Acoustical Ceiling Contractor Speaks Up

Although the installation was unusual and many GCs were hesitant to accept the mission, good communications among the contractors, the architects and the manufacturer allowed the job to run smoothly.

"Lot of resistance from the general contractor. Nobody wants to bid this thing. No one wants to install it, it’s too complicated.”

Those are remarks made by Bob Dixon, estimator for Chicago’s Airtite, Inc., the acoustical ceiling contractor for the job at the Chicago Ridge Mall in Chicago Ridge, Ill. This mall recently underwent its first renovation since it was built in 1984.

Dixon said the ceiling, which involved a custom installation of standard materials, was an interesting feature of the mall. The project architects calculated that the common area, meaning the circulation space of the mall, is about 120,000 square feet.

“The general contractor said ‘No one wants to build it’ and ‘No one wants to install it.’ I know there are installers from all trades who welcome something different because they’re tired of doing the identical..."
installation over and over again.” Dixon said.

“If general contractors get odd jobs that are a little bit different, I encourage them to talk to the architect. and encourage the architect to talk to them. Get a conversation going to explain how relatively easy the whole thing is even though the drawings may be unusual and look a little bit complicated.”

The general contractor who accepted the challenge of the mall was Ben A. Borenstein and Company (known in the industry as “BABCO”) of Evanston, Ill. Harvey Roth was the project manager.

The Architects’ View

Hiltscher Shapiro Associates, Ltd., Chicago, is an architectural firm that specializes in retail establishments. One of their architects, John Madsen, was the technical coordinator on the mall renovation project, assisting the architectural team in putting together the ceiling system at the mall’s food court. The firm developed a design concept that incorporated metallic elements in the food court’s ceiling, yet the designers also wanted a sense of transparency so that mall visitors would see neon lights both above and below the ceiling.

“It took about six weeks of time to work out the ceiling design.” Madsen said. “At its peak about seven people from the design firm were working on the ceiling. The overall mall took about two and a half months to do construction documents and about another two months to design the food court. WC also added new flooring, lots of new lighting, a new fountain and abstract acrylic art.”

“Our first design was a custom metal ceiling feature.” says Linda Chin, the project’s architect. “When we started honing in on the budget we realized we couldn’t afford custom metal work, so what we did use would have to have a similar appearance without the expense of going to custom extrusions.”

With painted dowel rods to simulate neon, the architects built a 4-foot by 4-foot section mock-up to prove that the selected materials would work. “We figured if we could build it in our office.” Chin says. “the guys could do it in the field, too.”

“We took standard ceiling pieces and combined them in a little bit of a different way to show the final look and we were real happy with it.” Chin says. “I don’t want to say that it was the most cost-effective solution, but it was cost effective enough that we could keep our original design intent intact.”
The mock-up showed that the ceiling would have a much different appearance than the one originally described, which would have included very custom ornamental metal work, so the firm had to sell the client on it.

**Ceiling Surprise**

The architects wanted to break up the look of the ceiling space, give the food court some direction and keep with the concept of order and control—"What we call 'chaos'" Chin says.

If you look at some of neon pieces in the ceiling, where Chicago Metallic's Vista ceiling system is installed, you'll see what the architects call the "comb ceiling." "That was the control and the order of the space," Chin explains. "[The neon] got to the round circular discs and things started breaking up—that's the chaos part—and then back to the control. The neon comes out of the comb and disintegrates, becoming wavy."

A terrific side effect of the ceiling design was discovered by accident: When you look at the ceiling above the mall's stores, the ceiling reflects their neon colors. It picks up colors from the floor and tenant signs, and that gives it a lot more sparkle than originally imagined by the "dream team."

Once the materials were purchased, installation time was relatively quick because of the simple pieces that were easy to snap together.

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and split it down the middle so they could align and get the correct spacing between each beam and so that the carrier would remain unseen through the open spaces.

Another contractor installed the
neon after the ceiling was in position. “We had to coordinate everything pretty well,” Dixon says. “In some cases we had to get our carriers ready for the neon installers to put in hangers for the neon. The neon guys couldn’t do anything once we got the ceiling portion up, and then we’d come in after them and snap in our panel.”

Scheduling and planning were important to the efficiency of the operation, which took “three weeks at most in the field,” Chin says. “For example,” she says, “we had to coordinate with the drywall contractor as well to make sure he left the proper openings.”

Ceiling components such as special trims and other items were custom-made by Chicago Metallic. For example, fabricating the curved pieces, U channel that houses the neon, was roll formed in the plant and installed by Airtite. The finish was standard. The 1-foot-wide straight run of metal that ran alongside the Vista were also custom pans as specialty items.

The Manufacturer
Says Dixon, “Working in a close relationship with Chicago Metallic, it’s nice to have someone like a Jim Stafford [Chicago Metallic’s assistant marketing manager] to be there when we needed him. There were times on the job that we needed [the manufacturer] to verify things like dimensions and to make sure everything was running correctly to get the material to us.

“Just keeping in close contact on the job as Jim and I did daily worked out very well.” CD

About the Project
In addition to ceilings that include hydronically heated ceiling panels, Airtite’s fields of operation encompass computer access floors and office wall systems, and the company is getting into drywall partitions. They have been in business for 50 years and are considered one of the biggest ceiling contractors in the state of Illinois.

The Chicago Metallic products installed at the Chicago Ridge Mall: Cube 1 3” x 3” open cell size, snap-in metal pan system, metal pan system, 2’ x 2’ panels in both perforated and non-perforated styles, 12’ plank panels, 4” square-edge Vista, custom straight and curved moldings and channels. All items finished with CMC’s -44 finish. The Chicago Metallic representative on the job was Bill Cohen.

Photos by Louis Skordas.