

# Building Scene

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Marlyn Fitchett editor/953-2102

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## Building a better auto dealership

By Gerald Frawley  
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When it comes to automobile dealership architecture, you might think the practical applications of running a business with five components would severely limit options.

But in the past year several area auto dealerships have opened or have begun construction, and although each accomplishes the same purpose, none of them look alike.

There are new Saturn dealerships in Troy and Plymouth. Meadowbrook Dodge is being built in Rochester. Fred Lavrey Infiniti is in Birmingham and Estate Motors in Bloomfield Hills.

Of course, there are similarities.

One reason, according to Richard Trost of Saturn Corp. is the automobile companies are exercising control over the architectural process.

Trost, a member of Saturn dealership retail environmental design committee, said General Motors' newest car company spent months designing its prototype dealership.

"It is a business — it's not a museum (so) it has to be efficient," Trost said.

**THE STARTING POINT** for Saturn and most dealerships is a concept called "functional adjacencies," he said. This means that dependent functions — like the service and parts department — are positioned near one another.

Different companies may prioritize some relationships differently, but some are obvious in all dealerships. More subtle relationships result in striking differences between dealerships, he said.

Most dealerships, for example, would place the customer lounge near the service area. "We at Saturn thought it would be better to place the customer lounge near the front (of the dealership)."

Placing a lounge at the front accomplishes two things — customers don't feel forgotten, and the most-likely future customer is exposed to new products, Trost explained.

Another trend in dealerships, he said, is the growing importance of service departments. Saturn and other dealerships are placing service entrances at the front adjacent to new car showrooms.

Sometimes function takes a back seat to other considerations like site restrictions and sales and marketing strategies.

**FRED LAVREY** Infiniti in Birmingham has the same goal — selling cars — as other dealerships, but it takes a different approach.

Here, the facility is a showplace for its products, architect Ron Kalliszewski said. "It (the dealership) looks almost like the cars were there and the building was built around it."

Kalliszewski, a partner at the architectural firm Luckenbach-Ziegelman in Birmingham, said he had to comply with design and architectural restrictions handed down by Infiniti.

When the concept was developed, a decision was made to emphasize appearance and feel, rather than function and foot traffic flow. "This isn't a showroom you can just walk through."

Instead, the design encourages visitors to walk around in much the same way an art gallery might be designed, Kalliszewski said.

There are four viewing areas where people see the automobiles. These viewing areas surround what Infiniti calls a "contemplation area" — an area set apart from the automobiles and, the sales people designed to give customers a chance to think and relax.

Despite these differences from the typical automobile dealership, Infiniti still recognizes necessary functions, Kalliszewski said.

Site restrictions limited what could be included. The service area is across the street at Lavrey's

Owners no longer have carte blanche in the design of their facilities. Both auto companies and dealers are hoping architects will help the car-buying public to beat a path to their newly-designed doors.

Porsche-Range Rover-Audi dealership. "We had to get special dispensation from Infiniti for that."

Kalliszewski said another important element is the reception area. "It's really a practical decision."

A receptionist can direct people to where they need to go, whether it is to talk to a service manager or ask a salesperson a question, he said. "And people appreciate the professionalism they associate with (reception areas)."

**BUT FUNCTION** alone does not an auto dealership make.

Here is where auto dealers differ wildly. Sometimes, dealers will strive for a conservative, traditional look; other times, companies will strive for a striking contemporary look.

"Architecture is a reflection of the mood of the times," Trost of Saturn said. The challenge for dealers is to create a timeless, undated image.

Saturn wants its dealers to promote an image of a new kind of car company. Concepts such as a sense of being inviting, uncomplicated, friendly, and timeless are best conveyed by appearance, he said.

"We wanted something instantly recognizable (as Saturn) — the intent was to make it say Saturn," he said.

This was accomplished in several ways.

"One way to make a building look more inviting," Trost said, "is to include a canopy (that shelters visitors as they approach the door)."

A canopy also makes certain there is no doubt about the entry location, Trost noted, adding one of the biggest problems with automobile dealers of the past is there was no central entry point.

