

A design like no other

By Andrew Stamer, Transatlantic Programs Center

The mission was to design a building to encompass more than 20 base functions, while meeting design and force protection guidelines – it also had to fit within a restrictive space, which was likely to result in an unusual building footprint.

What was delivered has been described as a “wonderful” and “top-notch facility” that will hugely impact the quality of life for service members stationed at and visiting the Naval Support Activity Bahrain.

The Installation Service Support Center, officially known as “Freedom Souq,” opened its doors June 15.

It was up to a team of architects and engineers from TAC to make this happen. They also took this coveted real estate and shaped it into the apex of the base.

“The site chosen for the project was located at the end of a beautifully landscaped exterior pedestrian mall that had existing buildings on each side,” said Crawford Horne, the senior architect from TAC and architect of Freedom Souq. “The design concept was to create an appropriate terminus to the mall that would provide an active focal point and link to the existing buildings while not restricting pedestrian movement or emergency vehicle access.”

With big ideas the design team started their work.

“This was by far, the largest and most complex individual facility design that I have ever worked on,” said Horne. “The functions contained within the structure are numerous and extremely varied in nature. The best analogy in the private sector would probably be an indoor commercial urban mall.”

The souq had to be designed to encompass a variety of functions such as a 24-hour food court, laundry, dry cleaners, barber shop, beauty shop, video store, Internet café, and photo shop. It also left room to house individual clubs for officers, chiefs, and enlisted personnel, two movie theaters and an all purpose assembly hall.

The two largest functions balance the facility on each wing: the physical fitness center and the Navy Exchange (NEX) – each operation taking up both floors of its respective wing.

To say the least, the facility is a unique design, but it had to be to accommodate all the functions that would eventually move into it while fitting the site that had been designated by the Navy for construction.

“The architect had to build something that fit the area and provided everything that was needed while still having all the force protection requirements,” said Muhammad Khan, a project engineer with the Bahrain Resident Office.

Horne agreed that maximizing the restrictive site and complying with the force protection criteria were critical to the design outcome.

“Architecturally this facility is much different than most Corps projects, which are normally straight walls and offices,” said Khan.

The design came from a number of detailed discussions with the customer to help establish where each function would be placed, said Horne. Some of this was straightforward. Because of height requirements, the gymnasium, movie theaters and assembly hall were all placed on the upper floor level. The NEX was placed close to the parking area for convenience, the food court was placed on the ground floor in the center of the building and in close proximity to the dining areas, and the fitness center was placed on the ground floor along an indoor pedestrian concourse.

But the beauty of this design was that it offered a challenge, even to Corps veterans, many of whom had never been involved with a facility design of this scale. The NEX alone, which takes up about one-third of the building's space, is comparable to the size of a Wal-Mart.

But size is only one part of the design equation because form counts as well.

"The design aesthetic was influenced by local modern architecture to a limited extent and by the Installation Design Guide created by the U.S. Navy to insure design compatibility for that particular location," Horne said.

"The exterior finish is pastel colored stucco which is used widely in the local community and is a traditional building material in the Middle East," he said. Also incorporated into the design were the limited use of windows, which were kept to a minimum for force protection and thermal considerations, but the windows also provided the architect an element to use to his advantage.

"The windows afforded an opportunity to create visual interest in the exterior facade of the building which would have otherwise been too massive to the eye," Horne said.

The rooftop patio areas, which are common in the Middle East, are adorned with fabric canopies. These canopies offer an architectural reference to traditional nomadic features – tent structures.

On the inside, the look and feel is much different, which is what the interior designer, Vickie Constantino, wanted.

This TAC designer said she wanted to get away from the Middle Eastern theme so prevalent on the outside of the building and give the inside an American feeling.

Because the customers and users of this service center are far from home, Constantino said, "I wanted to design something that might make them feel a little closer to home."

The job was a huge undertaking – to do 20 different interior design jobs at once, while making each area unique to the next, she said. It took her the "better part of a year" to get the job under foot.

As an interior designer it was her job to pick out just about everything you would see when you entered the building, from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, and many of the things in between.

The structural interior design portion consisted of her selecting the hard surfaces, such as carpeting, flooring, tiling, and wall paints or coverings.

Each step down the corridor is met by symmetrical patterns of dark green terrazzo tiling set within a field of beige. And the eyes are met with bold reds and blues upon entrance to the food court and general public areas, Constantino said.

"Because it's a Navy facility, I used a lot of navy blue and other shades of blue, but I also incorporated other colors to give it a little punch," she said. "I picked a variety of finishes, materials and colors to create a visual impact."

The second part of her design was the comprehensive interior design, which consists of the furnishings.

"Items selected range from plush recliners and lounge seating to shopping carts and everything in between," she said.

To furnish the inside of the facility, Constantino said she used 24 vendors to supply the \$900,000 worth of furniture, furnishings and equipment. While she picked out the items, the Navy was responsible for procuring them once the project neared completion.

Each organization within the NEX had its own distinct items that needed to be procured. The hundreds of items Constantino picked out included sorting bins for the mailroom, commercial appliances for the coin-operated laundry, seating and workstations for administrative offices, artificial plants, lounge furniture, and a large variety of dining tables and chairs to fit the themes of each organization within the facility.

“This is the biggest and most interesting project I’ve worked on because it has so many different elements,” she said.

In the 16 years Constantino has been doing interior design, this has been the most comprehensive. Many projects she works on are administration and office buildings, which don’t offer the quite the creative opportunities as “Freedom Souq” presented.