

In late 2008, drivers on Interstate 71 southwest of Columbus, Ohio witnessed the construction of a new facility on the east side of the highway just south of Exit 97. By January of 2009, construction of the impressive new building was completed. A huge illuminated blue sign facing the interstate, four feet high and 65 feet long, gave the name of the owner: Creative Mobile Interiors. Converted coaches and other vehicles parked adjacent to the building let everyone know that their doors were open for business at this new location.

In some respects, the new CMI facility is a milestone. Its completion appropriately takes place at the 10th anniversary of CMI. It also marks the first new conversion facility in the Midwest in decades, following years of retrenchment by other conversion companies in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. To a significant extent, the story behind Creative Mobile Interiors and their new office and production facility is the story of a single individual: Owen Connaughton.

A native of New York City, Connaughton was interested in vehicle interiors since he was a youngster. This interest led to a degree in engineering as well as a job with Custom Coach, the founder of the converted coach industry, in Columbus, Ohio. In his 14 years at Custom Coach, Connaughton obtained a great deal of first-hand conversion experience. He started as a cabinet maker and then moved up to lead man. From there he was promoted to engineer and eventually became the plant manager of the company's second facility.

In 1999, Connaughton made a major decision and left Custom Coach to found his own company, Creative Mobile Interiors. The fledgling company started operations in a 4,500-square foot shop on the west side of Columbus. The original staff consisted of himself and one other individual, Mike Beyea, who became plant manager.

In retrospect, Connaughton had picked a very difficult period for starting a new conversion enterprise. The year 1998 marked a 50-year high in the bus industry and by 1999, sales were starting to decline. The 9/11/01 tragedy was a further negative impact on both the transportation industry and the economy. During a span of only a few years, several conversion operations in the Midwest closed their doors. From west to east, this included Ramblin' Fever in Janesville, Wisconsin; Executive Coach in Fox River Grove, Illinois; Royal Coach in Elkhart, Indiana; Angola Coach in Angola, Indiana; and American Coach in Allen, Michigan. Even Custom Coach suffered major setbacks but survives in conjunction with Farber Specialties.

Connaughton stated: "My motivation for founding Creative Mobile Interiors really

# An Anniversary and a New Home for Creative Mobile Interiors

*Article and photos  
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The completion of the new conversion facility for Creative Mobile Interiors in Grove City, Ohio coincides with the company's 10th anniversary. All operations, including conversion work, upgrades, repairs, rebuilding and vehicle service work are now under one roof. This photo looks almost south with Interstate 71 to the right behind the parked coaches and the main entrance to the new building in the center.

was to bring custom conversions to a wider audience. With experienced craftsmen, production efficiencies, and design talent, I felt we'd be able to make custom conversion work affordable for people at many budget levels." Creative Mobile Interiors differed from the other conversion companies in two areas. One was that they did not limit themselves to new conversion shells. While they do conversions in new shells, CMI will also work on used coaches as well as a wide range of other vehicles including the MSV,

Sprinter, RVs and even truck trailers. A second difference is that CMI was not limited to expensive new conversions but was also able to meet the needs of vehicle owners with lower budget expectations. What resulted was a very versatile and somewhat unique conversion company that was able to survive and expand in spite of the economy.

As a result of CMI's versatility in both equipment and budget levels, they soon



The main entrance and reception area are open and bright due to two glass walls. This waiting room area is across the way from the reception counter to the right.



Located at the front door, the reception counter features a black granite countertop made by the CMI staff and the CMI logo on the wall which was also made by the staff.

outgrew their initial shop in the west side of Columbus. The decision was made to move to the Grove City area, southwest of Columbus. A 10,000-square foot building was rented on Seeds Road, just south and east of Exit 97 on I-71, in what might be called a rural and light industrial area. In addition to providing room for the conversion shop and a cabinet shop, this facility also had room for a reception area and conference room, a few offices, and a customer design area with samples of carpeting and laminates.

When the Sprinter was introduced in the United States in November of 2001, CMI was the first to do a conversion in the interior. CMI began calling this the "Sprinter PLV" or personal luxury vehicle. These quickly became so popular that CMI leased a 4,000-square foot building down the road for Sprinter conversions and similar work.

As CMI produced more new vehicles, their customers began asking for service. In addition, people and companies with other

converted coaches and vehicles began looking to CMI to handle their service needs. This resulted in the lease of a 3,000-square foot facility adjacent to the conversion shop and office. Increasing orders also prompted the lease of another 4,000-square foot facility down the road.

By 2005, CMI had grown to a staff of 27 people. Facilities had grown to include four different buildings with a total of approximately 21,000 square feet. All of the buildings were located within a half mile along Seeds Road in Grove City. Clearly, CMI was having some growing pains. There were ongoing problems moving people, equipment and vehicles from one facility to another. In addition, the existing office space was inadequate, particularly with a growing need for engineering and design work.

