

# At the Star, A Natural Evolution

by Pete Wetmore

Few newspapers maintain a salt lick for deer. Among them is the Anniston (Ala.) Star but that's just a small example of how form and function blend in the paper's new, natural environs.

The white block can be seen from the Star's new building in a nearby grove of hardwood trees. At the suggestion of its landscape architect, Consolidated Publishing Co. took pains to preserve the deciduous and by twisting its construction plans a few degrees off true north.

Vice President of Operations Ed Fowler likes trees—they're visible from almost every window in the new building. "We wanted nature to be very obvious", he says. "We took the best views and gave them to the people who work here." The only employees in the 78,000-square-foot facility without a window view are the technicians in the information services office—but with more than 300 devices spread across three counties, they get out a lot, anyway.

The structure may remind a visitor of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School of architecture, or a Japanese—style building. In reality, its design is reminiscent of Alabama's industrial past with the roof line mimicking those of manufacturing plants once prevalent in the area.

The seven-pod building was dedicated last September, seven weeks after Consolidated Publishing lived up to its name by putting production of all its titles under one distinctive metal roof.



**The spacious, light-filled lobby occupies one of seven distinctive pods that gives the Anniston (Ala.) Star's \$16 million, 78,000 square-foot building its unique, low-slung look.**



The Anniston Star and its sibling Daily Home in nearby Talledega are published seven days a week. They're joined by four weeklies, five total-market-coverage products and three niche publications. Consolidated also handles some commercial work, such as the campus newspaper at nearby Jacksonville State University.

"We deliver a lot of products to a lot of people," Fowler says, noting that Consolidated distributes 120,000 copies of its products every Wednesday and Thursday.

### Breaking New Ground

The 22-acre campus on the grounds of what used to be the U.S. Army's Fort McClellan is the Star's third location in 75 years, but the first major commercial tenant for what Anniston city fathers hope will become a prized business address.

Publisher H. Brandt Ayers says he's not at all nostalgic for the old building, which was a good idea "for its time" when it was built in 1959.

Looking out his office window at a forest dressed for fall, Ayers says, "What if they put you in a box and put the lid on it, and you didn't know if it was night or day, and you had to spend 42 years there, and one day they let you out? Well, that's the feeling we all had."

"You'd have to see the old building to see what this building has done for morale," Fowler adds. "We have to walk far," he says, because the new building has three times the space of the structure they occupied in downtown Anniston.

"It used to be [walk] three feet," Fowler says, "and you're there." Spaciousness pervades the L-shaped structure. The distinctive pods provide vaulted ceilings in the newsroom, executive offices, advertising area, lobby and hallways.

Strategically placed windows bring daylight into many spaces—under

the deliberately rusted beams in the lobby; into the cavernous, glistening white packaging area, and down to the floor of the press hall, 32 feet below an acoustical-tile ceiling.

The \$16 million project included \$8.9 million for design and construction, which was managed by Brasfield & Gorrie LLC of Birmingham. Architect David C. Hogan, vice president of Dario Designs Inc. of Framingham, Mass., led management and staff in creating an aesthetic vision statement that guided him in designing the building.

His study of the area's legacies led him to use earth tones throughout the building, drawing from Anniston's history as a foundry town and maker of clay pipe.

Symmetry underlies everything, from the number and size of windows to the shapes found in hallways—the outline of the cove ceiling above is mirrored in the carpet pattern below.

"We also had to have a building that works, that's functional," Fowler says. Plans evolved with the help of many employees, including one who suggested relocating circulation away from advertising to make things easier to access both departments.

Staffers also traveled to Grand Rapids, Mich., to inspect furniture choices at Steelcase Inc. Their exploration led to color schemes Fowler hadn't considered, plus the purchase of items such as \$350 desk chairs as part of a half-million-dollar budget for furniture alone.

Additional space and new equipment, especially the inclusion of automatic pasters in the pressroom, created new efficiencies throughout the operation.

The 25,784-circulation Star and 10,000-circulation Daily Home are both printed on twin six-unit presses from Dauphin Graphic Machines Inc. of Elizabethville, Pa. Color capacity grew from eight four-color positions in a 32-page edition to 16 four-color and 16 spot-color pages in 32 pages, eliminating all but one advance Sunday run.

