

# Adapting Through Diversity

During a 55-year career, John Kosar has helped Burt Hill grow by creating a diversified portfolio that adapts to challenges in each market

— Craig A. Shutt



John Kosar, AIA, NCARB

**C**hairman Emeritus John Kosar saw his architectural firm, Burt Hill Inc. in Butler, Pa., grow from a six-person staff in 1962 to more than 1,200 employees at its height a few years ago. During that time, he helped the company diversify into a wide range of building categories as well as domestic and international markets. He's also seen many changes in preferred architectural styles, client needs, and material choices.

Having retired last fall, Kosar continues to consult with the firm, which in late 2010 was acquired by Stantec, a North American architectural/engineering/consulting giant. That company's growth and acquisition strategy—it acquired eight other construction-related firms that year—fits well with Burt Hill's expansionist philosophy.

"We have always tried to be very entrepreneurial in our approach," says Kosar. "Our goal was to grow by bringing in new blood, both experienced and new. Having that entrepreneurial spirit and recognizing how market conditions operate, our strategy was to be widespread in various market

sectors." Those sectors include commercial/office/retail, housing (condos, dormitories, and hotels), education (higher-education and K-12 schools), healthcare, laboratories, and high-tech buildings. "That diversity helped us keep a nice, even keel and kept us growing."

## History of Adapting

Kosar's own adaptability began early in his career—on his first day in the office, in fact. He began working with the firm's predecessor, Howard & Murphy, in 1957 when he was hired by Whitney Murphy as a co-op student while studying at the University

of Cincinnati. At his first day on the job, he found Murphy packing boxes and was informed his boss was joining Perkins & Will. He began working full-time with Howard after earning his architecture degree in 1962.

Associates Ralph Burt and Alva Hill soon were named partners, creating Howard, Burt & Hill. After Howard retired, Kosar and Dick Rittelmann became partners in 1969, creating Burt Hill Kosar Rittelmann Associates, which it remained until a rebranding in 2005.

"The main attraction, for both our clients and our employees, has been our reputation for cutting-edge design



One of the first projects Kosar designed using precast concrete components was the YMCA in Butler, Pa. Completed in 1967, it features double tees spanning the natatorium as well as precast concrete components for the awnings over the entryway. Photos courtesy of Burt Hill, Inc.

and the variety of market sectors we work with," Kosar explains. "As our reputation grew, we became a place to experience and encourage creativity and provide exceptional service to our clients."

Kosar has seen many changes over the years, even to preferred architectural styles. "We try to meet the owner's goals and preferences in every design, with no pre-set ideas," he explains. The firm relies on a set of 10 metrics that are weighed for each project. These factors included aesthetics, humanism ("how we can make the building work better for individual users"), performance, sustainability, and the building's story.

"We put those together and see what challenges arise, and then we work to overcome them. Everything has to happen within the project's context of surrounding buildings and environment, functional performance, and the statement the owner wants to make."

Owners' involvement also has evolved, he notes. "Clients today are much more knowledgeable about the functional needs of their projects and how they want them to work," he says. "They also are better informed about materials. They travel a lot and remain curious, so they can suggest ideas that help us stay up to date."

### Material Evolutions

One of the materials that has evolved is precast concrete, Kosar believes. He has understood its capabilities since his first precast project in 1967, when he used double tees to span the natatorium and provide an entrance covering at the new YMCA in Butler, Pennsylvania. "I had become aware of precast concrete while I was an apprentice, and I knew it would be a great asset for moisture control in those areas," he says. "We installed indirect lighting on the tee's stems and created a very functional and aesthetic look."

Kosar specified the material for a number of projects over the years, including a call center for a national bank based in Pittsburgh in 2006, where security, durability, and long-term maintenance were key concerns. In the mid 1980s, it also was used to clad the headquarters for Beecham (now GlaxoSmithKline) in Pittsburgh, and the 27-story Liberty Center complex. "The style of buildings that owners were seeking in that period, with



*The new 16-story academic building at the Harrisburg University of Science & Technology features architectural precast concrete panels on its exterior and a total-precast concrete parking structure. The building features a 125-seat auditorium and outdoor roof gardens. The campus is entirely new and consists of four sectors: this academic center as well as a business incubator, student village, and corporate-office complex.*

a strong, institutional feel, often made precast concrete a good choice."

Another notable project to use architectural precast concrete panels was a six-building office park in Pittsburgh. "It created a specific statement for the entire complex," he explains. "Brick was very dominant in Pittsburgh, so precast concrete created a new look and provided the forward-thinking statement that the owners sought."

Burt Hill continues to use precast concrete on current projects such as the Harrisburg University of Science & Technology, the Wheeling Hospital's new seven-story medical tower, and the SUNY Binghamton East Campus Housing, which featured architectural precast concrete panels with embedded thin brick.

"We're using precast concrete

more today than ever," he says. "It's gotten to be a more adaptable material, and owners are better aware of its capabilities. We're also getting more assistance from precasters in meeting specific challenges and finding efficient ways to make full use of it."

### International Markets Expanding

The company has diversified further through a strong presence in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, where it operates an office with 600 employees, about the size of the domestic staff spread through nine U.S. offices. Their work began when a partner established contacts in the late 1990s and they gained several key projects. After the 9-11 disruptions died down, Burt Hill committed to the market and opened an office in 2004.

"Our clients like that we work there





*The new 21-story medical office building at Thomas Jefferson University, the largest freestanding academic medical center in Philadelphia, was designed to minimize disruption to occupants while allowing for phased expansion in the future. The project features architectural precast concrete panels on its façade, blending several colors and decorative styles to create visual interest and emphasize both horizontal and vertical features.*

rather than bring the design back to America to complete. Once we were established, the office grew rapidly." The market has slowed with the world-wide recession, he notes, as it has in America. "Healthcare is still fairly strong, because they are looking

to raise the bar for medical services." That's also true in America, he notes, with the healthcare market "still hanging in there." He expects the next strong market will be manufacturing/warehouse/office structures due to pent-up demand. "Once the

'precast concrete created a new look and provided the forward-thinking statement that the owners sought.'

economy stabilizes, we expect it will take off."

The firm also sees great potential for its office in India, which it opened in 2007. "That's a very active market," he notes. "They haven't slowed down much, and the way they are growing, they will be a substantial market over the next five years."

Kosar will be involved in marketing the firm through his consulting services, which he will continue at least through the end of the year. The rest of his time will be spent "traveling and enjoying life" after 55 years of not really working, he says.

"I never had to work in my life, because I totally enjoyed what I did," he says. "I made a lot of friends among owners, colleagues, contractors, suppliers, and developers. I had a great cross-section of people to work with, and I'm glad to have had the opportunity to work with them. It was very enjoyable, and very satisfying." ■



*The East Campus Housing facility at SUNY in Binghamton, N.Y., consists of four residential halls making up the new Dickinson Community. The dorms will be clad with architectural precast concrete panels embedded with thin brick to blend with other campus structures. The work is expected to be completed by the fall of 2013.*