Connaughton and his staff began thinking about the advantages of gathering all of the CMI operations under one roof. Since no suitable facility existed in the area, thoughts turned towards building a new plant that

could be custom-built to match CMI's needs and operations. Eight acres were acquired on Seeds Road that included more than 600 feet of frontage on I-71. This new location was within walking distance of the existing operations. Work got started on designing a new building.

Planning ahead, the new facility was designed to allow for future expansion. While the initial construction is known as Phase I, plans allowed for future expansion and enlarging the facility into a Phase II and Phase III. Dublin Building Systems was selected to do the actual construction and got started in late 2008. By the time ground was broken, the CMI staff had grown to 30 people. The original construction uses three and a half of the total eight acres. Dublin Building Systems finished the project in early 2009 at a cost of approximately \$2.5 million.

One major advantage of the new building is that it consolidates all of the CMI departments under one roof. Communication and coordination have been greatly

The Design Area offers samples of carpeting, wall coverings and laminates that are popularly used in conversions. A full-length glass window to the left provides natural light.



Adjacent to the glass wall are laminate samples in the Design Area. To the rear is a conference room with a large table for 10 and a one-way mirror overlooking production.





One nice feature of the new CMI facility is that it provides office space for the management people. Located towards the center of the building, this is the office of the service manager and the production manager.



The CMI staff is delighted with their attractive break rooms. Shown here is the break room for the production staff which features a sink, microwave, refrigerator, coffee maker and even soft drink and snack machines.

improved. With the old buildings, several people had to use walkie talkies because of the different locations. No longer do managers waste time traveling back and forth to the different buildings. In addition, a paging system was installed in the new building that allows a person to be located anywhere.

The new CMI facility obviously is an asset to the neighborhood. In the front of the building is an attractive pond with a fountain. Surrounding the building to the rear and sides is a six-foot ornamental security fence. However, there is a motorized gate with a keypad for after-hour arrivals. The parking lot in front of the office for customers is open to the road. There also is plug-in connections for converted coaches. Overall, the building effectively consists of two connected rectangles, the smaller one for office space and the larger one for production. Total interior area is approximately 17,900 square feet with 13,300 square feet for production and 4,600 square feet for office space and support functions.

One of the more attractive features of the office area is that the entryway and one side of the building has glass walls. Upon entering, you walk through a vestibule and second set of doors to reach the reception and waiting area. The reception area is noteworthy because of a black granite countertop made by CMI craftsmen and the CMI logo on the wall made by members of the CMI staff. The adjacent attractive waiting area includes black leather chairs and a couch as well as some decorative plants.

Moving ahead along the glass wall, you enter what is known as the Design Area. Very open and rather spacious, the Design Area has samples of carpeting, wall coverings and laminates used in conversions. The glass wall allows CMI customers to evaluate and select various treatments for their vehicle in natural light. Beyond the Design Area is a conference room that can be used

for both office meetings as well as working with customers. The large table has room for 10 people and a one-way mirror to the rear looks into the shop area.

To the rear of the reception area, and along the front of the building, are offices for Connaughton and the company controller. Behind the Display Area is an office area with three connected but stepped desks. At the adjacent wall is an extra computer printer and fax. While private offices are provided for the managers, most of the general office area is open with individual work areas. This makes it easier to interact and work together on customer projects.

Beyond this is an area with a copying machine, computer printer and a blue print

plotter. With so much work being done in engineering and interior design, the blue print plotter is an obvious necessity. Following this is a general office area for sales and engineering. It contains two sets of three interconnected but stepped desks. To the rear of the general office area you will find an office break room which includes a refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker and garbage disposal. The office for the chief engineer, Josh Gifford, is in the back corner.

There is somewhat of an intermediate area between office and production. Located in this area are the restrooms, the shop staff break room, and the office for the service manager and production manager. Like the conference room, this office also has a one way mirror looking into the plant floor. This

Much of the general office area in the new CMI facility is open to facilitate communication between the staff. Shown here is a stepped but interconnected desk for three people that provides separation while allowing communication. Looking towards the front of the building you can see the office of Owen Connaughton and the controller's office.



kind of design tends to minimize the need for foot traffic in the office, which in turn cuts down on dust and dirt in the office. The shop staff break room is large, well lighted, and includes a refrigerator, microwave, and machines with both pop and snacks.

Based on comments from the CMI staff, the new break rooms and bathrooms are very much appreciated. The number of bathrooms has doubled from the old facility and they are better placed in relation to work areas. At the old facility, the staff had to eat their lunch in the conference room or at their desk. With the new building, there are two break rooms plus kitchen equipment.

CMI's production area consists of one large building with overhead doors on both ends plus several rooms for storage or necessary components. The staff is very pleased with the multiple doors since they make it easy to move buses in and out of the building. At the old facility, the conversion shop had only one door, often necessitating moving two or three buses to get one in or out.

