

Having designs on ARCHITECTURE

By Bob Tremblay
NEWS BUSINESS WRITER

Pop quiz time.

Question: What do the Aquarium, World Trade Center, Airport and Courthouse MBTA stations, the airports in Boston, Washington, D.C., and Tel Aviv, every AMC

SMALL BUSINESS

Work in Progress:

and Showcase movie theater in Massachusetts and virtually every high school and mall in MetroWest have in common?

Answer: They all feature architectural specialty products manufactured by companies represented by Shannon Corp. The Sudbury firm serves as the consultant and representative for these manufacturers. Focusing primarily on ceiling systems, it works with design architects to transform their concepts into reality.

That transformation serves as the company's motto, and the firm has been providing this architectural function for 25 years, generating annual sales in excess of \$10 million and garnering more than 50 awards. It's thus a happy anniversary for the company's founder and president Bill Shannon, who runs the company with his brothers David and Tim.

Shannon attributes the company's success to its creativity, lengthy relationships with numerous architects and manufacturers, dedication to high-quality products and work ethic.

"We hate to say no," says David, the company's vice president. "We're not in the business of saying, 'We can't do that.' We figure out a way and help our manufacturers develop new products by virtue of that. An architect will make a suggestion and there's no way of making that yet. We'll then figure out a way with the manufacturers we represent."

The company also has made a habit of spotting design trends in advance.

"That's my job," says Bill. "I try to look forward. What's tomorrow? When we got into transit projects, I looked ahead of where we were and we positioned ourselves with unique products and systems. We created our own destiny by creating a market for these products."

Shannon Corp.'s transit projects have been in the news recently with the opening of the MBTA's Silver Line. Stations on the line that have undergone architectural renovations using products by Shannon manufacturers include the World Trade Center with curved stainless steel walls, ceilings, light coves and column covers custom built by Dallas-based Baker Metal Products. Gilham, Gander & Chin in Boston were the architects.

Baker also provided the articulated, high-performance finish fascia and soffits panels for the Courthouse station while the Chicago Metallic Corp. in Chicago manufactured its aluminum plank ceilings. Elkus Manfredi and Domenech, Hicks, Krockmalnic were the project's two architectural firms.

"When we started focusing on these projects in 1990, MBTA stations were very mundane, unimaginative structures," says Bill. "We started presenting to them the options of curved metal ceilings, different finishes and perforations."

Adds David, "What we've been able to do is play a part in upgrading public facilities. When you go into Boston now, instead of seeing plain, old MBTA stations, you see some of the most state-of-the-art stations in the world."

Bill Shannon started in the specialty products business as a contractor in New York. "I loved it," he says, "but in 1976 the construction market in New York collapsed, so I moved back here."

With the specialty products business changing as manufacturers sought a larger audience for their products, Shannon shifted gears and became a representative. "Manufacturers were limited to one chance with a contractor," he says. "An independent rep has a wider group of customers."

Shannon launched his company in Waltham, moving to Sudbury in 1985. David joined the firm in 1982. Tim, the company's senior account manager who also heads up its exterior products division, followed in 1987.

Concentrating solely on the commercial market, the company started out with an emphasis on acoustical products. "That's always been a core business of ours," says David. "We then branched into all kinds of products."

Though aesthetics clearly plays a factor in architectural products, looks aren't everything, according to Bill. Function counts, too.

"An architect may only want to see plaster on the walls and ceilings, but you may need acoustics in that space," says Bill. "The architect says changes to accommodate that will ruin his design. That's when we come along. We have a product that looks like plaster, only it isn't. It has acoustical properties and no one can see the difference."

Shannon Corp. works with 16 different manufacturers who produce a cornucopia of specialty products—everything from electrically operated window shades to a siding made of hardwood and resin. The annual sales of these companies range from \$9 million to \$300 million.

Shannon also works with hundreds of architects in and outside of New England who act as project catalysts.

