

So long, corner office

By Tara Marion

Architectural firms across the region are adopting new approaches to designing offices and office buildings.

Beta Design Group Inc. in Grand Rapids and **Eckert Wordell** in Kalamazoo, among others, support the use of natural and resource-efficient materials to make buildings more sustainable.

One of the most successful means of measuring sustainable design is through the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program, said Douglas Brant, president and CEO of Beta.

Some people would like to think it's an end-all environmental kind of thing," he said. "It's a rating system that enables you to quantify some of the different aspects of energy and environmental design."

The LEED Green Building Rating System is a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings.

LEED emphasizes state-of-the-art strategies for sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality.

Last year, Beta Design demonstrated its commitment to LEED standards by building a new facility using sustainable design and reusable building materials, such as carpet with recycled fibers, wheat board cabinets, a recycled rubber floor and a cork floor.

The 100,000-square-foot building, which was completed last year, also provides an aesthetically pleasing office environment with a four-story open atrium and large windows for daylight. The interior is painted in bright shades of blue, gold, red and green.

Colors like these are gaining in popularity, said Jason Novotny, associate at Eckert Wordell.

"People seem to be a lot more open to using brighter colors to give more individuality to spaces rather than the monotone office grays and blues from 10 years back," Novotny said.

Clients also express their individuality through the incorporation of curves in interior spaces.

"That architecturally lets you flow one space into another much more gracefully," Novotny said. "It doesn't seem as if people are working in boxes."

There has been a transformation in the way people approach the designation of space as well. As more executives opt for a team-based approach to work, the corner office is slowly disappearing.

"That's kind of a paradigm shift in the way business is conducted now," Novotny explained. "We're starting to see a lot more people who work together in teams, and with that comes a lot of flexibility for team spaces and break-out areas.

Stations are also being created for outside consultants.

When it comes to designing offices and office buildings, Brant said there are no rules anymore. His clients relish the opportunity to express themselves as individuals or organizations, but first and foremost are issues of quality.

"Quality of furnishings and quality of the indoor environment are something that people want more of," he said. "They want healthier environments. They want environments that enable human communication and interaction."