



Where the Pros Shop

At a mall you've probably never visited, designers buy exquisite furnishings at wholesale prices for high-calibre clients — and increasingly, you can, too.

BY SEAN SCULLY, PHOTOS BY MIKE MERGEN

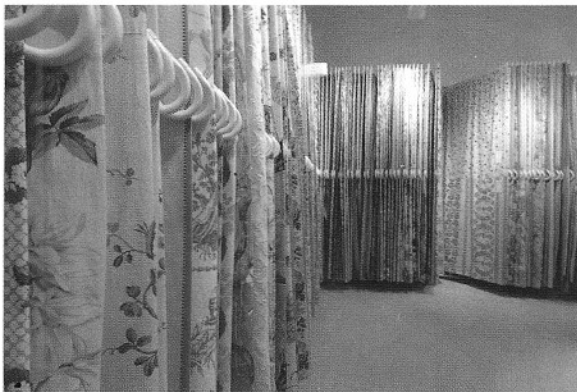
Behind a plain, discreet marquee at Market and 24th streets is a strange sort of shopping center that most Philadelphians will never see.

Inside, in what was once an auto factory and later a department store warehouse, are three floors of glass-fronted stores displaying the latest in high-fashion furniture, fabric and decorations. The atmosphere is quiet, almost churchlike, with sounds of footsteps from the few customers lost on the endless carpet and high industrial ceilings.

What's more, most of these stores don't really want shoppers from off the street. Many have signs by the door, warning the public off with the cryptic phrase "to the trade only."

This odd world is, in fact, what's known as a design center, one of perhaps two dozen around the country that cater to architects and interior designers looking for high-end products for their clients.

"It's such a large concentration of better furniture, carpet and merchandise," said interior designer Joseph Picardo, who has been using the mall, known as the Marketplace Design Center, for more than 30 years and still goes in about four times a week.



"When you're working on a project, and you're putting a color scheme together, you can run from one showroom to another, to collect the best of the fabrics and the best selections, or if you're looking to coordinate fabric to carpet, to an area rug, it's just there," Picardo says. "It's a good concentration of the best that's available."

The Marketplace Design Center leans heavily toward fabric stores, though it has furniture and carpet showrooms as well, about 50 showrooms in all. While the names are likely unfamiliar to the public, they would be well known to design professionals and their clients: Baker Knapp & Tubbs, Scalmandre, Hamilton House and many others. About half are showrooms run by national companies and the rest are local firms that represent multiple manufacturers.

The Marketplace Design Center has about 50 showrooms for fabric, furnishings and carpet under one roof, making it convenient for designers to mix and match.

"The main thing is everybody's together under one roof so it makes it a lot easier for designers when they're looking for products ... it makes it easier for everybody," says John Croce, owner of three

showrooms in the design center featuring several fabric lines.

Like other design centers, however, the Philadelphia center gradually is becoming more receptive to non-industry consumers, says General Manager Annette Sharkey Beavers. A few of the stores will now allow customers to come in off the street to browse, as long as they check in at the front desk and get a guest pass. A few will even allow direct retail purchases, although most still require that any actual purchases be made by a designer.

Most of the center's showrooms, however, still cater only to professionals.

"None of the fabric showrooms participate" in the guest pass program, Sharkey Beavers says. "The reason is not that they're snobby or don't want to deal with the consumer. The reason is that fabric showrooms are overwhelming. Show-

rooms are not staffed for waiting on more than a couple of people at a time. If I don't have a decorator or designer with me, I don't know which of those fabrics goes on my chairs or windows. I really don't and they don't have the time to deal with it."

Even those that allow outside customers don't have a lot of extra people around to deal with inquiries. Most of the showrooms are staffed by one, perhaps two, workers and are set up only to deal with designers who know what they are doing.

The best way for regular folks to get inside the center is to come along with a designer. More and more designers bring their customers along to preview fabrics or furnishings, Sharkey Beavers says.

Still, the atmosphere is remarkably different than a retail shopping mall. Where a mall might be thronged with customers, the design center might host only a handful of designers at one time, rarely as many as 100 over the course of a day. The designers tend to come in and spend all day looking at products, talking with staff, and studying catalogs.

Marketing Director Gerry Cipolla found the quiet atmosphere disconcerting when she came to the design center after a career working for retail malls.

