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What Industrial and Institutional Clients Want: Architects Discuss Trends

What do industrial and institutional clients want? For institutional clients, the answer is increased security, space and light. Industrial clients remain focused on costs, not design.

We talked with Bob Davidson, Chief Architect, The Austin Company, Cleveland, OH; Jason Korb, Principal, Korb + Associates Architects, Milwaukee, WI; Brian Meade, Associate Principal and Design Director, Dewberry, Elgin, IL and Tim McGrath, Design Principal and Senior Planner, Wold Ruck Pate, Palatine, IL to find out how the world of industrial and institutional architecture has changed in recent years.

Some of the changes in school design, says McGrath of Wold Ruck Pate, have been a function of the slow but constant change in how educators think about delivering education. “It has been a confluence of three events,” says McGrath. First, “No Child Left Behind” was a program that looked to other education models and how delivery is handled, he said. Another influence was the theory of multiple intelligences, which proposes that all children can learn, but in different ways. The creation of personal digital technology was the third event in the confluence, providing students with information access anytime, anywhere.

As a result, the old model of school design has become obsolete. Instead of “cells and bells,” with the teacher at the front of the room, the widely accepted trend is peer-to-peer learning, incorporating collaboration and working in small teams. This project-based learning has necessitated larger learning spaces. While many elementary education classrooms keep the students in one room through much of the school day, learning spaces for fourth-graders and higher frequently incorporate a student “commons,” with areas for conferences, collaboration and small spaces for presentations. These new, more open areas are used in a number of ways, so sliding walls and multi-functional furniture enable the rooms to be reconfigured quickly and easily.

Ensuring that students have an abundance of natural light is another “must” in school design, says Jason Korb of Korb + Associates. “Study after study shows that students do much better with natural light,” he says. “It’s critical.”

School boards and staff recognize the need for new designs that will embrace these new methodologies. “Our clients have been pretty flexible and are leading the charge,” says Korb.

School and Municipal Security

One of the biggest requirements for both schools and municipalities is enhanced security for students and staff. “There is a growing concern for safety,” says Brian Meade of Dewberry. “The need to limit public access has filtered down to architectural design. While school and community leaders recognize the importance of presenting a welcoming impression to local residents, staff members are concerned about allowing unrestricted access to public buildings.

“Entrances to hallways and lobbies today are very limited,” says Meade. Keycard access can record and control access for every door. “There is a digital record every time a door has been opened and closed, which allows for better control of who has access to locations such as the evidence storage room at a police facility,” he says.

A series of doors at school entrances helps to limit public access and requires those checking in to present credentials. “We’re also designing a second way out of every classroom, even if it’s not required by code,” says Korb. “The initial strategy is to create an environment that deters criminal activity,” says McGrath. “That means making sure that property is well lit and that we are not creating areas to hide.”

Budgets and Trade-Offs

While budgets may not be as tight as recent years, some caution remains, resulting in trade-offs and compromises. “Municipalities have to prove fiscal responsibility, yet city buildings are often icons in their communities,” says Meade. “This means showing civic pride where it counts, such as in a public lobby or at the front of a building, and using less costly materials in the back, where they are not seen,” he said.

In Illinois and in other communities around the country, municipalities are combining police, fire and city hall facilities to save on costs. “They have to do more with
less,” says Meade. For schools, budget considerations can mean making the school available for community meetings and events after the school day is over, says McGrath.

Another trend is promoting wellness with employees who work in municipal buildings. “It has become more and more important to encourage physical and emotional health for staff. With the co-located facilities, there are additional saving achieved by sharing fitness, training and media rooms,” says Meade.

For industrial buildings, which are sometimes little more than a shell for manufacturing or processing equipment, architectural design is rarely a priority. Clients frequently negotiate heavily to get the lowest prices, says Bob Davidson of The Austin Company. The companies have fewer technical resources to consider design complexities and our proposed solutions, and therefore, the evaluation of proposals leans more heavily on the commercial terms. The challenge is to communicate the solution and their benefits more clearly and structure our response to commercial side to give the owner more flexibility to make the best decision.

Some of these complexities include complying with international building codes in some of the large manufacturing and warehouse facilities that are being constructed today, says Davidson. “Designing fire protection systems and exit paths around equipment for these huge buildings can require some innovative thinking,” he says.

**Sustainability and Energy Savings**

Sustainability and energy savings also require additional tradeoffs in terms of energy savings vs. the cost of LEED certification. “Some cities like Dallas, which requires a LEED Gold minimum, are more on the forefront,”
Accessibility Questions?

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says Meade, “but most cities realize that there is still an upcharge for LEED buildings. They still want to get the most sustainability if possible.”

“Our basic spec would be a LEED Silver rating,” says Korb. “The industries and the suppliers are trending that way.”

Most industrial clients, says Davidson, want sustainability but are not willing to pay the additional cost of LEED certification. “However, as heavy energy users, most are interested in reducing energy consumption.”

Despite the intense competitive environment and budget challenges, the architecture business seems to be improving. “The economy is coming back,” says Davidson. “People are spending money again. We are working with a lot of repeat clients that value our expertise.” Korb notes that in Milwaukee business has been back in full force for at least two years, and with extensive downtown projects, the construction scene is “overstressed.” And Meade says that he’s seeing more RFPs and RFQs and capital improvement plans are starting to show money in the budget. “I’m seeing more space needs studies by municipalities,” he adds. “It’s good to see that they’re getting ready.”

“It’s an incredibe time to be an architect in education. After all of the hard work and thoughtful collaboration by the entire team, it is beyond words to see users moved to tears of joy at the opening of a project,” says McGrath.