

Building Scene

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Entrepreneurs display architectural acumen

By Dale Northup

Special writer

The roots of commercial architecture can be traced back to the industrial revolution and tall office buildings of the late 19th century. The offices, as vertical symbols of civic and business pride, facilitated transactions of supply and demand.

Then came Henry Ford, who changed the architectural profile of business and industry with the assembly line, the automobile and consequent spread of commercial enterprises across the countryside in a horizontal fashion. Our mobility enhanced a competitive market and an architecture that was designed to capture the eye of passing motorists.

Architect Robert Venturi, in his book, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," defends the architectural diversity of Main Street and the highway as reflective of a more democratic society and more visual delectables. Venturi further explains in his book an architecture that has become a visual reflection of our laissez faire ideals.

On some of the commercial buildings in Oakland and Wayne counties are buildings that reflect the needs of aggressive, yet visually sensitive, entrepreneurs who have sought a commercial image that satisfies their individual tastes while, at the same time, serving the concerns of business productivity.

John Milanski, owner of J&M Reproduction in Troy, planned his building by taking into consideration the interior specifications that would best serve a productive office for his growing business and 60 employees. Solving these requirements, he presented them to Troy architects Straub Associates who designed and engineered the building.

The 35,000-square-foot structure has an office appearance that belies its mechanical assembly function. Two sides of the building are clad in dark tinted glass, held in place with black metal mullions that together lend visual continuity to the facade. One of the sides has three baylike projections that step out, from the front to the back, culminating at the entrance. The transition between

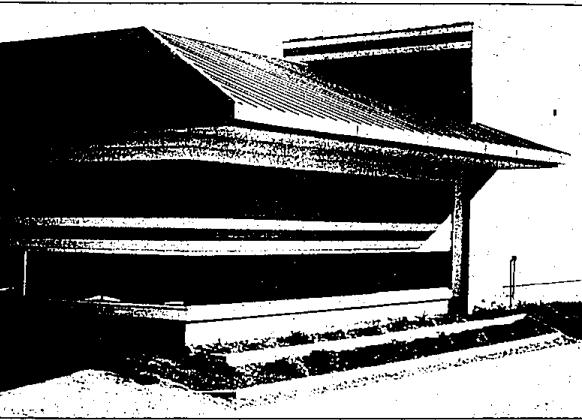


Photo by CHRISTOPHER LARK

The brick masonry of the Jasman Construction Building mediates between the roof and back portion of the building, anchoring it to the site.

Henry Ford changed the architectural profile of business and industry with the assembly line.

these three areas is softened by concave and convex glass.

THIS SUBTLE exterior wall cur-

vature is amplified in the office area inside with a curved corridor that dramatically wraps itself around the production area. Serving to reinforce this architecture, Straub's architect statement, "form follows function," the exterior form of J&M Reproduction was determined after the interior function had been created. A half-size basketball court is another interior feature that serves to satisfy the off-hours physical activity of Milanski and his employees. White, fluted concrete block covers the other two sides of the building.

On Helm Street in Plymouth Township, which is an office/industrial building built by Lee Jasinski for

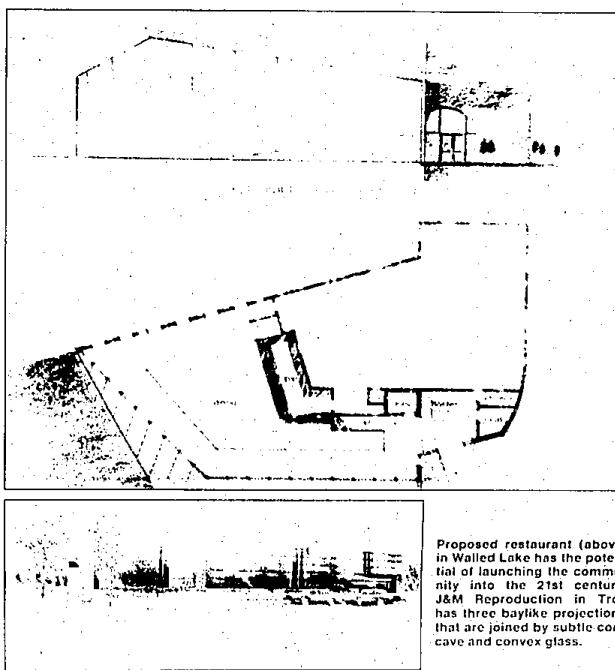
business, Jasman Construction, Jasinski collaborated with Plymouth architect Lee Phillips on the 24,000-square-foot building. The architectural prototype was Frank Lloyd Wright's Winslow house of 1893 — a relatively simple block-like dwelling with a shallow hip roof — that helped usher in that 20th century masterpiece known as the Prairie House.

