

DESIGN

'Not the icing, the whole cake'

By Bill Parker
staff writer

The Manatee-based Century Boat Co. has been a leader in the production and sales of luxury family cruisers since its beginning in 1976. But a few years ago Century decided it needed a boost.

Sales were slipping. Century wanted to re-establish itself as a leader in cruisers and introduce its product into new coastal markets. The question confronting Century was how to adapt its product to attain these goals.

The answer was simple. Design. Meridian Instruments, a small medical research company based in Okemos, recently developed a computer-controlled laser, which allows scientists to isolate and analyze certain body cells — something they were previously unable to do.

Meridian's problem was lack of marketing knowledge to launch the research instrument into an international market. Nor did they know what size or shape the instrument should be to attain its maximum benefit.

AGAIN, THE ANSWER was simple. Design. These are two Michigan companies that have

recently benefitted from quality design in marketing and developing their products.

Through the assistance of Dan Phares of Phares Associates in Birmingham, Century was able to redesign an old product.

Meridian, through the assistance of Ford & Earl Associates in Warren, incorporated design into its new product. The results were equally impressive.

With its newly designed cruiser, Century penetrated the coastal market and subsequently tripled its sales in one year.

Meridian has launched its laser into the medical research field and opened the door for advances in cell design research.

According to the definition provided by Design Michigan, design is a creative, problem-solving process that helps to clarify objectives and translate them into reality. It can be applied to buildings, interior spaces, mass produced products, printed and visual communications and landscapes and environments.

Design Michigan is a non-profit, statewide public information and service program sponsored by the Cranbrook Academy of Art and funded by the Michigan Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

OFTEN WHEN someone mentions design they automatically think of style. But according to Jack Williamson, director of Design Michigan, the two are drastically different.

"Style usually relates specifically to the visual image. It's usually related to fads and short-term changes.

"Design takes the whole picture into consideration. You find out what the constraints of the project are and what the needs are. Then you develop alternatives to the end result.

"You don't jump to the conclusion that you need something but rather stand back and look at all the options before drawing a conclusion.

"Design isn't just the icing on the cake but rather the whole cake. It's the size, shape, ingredients, everything combined for the overall finished product."

Williamson points out that the United States is lagging in terms of incorporating design into business as an integral part of the decision-making process.

He notes that 35 major industrial countries have regional design centers. The United States doesn't.

"AWARENESS OF the different possibilities of design are way behind in this country," said Williamson.

"In Europe the resources have been limited so they have had to use their available resources more efficiently.

"But in the United States, after the wars there was an economic boom. Resources were readily available, and there was a market for all kinds of products.

"Since the energy crunch, however, resources have been limited. People are also more discriminating about products.

"Lifestyles have changed, and there has been an increased awareness of the value of design.

"I think people are beginning to awaken to the fact that designers are responsible for the fact that products with top design are usually better suited for the market.

"In Japan and Germany design is heavily integrated with the manufacturing process," said Williamson.

"In the 1960s Japan sent representatives to different countries to learn about design. Then they brought all this information home and studied it.

"They now have design research teams and have been able to penetrate every market they ever wanted to."

Design Michigan doesn't do actual design work; its main function is to promote the awareness of design.

It does this through audiovisual shows, a design hotline (313-645-3316), a speakers' referral service, a manufacturers' assistance program, a cities and towns program, and mini exhibits such as the one running through March 17 at the Oakland County Galleria, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac in the Executive Office Building.

"Through our assistance programs, exhibits, conferences, seminars, one-on-one counseling and our other services we try to make manufacturers or economic development units aware that design is a possible resource," Williamson said.

"We want to make Michigan decision-makers in business, government and throughout the state aware of the usefulness of design."



BILL PARKER/staff photographer

Jack Williamson, director of Design Michigan, pauses at the center's exhibit at Oakland County Galleria.

Colonial setting home to R&D automotive lab

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The colonial-style building looks like a suburban insurance office, or maybe an oversized funeral home.

It holds offices and an automotive development lab.

And despite rooms with revolutionary names like Liberty and Senate, the \$10 million structure is owned by a British firm.

Philip D. Vrzal, Birmingham resident who is chairman and chief executive of GKN Automotive Components Inc., has a sense of humor about the building at 3500 University Drive in Auburn Hills. For a spell he was worried that the chaps at the parent company, GKN (United Kingdom), might not like it.

"They sent someone over who wrote a report on it. He loved it," Vrzal recalled.

GKN AUTOMOTIVE sells original equipment to Chrysler, Ford and American Motors — front wheel drive shafts, viscous couplings, suspensions.

It moved its U.S. administrative office out of Southfield and its research and development out of three separate locations in Troy into the 110,000-square-foot adjoining structures on 17 acres of wooded hills in Auburn Hills, a short hop from Oakland University.

Manufacturing is done at three plants in North Carolina. All 180 office and R&D employees will be relocated in the new building. There are no immediate plans for additional hiring.

Some 80 percent are engineers and data management technicians. Vrzal characterized his informally dressed crew as "having a lot of edu-



GKN Automotive Components' new office and research and development lab is on University Drive, a short distance from Oakland University.

cation and a lot of informal smarts." Vrzal himself has a doctorate in business from Indiana University.

THE PROXIMITY to Oakland University is intentional. Company and college have set up working relationships. GKN has a cooperative employment program with OU, and OU picked up some computer equipment when the company changed systems.

OU President Joseph Champagne and other university figures will attend the Feb. 24 formal dedication ceremonies, where they will be greeted by Sir Trevor Holmeworth, chairman of the parent company.

"We beat Chrysler into the new Oakland Technology Park," said Vrzal, who has been with GKN since the parent company formed it in 1978.

He and Larry Fillmore, Birmingham resident who is director of research and development, are visible in praising the work of Cunningham-Limp Co., the Troy contractor who put up the specialized building.

"WE HAD special needs," said Fillmore, citing:

- An in-ground trench for hydraulic, cooling, water, air and drain lines.

- A six-foot-deep block of reinforced concrete on which equipment to shake motor vehicle suspensions is mounted. The block must be physically inert.

- Soundproof rooms for dynamometers. If workers are exposed directly to the sound, they suffer a "fatigue factor," he said.

- Backup power for computers and emergency lighting.

THE U.S. subsidiary has sales of more than \$200 million. The parent firm already was established as an international automotive supplier of forgings, stampings, axles, clutches, wheels, overdrives, engine and transmission parts.

Its expansion into the U.S. came after the Arab oil embargo that started in 1973, when \$1-a-gallon gasoline in the U.S. and \$3-a-gallon gasoline in Europe put a premium on new technology.

GKN Automotive Components also has a subsidiary of its own — DriveTech, in Wixom. It makes parts for the automotive aftermarket.

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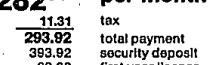
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