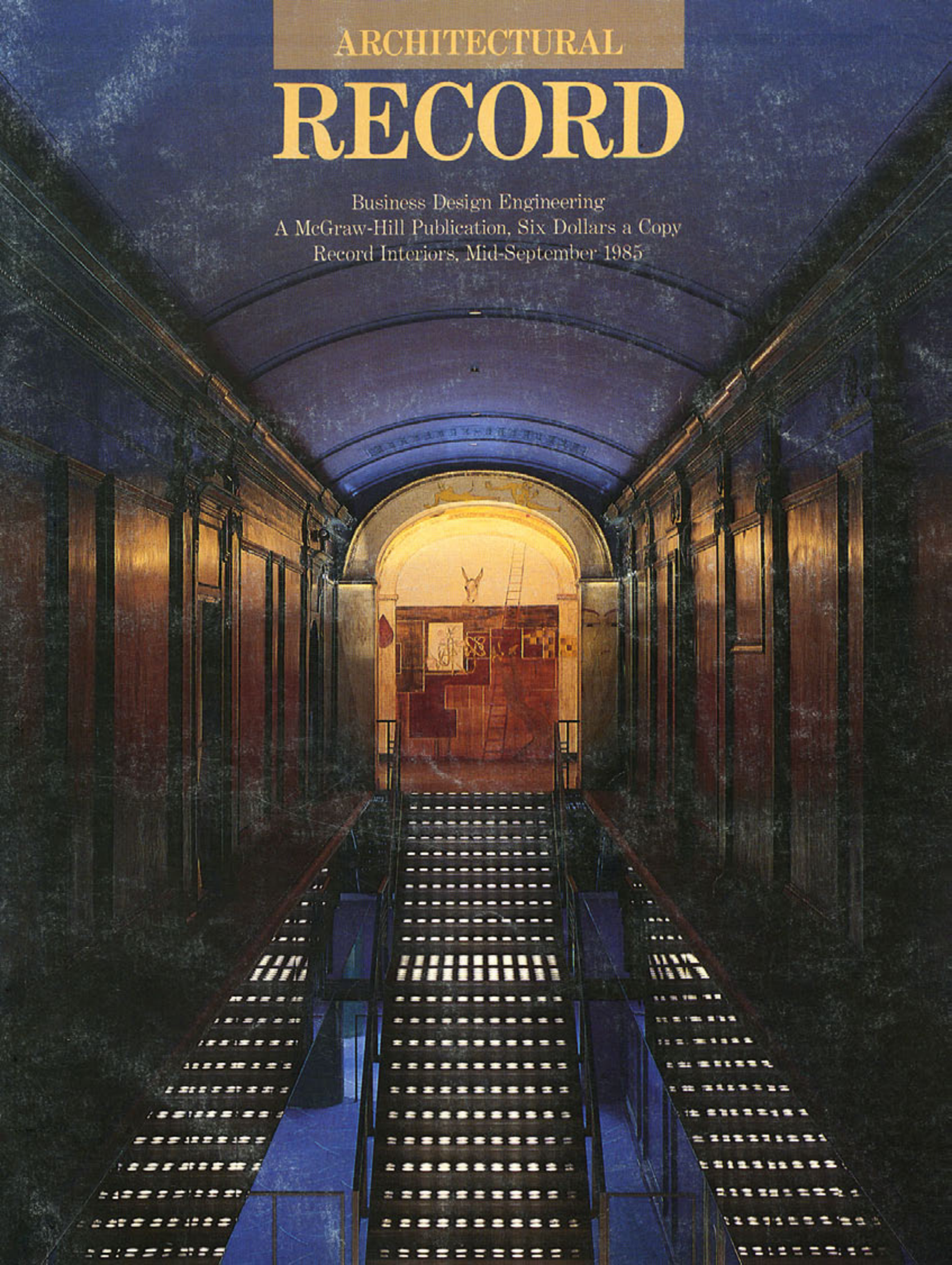

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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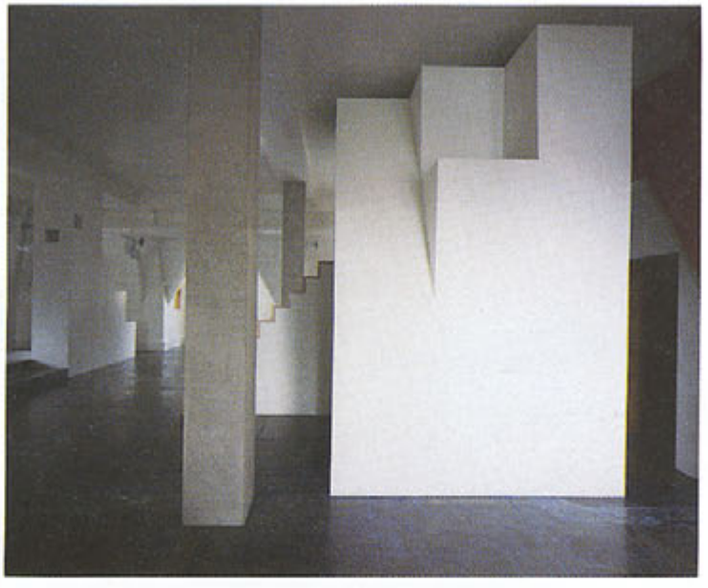
Great performances

Gillette Studio
New York City
Franklin D. Israel, Design Associates



It could be a stage lying in empty wait for the critical scene in some great drama; an abstract set through which the lone thespian paces while delivering his wrenching soliloquy. One can almost imagine the anguished Oedipus recounting his heinous crime here, or the delirious Lady Macbeth wringing her murderous hands and wailing. Endless though the theatrical possibilities may be, however, the only drama acted out in the Gillette Studio is the drama of Francis R. Gillette's life. If the setting appears to lend itself more readily to the performing arts than to the domestic, the owner will accept that judgment as evidence of a residential aspiration achieved. "I wanted to be a voyeur, a member of the audience . . . to have the sense of looking through a camera," recalls Gillette, who looked to Franklin Israel to make his dream house come true. While many of his colleagues would undoubtedly be nonplussed by the client's request, Israel was empathetic—having once abandoned his drafting lamp for the brighter lights of Hollywood, signing on with Paramount and later with Roger Vadim as a set designer. Though a disenchanted Israel ultimately returned to the fold—"in the end, it's just celluloid, and I'm more interested in tactile reality"—the experience served him well. When longtime friend Gillette called from New York to say that having tired of a "conventional" Park Avenue apartment he was ready to make a dramatic change, Israel was prepared for his part. Taking a leave of absence from home-base Los Angeles, the designer spent the next six months in Manhattan drawing, while Gillette looked over his shoulder to ensure that the esthetic accommodations suited the "artful existence" he envisioned leading.

While residential commissions necessarily invite more intense client involvement than others, this residential commission threatened to break new ground. Gillette is a strong-willed perfectionist with very definite ideas, and the eminent hair-and-makeup artist approached the design of his studio with the same do-or-die conviction with which he approached model/actress Lauren Hutton for Revlon's "Ultima" campaign. Brandishing a well-worn monograph on architect Luis Barragán's work, Gillette asked Israel to essentially *borrow* a few pages. Though Israel shares his client's admiration for the Mexican master's work (as who does not?), pastiche held understandably little allure. Especially considering the opportunity posed by the extraordinary 3,000-square-foot room at the top of a 1909 office building that Gillette purchased as the site for the "Barragán village" he specified. "No" was considered an unacceptable response to the proposal. And besides, Israel subscribes to the theory (considered quaint in certain circles) that architecture is a "service" profession, i.e., "a client should be given what he wants."

