

Team Leader

HGA's Blanski thrives on building team consensus to resolve complex challenges

— Craig A. Shutt



Bill Blanski, AIA, LEED AP

As owner demands and budget restrictions grow, projects become more complex and challenges become more daunting. Some architects find such trends frustrating and obstructive. HGA's Bill Blanski thrives on those projects and enjoys leading a team to overcome the obstacles.

"What I like best is working in a group as a community to resolve issues on complex projects," says Blanski, AIA, LEED AP, a vice president and design partner in the Minneapolis office of HGA Architects & Engineers. "I find I do better work in a team setting—and other people do better work too when I lead the group to find solutions. It's part of my DNA." That role has led him to thrive on such complex projects as university laboratories, multipurpose institutional buildings, and government structures requiring high sustainability and detailed specifications.

"Variety is important to a design firm," says Blanski. "There is a tendency to specialize in one type of work, but diversity helps create new ideas that can be used in other markets. Owners are always looking



Marquette University's 115,000-square-foot College of Engineering building consolidates four engineering departments and includes lab space, offices, classrooms, and other needs. The building, which achieved LEED Silver certification, features architectural precast concrete panels embedded with half bricks and accented with cast-in, limestone-colored lintels and headers. All photos: HGA.

for new things, and are responsive to new ideas, materials, and approaches. We have a lot of sharing across offices." HGA operates seven offices around the country.

Three Philosophies

His goal as design principal, he says, is to "lead the design team to a shared understanding of the project on both a macro and micro level that will uniquely inform the design process." To do that, he uses three distinct design philosophies.

The first is an Iterative Design Philosophy, which progresses as more information is learned about the client's goals and the building's function. "We don't come in with just one approach. Our goal is to solve the problems as presented and move forward to a final solution step by step."

The second is the Contextual Philosophy. "I immerse myself deeply in the macro and micro activities of the building and the site to learn its

details. We need to understand the nature of the site and its relationship to the work that will be done there." That process often takes months, he notes, and it continues through the preprogramming and schematic-drawing phases. "That gives us several months to research both the natural and human ecology."

The third, which he deems most important, is the Mission and Vision Philosophy. "We have to understand what ultimately drives our clients and get into the heads of the users, to learn what they need, what they want to accomplish, and how they can work best."

Blanski's path to architecture was ordained from an early age, he says. "I lucked out, because I always knew I wanted to be an architect, from the time I was in grade school." His certainty grew thanks to a high-school program that placed students in local offices to gain experience. He worked in an office, helping with design documents. He went on to earn a

bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree from Yale University.

After graduating, he worked at Buchanan Associate Architects in New Haven, Conn., for a couple years before settling in at HGA. After seven years there, he decided to open his own office in 1995—but returned to HGA in 1997.

"I had a nagging itch to run my own office, and I had a very successful time," he relates. "But I realized I like a big office and working in a community. I knew I'd have to spend 10 or 15 years building my practice to work on the same complex projects I could be working on that very minute at HGA. So I decided to return."

The type of complex projects he enjoys can be seen in his design for the College of Engineering at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis. The 115,000-square-foot building, designed in collaboration with Opus, consolidates four engineering departments and facilitates interaction among them. It was clad with architectural precast concrete panels embedded with half bricks and accented with precast concrete limestone-colored lintels and headers.

"That was a fantastic project for my skills, because some of our clients were structural engineers. They could appreciate the materials being used." Blanski often uses natural materials from the Minnesota area, embedding them into precast concrete panels. "Precast concrete's benefits often resolve problems with its speed of erection, efficiency in enclosing a building, and integrating stone or brick while creating a panelized system. Owners are looking for buildings that will last but also will be low in maintenance."

Today's Complex Projects

Today, he's leading the design of a \$250-million, corporate-headquarters project that involves 35 people, not including the contractor's team. "Leading this group and being part of the discussions as we work through issues is what I enjoy about being a design architect."

New challenges continue to arise

that must be resolved, he notes. "There's a profound interest, with the economy still recovering, to find value wherever possible and stretch dollars further. Along with that is an increased focus on sustainability and being a better steward of natural resources, conserving energy, and reducing our carbon footprint. Those goals don't have to cost more. It's exhilarating and inspiring to find solutions to meet each need."

Over the years, Blanski's collaborative skills have extended to include serving as an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Minnesota's College of Design. "Teaching has always been a passion of mine. I'm committed to helping to educate and bring in the next generation of architects."

Those efforts have been reduced in recent years as he focuses more on design work, but he has compensated by leading church-sponsored groups during the past 12 years to build service facilities in Guatemala. His group of 50, which spends 10 days in the country, has built computer schools and homes, and installed water-filtration systems. They use local materials, design the structures, and partner with local trades. The group has included his three children, who now are all married.

That work will provide grist for the mill as he prepares for tomorrow's challenges. "I'm excited about the new ideas being developed for the tenor of design in office environments," he says. "There is a significant overlay of efficiency and flexibility that needs to be balanced."



The inspiration for the color palette for this GSA building in Portland, Ore., was the Pacific Northwest and its giant redwoods and sequoias. The precast concrete architectural wall panels feature punched windows in only three sizes to simplify casting. It includes a system of western-cedar patterned, vertical blades applied over the panels to act as sunscreens and reinforce the natural patterns in the landscape. Fine black sand was added to the mix and a light sandblast was applied to achieve the dark

Thanks to technology, today's employees can work anywhere, for good and bad, he notes. "We have to find ways to ensure their environment encourages creativity as they roam, whether it's in a communal work space or the coffee shop. I have a passion for finding ways to create work environments that Millennials who are geared to computer mobility and life/work balance can use to maximize their efficiency." **A**



The 176,000-square-foot collocation laboratory for the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture and Health creates collaboration space, as well as clean rooms, laboratories, and office space. The building was clad in architectural precast concrete panels inset with local limestone, which was integrated to conceal panel joints.