The famous poet, Robert Frost, had a strong opinion—even if he didn't have office people in mind.

"Something there is, “Frost wrote, “that doesn’t love a wall . . .”

The line is from Frost’s poem, Mending Wall, and it succeeds in capturing the spirit of open-office planning. That’s where old-fashioned walls give way to streamlined cubicles and enclosures that can be imported piecemeal and erected on the spot.

This new kind of office landscaping is one of the most exciting and visible trends in office decor in the past decade.

The Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries—International went for the open office technique when it set up new offices at 25 K Street, NE, Washington, D.C.

More and more architects and office design teams are creating office environments that are geared toward the changes expected in the modern workplace through the upcoming decades.

Today’s economic climate demands that companies plan ahead for these changes so that any future adaptations in office space can be accomplished with a minimum of time and expense. Such planning becomes particularly important when you consider, for example, that the cost of relocating a single employee’s work area today in conventionally planned space can be as high as $400 to $800. Like everything else, this price is going up and up.

The pressure is on to develop more flexible office spaces. That’s why demountable and moveable partitioning has taken off so in the past 10 years since it was imported from Germany. The Germans, given the task of rebuilding quickly with quality came up with the concept of Bürotäfelensamkeit (literally “office landscaping”), as a technique to expand office space yet keep it flexible enough for quick change.

North American designers took the concept a step further and connected the panels so that desks, shelves, electrical and communications wiring and
Several surveys done in the U.S. and Canada predict that by 1985 half of all new office developments there will be using more open and flexible systems.

all of the outlets could be built into the units. Several surveys done in the U.S. and Canada predict that by 1985 half of all new office developments there will be using more open and flexible systems.

Encouraging this trend is the accelerated growth in sophisticated business machines and telecommunications equipment that is already yielding a strong impact on the way offices are designed.

The projected electronic inventory list for the next decade alone is awesome, including such machinery as voice activated typewriters, image printers, intelligent copiers and personal CRT’s (that’s a fancy word for a TV tube) and computer data banks.

Unless architectural and interior systems are integrated to accommodate this equipment, needless expenditures can result later on. This means that not only must the appropriate wiring set-ups, structural supports and power apparatus be in place, but that these must be easily accessible for adjustment as new machines are added.

What makes this such an attractive marketing opportunity for wall and ceiling contractors is the other built-in growth factors. The expected increase in the number of white-collar workers is influencing, too, the design and use of office space.

Nearly one-half of the 104.3 million civilian work force projected for 1988 will be white-collars, along with more than one-half of the 16 million new jobs in the coming decade, according to Buildings Magazine.

Many interior planners believe the office environment will assume a role of key importance as business managers look for ways to stimulate productivity among this new class of better-educated workers.

Productivity Emphasis

As the nation struggles to bind up its economic wounds, the emphasis among these workers will be on productivity, and, increasingly, that productivity is likely to be tied to the working environment.

To this end, architectural schooling is turning to innovative office plans which are designed to foster produc-
tivity—and the architects are turning to competent construction leaders to provide the installation skills and technology. Among the systems that a modern wall and ceiling contractor must have competence is in the sophisticated open landscaping arrangements which are engineered to promote efficiency and constructive interaction through the use of strategic “blind corner,” acoustical control devices, “white sound” masking and other noise abaters.

If the present trend continues, more and more companies can be expected to adopt such open floor plans in the decades ahead.

High on the list of today’s forward-thinking planners is consideration of the availability of office space itself. As construction costs continue to mount, and the number of new projects slows, office space will be at a premium, with the cost per square foot possibly doubling by the end of the decade.

More than ever before business managers will look to the long term in planning their office facilities. Some will move to new locations with a built-in capacity for growth and change; others will opt to renovate their existing facilities.

Whatever the case, these managers will be wise-and mostly willing-to engage a construction team with a sound record of projects completed on time and within budget.

Errors in construction planning and scheduling can add up to weighty sums, and it is therefore important to hire an experienced construction manager who can plan and direct the project from the beginning.

Many wall and ceiling contractors have shied away somewhat from this new office partitioning approach on the understandable grounds that furniture people—indeed, even the architects and designers themselves—have a lock on the panel and equipment provision. That is, these people are not only doing the designing and the planning, but they are providing and installing, with their own teams, the materials.

Not so, say many building owners. “When we hire an architect or designer to layout and plan an office area, that’s all we want. Truth is, we’d prefer to do business with a contractor who can provide the layout
work-and then do the installation. We feel we get a better job-and a cheaper price.”

If the projected growth materializes, then the phrase, “corporate maze,” will take on a whole new meaning-because a maze is usually the first impression one gets of an open system, with its twisting fabric-paneled corridors and cul-de-sac offices.

A person can see the other side of the room, but isn’t just quite sure how to get there.

The maze, though, has highly practical aspects. “It’s possible to get 20%-30% more usable office floor space,” says one wall and ceiling contractor. “That’s because you start to use the vertical space above the desk level with the help of frontal and overhead storage capacity built into the retaining walls and desks.

“Instead of square feet, your living space should really be measured by its cubic dimensions.”

Demountables Grow

While open office planning is one way to go, the conventional moveable or demountable floor-to-ceiling panel is growing in popularity, too.

“Office landscaping and open offices are not the same thing,” one architect emphasizes pointedly. “Open offices are merely one kind of office landscaping.

“You get your cake and eat it, too, with demountable partitions. Many people, frankly, don’t like all that openness . . . they want privacy.

“Demountable partitions can provide that . . . they can provide the sense of enclosure and privacy that is so highly desired in so many cases-and they can do it at a price which is but a fraction of the standard, conventional wall.”

What makes the demountable such a viable alternative, too, is the construction advantages it offers while work is going on. Panels and sections can be brought up the elevator in a high-rise building, carried into a working office space and put into place with a minimum of fuss.

The opposite is just as easy. Wall partitions can be removed, moved to another location, and the daily office routine can go on with either operation getting in the way of the other.

All in all, demountables are a coming force, growing rapidly as new approaches to office space partitioning develops. For the enterprising wall and ceiling contractor, it’s getting late, but there is still time to cast a long, concentrated look at the potential in this growing business.