The ceiling system provides a unique focal point that helps define the main hallway of Marketing Mix, Inc.

Photos provided by Tom Niemeier, Levine-Niemeier Architects
By Ardis Berghoff

When the founding owner of Marketing Mix, Inc., came to architect Tom Niemeier last year for the design of her firm's new office space near St. Louis, Mo., she was in search of a look that reflected her company's dynamic image and product. Lori Sale's nationally recognized entertainment marketing firm had used his services seven years before to create her company's previous office space. With a lengthening roster of high-profile clients based mainly on the East and West coasts, she had expanded her company and needed new offices to accommodate the growth.

The space Sale had leased—a 14,000-square-foot building that housed retail fabric and grocery stores in the past—allowed for a creative design but posed challenges in its conversion to offices. In all, this commercial renovation project called for a mix of ingenuity, flexibility and close partnering between Niemeier's St. Louis-based architectural firm, Levine Niemeier, and his general contractor, Mitch Orlando, of Orlando Contracting. The partnership produced creative answers to the interior's design challenges, using unique building products such as the Curvatura 3-D ceiling system from USG Interiors, Inc., Chicago, and standard building materials in interesting, new ways.

The 1950s Meet the 1990s

Niemeier's canvas was an example of 1950s-style retail architecture: It featured a 16-foot high butterfly roof that sloped inward, creating a 12-foot low-point in the middle for water drainage. Clerestory windows ran the length of opposite sides of the building, while storefront glass comprised most of the building's front. The interior space was filled with natural light and little else to help define individual offices.

"I immediately knew when I saw the space that we could work with it—I loved the building's
features,” Niemeier said. “To preserve the light yet divide the space, we created walls that go only partially up to the ceiling, allowing the natural light to penetrate the space while still organizing it into various departments and rooms.”

Niemeier’s concept varied the height and appearance of the walls according to the function of each department. In effect, he created a small “city within a city” with terracing walls and other urban-inspired details. Offices that required more privacy have higher walls, while those of support staff, which are farther into the space, have walls as low as 4 feet.

Many of these walls are constructed at unusual angles. The length of the wall in the front hall is canted outward, while its top follows the ceiling’s slope. In addition, the walls are capped differently, as buildings are in a city, with different materials such as wood and drywall. In some areas, the walls are stepped out like townhouses.

“So many varying walls created good breaks for the paint colors,” Niemeier explained. “The pallet includes several shades of earth-tone beige punctuated with rich colors such as periwinkle, terra cotta and forest green. In the central hallway, we used a special technique of hand-painted squares that radiate outward in shades of beige. They’re a play on the punched-opening windows in those walls.”

The design uses other materials and architectural elements reminiscent of an urban landscape. Details in drywall, metal and wood, as well as glass windows in the walls of inner offices, reflect the variety of a city.

**Partnership Produces Design Details**

The heart of this design was in the unusual use of materials to create unique details throughout the building. These treatments were possible only through a close working relationship between Niemeier and contractor Orlando.

“This project was a success in large degree because we were able to work with our contractor early on to find innovative solutions,” Niemeier said.

Both architect and contractor came up
with an answer for lighting. The building already had the typical, long banks of fluorescent lighting found in many retail stores. While they weren’t overly attractive in appearance, Niemeier realized that keeping them would save thousands of dollars for the client—money that could be spent on other details.

It was Niemeier’s close working relationship with Orlando, which stretches back seven years to Marketing Mix’s first space build-out, that produced a solution to the lighting during the design stage. After meeting on the site a number of times and talking through the client’s lighting needs, Niemeier proposed a design using perforated metal shields, which would cover the bulbs and diffuse the light. Orlando suggested they create custom-made metal housing to hold the shields that would bend around the existing lights.

Orlando worked with the HVAC contractor, who used galvanized steel for the housing that matched the exposed duct work throughout the space. He had a catalog supplier of metal products make the perforated metal covers. They then replaced the old bulbs with SP fluorescent bulbs for warmer lighting.

“This solution cost us only $3,000 for 300 lights and created a very contemporary, industrial-style look,” Orlando said. “We easily could have spent $30,000 or more on new fixtures otherwise.”

The design repeats the use of metal detailing in the main hallway, where a unique ceiling system was used to define the space. Niemeier specified the Curvatura 3-D ceiling system. The approximately 50-foot long ceiling panel, which was hung from the roof’s central low-point, undulates like a metal wave across the ceiling, creating a dramatic effect and bringing the hallway down to a more human scale.

“This ceiling has a custom look without the expense and trouble of creating it ourselves,” Niemeier said. “It announces that this is an area of transition and feels different from anywhere else in the building. The lighting above the Curvatura filters through its perforated aluminum panels to create an interesting pattern on the walls. The pattern we chose reminded me of the metal fire stairs on city buildings.”

Niemeier was able to create a customized curve with the ceiling system by specifying the radius and length he needed. “We then suspended the system with aviation wire—rather than standard ceiling wire—for a straight, clean, almost invisible look. The Curvatura looks like an art piece in and of itself,” he said.

Niemeier and Orlando achieved yet another unusual look with their choice of flooring. While they installed carpeting for acoustical reasons in offices and work stations, circulation areas had flooring made from the woodchip board normally used as an exterior substrate on walls and roofs.

“Using this material was a successful experiment for both of us,” Niemeier said. “I had seen it used elsewhere and knew it would be a durable and inexpensive alternative to hardwood flooring. It creates a unique, warm look that stands up to heavy use and hides stains well.”

They finished the floor with up to six coats of polyurethane. “The particle board is very porous, so it took the finish readily,” Orlando said. “We kept applying coats until the polyurethane stood on the surface to create a mirror-smooth finish.”

The Irony of Project Parameters

Both Niemeier and Orlando agree that the project’s budget limitations and design parameters as dictated by the space actually ended up being an advantage rather than a disadvantage.
“I’m really glad we had those given limitations, because they made us concentrate on cost-effective, creative solutions,” Niemeier said. “We probably made better decisions with the limitations rather than if we’d just had unlimited money to work with.”

“We enjoy working on unusual projects such as this one where we can truly use our expertise,” Orlando said.

About the Author
Ardis Berghoff is a Chicago-based public relations consultant for USG Corporation.