Thinking Ahead

Designers discuss the challenges of newspaper project planning with a view to changing technologies and future expansion

by Helene Cohen Smith

THE UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE of technology and its effects on workflow have the potential to frustrate those involved in construction or renovation of newspaper plants.

According to Rick Ruffino of the Blevins Harding Group, a newspaper planning and consulting firm based in Boulder, Colo., much of the change in the way organizations such as his are designing plants results from a shift from press technology-driven planning to office technology-driven planning.

Ruffino said the advent of digital technologies gives newspaper office personnel the freedom to be anywhere on or off site.

"We always had bureaus," he said, "but they were outposts. Now they're major sources of information."

Ruffino includes telecommuters in his definition of bureaus, but emphasizes the need to address the isolating aspects of working from home. "You should have a place to go in the office; it's the anchor that allows people to maintain contact."

An increasingly popular concept that Blevins Harding is exploring with clients is known as "hoteling," whereby organizations provide office space and equipment based on the likelihood that a percentage of telecommuting personnel will be in the office on any given day.

For instance, if an organization employs 25 outside salespeople, or telecommuting reporters, it may find that only 10 of those people may be in on any given day. As a result, the organization can save money and space by building only 10 workspaces, to be shared by all 25.

Ruffino said his firm examines the bureau and telecommuting issues with publishers during the process of "programming," which Blevins Harding defines as a "rigorous process of interacting with the client regarding [issues] they may not have thought about."

"It crystallizes their thinking. It's a good process for them," he added.

Dario DiMare, formerly of Haskell Co., and recent founder of his own Framingham, Mass., firm, said that modern newspaper plant designs revolve around two main issues: specific needs and technology, both present and future.

"They both change simultaneously," DiMare said. "It becomes a moving target."

Today DiMare figures electronics into the design of the entire facility. With change the only constant, he said the key to designing for electronics is flexibility.

"The ultimate way of dealing with electronics today is a raised floor, but

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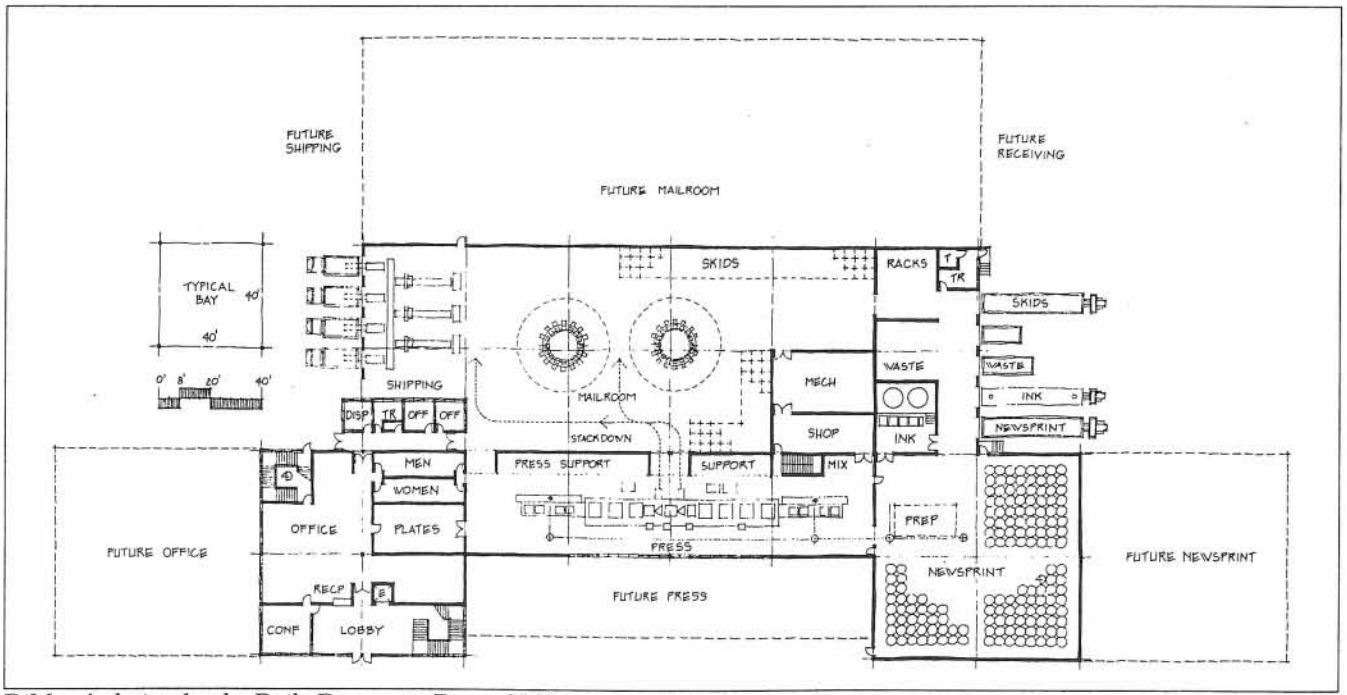

