Office walls are moving again. A few years ago the rage was "open office landscaping," a design spasm imported from Germany that put the boot to traditional offices with fixed doors and walls. The near-revolution prompted a lot of wall and ceiling contractors to investigate movable furniture and filing systems as a strategy to remain in the interior partitioning business.

Contractors can relax a bit now, says Dr. Reinhard "Rick" Widmann, the 40-year-old director of the Construction Systems Group for the Gold Bond Building Products Division of the National Gypsum Company, Charlotte, North Carolina. The pendulum is swinging again, Widmann claims, and the always promising but slightly lagging demountable/movable wall system is coming on stronger than ever.

Not only is the open office landscaping technique in full retreat before this emerging assault, but an active market operates for used open office partitions. The top five open office system manufacturers have even added lines of full height movable walls and will take trade-ins.

Widmann should know whereof he speaks. He's been actively involved in sales for Gold Bond since 1970—before and during the open office phenomena—and is now taking a leading role in the realigning marketplace.

Born in Fussen, Germany, son of graduate architect Paul and Maria Steindl Widmann, Rick came to the U.S. with his parents to the New England area as a 5-year-old. His father worked initially as a carpenter before starting his own home building business. The latter is where, starting as a summer laborer, Rick learned his
professional carpentry skills.

Later, the veteran Gold Bond sales executive earned a BS degree at Boston University, then an MBA and a doctorate in law at Western New England College. Upon graduation, he joined Gold Bond as a construction sales rep in Albany, NY. Interviews for promotions followed quickly, first as assistant district manager in Houston, then National Accounts Zone Manager in Charlotte, leading finally to his promotion to Director of Construction Systems.

To keep Gold Bond tuned in to the sensitive wall and ceiling market, Rick remains active in a number of organizations: AWCI, CISCA, International Facilities Management Association, Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association and the National Office Products Association. He also serves on the advisory board for Buildings Magazine.

Construction Dimensions caught up with Widmann in Washington, DC, where he was working with government officials on their plans for future office partitions. Like private industry, the government, too, is re-evaluating the effectiveness of the so-called open office.

DIMENSIONS: From a contractor’s viewpoint, Rick, what’s happening in the office wall or partition business? That is, will demountable or movable walls finally come into their own?

WIDMANN: Let me address that question properly by telling you what jolted National Gypsum Company’s Strategic Business Unit four years ago. In a series of in-depth meetings we found that gypsum board sales were going up, but underneath this pleasant growth curve was the fact that gypsum board was getting a smaller piece of the commercial building business.

More commercial buildings were going up, yes, but gypsum was being limited in use to cores and perimeters. The office partition business was going to others.

DIMENSIONS: You mean gypsum board sales were increasing because of more construction activities, but we were actually being squeezed out of the interior business . . . in short, getting a smaller piece of the job?

WIDMANN: That’s right. Open office business had increased to $2 billion in 1978, but vaulted to $6 billion by 1985. This office partition business was increasingly going into office furniture, carpets, free standing panelized systems—

DIMENSIONS: —paneled systems? You mean the Steel Case type?

WIDMANN: I refer to the system which is less-than-full height with furniture as an integral component . . . hung on. The open office people, not wall and ceiling contractors, were getting this business. The panelized systems work alone amounted to some $2 billion in 1985.

From a contractor’s viewpoint, each linear foot of these systems is one foot less of drywall—and that’s a threat to a wall and ceiling contractor.
DIMENSIONS: A number of contractors, though, caught on to this trend and got into the open office business successfully, right?

WIDMANN: A few . . . some of the bigger ones . . . did swing with the market shift, yes. They not only could do cores and perimeters, but just about any interior job as well.

DIMENSIONS: Why? Why the abrupt shift now back to drywall type partitions?

WIDMANN: First, the shift isn’t all that abrupt. Open office never became a universally accepted idea and a lot of companies opted for a demountable alternative to fixed walls without going the open office route.

