

## BMW NA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

### Chapter 11: "Woodcliff Lake: New Headquarters for a Growing Company

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In its first decade, BMW of North America experienced tremendous growth. Sales doubled within the new company's first five years, thanks in large part to the popularity of the first-generation 3 Series that debuted in 1976. Along with increased sales came an increase in personnel. By

the early 1980s, BMW of North America had outgrown the buildings it had leased from Hoffman Motors as part of the settlement by which it secured the right to sell and distribute BMW automobiles in the US.

First among those was the corporate headquarters and parts distribution center in Montvale, New Jersey, which had opened just a few years before BMW NA moved in on March 15, 1975. Hoffman was known to appreciate fine architecture—he'd commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design a showroom on Park Avenue in Manhattan as well as his personal residence in Rye, New York—and the Montvale building was a great example of mid-century Brutalist architecture. (The name of its architect has been lost to history.) Upon entering the building, guests were greeted with an expansive two-story



lobby/showroom finished with tan tile floors, a floating staircase and bookmatched, rosewood-paneled walls. At the far end of the lobby showroom, a two-story natural travertine stone wall displayed a stainless-steel BMW roundel and the words “Bavarian Motor Works.”

“It was sort of a strange design,” said Tom McGurn, BMW NA’s first public relations director. “The lobby made a huge statement with rosewood paneling, and it had a lot of glass, but it only had a very small cafeteria, and the offices were a mishmash of sizes.” The largest office, of course, had been Hoffman’s, which McGurn described as “very over-the-top.”

“Hoffman wanted to create an aura and did,” McGurn said. “His desk was semi-circular, so you were a long way away from him. The chairs for the guests were very low, so when you sat in them the desk was almost chest-high. Hoffman wasn’t very large, and his chair was definitely elevated. After [BMW of North America’s first CEO] Jack Cook inherited the office, he remodeled fairly quickly. Jack was not an elevated-chair kind of guy.”



Beyond the oddities of the layout and decor, the Hoffman building had been designed for a company that was selling some 13,000 cars per year. It was simply too small for a company selling five times that number, as BMW was doing a decade after taking over from Hoffman. By the early 1980s, BMW NA had

around 370 employees working out of several buildings scattered around Montvale. “We were bursting at the seams,” McGurn said. “At one point, the marketing department was in a building across the parking lot, and so

was the senior vice-president of operations. Other offices were half a mile away. It just wasn't unified."

To make matters worse, it was becoming increasingly difficult to insist that the dealer network invest in facilities that displayed a unified BMW corporate identity when BMW NA itself was far from compliant.

Furthermore, the Montvale location was far from the freeway—commercial truck traffic is forbidden on the adjacent Garden State Parkway—and the large trucks delivering parts and vehicles had to traverse narrow, twisty residential roads to reach the distribution center.

It was time for a new headquarters, and getting one built would be the responsibility of Dr. Günther Kramer, who succeeded Cook as BMW NA's chief executive officer. Then 53 years old, Kramer had earned his doctorate in law in 1970, and he'd been BMW AG's chief legal officer from 1973 until his arrival at NA in 1983.

Two years later, Kramer announced that the company's activities would soon be united under one roof. BMW



had purchased 40 acres of land in Woodcliff Lake, about four miles from Montvale and visible from the Garden State Parkway. The property had been an apple orchard, and it featured a small lake and wooded area along its back edge. The new three-story headquarters building was designed by CUH2A architects of Princeton, with exterior panels of white porcelain enamel setting off grey glass windows. The building's three offset cube layout, premium materials, and clean, unadorned surfaces emphasized

crisp white facades that provided the perfect contrast to the Bavarian blue of the company logo. As such, it mirrored the corporate identity BMW wanted its dealers to adopt.

CUH2A did a masterful job of integrating the modern headquarters into the partially manicured and partially natural wooded landscape of the property. The building was almost hidden from the residential street (Chestnut Ridge Road) at the front of the building, yet it showcased BMW's presence to the traffic flowing down the Garden State Parkway at the rear. At the same time, it provided BMW employees with beautiful, park-like views from its expansive windows.



Construction began in September 1986, and work was completed by the end of 1988. Employees packed up their desks in Montvale on a Friday, and by the following Monday they were working in new offices at 300 Chestnut Ridge Road in Woodcliff Lake. The new building was large enough to contain all of the divisional offices for North America. Its layout—three staggered cubes—provided for a multitude of executive corner offices on two levels throughout. The lowest level housed a state-of-the-art video studio, computer server room, a barber shop, and a dry-cleaning service. A large cafeteria marked a huge improvement over that in the Hoffman building, with indoor and outdoor dining areas, three stories of floor-to-ceiling windows looking onto the woods, and a wide variety of food options at subsidized prices. Finally, the building had an abundant number of meeting rooms that could welcome dealers and suppliers, plus a well-equipped auditorium with vehicle access for larger

meetings.

“Everything was consolidated,” McGurn said. “The dealer council no longer had to meet in a hotel, since we had our own conference rooms. We had an auditorium-type room where we could hold an all-employee meeting, which was so convenient.”

To alleviate the parts warehouse trucking issues, a new parts distribution center was built in an industrial area in Mount Olive, New Jersey, some 50 miles away and just off the Interstate 80 freeway.

BMW NA continued to lease the old Hoffman building in Montvale through 2011. As a result of the headquarters move, the Hoffman building became the offices for BMW NA’s Eastern Region handling sales, marketing, aftersales, center development, and other functions for the northeastern US. The Montvale building’s shop space, meanwhile, was used for car and motorcycle technical training and to service company vehicles. The remaining offices nearby were vacated as their leases expired.

The 300 Building, as it was affectionally known, underwent several renovations over its three decades of service as the headquarters for BMW NA. As the company expanded, additional property was purchased and buildings added to the campus.



Somewhat sadly, an era ended on December 13, 2024. The 300 Building was officially vacated, and employees moved into a new BMW of North America LLC headquarters at 200 BMW Drive in Woodcliff Lake.

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