The end nearest to the interstate contains three bays that are primarily used for conversion work. This would include new coach conversions as well as retrofits and upgrades. Special wiring is provided so that the coaches can be plugged in to shore power as required. Outside of these doors is a coach parking area adjacent to the interstate with standard campground plug-ins. This is enclosed in the security fence and can provide an overnight living area for customers or parking area for coaches awaiting work.

In the center of the CMI indoor production area is their cabinet shop. This is a fairly large area and does include saws and several different tools for working with wood. The building has a dust collection system to keep everything neat and clean.



There are three bays on what might be called the west side of the big production area. This area is typically used for new conversions and conversion updates. Campground-type land lines are provided for the coaches. A portion of the carpenter show can be seen in the foreground.

The opposite end of the building also includes three bays. A single bay on the right or south end of the building is dedicated to service. In fact, outside of the roll-up doors is a parking area located within the security fence that can accommodate at least a half-dozen coaches awaiting service. CMI has a Hywema lifting system with six posts capable of lifting 86,000 pounds.

The two bays to the left or north are primarily dedicated to converting or rebuilding shorter vehicles. We were told that the staff can fit as many as four Sprinters into this area at the same time. Sprinter conversions are very popular at CMI. However, while we visited we found that this area was busy with rebuilding six MSV buses for the Jackson State University in Mississippi.

Additional rooms are located around the production area and are used for various purposes. There is an electronics room for storing as well as working on various electrical components. This not only helps with inventory but also keeps the equipment free of dust. CMI has always had a good reputation with coach electronics and are leaders in audio/visual control systems and two-way communications. A parts room contains the usual parts needed in doing conversions and service. There is also a climate-controlled upholstery room for carpeting and similar items. Shipping and receiving also has its own room as well as its own shipping and receiving dock. This is a major step forward from the old facility which had neither.

CMI's versatility allows them to work on both new and used coaches. Shown here is a new H3-45 nearing the end of its conversion process. It was due to be delivered in a few weeks.



CMI has an excellent reputation for all types of Sprinter interiors ranging from personal vehicles to corporate usage. This particular Sprinter was converted into an incident command post for a township fire department.



I am sure that much of CMI's success can be credited to their diversity. In addition to full-size coaches, CMI will also work on smaller buses and even trucks. They have developed an enviable reputation with their Sprinter Personal Luxury Vehicle conversions that provide unique interiors for unique customers. They also have had a great deal of success with converting trailers.

Diversity also applies to the interiors and purpose of the conversion. While motor home interiors are typical, CMI has also developed a reputation for numerous different kinds of interiors including product display vehicles, executive, catastrophe response, hospitality, mobile offices and various medical uses. Interiors include marble, granite, leather, bamboo and natural wood including various wall coverings and carpeting. Special equipment includes an in-motion digital satellite system, wireless Internet access, a global positioning system, multi-media entertainment system, and even flip-down plasma screen television. Customers have also asked for European leather seating, maple hardwood floors, laminate walls, Corian® counter tops, and a host of special electronic items.

CMI has also been able to meet the needs of different budgets. While some conversion companies work only on new shells, CMI also does retrofits and enhancements on older coaches. It would not at all be unusual to find a GM PD4108 conversion in for upgrades and a new Prevost H3-45 being converted side by side.

Other equipment that CMI is familiar with includes an autostart generator, remote-controlled, sliding side doors; rooftop air conditioning; a remote-controlled, retractable awning; a bolt-down electronic security safe, and an LCD touch panel for whole-coach automation.



There are three bays on the east end of the big production area. Normally, this area is used for coach service and Sprinter conversions. CMI will service their own coaches as well as those from other conversions firms. A portion of this area was being used for a major rebuild on six MSV vehicles for Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi.

In the staff at CMI are cabinetmakers, upholsterers, electricians, service technicians and people working in interior design, marketing, administration and sales. While CMI itself is only 10 years old, several members of their staff had extensive prior experience elsewhere, including several that worked for Custom Coach.

In addition to its usual conversion, rebuilding, retrofitting and service work, CMI also keeps a few vehicles available for use. Noteworthy is their "Buckeye Bullet," with a special theme for the local team. There is also an executive coach that has gone out on tour.

CMI's customer list includes entertainers such as Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles,

the Doobie Brothers, the Four Tops, and the rock band Korn. Customers from the bus industry include the Free Enterprise System, MCI, National Bus Trader and Charles and Janet Wotring at Royal Coach. Recent corporate customers are Hewett Packard, iPod, Time-Warner, Airstream, Boston Scientific, Infinity Marketing, IBM, Laidlaw, Mobile Medical, Fahlgren, Cooper Tire, Kodak and Campbell-Ewald. The March of Dimes and Navy Seals are among the associations that have used CMI for their needs.

In 2009, CMI celebrates their 10th anniversary. Their new facility is not only a great way to mark this event but is also a very positive event in the bus industry. □

Shown is a portion of the new upholstery room for carpeting and similar items. This area is climate-controlled to prevent any damage to the carpeting stored here.



The new electrical room not only provides a stock of various electrical components, connectors and wires but also offers a clean area for working on electrical components.



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