If, considering the circumstances, Israel's professional commitment seems to exclude his personal desire to create an original piece of architecture, a single image of the finished studio should end all speculation. By looking to the container in which he was working to help guide his hand in molding the powerful forms and planes he inserted into it, Israel was able to produce a design that steps out of the long shadow cast by its conceptual source. When vestigial fragments do appear—in the form of a stair and a fountain (following pages)—they are treated like a pair of familiar quotations that the careful writer flawlessly assimilates into his sentence—still identifiable, of course, but also fresh in their new environs. The highly textured materials the designer assembled and the vivid palette the client specified may appear far from home here in New York City, but their basic integrity and gutsy strength seem a fitting match for the great container. Similarly, the brute force of the tower's idiosyncratic roofline, which forms an almost overpowering umbrella, finds muscular counterpoint in the sculpted concrete fireplace (facing page) and stepped plaster pavilion (above)—two unabashedly inserted objects, clearly come to stay. If high on Israel's priority list was the "clear distinction between new architecture and old shell," he was not to be satisfied with simplistic juxtaposition. New and old effectively engage in an ongoing dialogue, in which there is tension but no animosity—since each is up to the strength, and to the task, of the other. Which means our drama has a happy ending. *Charles K. Gandee*

"I wanted to be able to bathe in the morning sunlight," somewhat wistfully recalls client Gillette, who insisted that designer Israel recreate Luis Barragán's famous fountain for the purpose (facing page). Though the familiar image of water spewing from the rough wall into a waiting pool is a long way from its source, it is also near magical. Smooth concrete steps lead the bather up to the pool, and also bring water cascading down into a waiting moat.

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Francis R. Gillette
Designer:
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Carpenter:
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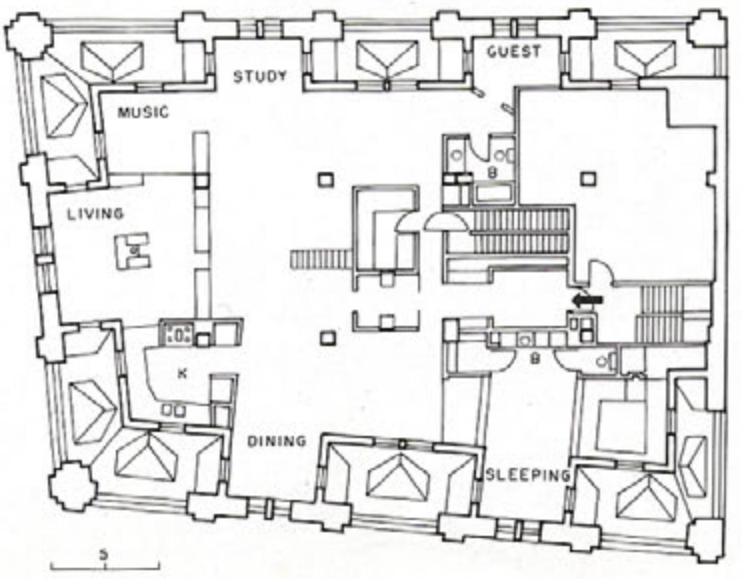
©Timothy Hursley

Though both client and designer admit to feeling intimidated by the rabbit warren of offices they first walked into almost five years ago, they found 16-foot ceilings, 360-degree views, and 3,000 square feet of space irresistible. Situated on the 31st floor of a 1909 office tower (turned cooperative apartments) in Manhattan's Financial District, the space's greatest assets (and character) lay hidden behind office partitions, dropped ceilings, linoleum floors, and a maze of hot water pipes. Designer Israel embarked on a pre-renovation "excavation" which, when completed, revealed the glorious promise within. Since bachelor Gillette's program did not call for conventional room arrangements, Israel was able to preserve much of the original character he found. (Some of the massive pipes were moved, of course, and all donned white vinyl coats.) Though the requisite living, dining, sleeping, and study areas do exist, they make their home in gabled alcoves around the perimeter (plan below), thus leaving the central space open—save, of course, for the "house" Israel built in the "house." The lathe-and-plaster pavilion contains a darkroom, as well as a "private chamber" on its second floor (facing page). To counter the potential disorienting effect of the "open" plan, i.e., to ensure that the "studio" not be experienced as a "loft," Israel established strong, formal axes and symmetries. Witness, for example, the entry sequence (plan below): visitors are guided through a photo-gallery vestibule, across a cross-axial alternative route (photo right), and continue on through a second, chapel-like vestibule carved into the new "house"; once they've slid the wooden gate open, they enter onto a mottled cobalt-blue concrete "stage."