Open Space Planning is Rapidly Gaining New Markets

What is office landscape? It’s a new approach to interior office space planning that is destined to put the wall and ceiling contractor as we know him today OUT OF BUSINESS.

Sounds a bit severe, doesn’t it?

Nevertheless, many contractors today are hearing that the reason they are not getting the amount of wall work they used to get on a typical job is that the owner has gone to “Office Landscape” or the “Open Plan”.

There was a time when the town blacksmith wondered why he was shoeing fewer horses. The reason was a little more obvious to the blacksmith than the reason for the decline in wall work is to the contractor.

It is quite interesting to note that there are some similarities between the attitudes of some of the old blacksmiths and some of today’s contractors.

There were those blacksmiths who said “Those contraptions (automobiles) won’t last”; “It’s only a fad” etc., etc. Remember the stories about the horse and buggy riders passing broken down automobiles yelling “Get a horse!”? (I must admit I haven’t heard of any contractors walking through office areas that weren’t performing satisfactorily and yelling “Get some walls!”)

Well, there have been contractors questioning whether the “office landscape” or “open plan” will last, or whether it’s just a fad. If you want to know the truth, there are many office inhabitants, office managers, and office planners with experience in some “office land-

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scape” or “open plan” installations who are yelling “Get some walls!”

Those broken down Model “T” automobiles had their problems and eventually production techniques, quality control and consumer demand straightened them out. I think you should know that we’re over ten years into the “office landscape” or “open plan”, and those three things—production techniques, quality control and consumer demand—are starting to straighten out the initial problems that surfaced in this new concept of interior office space planning.

If your believe projections, the furniture industry is projecting that over 50% of future buys for new installations will be going into some form of “open plan” space.

The discouraging thing about all of this is—most contractors don’t actually know what “office landscape” or “open plan” really is. The contractor shouldn’t feel alone, however; Many people who “think they have it” simply don’t. It’s not really as simple as “what you see is what you get.” It’s more like what you see is only the “tip of the iceberg”. Let’s put a couple of terms straight.

OFFICE LANDSCAPE is a planning process, that when carried to completion results in a highly efficient, highly productive, extremely functional and continually flexible office environment created for specific individuals in which to perform the specific tasks necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of a managing organization.

OPEN PLAN IS A RESULTANT ENVIRONMENT where compromises, omissions or errors in the above process bring forth a still acceptable solution (most times).

Let’s simplify all the jargon. Today’s office environments are really starting to get the “professional planning” attention the factory environment has been getting for years. The reason? Same as in the factory, it’s too expensive to do things in a haphazard manner. We think it ridiculous for a factory worker to have to walk across the room everytime he needs a piece of raw stock from inventory to put into his machine. Is it any more ridiculous than having an office worker walk across the room to get a file folder five times a day so the material inside can be referenced?

No matter how you state it—effi-
ciency is productivity, productivity is profit and profit is the goal and objective of any company managing organization. When you relate this to the individual in an office performing his or her tasks, efficiency and/or productivity is affected by the interior environment. The physical environment, the psychological environment, and the social environment all play an important part in the motivation and support for a worker performing tasks.

In today's office world, flexibility is the key to many doors that formerly were never opened. Today, tasks change frequently, equipment must respond to the task change, workers change, a company's goals and objectives change—and the environment must accommodate it all. The structural requirements change and even the physical limitations change—and the environment must accommodate it all. There is a demand for flexibility in the environment.

A simplified partitioning plan to eliminate the "Bull Pen" effect.

Sure we've always had flexibility—"bolt down" walls, telephone and power raceways with "flexible" access points, dollies to move furniture around, etc. The problem is: "bolt down" walls aren't really that flexible. And under floor raceways aren't really that accessible.

And you know what else isn't really that flexible? The buck! Have you checked out the flexibility of the

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dollar these days? Let’s try to move a fixed ceiling high (contractor installed) wall in an office today. And in doing so let’s consider its flexibility and its cost. You knew sooner or later we had to get around to cost. Regardless of how we get there flexibility in fixed wall environments is a function of labor, which today is high cost.