When seen from a distance, the building projects a marked similarity to the Prairie House, which is reinforced by its tall gables and adjacent wetlands bases. Bands of windows, complemented by stucco bolt courses, together emphasize the horizontal flow of the one-story structure under a shallow hip roof that is minus the ridge, not noticeable from

afar. Another impressive feature, compatible with the Prairie House model, is a chimney-like brick mass that stands as a visual anchor between the metal roof and storage areas at the back of the building.

At East Lake Drive and 14 Mile Road in Walled Lake is a planned restaurant for a group of local business investors. The 10,000-square-foot building, which will overlook Walled Lake, is the design of Birmingham architect Victor Sarek & Associates. Responding to a somewhat compressed 112-foot lot line

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Proposed restaurant (above) in Walled Lake has the potential of launching the community into the 21st century. J&M Reproduction in Troy has three baylike projections that are joined by subtle concave and convex glass.

Accessibility laws toughened

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Ramps on building entrances, elevators instead of escalators, extra wide stalls in public restrooms — handicapped accessibility is as important as ever.

At a recent seminar sponsored by the Building Owners and Managers Association in Troy, attorney Jeffrey Supowitz, of the Detroit firm Mager, Monahan, Donaldson & Alber, told builders and architects they must be more careful than ever when it comes to handicapped accessibility with the federal Fair Housing Amendments Act that goes into effect March 13.

Under the law, certain multiple-family dwellings that are occupied after March 13, will be subject to radically new requirements, he said.

The act requires all ground floor units

be handicap accessible in buildings of four or more units. In buildings with elevators, all units must be handicap accessible.

There are several common misconceptions about the new laws, he said, including the belief it applies to only subsidized housing, or that it applies only to apartments.

"It applies to condominiums, too," he said.

"Accessible," Supowitz said, "is not the same as barrier-free, which the building industry is already familiar with."

THE NEW LAW is much more encompassing, he said. Under it, all public use and common areas must be accessible to handicapped persons.

"You have to be careful — that includes clubhouses as well."

Other requirements include doors that allow access by people in wheelchairs, accessible routes into and through buildings, differently placed switches, electric outlets, thermostats and environmental controls, reinforced bathroom walls, accessible parking areas, use of grab bars, and kitchens and bathrooms allowing wheelchair maneuverability.

These are only general requirements, Supowitz said. No architect could design a building and be assured he is within the requirements of the act.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development is working on specific guidelines that are expected soon, he said. Preliminary guidelines were released in January 1990 and are currently under review by the law's sponsors.

Until they are, the act provides that buildings that meet the American National Standards Institute specifications — extremely strict requirements — will be deemed as meeting the requirements of the act.

"It provides builders with a safe harbor."

There are a few exceptions to the new regulations, he said, most notably, townhouses. "Some have referred to this as the townhouse exception act."

"This is not an act about accessibility; it's not a law about disability — it's a law about providing housing for people with a disability," Beasley said.

The act is necessary, he said. In 1989, there were 400,000 multiple family units built — 89 percent were walk-ups that would be covered under the new act.

WHEN IT COMES to handicap accessibility, the two most abused areas are kitchens and the baths, he said. HUD's proposed guidelines generally require the addition of space to these areas, but that's not always the solution.

A task force consisting of representatives from the National Association of Home Builders, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the American Institute of Architects and other industry groups commented extensively on the proposed guidelines on ways to provide accessibility without requiring so much size.

For example, the standard apartment bathroom is 37.5 square feet. The task force proposed bathroom would be 43 square feet. The original guidelines proposed by Housing and Urban Development would require a minimum size of 56 square feet.

Beasley said since the goal of the Fair Housing Amendment should be to provide housing opportunities, regulators must be careful to make requirements fair. "If builders are in business to make a profit, if they can't make a profit, they won't build."

Beasley said it's too early to guess how much of an impact the task force's recommendations will make on the Housing and Urban Development's guidelines.

"It's basically wait and see."

Christine Milner, a staff person with the Michigan Department of Labor Bureau of construction codes barrier free design division, said Michigan is rewriting its codes to coincide with the Fair Housing Amendment Act.

"In theory, a builder will only have to worry about one set of regulations," Milner said. "If you follow the Michigan construction codes, you won't have to worry about the federal regulation."

Ask The Experts!

The first time I attended a meeting of the Michigan Association of Home Builders, I was struck by the number of people who were there. I realized that there were many more people involved in the industry than I had ever imagined.

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