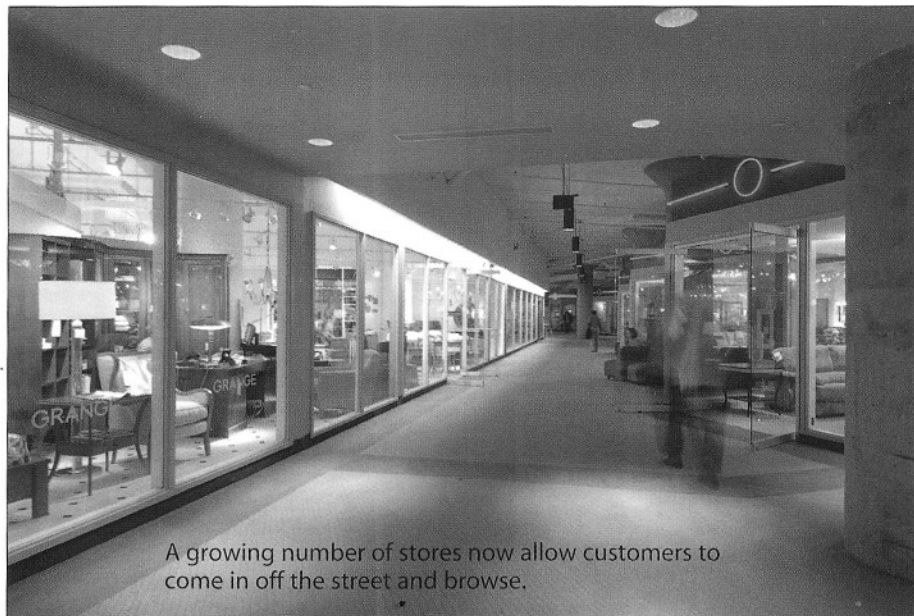
"I'd think 'Oh my god — are we going out of business? Am I going to have a job a month from now,'" she says, recalling her

puzzlement at seeing the nearly empty halls. "But we have to understand that the designer coming into the building may also be working by phone, fax, Internet. And a single designer can bring \$1 million in business to a particular showroom easily within a year."

The Internet has changed the business since the design center opened in 1974. Designers and customers can get much of the information they need online, and even in some cases order high-end products electronically.

But, designers say, there will always be a need for some place like the design center, where you can look at a real product, measure it, touch it, and see how it looks under various lights and in combination with various fabrics.

"The Internet is great but there is nothing like being able to feel the fabric and touch the nap and get that dimension



A growing number of stores now allow customers to come in off the street and browse.

that you just don't get on the screen of the computer," says Philadelphia-based interior designer Mary Ann Kleschick. "That's what you're selling. That's what you're offering the client. People use the same words: I want it elegant; I want it comfortable; I want it relaxing; I want friends to be at home here. It's hard to feel that on the Internet."

The staff isn't too worried about com-

likely that most Philadelphians would recognize the exterior instantly, although they probably don't know what goes on inside.

The side of the Design Center faces out on the Schuylkill River and is plainly visible from West Philadelphia — and it happens to be the site of the famous mural of a whale and other fish.

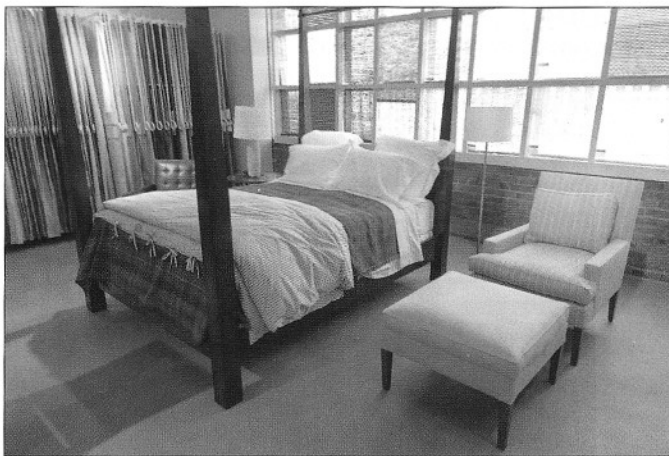
The painting is there almost by accident, Sharkey Beavers says.

In 1993, city officials called the Design Center and said that well-known artist Robert Wyland was on a tour of the country, painting murals of whales to highlight his favorite environmental cause and he wanted to use the blank wall of the Design Center. Despite some initial doubts, the Design Center's management and ownership — mostly a pension fund in England — agreed, and Wyland showed up for a one-week event.

"We felt that our ownership wouldn't want it," Sharkey Beavers says. "Fortunately, we did get them to do it and it was a wonderful week here... He came with calendars, pictures, sculptures that were \$5,000, \$10,000, jewelry, T-shirts, hats. Everything in the world."

The painting, while still in decent condition, is beginning to show some signs of wear. Wyland had said he would come back and fix it up, Sharkey Beavers says, and she is preparing to ask him if he will help maintain it.

Who knows, she says, "he might come back with his whole entourage and his stuff...it was a great week. It was wonderful. We had more people than we've ever had, buying gold whale tales, calendars and books. It was great." ■



petition from the Internet either. As long as high-end customers continue to use interior designers, there will always be a market for design centers.

"There is a certain level of customer who is accustomed to using a designer," Cipolla says. "And they'll only use a designer..."

They trust the designers. They trust their taste. Truly the designer's job is there to save them the legwork."

Curiously, as unfamiliar as the interior of the Design Center is to the public, it is