To convey a sense of the uncomplicated, Saturn decided on simple, flat walls in Saturn colors of white, with gray and red accents. When coupled with the canopy, the simple walls are intended to create a sense of excitement.

"It's called the concept of stimulation through contrast," he said.

**COMPLETING THE** design required various elements of landscape architecture, parking and driveways. "We had to give individual dealers a lot of room to maneuver here."

Entrance drives, Trost noted, were intentionally designed to approach the dealership from the front and center so visitors can take in the whole dealership.

Conventional dealerships might have several entrances from the front and side, but Saturn's dealership model attempts to focus the visitor's attention.

Kalliszewski said he also had to comply with architectural specifications from Infiniti. But in his case, he was granted a great deal of leeway in which to design the dealership.

Most Infiniti dealerships are beige with black trim and have a relatively smooth-textured surface; Fred Lavrey Infiniti is brown brick with green trim.

"Fred Lavrey and I felt (the more contemporary Infiniti design) wasn't appropriate for Birmingham," he said.

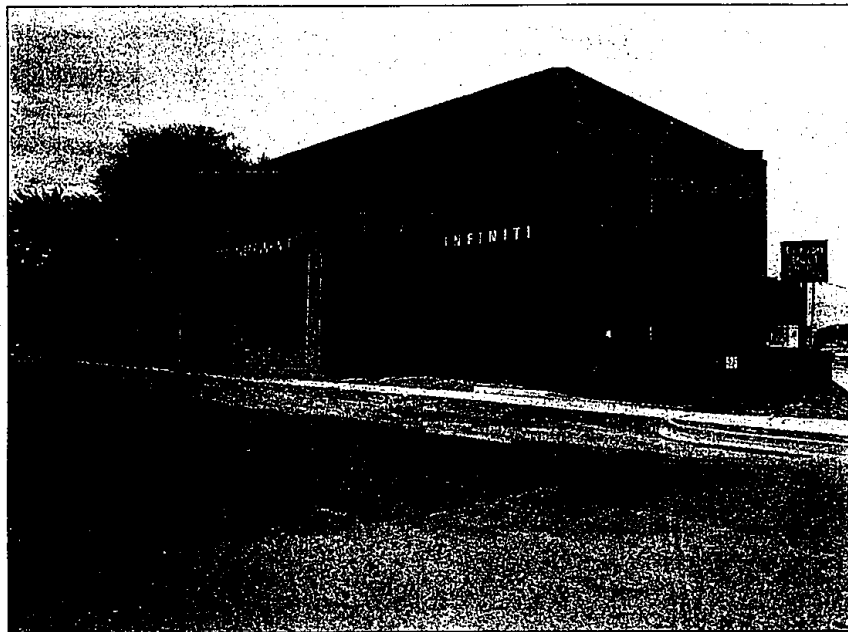
"We wanted a low-pressure, low-profile, low-statement facility," he said.

Further complicating the design was a need for leasable office space above the dealership, Kalliszewski said. Most Infiniti dealerships are stand-alone facilities, but land prices in Birmingham necessitated expanding the facility.



BILL DRESLER/staff photographer

The canopy of the Don Massey Saturn dealership in Plymouth tips off the location of the entry, resolving problem of dealerships built years ago.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Most Infiniti dealerships are beige with black trim and a smooth exterior surface. But in keeping with Birmingham's architecture, Fred Lavrey Infiniti is brown brick with green trim.

## Bank on architecture

Free tours of the Standard Federal Bank corporate headquarters in Troy will be offered from 1-4 p.m. on Architect's Sunday — Oct. 6. The event is sponsored by the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects with architect WBDC Group, interior architect Ford & Earl, and construction manager Barton Melow Co. Standard Federal headquarters is a seven-story building on a 27-acre site on Big Beaver east of Coolidge. Its interior is dominated by a granite-clad atrium that floods the building with natural light. The stepped-up design and open floor plan around the central atrium allow each office a view of the skylight.



The growing importance of service departments is being reflected in new auto dealerships. Saturn and others are placing service entrances at the front, adjacent to new car showrooms.