

Meeting Summary: NPR FACILITIES – PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

On 7 August 2008 fifty members and guests of the DC Chapters of AES and Acoustical Society met at the NPR headquarters in Washington DC. The topic was a preview of the new NPR HQ followed by a tour of the existing facilities. The presentation was begun by NPR Senior Engineer Jan Andrews. He introduced Bud Aiello, NPR engineer, and Sara Wiley, an architectural and engineering consultant to NPR from the firm of RTKL.

Bud Aiello opened the presentation with a bit of history of NPR. From the mid-70's to 1994 the headquarters was on M St., in 4 ½ floors with 6 studios that were seriously in need of renovation. Instead of renovating, however, NPR purchased the present property on Massachusetts Avenue, which had previously housed a bank operations center. The goals were to have a more efficient news facility, a world-class performing/recording studio, enhanced employee quality of life, and space for future growth. This became the present 150 thousand square foot facility which has two performance studios with adjacent production rooms, 5 news studios, 3 news intake rooms, separate master control areas for audio and satellite, and 19 edit rooms. This undertaking resulted in what became known as “the last great analog facility”. While digital approaches were known to be the emerging broadcast technology, it was not yet feasible to make the leap at that time (1994). The design philosophy for control rooms was live-end, dead-end, but enhanced by using diffusing instead of absorbing wall treatments. Compromises included unavoidable low ceilings (except in the performing studios), use of the building's existing mechanical plant (vibration noise), and inadequate emergency power systems. Problems included structure-borne noise issues, grounding issues, coping with unexpected equipment heat loads, and a huge staff expansion. Currently a large part of NPR's staff must operate off-site. It is time to move; the target date is three years from now.

Sara Wiley continued the presentation with a description of her firm's role in the preliminary planning of the new 350 thousand square foot facility to be at 1111 N. Capitol St. This planning included site selection issues such as possible neighborhood noise, and setting preliminary goals as to the functioning of the personnel within. For example, it is a goal to locate all of the news function in one large area on one floor to maximize ease of interaction. Another goal is to have the control room person closer to the host announcers in the studio, and less prominent to the visitor. Overall, in all departments, more space is needed to reduce the present crowding of personnel. Still another goal is to focus on having generic functional areas in the spaces instead of having specific areas for each program and its personnel. Ideas have been stimulated by visits to the new NPR facility in New York City and the BBC. The result is a preliminary concept with lots of glass walls and less of the traditional enclosed sound-proof studio concept. However, concerns are noise levels within the large space, and excessive room-sound coloration at the microphones (losing the “NPR Sound”). Not decided yet is the role of music and performance spaces in the new NPR concept; however, some space in the building plan and dollars in the budget have deliberately been set aside to enable later incorporation, hopefully for a new “Studio 4-A”. Also to be incorporated in the new facility is television, in that TV cameras will be sent with reporters into the field; this anticipates an ever-increasing role for video at the NPR website.

Several questions were asked of the presenters; one was: “What IS the NPR sound?”. The answer, according to Aiello is “A U87 at 18 inches with high-pass filtering.” (A U87 is a classic microphone by Neumann.)

The evening ended with an excellent tour of the control room spaces and the two excellent performing/recording spaces. As expected, there were numerous U87's to be seen in the various studios, waiting for their announcers.

Fred Geil