The press crews from Anniston and Talledega merged, applying their knowledge of Goss Urbanite and Community presses, respectively, to the new building. They all learned how to operate the flying pasters from Jardis Industries Inc. of Itasca, Ill., which stand at either end of the press line.

The pasters were a huge step forward, says Production Director Roger Sawyer, as they carry larger newsprint reels and permit continuous operation of the press.

Reproduction is also much improved because the old manual pasters in the previous two pressrooms had suffered from age, sometimes fluctuating wildly as they spun out paper.

Color registration, once "iffy," as Sawyer puts it, now is maintained through equipment from Perretta Graphics Corp. of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., which press operators monitor in their quiet room. Settings are calibrated using data from US Ink of Carlstadt, N.J., which supplies all of Consolidated Publishing's inks, including a special spot-color red.

The pasters have had an unexpected consequence for the 51-person Star newsroom, Sawyer notes. "You can't come and say, 'I want to change this on a roll change,'" he says, recalling editors' frequent requests from days past, when a reel change meant stopping the press.

With the added speed, Sawyer adds, "you can't proof off the press anymore."

Now the Star comes off the press in 35 to 50 minutes, following the Daily Home's press run. Trucks carrying the Daily Home 30 miles to Talledega also carry copies of the Star for distribution in southern Calhoun County.

### Technology in the Blood

The Star is a pagination pioneer having adopted Macs in the late 1980s and full-page output in the early 1990s. "Full-page" meant sending a broadsheet image to an 11-by-17-inch, 1,200 dot-

per-inch laser writer, then shooting a page negative at 133 percent, Sawyer recalls.

Today, three Avantara 20/25-OLP imagesetters from Agfa of Ridgefield, N.J., produce all pages on film. Page flow to the imagers is determined by workers in the print room—the successor to downtown's composing room. A T-1 line connects the newsroom in Talledega to the print room, delivering two dozen or so pages a day, while the weekly publications have 128 kilobyte-per-second connections.

Two rooms not replicated on the McClellan campus are a darkroom and a composing room. Photographers carry Nikon digital cameras, and the photo desk uses Adobe Photoshop to prep images for production. Pages are laid out in QuarkXPress, with reporters writing in Microsoft Word. Ads are built using Adobe PageMaker.

In 1979, the Star brought in a conventional editorial front-end system. When the day came to replace it, sticker shock led the paper to adopt networking software from QuickWire Labs of Hamilton, Ontario, patching Word, Quark and PageMaker together into a system that endures.

Computer purchases are in the

works, Fowler says. A circulation system from Publishing Business Systems Inc. of Barrington, Ill., will be installed soon. The advertising department is in line to get ad-sales and classified systems to replace a nine-year-old array from Baseview Products Inc. of Ann Arbor, Mich.

### **Out the Door**

"I have to stop calling it the mailroom," Fowler says, referring to the packaging area. Equipment there spans two eras, with metal-topped tables from the old mailroom just across the floor from glistening new machinery. Papers flow through the packaging area on conveyors and stackers from Quipp Systems Inc. of Miami. Bundles are secured by strappers from Dynaric Inc. of Teaneck, NJ.

The largest piece of hardware is an SLS1000 12-into-2 inserter from GMA Inc. of Bethlehem, Pa. Rated at 18,000 pieces an hour, the SLS1000 outpaces an older Muller 227 8-into-1 inserter next to it, the only heavy metal brought from the downtown plant. "We use it for some of the smaller runs," Fowler says. "It's slower, but it works."

Generous space is now available for storing preprints, another major gain in efficiency. Previously, both the Star and

Daily Home had to cut their newsprint inventories to make room for preprints awaiting distribution. Now, inserts are stored on pallet racks featuring ingenious sliding shelves. Newsprint from Consolidated's sole supplier, Bowater Inc. of Greenville, S.C., has ample space for a 40-day supply.

The packaging area illustrates the company's concern for good working conditions. Carriers drive up to a generous parking lot, then wait for papers in a room right off the mailroom floor featuring a television and its own bathroom.

Workers operating the inserters use an ergonomic pallet lifter from Southworth Products Corp. of Falmouth, Maine, that rises as preprints are removed and also rotates to position stacks of preprints for easy lifting.

While some spaces, including an audio-visual conference room, await full development, one room is idle, and will remain so until a new use can be found for it. A sign on the door reads "telemarketing."

Says Fowler: "We don't do it anymore." ■