DiMare's design for the Daily Democrat, Dover, N.H.

Challenges

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it's expensive. The unbeatable advantage is that you can put anything in it — electrical, voice, data and mechanical systems."

According to DiMare, raised flooring allows easy relocation of all types of equipment. If the cost cannot be justified, however, the publisher has options such as in-slab raceways, where electric trays, or grids, are built into the cement floor or ceiling.

"If you design properly," DiMare said, "the walls, ceiling tiles, floor systems, sprinkler heads, diffusers, lighting fixtures, will all be on a grid. Therefore, if you have to move a wall or an office, you can do so without affecting building systems. It's logical, inexpensive and easy to adapt to changing technologies if you design this way."

He compares today's newspaper design model with what designers in other industries call "smart buildings"; then a misnomer when you consider that they were only talking about a small computer room within an entire facility. "It's not like this hasn't been done before," he said. "The difference is that now you are truly talking about a whole building."

The industry's increasing reliance on advanced technology also necessitates the design and implementation of security systems. "Today the product is the chip," said DiMare, "and so you have to protect the chip with such things as sophisticated fire suppression and security systems. A computer can be a very vulnerable commodity."

As a result, DiMare said that in addition to his regular roster of newspaper-familiar contractors, he is also associating more and more with those familiar with data center construction.

In DiMare's view, the only catch in contemporary design is what he calls "Factor X" — the unknown changes in technology and market demands. In discussing technology, and specifically, wiring, he said, "You have to build-in the "what-ifs," such as "how many pair will they be able to twist, and how thin will the wires get?"

He believes that a plan commissioned by *Foster's Daily Democrat*, Dover, N.H., while he was with Haskell Co., typifies the flexibility and "smart building" design that will allow a newspaper to operate cost effectively far into the future, no matter what the "Factor X" may bring.

Because the 32,000-circulation *Daily Democrat* is an afternoon paper, the publishers were able to make the press, which can be viewed through windows, the focal point of the facility.

The building was designed on a 40'x40' grid. Any portion of the facility can at least be doubled in size without disrupting the current operation. Electrical grids, either in the ceiling or the floor, will accommodate technology requirements.

Cost-saving measures included utilization of the property's natural topography when designing shipping and receiving bays.

"We minimized the cut and fill, which keeps costs down," he said.

According to DiMare, the design reflects all the particulars of workflow at a newspaper production facility, down to the trucker ready room adjacent to the receiving bays.

"The bathroom, coffee and phone are right there; so you are able to minimize liability and restrict access for security reasons, while still accommodating the driver," he said.

He further noted that while "expandability is ideal . . . the design also has to function well."

For example, in the design for Dover, he said, "the lowest truck on the right is where they will receive newsprint, and we've made that directly adjacent to newsprint storage, which is adjacent to the roll-prep area, which is where it should be, right next to the press. From the press, you are right next to the mailroom, and then out the door."

By design, all raw materials and finished products move in a linear, one-way fashion.

"Everything flows perfectly without crossing paths," said DiMare.

What's true for incoming ink, newsprint and palletized materials, he added, also holds for outgoing newspapers and waste.

"It's a big jigsaw puzzle, and there's never any one, cookie-cutter solution," said DiMare. "The best you can do is try to optimize every piece without compromising another."

According to Ruffino, the process of designing efficiently requires that clients be educated regarding the long-term consequences of their decisions.

"We'll bid on a mailroom where they plan on installing a technology that may be good for five to 15 years, but the facility itself will last for 60 years. We argue that you have to build for the future, and not just the equipment you're putting in now."

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