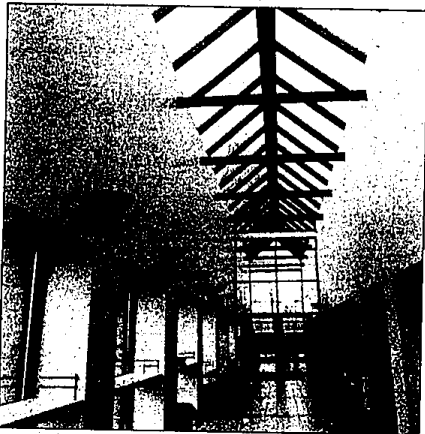


Building Scene

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Marilyn Fitchett editor/591-2300

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photos by JIM JAGGELD/staff photographer

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.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

New post offices earn stamps of approval for design, function

By Doug Funke
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. And 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 couldn'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 work space," Moore said. "Carriers to sort mail and clerk, to service delivery areas 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, loading docks, post office boxes and service counter.

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 one 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 the 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 far-flung 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.

"Personally, I think they're very aesthetically pleasing," Schiller said. "I like the thought that has gone in. They're designed structurally very sound so they last a long time."

NEW POST offices don't come cheap. Moore provided budgets for several built or under way in the area.

- West Bloomfield, 29,500 square feet, \$5 million.
- Birmingham, 38,000 — square feet, \$4.9 million.
- Plymouth, 22,000 square feet, \$4.2 million.

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

But the money can be well-spent if employee morale and productivity increase 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 Peskupa, 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."

Tom 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."

Hilary Borman of Birmingham said she was surprised at 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 issued 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 exposure to radon in homes with the risks of radon-caused lung cancer among mine workers.

Radon gas 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 always into a group of short-lived radioisotopes that can attach themselves to dust particles and then be inhaled. Two of the radioisotopes, polonium-218 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 new NRC study said that when comparing how the radon particles 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 these percentages."

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 and their service-related people. Since he has gotten 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 in your condominium and you may consider bringing a petition to remove him as a director if the word is out to the other members of the association of his abusive tactics. In any event, allowing someone to continue in that role will continue to undermine the best interests of the association for which all of the co-owners will pay.

I am not a prude, but I can no

longer stand my upstairs neighbor cavorting at all hours of the night with her multiple boyfriends. I have written the board on several occasions, but they say it is not their business. I have pounded on the pipes to try to get this woman to show basic decency but to no avail. Moreover, the association won't take care of any sound conditioning problems that I am having. What can I do?

The first thing is to determine whether there is anything structurally wrong with your unit in regard to sound transmission. Assuming there is not, you then have a problem of a co-owner presumably abusing her privileges as member of the association, to the extent that she is unreasonably interfering with your use and enjoyment of the premises. I would formally write a letter to the neighbor requesting her to keep the noise down.

I would also write the board demanding that it take some action against her to the extent that your complaints about her can be documented by a third person. If the board is unwilling to take action, consider taking action on your own



condo queries
Robert M. Melsner

against the neighbor and perhaps against the board for failing to discharge its legal responsibilities under its 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. Instead expenses are deductible only to the extent of gross rental income from the property. Personal use arises when the residence is rented 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 but personal use does not exceed the 14-day 10 percent use test, then the residence does 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, 1986 investments may be deducted against other income. For 1991 and later years, losses from pre-Oct. 23, 1986 investment are treated the same as any other investments. You are advised to consult a tax adviser regarding specific information.

Robert M. Melsner 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. Melsner at 30200 Telegraph Road, Suite 407, Birmingham 48010. This column provides general information and should not be construed as legal opinion.

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