

Building Design: A river runs through it

Architects applied wave theme to roof, sidewalks, landscaping, even windows

by Sue Merrell
The Grand Rapids Press

It's hard to suppress a wave when you drive past The Press new printing and packaging facility in Walker.

The design on the side of the building, the curved roof overhang, even the berm of earth between the building and Int. 96, create a ripple effect.

As the sun moves over the building, the shadow from the overhang moves across the building like flowing water.

"The river played a huge role in the development of Grand Rapids, so the wave design is reflective of the river," said David Ehrhardt, vice president of Dario Designs in Massachusetts and head architect for the project. Wave patterns are repeated throughout the building, from the curved sidewalk and planting areas on the north side of the building, to the burgundy and khaki carpeting in the offices, to the brown-and-olive tile and curved counter in the foyer.

Even the window glass ripples.

"Newspapers view themselves as an integral part of the community, so it's important that the building create an image that is tied to the area," said Dario DiMare, president of the company. "This concept could not be put in Oregon or Alabama."

Dario Designs specializes in newspaper buildings, "designing 30 to 35 a year. The building they designed for Fort Wayne, Ind., has three walls coming together to mimic the intersection of three rivers there. The plant they

built in Springfield, Mass., shows off the inner workings of pipes, gears and wiring through a glass window, a tribute to the area's manufacturing.

For West Michigan, designers looked at the importance of the Grand River and came up with an undulating line that helps to disguise the enormous building, which stands eight stories tall at the highest point and stretches a tenth of a mile along the highway. "It goes on and on, but that's OK," DiMare said. "So does the river. It's so massive, but you turn that into an asset"

The facility's size is dictated by the equipment. The 528-foot-long building fronting Int. 96 houses a state-of-the-art automatic storage and retrieval system for newsprint. The center tower, which purposely resembles a grain elevator from West Michigan's agricultural history, rises to a peak of 87 feet over the vertically designed Geoman press.

Windows circle the press hall and the football field-sized packaging room, which is completely different from the dark dungeon of the pressroom in the basement of The Press' downtown facility. It has a nice pleasing atmosphere, letting in daylight during the day, and you can see the stars at night," Ehrhardt said. "We wanted to create an environment that's nice to work in. You don't feel like you're stuck inside."

Designers also wanted to create a facility that's nice to visit with large conference rooms to accommodate advertising clients and walkways that overlook the packaging and printing areas for tour groups.

But an appealing design doesn't have to be more expensive, DiMare said. The entire site is built on a 4-foot grid so everything is 4 feet wide or in multiples of 4 feet. Every door is centered on a 4-foot section. Beams are set on multiples of four feet.

That means there is less waste installing tile or drywall, because building materials come in 4-foot widths.

"It drives the cost of the building down, and it's cool to look at," DiMare said.

"It gives everything a clean, orderly look," Ehrhardt added. ■



Contoured glass pillars frame an open-air break area