Movable partitions are not primarily about quick and cheap. They are about flexibility for the owner. They are about service after the sale for the contractor. They are about protecting a market that furniture manufacturers are taking away from AWCI contractors.

The manufacturers of furniture panel screens have made great inroads in the non-residential interior wall business over the past 15 years. The ceiling height movable partition contractor who can provide equal flexibility, more privacy and sound control at a lower cost has a real opportunity with clients who are dissatisfied with their current open plan set-up.

Many relocatable interior products are on the market. However, their effective use requires knowledgeable design and installation. Building floor plans can’t be changed just by moving walls. A relocatable interior is a combination of rearrangeable interior systems. HVAC, power, communications, lighting. The possibility of “modify” rearrangements must be considered whenever adaptable floor plans are contemplated.

Architects and interior designers need the expertise of a contractor if gypsum panel based movable partitions are to be used on a particular project. By providing technical assistance to the design professional is time consuming, so why would a contractor promote the use of movable partitions? Two reasons come immediately to mind:

• Contractors will increase their scope of work by adding movable partitions to the permanent walls.
• Additional work opportunities for the contractor when the office or business is modified at a later date.

Contractors and designers need a broader understanding of the practical realities of construction for movable walls to be effective. The following is
“Also avoid large wall panels that emphasize joints, even if flush joints are utilized, because they result in more cut or irregular panels.”

a checklist of suggestions that installing contractors should bring to the attention of clients interested in relocatable interiors.

Ceilings . . .

Start with an unbroken suspended ceiling throughout an entire floor. Standard ceiling components—prefinished panels, grids and the drop-in accessories that work with them—are functional, time-tested, relocatable interior products. Handle as much lighting, power, communication cable, mechanical and HVAC in the ceiling as possible. Economize plenum use by organizing utility runs. Unobstructed ceiling plenum space will ease moving light fixtures, HVAC registers and tiles when it’s time for a change.

Floors . . .

Next, install the entire floor in one pass. If the sub-floor is concrete slab, level the latex modified concrete to within 1/4-inch per foot and no more than one-inch total difference in the areas where floor to ceiling walls eventually may be moved or exchanged. Carpet should run under partitions where there is any potential for relocation. Carpet tile should be given strong consideration because of the ease of repairing a single tile and its ability to work with flat wire products. However, limit the use of flat wire to single straight runs to avoid bulging which can occur at folds, intersections and connections. A raised floor should be considered if a large number of communication and power outlets will be needed at locations other than in ceiling height walls, such as when a large, open plan is used.

Walls . . .

Finally, select a wall system that offers a complete range of options from private office to open plan, from secure to accessible, from utility to executive.

Avoid being locked into a “slave”
wall system that is compatible with only one brand of wall-supported furniture, electrical fixtures or wiring systems. Look for a wall that works well with most major brands of interior products. Specify carpet grippers and ceiling attachment systems that won’t leave marks when walls are moved. Learning about hardware that facilitates the connection of one interior product to another is detailed and time-consuming, but is key to successful flexible interiors.

Don’t limit space division dimensions to a list of available panel widths. While modular interiors are attractive in theory, in reality actual building conditions—such as fixed columns and use of existing furniture—dictate that the installer needs a system which provides for cut panels so room dimensions can be any size required.

Avoid the “pre-fab” look created by surface-mounted battens and surface mounted corner trim which emphasize vertical lines and joints. Also avoid large wall panels that emphasize joints, even if flush joints are utilized, because they result in more cut or irregular panels. Small panels offer more relocation options and tend to create a more monolithic look, much like the individual bricks that blend into a brick wall. Ideally, the wall panels should be 24 or 30 inches wide, with flush corners and joints.

**Maintenance Considerations . . .**

The individual components of a flexible interior have many advantages over their traditional, built-in-place counterparts. Carpet tiles can be shifted to avoid darkened areas near HVAC registers. Intrigally-colored ceiling panels can be used so nicks don’t show. The partition cavity is easily accessible to accommodate wiring changes. Nice features, but still not the primary fruit of a functioning relocatable interior.

Potential suppliers should undergo the acid test. A visit to an installation in progress. Know exactly what will be supplied and how the parts are assembled. Some systems are far easier than others to dismantle and rearrange.

Relocatable interiors have not matured to the point where bidding can be relied upon to deliver the lowest life cycle cost.

Suppliers and contractors that provide the best service and technical support should be utilized. Accurate detail shop drawings are a must. A contractor licensed to install a particular system will know its capabilities and is integral to a successful relocatable interior. Only a flexible interior program in the hands of knowledgeable, skilled designers and installers can put control of a facility in the hands of its occupants.