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- [AIANY](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
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- [Write the Editor](#)
  
- [Reports from the Field](#)
  
- [Editor's Soapbox](#)
- [In The News](#)
- [Around the AIA + Center for Architecture](#)
- [Names in the News](#)
  
- [Rhetorically Speaking](#)
  
- [Preview: AIA Guide to NYC](#)
  
- [Conversation](#)
- [eOn the Scene](#)
- [In Response](#)
- [AIANY Membership Report](#)
  
- [New Deadlines](#)
- [On View](#)
  - [At the Center for Architecture](#)
  - [About Town](#)
- [eCalendar](#)
- [PIE](#)

## [Reports from the Field](#)

### [common room Takes Uncommon Approach to Design](#)

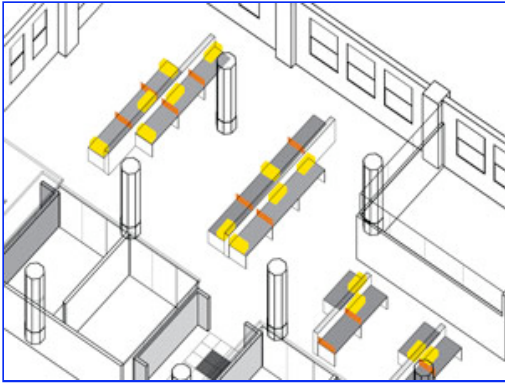
By Murrye Bernard, LEED AP

**Event:** New Practices New York 2008, common room: 5 Obstructions (for Architecture)

**Location:** Häfele New York Showroom, 01.22.09

**Speakers:** Todd Rouhe, Maria Ibanez, & Lars Fischer — Principals, common room

**Organizer:** AIA New Practices Committee



NYFA Offices.

common room

The New Practices Winners Symposium last October left me wondering if common room, did, in fact, practice architecture (See “[New Practices Preview: Six New Firms in Five Slides](#),” e-Oculus, 02.28.08). It turns out they DO practice architecture. Firm principals Todd Rouhe, Maria Ibanez, and Lars Fischer discussed the firm’s work, philosophy, and interests. Their presentation was structured by a series of five statements that summarize their practice:

*1) Appropriate the Everyday*

Before beginning design, common room carefully evaluates the daily routines of future users. In the case of office space for the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), common room noticed that workers were using potted plants to form privacy screens. In their design they provided built-in planters and an open framework for hanging plants and climbing vines.

*2) Never Finish*

Common room sees architecture as an interconnected process where ideas blend from one project to the next. The podium they designed for the New Practices New York Exhibition at the Center for Architecture was adapted for their exhibition at the Häfele Showroom, for example.

*3) Share Space*

Because NYC forces people to share close quarters, common room creates “hybrid spaces.” In the design for CANADA, a gallery in the Lower East Side, a simple table acts as a mediator between public display and functional workspace. Gallerists did not want a typical “white box” gallery, so common room chose to expose the gallery’s operations making them “as important as the display of art.” True to their name, the large table in common room’s own office allows everyone to participate on one level in everything that happens in the firm.

*4) Include Difference*

When programming 30,000-square-foot floor plates of the Lehigh Liberty Center, an eight-story warehouse in Newark, common room had to consolidate two divergent programs on the same floor. Storage facilities are situated at the center with flexible office space lining the perimeter. While it is an efficient layout and profitable for the owner, this strategy is also better for neighborhood, Rouhe believes.

*5) Don't be New*

While “innovation” is a key word that comes to mind with New Practices, common room argues that designers shouldn’t “be new for the sake of the new.” At NYFA, common room reused existing light fixtures as a money-saving precaution. While this limited the plan, they were still able to achieve special moments such as the aforementioned screens and planters.

Common room looks to historical examples for organization, values, and ideals — not just form. And while technology is

often a driver of modern form, common room is instead “interested in the boundaries of institutional space.” This is evident in their presentation, which lacked digital renderings. They portray their work through simple, rational program diagrams and photos of built projects.

The next NPNY lecture, given by David Wallance Architect, will be 02.12.09. Go to the [AIANY calendar](#) for more information.

Murrye Bernard, LEED AP, is a designer with TEK Architects and has written for *Architectural Record*, *Architecture Boston*, and *Architectural Lighting*.

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