In the eyes of corporate America, traditional fixed wall construction may become as obsolete as typewriters and carbon copies.

Rapid growth and the arrival of computer technologies have forced corporations to seek more flexible work environments that can change as they change. Fixed wall construction, with its apparent reconstruction costs and inconveniences, is today being replaced by movable walls (also known as demountable or relocatable partitions). It’s an inevitable trend that by 1990 may involve nearly 50-60% of all interior walls installed in commercial buildings, a startling forecast considering just four years ago 80-85% of the commercial walls were fixed wall installations.

To many in the construction industry, movable walls may seem an overnight occurrence, when in truth, the movable wall concept began in the 1950s. Its growth was slowed by the advent of the open plan (or open landscape) office system in the 1970s, which at the time was considered the ultimate solution to work space flexibility and productivity.

For all the desired benefits of reduced energy and relocation costs, savings in floor space and shorter depreciation allowances for the
owners, open plan offices are expensive to install (usually $200-$700 per lineal foot) and have had a negative influence on overall productivity. Employee complaints about the lack of visual and acoustical privacy, increases in noise and distractions, and a loss of prestige in a non-private office plan forced corporations to take another look at the “benefits.”

No doubt, these problems coupled with the constant state of corporate change has created a dilemma for building owners, facilities managers and architects/designers, who, as Buildings Magazine reported, are now attracted by the benefits of movable wall system, which is “unilaterally acclaimed as the trend of the future . . .”

Industry Impact . . .

Granted, the dilemmas of corporations may not be the primary interests of the inside contractor nor will they affect every contractor. Yet for those whose livelihood has depended upon commercial renovation or new construction, the movable wall trend will at some point have a more measurable impact.

As an example: Ten years ago, J.D. Flaherty, vice president and one of two owners of Construction Systems, Inc., Columbus, Ohio, would never have thought movable wall systems would become a trend in corporate office facilities. “In fact, there were many times we changed the specifications for movable wall systems to regular fixed drywall,” he admits. “We just didn’t see a viable market for it.”

Yet in February, Construction Systems (a member of AWCI) completed one of its largest installations of a full-height movable wall system for Vantage Properties, the nation’s eighth largest commercial property developer.

(Editor’s note: Mr. Stephens, a World War II veteran and former marine, began his career with Gold Bond in 1953 as sales representative for the northwest Georgia territory, became sales manager of the Memphis district in 1962 and of the Atlanta district in 1966, and assumed his present position in 1980. He is a 1951 graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology in ceramic engineering.)
Xerox headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia combines full ceiling height panels with movable partitions to maximize employee productivity.

The $3 million, 116,000 square foot renovation project in Columbus, Ohio initially involved 4300 lineal feet of movable wall system. And in less than six months another 225 feet of new material plus 35 feet of partition relocation were ordered. There was also the opportunity to train the company’s maintenance staff to handle future changes.

Since becoming an acoustical and specialty contractor four years ago, the firm reports that it has installed approximately 8,000 lineal feet of movable wall system in an area just becoming aware of the concept.

To Mr. Flaherty, the favorable ratio of material to labor he could achieve with movable wall installation persuaded his company to become involved. “The economics of the system call the shots,” he said. “With movable wall systems, the return is far greater than the risks.”

The Columbus project, excluding door and window installation, was a profitable 1 to 1 ratio. The ratio, including doors and windows, was 1.22 to 1, a ratio that has even approached 1.5 to 1 on other projects.

Another key benefit to contractors has been their ability to negotiate, rather than bid, the work for a project. Movable wall contractors are able to offer a complete installation package, involving all components—studs, track, door frames, all hardware, drywall panels and trim accessories—which means more bottomline profits than before.

From the owner’s perspective, the interior space can be finished in less time, with less hassle and fewer crews.

And if the owner or specifier already prefers a particular system over another, he is less concerned about minor price differences than oftentimes can win or lose a contract.

Most manufacturers have intensive on-site training programs and provide support material to help the contractors sell the system to the owners and specifiers. Some manufacturers will also train the contractor’s estimators. In effect, the contractor is viewed as an extension of the manufacturer’s “sales force” and receives top consideration.

Wherever movable wall systems are installed, there is also the opportunity for additional work for the partition contractor. Movable walls may need repositioning from time to time, and corporations may opt to have the partition contractor, rather than their own maintenance crews, make the changes.

Additional partitions and materials may also need ordering. Many partition contractors, anticipating reorders as well as new projects, often stock components of the movable wall systems to insure immediate deliveries.
and turnaround. In some instances, the client may want to store his own com-
ponents and panels for future changes.

Key Benefits . . .

Not all movable wall systems are alike, but those that rank at the top provide ease of installation, demount-
ability and minimal waste of time and material. For the general contractor, they also eliminate the time-consuming and costly job of coordinating the ef-
forts of carpet contractors, drywall contractors, paint contractors and other labor sources.

Actual field tests have proven that a ceiling-height movable wall system can be installed, removed, repositioned and reused for a cost many times less than that of a conventional fixed wall or open office system. Some system panels can be removed in less than one minute.

Movable wall systems are also more “forgiving” than fixed drywall systems—meaning field mistakes in-
volving movable wall systems only result in time to demount and reassemble components. There’ll be no taping, spackling or touch-up painting. No new wallcoverings to apply or mess to clean up. In some cases, there’ll be no new carpet to cut.

Although movable wall systems vary in ease of installation and demount-
ability, appearance, durability and cost, most systems consist of three basic elements—metal framing, trim and removable panels. (Costs range from $25-60 per lineal foot for gyp-
sium wall panels and $70-120 for steel panels.)

Some systems may require ceiling and/or floor mountings. Others are held together by metal fasteners attached to cross channels that are held up by the wall framing. Others utilize edge-type clips, kerfs and laminated panels.

Yet for the most part, design possibilities are limited only by the im-
agination of the specifier. Variable wall heights, integrated glass panels and other design options give offices, con-
ference rooms and reception areas a visual spaciousness preferred over many fixed wall and open plan office construction.

State of the art in movable wall systems are those that offer a wide range of standard and custom design choices for framing and panels.

In addition to the latest fashion colors, there are now fabrics, vinyl, polyester, painted metal and wood veneer finishes available. Gypsum panels can also be field applied with wallcoverings or painted. Trim and framing are also available in a variety of colors and finishes.

Whereas accessibility to individual panels appear to be a top priority for corporations, the ability of the system to be retrofitted with an existing system (including fixed wall systems) or the ability to mount shelves, lighting or other furniture components may in-
fluence the final selection.

As Corporation Design and Realty stated in April, “With an increasingly wide range of systems available to meet a corporation’s individual needs, more firms will undoubtedly turn to mov-
able wall systems to help enlarge, reduce, modify, relocate or eliminate office space. And for the firm whose
employees require greater degrees of privacy, a movable wall system can be a viable and economic alternative to conventional drywall partitions and open plan offices. By helping a company meet its needs for privacy and confidentiality while maintaining a degree of flexibility and comfort, they can help the firm achieve a primary goal—keeping its employees happy and productive.” The contractor who has a better understanding of how to help corporations meet those needs will grow profitably with the changing times.”

In IBM of Canada’s Customer Center Library, movable walls are called on to support the weight of loaded bookcases.