

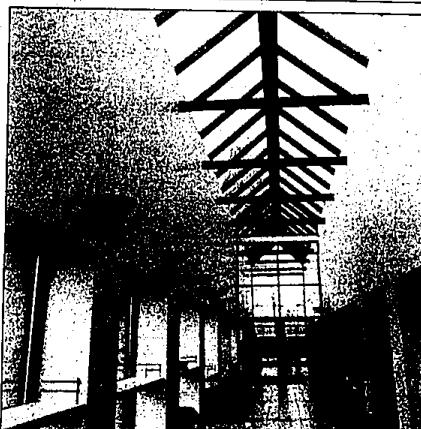
Building Scene

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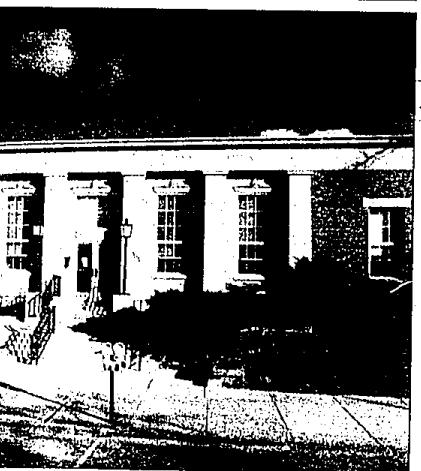
Marilyn Fitchett editor / 591-2300

Monday, February 10, 1991 O&E



Post office architecture has changed dramatically over the years but one thing remains the same — work space for employees is the primary factor in any design. Extras like an atrium running the length of the new Garden City Post Office and a fancier entrance bring a more modern look to government structures. Compare elements of the Garden City building to the former main post office in downtown Birmingham.

Photos by JIM JAGDFELD/staff photographer



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

New post offices earn stamps of approval for design, function

By Doug Funkhouser
staff writer

A steady increase in the volume of mail, explosive growth in suburbs and greater numbers of customers coming by to rent boxes, buy stamps or drop off letters have sparked a building boom here by the U.S. Postal Service.

New post offices have opened recently in Garden City and Birmingham and are under construction in Plymouth, West Bloomfield and Livonia.

"It used to be if you looked at a post office, you knew it was a post office," said Susan Moore, spokeswoman for the postal service.

Not necessarily because the structures were pleasing to the eye. Post offices often were small, low-slung buildings with cinder blocks on three sides. Downtown stations tended to be a little more quaint, but that can't be expanded as the work load increased.

Facilities generally looked dreary and dingy. Parking was a major hassle for patrons and employees.

NOW, YOU'RE likely to see atriums, recessed lighting, two-tone floor tile, tinted glass, colorful window treatments, cloth wall coverings and carpeting.

Yet, form follows function as far as new facilities go.

The primary factor is need. For example, Moore said, "Carriers to sort mail and clerks to service delivery area need certain square footage."

The postal service uses a kit-of-parts approach to new construction. Basic standard parameters are provided for work areas like sorting stations, mailing areas, post office boxes and service counters.

Architects who bid projects are given freedom to arrange the elements to make best use of a particular site. Architects also have a choice of several different facades.

"THEY REALLY look very care-

fully at what their requirements are, what goes on in the work room and how things function from step to another," said Anita Toews, an architect with Corporate Design Group of Ann Arbor.

That firm designed both the Garden City and Plymouth post offices.

"They tell us what size each part will be. We choose materials. We can push, pull, add touches as we see fit. The way you put them together is up to you," Toews said.

Division facility planning staff, with input from local postmasters, makes the final decision. Contractors then bid on the construction.

Robert Schiller, president of Schiller Construction of Redford, built the Birmingham post office.

"IT'S LAID OUT more conveniently for the customer than it used to be," he said. "It has a larger lobby area. The teller area is more thought out."

The kit-of-parts approach allows for more uniformity in the postal service's building empire, but still allows for local architectural variation, Schiller said.

"There's a lot more design effort going in structures than there used to be. There's no doubt they're more conscious about traffic patterns, traffic flow, natural lighting in the building. The post office is trying to create buildings that will appeal to the eye for the next 20 years."

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- Livonia, 22,000 square feet, \$3.4 million.
- Garden City, 23,000 square feet, \$3 million.

But the money can be well-spent if employees are more productive and customers have an easier time getting in and out.

"If going to a new facility gives better light, better ventilation, better access, it certainly enhances the work environment and enhances productivity," said Hector Peskopia, an industrial psychologist and owner of Human Factors & Resources Group of Southfield.

ARCHITECTURE for specific post offices, like any other building, will have its supporters and detractors.

Doreen Matich, a Garden City resident, likes the spaciousness and modern look of that community's new post office. Parking is much better too, she said, describing the old as "horrendous."