The problems in the open office that drywall partitions overcome include: Noise—open offices never really control it; Economics—you can put up a linear foot of fixed drywall for $20 versus $1,000 for an open office system; Fire Rating—there is no fire rating in an open office, and that’s a major concern these days; HVAC and Lighting—without a plenum and walls in which to place piping and wiring you can’t move office areas and expect an acceptable line-up with these facilities, and heat variances—office equipment gives off uneven heating and this is compounded by lighting placement problems.

DIMENSIONS: Listening to you, one wonders why open office spaces got started at all?

WIDMANN: Well, it certainly ex-
“Many offices feature fixed walls and movable partitions. The open office isn’t completely gone, and the whole business community isn’t rushing to do the next job only in demountable/movable partitions.”

plains why no revolution took place and why the pendulum is moving back toward a more formally partitioned office arrangement. Furthermore, corporations are now looking at life cycle costing more seriously—

**DIMENSIONS:** Comparing the cost of initial installation against the expected life cost of an installation that has been around for a long time, and the low dollar has pretty much dominated the construction scene. For a long time, life cycle costing was more talk that fact, wasn’t it?

**WIDMANN:** The entire field of office environment and manpower utilization has become so important that companies now employ “facilities directors” and these professionals are firm believers in life cycle costing. Companies are concerned today with cost—both initial and life cycle.

In support of life cycle costing, let me cite a few figures. The life cycle cost of an office facility consists of 2 percent for original furniture; 4 percent for initial construction costs; 2 percent for miscellaneous costs such as insurances, taxes, maintenance. The other 92 percent? That’s for people’s salaries.

Is it any wonder then that companies want structures designed to maximize employee performance . . . that they want the best possible return on their most expensive investment.

**DIMENSIONS:** And that, I’m sure, brings us to working environment?

**WIDMANN:** It most certainly does. Why take an expensive employee and stick him in a tiny work station—just to save a few construction dollars?

Companies have found that a good employee needs a space to work, to think, to communicate in privacy. Such consideration for employees builds self-esteem which is a direct element of productivity. No wonder the move is back to ceiling height partitions.

**DIMENSIONS:** Rick, those companies in the open office industry who have “pushed the camel’s nose into the tent” aren’t going to give up their foothold in such a lucrative market, are they?

**WIDMANN:** That’s precisely correct. Indeed, in the last five years every major open office manufacturer has either lined up or has bought out a full height partition business. They see the way it’s going, too.

**DIMENSIONS:** But it’s not going back to exactly what it was prior to the open office era, is it? I mean, fixed walls have enjoyed their prime time and now the market is more flexible in its demands.

**WIDMANN:** The trend is toward the movable wall right now. But you have to be careful about saying a particular type application is finished. Many offices feature fixed walls and movable partitions. The open office isn’t completely gone, and the whole business community isn’t rushing to do the next job only in demountable/movable partitions.

**DIMENSIONS:** Then what advice would you give to a wall and ceiling contractor right now? How should a contractor be positioned to take maximum advantage of the current shift?
WIDMANN: If I were a contractor I’d take a serious look at the more than 100 manufacturers of movable partition systems—and align myself with one of them. It’s not that difficult really. You have to understand that the product is now standardized except for the clips, studs and fasteners.

DIMENSIONS: There are contractors who insist that they can erect a fixed wall at less cost per linear foot than it costs to install a movable system. How do you answer that challenge?

WIDMANN: I would challenge the challenge. To put up a fixed wall you must contend with the studs, track, board, then first, second and third coats, then sand and finish. A movable system eliminates joint treatment using beveled edge wallboard immediately ready for paint.

Where much of this confusion over costs comes in, I believe, is the historical attitude of contractors that vinyl or fabric covered boards are more expensive than fixed drywall with field applied vinyl or fabric. That’s not necessarily true.

DIMENSIONS: How about marketing for a contractor? Most manufacturers indicate that some selling must be done. A contractor trained to bid work often shies away from an active selling or negotiating posture.

WIDMANN: Let me state this: any contractor who goes into a movable wall system will create more business for himself. The market will see to that and it is prepared to pay a higher markup for such a system. That means a contractor can make more money with demountables than with standard, fixed, bid walls.

As for marketing and negotiating, certainly a movable wall project requires more contractor involvement. The owner sees this as an investment and wants expertise as part of that package.

