



Wexler Gallery's new home in Philadelphia is a reified industrial-modern hybrid

Pennsylvania-based DIGSAU's transformation of a former pretzel factory into an expansive new gallery featuring a flagship outlet and office spaces speaks of a marriage of aesthetics.

by [Anmol Ahuja](#) | Published on : Nov 06, 2023

The question of adaptive reuse, or that of spatial transformation and a reformed genesis of utility within a pre-existing structural framework, begets a pointed understanding of the extent to which the 'original' or its essential character may be retained in the 'new'. More importantly, how an existing syntax lends itself to a

radically new one sans a skeletal reformation, or the proverbial old making way for the new, is increasingly relevant in understanding architectural adaptive reuse. In that sense, adaptability in architecture is not far from the Darwinian hypothesis on evolution. In the ever-evolving echelon of real estate of which most contemporary buildings have to learn to unwittingly be part of, adaptability (rationing to adaptive reuse) or the ease with which an architecture *adapts* to a new programme, even if in entirely new forms, remains core to the language of sustainable development. That alone seems to be the reason that most industrial structures the world over, either remnants of a machinic heritage that no longer remains functional or feasible, or of migration beyond city limits as it continues to expand, lend themselves readily to a wide gamut of spatial programs and purposes, regardless of a rather preeminent aesthetic and formal language. The flexibility of space in the most didactic terms outweighs other considerations by a vast margin. As in the case of the Wexler Gallery with its new base in the Fishtown-Kensington community of Philadelphia—moving from the Old City to a buzzing corridor replete with retail, art, and commercial avenues—the only way forward for a second life for structures seems to be by a juxtaposition, a hybridisation.



The design features an open-air plan with a large central atrium favoured by natural light and air
Image: Courtesy of Halkin Mason Photography

Spread across a sizeable 11,500 sq.ft., the reformed design scheme by DIGSAU breathes new life into a former pretzel factory, re-codifying the spatial syntax of a quintessentially industrial setting, into one of a space for art and community. This is characterised by an open floor plan favoured by the free movement of air and light, forming the ground for the gallery's curated display of works from artists including Jomo Tariku, Andreea Avram Rusu, Valerie Campos, Henry Bermudez, Trish DeMasi, Gulla Jónsdóttir, Feyza Kemahiloglu, Edward McHugh, Greg Nangle, Malcolm Mobutu Smith, Eric Slayton, Mami Kato, and Patrick Weder, among others.



The schematics of a former pretzel factory fit well for the art gallery and its display spaces, according to the architects
Image: Courtesy of Halkin Mason Photography

A direct manifestation of the open floor plan, the central atrium topped by the gallery's gorgeous restored timber gabled roof greets visitors to the primary display space on the ground floor and is perhaps the most readily translatable element from an industrial setting to its modern setting for display of art. "The spatial schematics of a pretzel factory and, we think, of many industrial spaces are quite well suited for the display of art," states Jamie Unkefer of DIGSAU, in conversation with STIR. The studio further utilised the large structural bays, high ceilings, and clerestory windows that were presumably lined along the second floor with the major industrial production processes—all staples of industrial space—to their advantage in the new design. Apart from the proportions being suitable, both in an aesthetic and structural sense, these elements lent clear avenues for the experience of diverse media across scales. "The possibilities for adapting pre-war industrial space for the creation and experience of art has become an increasingly relevant part of the conversation about the nature of contemporary gallery space," Unkefer continues.



"The design seeks to create a strong dialogue between the rich texture and materiality of the existing structure with the clean, planar surfaces for art display," states Jamie Unkefer of DIGSAU

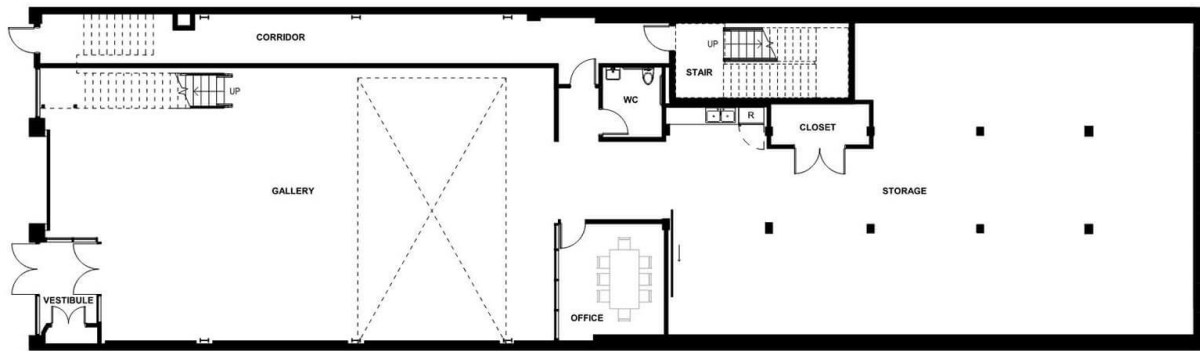
Image: Courtesy of Halkin Mason Photography

A particularly remarkable, eclectic spot within the new space is the stairway core leading up to the offices on the first floor, earmarked near its entrance by Andreea Avram Rusu's exquisite *Botanica* chandelier, suspended craftily from the wooden ceiling. The core is defined by a veritable contrast between a carefully engineered steel framed staircase with wooden landings, and the slightly unfinished texture of the walls enclosing it. A similar contrast in materiality, and a juxtaposition of aesthetical sensibility between the industrial and modern, the 'old' and the 'new' applies to the rest of the building, wherein DIGSAU take careful measures to preserve and to innovate in requisite pockets.



The staircase near the entrance is earmarked by the Botanica chandelier by Andreea Avram Rusu
Image: Courtesy of Halkin Mason Photography

"The design seeks to create a strong dialogue between the rich texture and materiality of the existing structure with the clean, planar surfaces for art display," Unkefer comments on the aforementioned juxtaposition and contrast. True to the organisational blueprint of the industrial structure and space, the team at DIGSAU retained a series of steel columns and beams, presumably added later to the building, creating the spatial programme of the gallery around it. While the building's history comes alive in the selectively exposed plaster walls in the interior that aid in art display, and the heavily textured masonry walls that form the gallery building's facade, the existing timber frame on the other hand was carefully restored and sandblasted to bring out its richness, creating a material palette that complements the conceptual spine of the project.



Wexler Gallery: Ground Floor Plan

Image: Courtesy of DIGSAU

Wexler Gallery co-founders Sherri Apter Wexler and Lewis Wexler share in the gallery's exploration of the relationship between craft and [fine arts](#), and its new home amidst a thriving art-centric community in Fishtown. "Philadelphia is a magnet for arts and culture, and we are thrilled to move into this expansive new space to give our artists' work the perfect backdrop to showcase their talents," states Sherri Wexler in an official release. In a similar vein, the more conceptual juxtaposition of the building's context and the very nature of a contemporary gallery space or a space for the display of the arts, comes alive here in dynamic, near perennial dialogue.