Tony Honeycutt of Wayne wondered about high heating bills at the new Garden City facility with the atrium and maintained that parking was still a problem.

He described the building as "a little elaborate" but the atmosphere as "nice."

Said Len Parker, a Birmingham resident, of that community's new post office: "It seems functional. I'm kind of disappointed they had to leave downtown. It doesn't have the charm the old one did."

Mary Borman of Birmingham said it was a question of how large that new post office is.

Paula Surma of Garden City said she loved the service she received in that new building, but wished the structure had a less modern, more historic appearance.

Postmasters of the new facilities are complimentary about their new work places.

"It's not only pleasing to the eye, but architecturally efficient," said Gregory D. Cox, Birmingham postmaster.

Radon danger 'overstated?'

(AP) — Radon gas in homes may not be quite as dangerous as previously believed, but in high concentrations it can cause lung cancer, experts said.

A study recently by the National Research Council said that earlier estimates of the risk of lung cancer in homes may have overstated the danger by 20 to 30 percent.

Estimates by the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements and other agencies compared the danger of developing lung cancer from radon to the risk in homes with the risks of radon-caused lung cancer among miners.

Radon is a byproduct from the decay of uranium-238, which is present in most soils and rocks. The invisible substance often is strongly present in some mines and can collect in unventilated homes built on some types of soils.

Radon seeps into a group of short-lived isotopes that can attach themselves to dust particles and then be inhaled. Two of the radionuclides, polonium-210 and polonium-214, emit alpha radiation that can damage cells and cause lung cancer.

HIGH LEVELS of lung cancer among some miners are attributed to their daily contact with radon, and some earlier studies found that the risk was as great or greater for residents in homes where radon was concentrated.

But the NRC study said that when comparing how much radon would be inhaled and absorbed, the risk of cancer "tends to be lower for the home environment" — by about 30 percent for adults of both sexes and by 20 percent or less for infants and children.

As a result, the study said, "direct

extrapolation of risk estimates from the mining to the home environment may overestimate the numbers of radon-caused lung cancer cases by three to four times."

Dust particles in homes tend to be smaller than in mines, the study said. This increases the likelihood that home particles, including those attached to radon, would be deposited in the lung.

But the committee said miners tend to breathe more rapidly, due to the exertion of heavy work, so they are inhaling a greater amount of radon.

Children in homes tend to be more susceptible to radon-caused disease than are adults because they breathe more rapidly and are more apt to be physically active. But children in the domestic environment still are less at risk of lung cancer than are miners, the study said.

Board member undermines association

I am co-owner in a condominium and am disgusted with one of the board members. He is a tyrant who is abusive to the association's employees in their service-related roles. Since he has gone on the board, he has undermined the relationship between the other directors and the association's management company, its attorney and its other consultants. What can I do as a co-owner to deal with this tyrant?

I would suggest that you write this director a personal letter advising him that you are on to his antics and that you plan to bring this to the attention of the board or the entire association, seeking his removal unless he mends his ways. It sounds as though he has already done a great deal of damage to your condominium and you may consider bringing a petition to remove him as a director if the word is out to the other members about his conduct and his abusive tactics. In any event, following someone to continue in that self-centered attitude to undermine the best interests of the association for which all of the co-owners will pay.

I am not a tyrant, but I can no



condo queries

Robert M. Meissner

against the neighbor and perhaps the board for failing to discharge its legal responsibilities in your behalf.

Can you tell me what the rules are in general for vacation homes under the Internal Revenue Code?

Where a home is used for personal purposes for more than a set number of days of the year, the home is treated as a vacation home and is not subject to the passive loss rules of the Internal Revenue Code. In such cases are deductible only to the extent of gross rental income from the property. Personal use arises when the residence is used for 15 days or more and personal use exceeds 14 days or 10 percent of the number of days that the property is

rented in the year. When the period is 15 days or more, the personal use does not count as 14-day 10 percent use test, then the rules do not fall under the vacation home rules, and losses are limited by the passive loss rules of the Internal Revenue Code. These rules in general provide that the losses cannot exceed income from passive activities.

Example: In 1990, 10 percent of losses from pre-Oct. 23, 1976 investments may be deducted against other income. For 1991 and later years, losses from pre-Oct. 23, 1986 investments are treated the same as any other investments. You are advised to consult a tax advisor regarding specific information.

Robert M. Meissner is a Birmingham attorney specializing in condominiums, real estate and corporate law. You are invited to submit topics about condominiums that you would like to see discussed in this column by writing Robert M. Meissner at 30200 Telegraph Road, Suite 467, Birmingham 48020. This column provides general information and should not be construed as legal opinion.

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