From a contractor viewpoint, it’s a decision as to whether the contractor wants to bid and battle, or get into a proprietary system where he may have to bid and negotiate originally but one which will allow a recoup because the owner will come back later on changes and component purchases.

DIMENSIONS: Many contractors have avoided demountables on the
grounds that an extensive investment has been demanded up front. The word has been that a contractor must have a considerable existing inventory so he can respond quickly and efficiently to customer calls. Is this still a major element?

WIDMANN: That just isn’t true. So many demountable partition manufacturers exist in this business that a contractor can find a supplier who will ship in response to a bid. The more successful contractors stock and promote, but any contractor can get into demountable partitions without committing a large amount of money up front: that’s a misconception.

DIMENSIONS: What turned conditions around like that?

WIDMANN: Remember, in the U.S. only Gold Bond and USG manufacture a system with gypsum wallboard and components. Other manufacturers with systems are set up to utilize anyone’s gypsum wallboard.

Large manufacturers have requirements to qualify as an installer, but many others will sell a contractor the system he wants.

In the past, panels were heavy and cumbersome, and most systems were progressive, domino types. That’s no longer true: non-progressive systems now on the market allow a panel to be changed without disturbing other panels. Plus, the panels are lighter and easier to remove or install.

DIMENSIONS: If a contractor was interested in entering—or investigating—the demountable partition business, what steps should he take?

WIDMANN: First, locate a manufacturer that fits in with the way the contractor wants to do business. For example, some manufacturers have salesmen pushing their systems and some don’t, and some will send literature in response, etc.

Second, get some training in demountable partitions. Most good manufacturers offer training.

Third, bid or negotiate a job. Start looking for jobs specifying a demountable/movable component. Look up “partitions” in the Yellow Pages and check out the competition.

Last, get your feet wet. You don’t have to take on the biggest job available, but you do need some field experience and time to try out your marketing program. Truth is, estimating a demountable job isn’t all that difficult.

DIMENSIONS: Most of the labor content has been done in the factory so the estimating is mostly one of assembly of components, isn’t it?

WIDMANN: That’s right. While we’re on this subject let me give you a brief description of what Gold Bond will make available to contractors in the near future. We have obtained rights to a computer software program written by a working demountable contractor.

We expect to expand upon this program and offer it in 1987. What this program will do right now is compute the information provided by only seven questions and provide an accurate total job cost. The contractor who wrote this software right now prices jobs on the spot over the telephone in a few minutes—and his numbers are unerringly correct.

Furthermore, the program will then print out a complete materials list and generate the appropriate purchase orders. That’s just in a few moments with a few questions.

DIMENSIONS: Rick, from a manufacturer’s stance you’ve seen fixed walls surrender a lot of market to open office, and now you are helping demountables take back from the open office. That’s three major trends in only 15 or so years.

What do you see coming up in the next five years?

WIDMANN: The twin influences of life cycle costing and of the computer will impact on office design. The 10x10 office block is on the way out because interior designers are increasingly imaginative when it comes to creating a modern, acceptable working environment. Plus, changing office areas around is a given fact of business life today, and the partition system must
accommodate this need quickly, conveniently, and economically. Adding new computer systems to the modern day office will require wall systems that are demountable to handle these changes economically.

Some fixed wall will remain, of course, but manufacturers will continue to move more and more toward standardization of movable wall product lines. With the right kind of product planning, you can accommodate an entire building just by changing face panels.

To meet the need for computer clean rooms, you’ll see more metal faced panels. As a matter of fact, some designers are specifying 24 gauge steel over drywall for minimum security areas—a whole new, big market—and this same product is also good for electronic detection security. Acoustical and fabric covered wall panels will increase in demand, because of aesthetic and noise-reduction capabilities.

Also, I think more and more emphasis will be placed on fire rated assemblies.

DIMENSIONS: So you look for more change . . . possibly at an increasing rate?

WIDMANN: The one thing — whether we talk about manufacturers or contractors—is change. It took only 15 years to touch on three major changes.

Who knows how fast the change will be in the next decade?