

BUILDINGS DESIGNED FOR VERSATILITY

The traditional approach to the construction of buildings for public use has been to construct both the exterior and interior lay out with a fixed view of the uses each space would serve. In school design, for example, the classrooms were constructed with fixed walls to create spaces for seating the projected number of students.

Buildings can be viewed as long term investments. A building depreciates in about 30 years. What this means in round figures is that if a school is built for \$6,000,000 the expense is written off at \$200,000 annually for 30 years. When spaces need to be modified the expenses of knocking out and reconstructing interior walls are written off on the same basis. This construction modification entails the need to contract costly skilled laborers and is both a messy and disruptive process.

The drawback to this form of planning is that the utility of interior building spaces, more often than not, changes with much greater frequency. As trends in education or business environment keep evolving, the fixed structures are often an obstruction to trying new arrangements or implementing potential improvements in method of operation.

Today, in part as a result of the focus on energy efficiency and sustainability, the approach to designing public buildings has changed significantly. This has been made possible by the introduction of new construction materials. Now the building itself is viewed as a sort of fixed shell but the interiors are being designed with a variety of adaptive partitions. One of the major changes is the new demand for use of "moveable walls". These walls are hung on tracks and serve the same function as fixed walls. When an interior space needs to be modified the walls are readily reconfigured without any mess and without the need for skilled labor. These walls will depreciate in a short term of about 7 years. They contribute significantly to the ability of the building to continue to accommodate changing uses and they are reusable. The walls come in a variety of styles; with or without glass paneling, varying levels of soundproofing and can have different surfaces on each side.

For short term adaptations of spaces there are a variety of partition products. These include such items as accordion folding panels, and screen partitions. When these products are combined with the use of furniture that is foldable, stackable and moves on casters: the transition from one type of function to another is accomplished very quickly. This maximizes the functionality of the entire interior area.

When a building is designed with attention to energy efficiency and multifunctional structuring the increase in cost at the outset can easily pay for itself in reduced operating cost after just a few years in operation. The same is true of major renovations. Bringing an old building up to code is a very costly process if it entails modifying interior walls. If it must be done, it makes sound economical sense to invest in incorporating the new materials at the same time.