

Washington Business Journal

The Way We Work

Firm's Office a Material Representation of Its Business

by Phil Waggener, Contributing Writer

April 12-18, 2002

The design of California-based DPR Construction's new regional office near Falls Church is rich in imagery reflecting the business it's in and the objectives it pursues.

Visitors entering the reception area see a translucent panel marked with distinctive X's that signify construction scaffolding. Moving into the working area, guests encounter a curved, slanted wall with the look and texture of limestone. Cut into the brightly illuminated wall are openings framed with raw structural steel and exposed rivets.

The stonelike wall has subtle levels of symbolism beyond its obvious representation of a construction material. It evokes an image of the monuments and classic buildings of the Washington area, explains Herman Diebler Jr., an executive in the DPR office (www.dprinc.com). Also, the slant of the wall gives it the feel of a mountain cliff to be scaled – a challenge to the company's workers to achieve DPR's ambitious growth plans.

The most subtle symbol of all is the curve itself, which has a radius of precisely 2,030 feet.

"We call it our '2030' wall," Diebler says. "It represents DPR's goal of becoming one of the most admired companies [on Fortune magazine's list] by the year 2030."

In contrast to the imposing wall, few barriers exist in the rest of the office. Staff members - Diebler included - sit close together in a large open space, separated only by waist-high partitions. Everyone has a view out the large windows on three sides, and everyone can see - and often hear - what's going on elsewhere in the office.

"That's our style of operating," Diebler says. "In many of our competitors' offices you walk in and see project management down that hallway, estimating down that hallway, accountants over there and the vice presidents by themselves in mahogany row. We have estimators sitting next to project managers sitting next to accountants. It promotes communication. If I hear an accountant trying to solve a problem with a vendor I know, I can jump in and try to help out. We're a very close group of folks."

This arrangement is part of DPR's egalitarian, nonhierarchical culture Diebler brought with him when he moved from the company's home office in Redwood City, Calif., to establish a regional office in Fairfax County.

The culture also disdains formal titles.

"We try to promote a flat organization that empowers people to make decisions on their own and doesn't put boundaries around them by having presidents or CEOs or vice presidents," Diebler says. Neither his business card nor anyone else's shows a title. Asked to characterize his role, Diebler had to think a moment before replying, "I guess you could just call me project executive."

For times when people need to talk without disturbing others, there are open-ended "team rooms" in two corners. A more conventional, totally enclosed conference room is hidden behind the receptionist's desk, but it's not used often. "It's formal," Diebler points out, "and we don't like formal."

Another cultural import from California is a refrigerated and stocked wine bar, where people can gather to celebrate the winning of a contract or the completion of a project. Every DPR office has one. For extra elbow room during these gatherings, a wide door behind the island bar slides back on a rail, exposing a large room normally used for training sessions.

The Fairfax office is one of 18 in DPR's rapidly expanding operation - 17 in the United States and one in Singapore. The 12-year-old company did about \$1.9 billion in business last year, moving up from 25th to 15th place nationwide in one year.

DPR focuses on buildings for high-tech operations, such as biopharmaceutical and microelectronic facilities, but it also does more traditional construction, including two Ikea stores in the Washington area.

The company clearly expects its operation in this area to expand. It leased 15,000 square feet of contiguous space but currently uses only about 60 percent of it for the 35-person staff. The rest is up for short-term subleasing until needed.

The company's policy, however, is not to allow a regional office to get bigger than about \$100 million to \$125 million in business a year because then "it becomes harder for the leaders to give personal, hands-on attention to every project," Diebler says. "If we grow to that level, we would likely open another office in the area, perhaps in Maryland."