Taking the “Fear” Out of Specialty Ceilings

By Chris Edwards

So many years have passed since the invention of the suspended ceiling that we all now take for granted its numerous advantages. The creation of the ceiling plenum so easily achieved with the sophisticated grid and panel systems now available, is at once the key to mechanical component management within the building, access to those components, the provision of sound attenuation and the creation of a significant opportunity to visually enhance the ceiling plane.

As the quality of grid and panel manufacturing has improved, so too have the number of visual options available. Enhanced quality and subtlety in panel texturing, scoring and edge detailing, together with more crisply detailed grids and grids of differing widths and profiles, present a broad aesthetic menu still within the essential simple discipline of the grid and lay-in concept. Indeed, the wonderful logic, simplicity and economy of the system ensure that the vast majority of ceilings will continue to be handled by the installation of grids and panels.

For specialty ceiling manufacturers, the simplicity and economy of these grid and panel systems have presented something of an obstacle. Even when generous budgets have allowed the consideration of specialty ceilings, the installations have often suffered because of the ceiling’s requirement for techniques and materials unfamiliar to the installer. Resulting problems in product definition, ordering and installation contrast sharply with the easily available, easily understood and reliable installed standard grid and panels. The result has been a perception generally shared by installers that the “specialty ceiling” is a breed of animal to be feared and mistrusted.

Forms & Surfaces has made a conscious effort to design specialty products (notably doors, walls and hardware) which are “installer friendly” as well as aesthetically attractive to the owner and specifier. We have recently looked at our ceiling product offering from this “installer friendly” point of view, and the result is a brand new ceiling system (actually a group of systems) called Integra-Tee™. This system is specifi-
cally designed to use principles of assembly and installation as familiar to contractors as the regular T-bar grid and "white side down" board.

But Integra-Tee is a specialty ceiling and, as such, must make a special visual contribution as well as being trouble-free in specifying, handling and installation. Integra-Tee’s special visual appeal is its boldly stated grid and large scale module. Recent trends have shown a rising desire on the part of the designer to strongly express some fundamental modularity in the building. This trend is manifest in the broad use of rectilinear grilles as screens, window detailing, or decorative elements. Building facades are divided into squares, and that division is an important part of the visual “rhythm” of the building. This is in strong contrast to the “seamless” glass curtain wall so popular just a few years ago. The design direction in the suspended ceiling business has incidentally bucked this trend. More recent developments have been to create slimmer grid member profiles and to score the infill panels in imitation of smaller and smaller modules. Integra-Tee, by contrast, is in keeping with the general design trend and is designed to celebrate the ceiling module at a larger, more generous,
more “architectural” scale. This use of elements that boldly express the modular dimensions of an interior is a current design idiom called “Structural Graphics.”

The Integra-Tee Ceiling System offers this “Structural Graphics” look. It also has a wide range of module sizes and infill panel types and is for this reason a quite complex system. We realized that for Integra-Tee to be “installer friendly” it needed more than simple installation. It needed to be simple to understand, simple to specify, simple to define, simple to order and simple to install. We tried to make the Integra-Tee Ceiling System all of these.

The system is based on the grid and infill concept and offers a tremendous range of infill options, sizes and price ranges. However, with its clearly organized literature and supporting documentation, it is truly simple to understand, to specify and to order. Precise definition of the ceiling down to the last ancillary component is made simple by the unique “take-off and installation instructions” sheet. Each part is defined and given a number, and the purchaser follows a clearly laid out procedure to create an exact bill of materials from which to request a quotation or to place an order.

Finally, there is one more piece to the ceiling puzzle that Integra-Tee provides—S.M.S., or the Service Management System. This is a system within the Integra-Tee family that allows the specifier to group all services into one dedicated area keeping all infill panel faces free of interruption.

Once the order has been defined, placed and shipped (all of which can be accomplished without recourse to a lengthy shop drawing development phase), the installer can turn his attention to the critical step of the installation itself. It is at this step that the basic similarity between the specialty Integra-Tee and the grid and panel will be most appreciated.

The first thing the installer will realize is that this visually sophisticated system is based on a simple main runner and cross tee suspension grid. The grid is made up of two aluminum extrusions that simply snap together. No matter which suspension type is chosen (Integra-Tee offers three), installation is a simple procedure involving hanging and leveling the main runners in the usual way and then snapping in the cross tees. Cross tees locate positively in machined notches in the mains. The different cross tee details (which accommodate different types of infills) are accepted by different notch configurations. However, there is no possibility for error, as each main runner and cross tee detail is encoded in the part number and is automatically established when the order form is completed. The extrusions which make up the generously scaled grid are strong and rigid, and the resulting suspension grid is rated “heavy duty.”

The infills are the final step. The options are broad, but again the use of the order form insures that the appropriate infill will be ordered. All infills are lay-in panels, so their installation is also simple. An additional advantage is that the installer has the option to provide his own infill. In
Service Management System (detail)

many cases the boldly expressed grid will provide a sufficiently special look to satisfy the specifier, and the project budget can be helped by the installer providing one of the low cost infill options which the ceiling is designed to receive.

With its bold look, simple grid and panel concept and its support documentation, the Integra-Tee ceiling offers specialty opportunities that need not raise concern in the installer. Integra-Tee can be used as a mere inexpensive restatement of the grid theme at a new, more generous scale, or it can provide a fully integrated system with rich wood veneer or perforated metal panels and a completely tailored service system. In either application, it involves no more than a simple suspended grid with lay-in panels. Integra-Tee is in concept, if not in appearance, a familiar and not-to-be-feared system, designed specifically for the ceiling contractor.

About the author

Christopher P. Edwards is currently president of Forms & Surfaces, where he has worked for over 20 years in the design, marketing and product development of a variety of specialty products. Prior to his association with Forms & Surfaces, he worked in the field of architectural decoration, exhibition and store fitting for David Gillespie Assoc. in England. Edwards is a native of England and a graduate of the Royal College of Arts in London.