Enter the “open plan”. Truly moveable walls—truly moveable power and telephone distribution systems—and move labor—not skilled labor. Put these all together with a reasonably good management and administration structure and the office environment begins to provide flexibility at reasonable cost.

To move one fixed wall office from one location to another can cost $8.00 to $17.00 per square foot, require two to three separate labor trades and take two to six weeks to clear the paper work. To move one “moveable” office from one location to another can cost $0.15 to $0.45 per square foot, require an unskilled move team and take thirty minutes. “Open plan” flexibility and reduced costs.

I am sorry to say that’s only part of the story, however. Remember the broken down Model “T” automobile? We have a lot of broken down “office landscape” and “open plan” installations. And yes many are going back to the fixed (contractor installed) offices. Not necessarily the old dry wall...

This space division creates an open unconfined feeling by using partially glazed panels.

Ceiling height glass minimizes obstructions and is more suitable for work situations requiring visual supervision.
though—there are new products in the market.

Not everybody was sleeping while we were playing around with “office landscape”. The new “fixed wall” environments do have more mobility and flexibility than the old “plaster board” applications. I indicated earlier that production techniques, quality control and consumer demand were starting to straighten out some of the initial problems. I’ll be more specific.

Production techniques and product innovation have created a whole myriad of options for the office planner to consider when he/she looks for a solution to enclosure problems. There are screens acoustic, screens aesthetic, high, low, wide, thick, thin, heavy, light, expensive, inexpensive and on and on. There are panels of all kinds with and without lights, furniture, etc., etc. There are even ceiling high variations of all the above.

Quality control has opened new doors to new experts—acoustics, lighting, HVAC, psychology. The past ten years have provided the proving grounds, laboratories if you will, where performance in all of

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these areas is now controllable, predictable and in most cases—measurable.

Consumer demand has been heightened by the need for flexibility and the pressure of escalating labor costs. The corporate marketplace has turned into a frenzied conglomeration of sellers, buyers, speculators, losers and winners, rich and poor—all forcing supplier companies to maintain flexible positions with economic balance (that means keeping the costs down).

How specifically does all of this affect the problems in the "office landscape" or "open plan"? It's easier to look back now and identify the problem areas. The areas are fairly well defined. My personal punch list on a project where the failure of "office landscape" was extreme goes like this:

1. Lack of management understanding and commitment to the planning process.
2. Extreme compromises in:
   a. space allocation to the tasks
   b. acoustic treatment
   c. special equipment
3. Lack of commitment to an administrative management function
4. Failure to properly indoctrinate, educate and accommodate the office and support personnel relative to the project scope.

If you look at these items you can readily see that none is impossible to correct. Furthermore, and this is the distressing thing to a space planner, returning to the conventional office arrangement does not correct any of these problems. Putting up fixed offices does not make the problems go away.

In reality, the sophistication of acoustical planning coupled with good task analysis and space planning can provide better privacy without a typical fixed wall environment. Good management and prompt response operating in a flexible environment can generate more productivity than a typical fixed wall environment.

What is office landscape?

I'll tell you how you should be answering this question if you've followed all the thoughts above. Office landscape and open plan are a process and a solution that are slowly changing the shape, configuration and physical structure of the interior office environment. Office landscape is a process that when carried to completion in an office project will result in a minimum of fixed interior walls, maximum flexibility of all office elements and a commitment to functional solutions in acoustics, lighting and their related structures.

In short, Mr. Contractor, the horse is always going to be around, but there are going to be one hell of a lot of cars on the road too!

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Robert D. Vrancken, a professional designer, is actively involved in product design and development, interior architecture, facility design and space planning projects.

A teacher and lecturer who has gained experience while associated with Smith Corona Marchant, General Motors, the Sperry Univac division of Sperry Rand and as a freelance design consultant, he is heavily involved in environmental standards research and facility acquisition design coordination. His work includes the development and implementation within the corporation of standards for furniture, color, carpet, wall systems and lighting. He has been actively involved as a Senior Associate of Office Environment Research Associates Incorporated, and its efforts to provide an education oriented source for environmental problem analysis.)