"We always start with an architect," says Bill. "An architect will be designing a job and they'll call us in and say, 'We have this concept for our building and we're envisioning it to look like this.' Then we'll say, 'Here are a number of different ways of accomplishing this at different price levels and with different materials.'

"One of our keys to success with architects is the synergy of the various products we represent. An architect may call us on a project about our shades and we'll ask, 'What kind of a job are you working on?' They'll say, 'It's a university project.' So we'll get called in on the shades but end up doing custom fabric wall panels and other things."

"What we say to an architectural designer is, 'You tell us what you want to do and we'll show you how to do it.' That's the foundation of our company."

Though Shannon Corp. works hand-in-hand with architects, these firms don't pay the Sudbury company for its services. It's the manufacturer who pays Shannon, which receives a percentage of the manufacturer's sales. The rate usually falls in the 10 percent to 20 percent range.

Projects can cost as little as \$15,000 or as



STAFF PHOTO BY ED HOPFMANN

From left, brothers Tim, Bill and David Shannon operate the Shannon Corp. in Sudbury.

much as several million dollars.

Shannon's sales have registered a 10 percent growth annually for the past five years, according to Bill. "We're at a nice level right now," he says. "If we stay at this level for the rest of my life, I'll be very happy."

The company certainly doesn't lack assignments as it is currently working on 300 projects located all over the world. This heavy workload has quieted the naysayers.

"When I came back from New York and started this business, it was common in several other major markets but not here," says Bill. "New England had no presence in the specialty architectural products business prior to 1980."

Adds David, "In the beginning, one manufacturer told Bill that he didn't see Boston as a viable market for specialty architectural products. Now we're one of the top four companies in the country."

What separates Shannon Corp. from many competitors is its commitment to excellence, according to Bill. "Their only pitch is they're cheaper than we are, but you get what you pay for," he says. "They sell knock-off products that sort of look like our products. ... (Customers) have used the other stuff. Now they've found we have the right stuff."

Shannon's longevity in the business helps, too, as familiarity breeds frequent contacts from architects. Having multiple products with varying functions helps as well.

"It's very important in our business to have products that focus on many different market segments," says Bill. "In our early years, we were focused on just a few, and it was very difficult to deal with the ups and downs of the economy and the various types of construction going on. Now, because of the way we've diversified our products and the types of projects we work on, and due to the fact that our architects work all over the country and the world, we're kind of recession-proof. If one part of the country slows down, the other part might be picking up."

In addition to transportation, major markets for Shannon include colleges and universities. "They're competing to get students, so many are building science buildings, arts buildings and gymnasiums," says David. Adds Bill, "You name a universi-

ty in the area and we're working on it."

High schools have become another big market, Bill points out. "They've gone from being small-niche projects to becoming very large, \$40 million to \$60 million projects that are incorporating the most up-to-date, unique products that were previously only seen in university projects," says Bill. "It's become a huge new market for us."

Shannon Corp. also owns the distinction of being an all-brother business. Bill is the oldest of seven children, David is in the middle and Tim is the youngest. All grew up in Wayland. "Working with my brothers is a fabulous experience," says Bill, who still resides in Wayland while David lives in Ashland and Tim in Framingham.

"Bill and I are nine years apart so we don't have any sibling rivalry," says David. "And none of us keeps things inside. If we're going to have a conflict, we get it out, get it over with and move on. We're very good at working together." Adds Bill, "There aren't a lot of arguments."

Just a lot of projects and project satisfaction. "It's rewarding to look at the unbelievable architecture we've been involved with all over the world and know we've played a part in that," Bill concludes.

(Bob Tremblay can be reached at btremblay@cnc.com or 508-626-4409.)

PROFILE

SHANNON CORP.

President: Bill Shannon

Number of employees: 3

Yearly sales: Exceeds \$10 million

Industry: Commercial building and construction

Background: Based in Sudbury, Shannon Corp. is a consultant and independent manufacturers' representative of specialty interior and exterior architectural products and systems. Its Web site is www.shannoncorporation.com.