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Company of the Month: BL Companies is a sole source for comprehensive design services assisting national retailers

November 27, 2015 - Retail



Storrs Center - Mansfield, CT

Meriden, CT “Employee owned. Client driven.” This simple expression distills the mission, vision and values of BL Companies and how they stand apart. Over the past 29 years BL Companies has grown to 13 offices in 8 states, with over 250 employee owners serving the eastern and southern U.S. It all began with a simple concept: to be a sole source for comprehensive design services to assist national retailers in achieving their rollout goals, with a single contract and a single point of contact.

On this premise, the company grew the firm to provide every service in-house for a complete land development project. For their clients, that means a single contract and a single point of accountability for all services including architecture, building engineering, civil engineering, environmental sciences, and land surveying. BL Companies also grew geographically, moving with its clients to provide those services throughout the eastern and southern U.S. Along the way BL has grown into other markets such as mixed-use, residential, public infrastructure and energy, but its mainstay remains retail design for rollouts, shopping center design, and tenant build-outs. Their breadth of services and depth of resources are not the only things that set them apart. In 2006, BL Companies became an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan). Now every employee has a stake in the company and understands that the impact of their performance affects their own bottom line, as well as that of their cohorts. This has given rise to an “ownership culture,” where employees are personally invested in their work and care deeply about the results of that work. Everyone understands that the employee owners are the company’s greatest asset and there is an obligation to look out for one another and take accountability for their actions. This culture of caring also extends to the communities they work in. The company takes an active role in causes that support the community such as local food banks, ‘r kids Family Center, Channel 3 Kids Camp, and more. Employees are also encouraged to find ways to give back on a personal level. On a more global level, the firm is also committed to sustainable design

Whole Foods Market -Brooklyn, NY

and has completed numerous LEED certified buildings including the first LEED Platinum certified school in New England – the Mary M. Hooker Environmental Sciences Magnet School in Hartford. Sustainable design principles have also carried over to their retail work, recently raising the bar for the design of grocery stores. BL Companies provided comprehensive design services for the Whole Foods Market in Brooklyn, N.Y. This project has received LEED Platinum certification, Four Green Globes, and EPA GreenChill Platinum certification as well as an AIA COTE Truth & Beauty award. It is the first grocery store in the country to be entirely free of ozone depleting CFCs. Beginning with a massive clean-up of a heavily contaminated former industrial site, the facility uses solar and wind power, and treats 100% of its storm water on site. On its roof is a 19,000 s/f hydroponic greenhouse that produces approximately 7 tons of leafy greens annually for sale in the store and for distribution to other Whole Foods Markets in the city. Just as gratifying is the fact that it has become a community gathering place providing access to a restored section of shoreline along the Gowanus Canal and venues that include indoor eating spaces and a rooftop beer garden.

Over 80% of the work performed by BL Companies is from repeat clients. This is a source of pride and a testament to the performance of the company. Among its major clients are Whole Foods Market, Rite Aid, Walgreen’s, Costco, and FedEx Ground. Aside from the Brooklyn location, the company has designed seven other Whole Foods Markets throughout New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Maine. Their work for Rite Aid numbers in the hundreds of stores over more than 20 years throughout the northeast and Mid-Atlantic. The firm has also designed numerous Walgreen’s stores throughout the northeast. More recent work includes several Costco stores including one that just opened in New Britain, CT. BL Companies also provided comprehensive design services from concept through completion for the renovation, or reconstruction of all the service plazas on Connecticut’s highways and the restoration of the historic service plazas along the

Merritt Parkway. The last of these 23 was opened in September of this year. This project was a natural extension of the company's expertise in rollouts and retail work as the redesigned facilities included a much broader selection of fast food and retail tenants. All design services were provided by BL Companies.

Silver Commons - Meriden, CT

One particular strength in the firm's services is its expertise in navigating the entitlement permitting process. This can be the greatest challenge that retailers face with respect to the impact on the schedule of store development, and in retail perhaps more than any other market, time is money. Retailers are dependent on achieving their development objectives and gain an edge on their competition by being first to the market. The faster the entitlement permitting and design cycle can be completed, the sooner the facilities will open. This high-speed and high-energy environment is what BL Companies thrives on.

Another extension of their services that came as an outgrowth of their expertise was the Storrs Center project on the edge of the UCONN campus. As the largest public-private partnership ever undertaken in Connecticut, this mixed-use development created a sense of place for the town of Mansfield and the UCONN campus by creating an urban environment in a rural setting. The result of this rare opportunity is a walkable community with thriving street-level retail and highly sought after apartments above. BL provided comprehensive design services for this transformative project over a period of 11 years, from master planning through construction administration.

Whole Foods Market - Darien, CT

With over 30 current positions open the firm continues to grow, but is also very selective in its hiring process. Since every hire is a new owner, it's important to make sure that they possess the skills that are needed, but equally important to make sure they are a fit for the ownership culture that makes the firm: "Employee Owned. Client Driven."

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