

INSIDER NEWS

Local firm quietly builds the region

By Laura Laing

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You may not recognize the name, but you know MMM Design Group. At least you know their work.

If you've driven into downtown Norfolk on Interstate 264 or taken the Coliseum exit on Interstate 64 or enjoyed a book at Norfolk's Kirn Memorial Library, you have taken advantage of the engineering and architectural work of MMM Design. Last week, the firm announced a contract to design the buildings and canopies for the new \$400 million marine terminal being built by APM Terminals North America Inc. in Portsmouth.

"When you've been in business for 60 years, you can do a lot of stuff," said George Wilson, president of the firm who started as an entry-level engineer right out of Old Dominion University more than 30 years ago.

Beginning in 1945 when architect Alfred Lublin joined engineer John B. McGaughy, Lublin, McGaughy & Associates was one of the area's first architectural and engineering firms, Wilson said.

In 1965, after Lublin died in a plane accident, McGaughy joined William Marshall and William McMillian to form McGaughy, Marshall & McMillian, which soon became MMM Design Group.

"Everyone called us MMM anyway," Wilson said.

With 74 employees – including architects and a wide array of engineering specialists – MMM Design Group typically works with institutional, commercial and municipal clients. The firm's office is located in downtown Norfolk. In 2000, it opened a second office in Charlottesville.

"We compete against the international firms that have dozens of offices around that country and even around the world," said Thomas Herbert, the firm's director of business development. "We bring the same capabilities they bring to a project."

In other words, they're in the ring with the big boys, and MMM Design has proven that it can hold its own.

In the mid-1980s, Wilson remembers getting a phone call from Moon Engineering shipyard in Portsmouth. Still located on Front Street, Moon had recently received a huge Navy contract. The ships were on the way, but the company didn't have the space to handle the work.

"I enjoyed that project because it was such a tremendous challenge," Wilson said. The design-build process was not popular at the time, but MMM Design had no choice.

"We brought a contractor on board and as we were designing the project, they were building the project," he said. "And we got it done on time."

Being local is one advantage. MMM Design Group is designing the new Freemason Street Garage in downtown Norfolk, which was previously called the Boush Street Garage. Stanley Stein, the city's assistant manager and director of facility and enterprise management, is coordinating this project.

"They had done a good job for us, and they had done some related work," he said about MMM Design. "It helped just being able to walk down the street."

The \$660,000 design project is complex.

"It's going to have condominiums built by a private contractor wrapping the garage," Stein said. That means working with different foundations and taking into consideration the differing needs of business patrons and the condominium residents. Plus, MMM has had to work closely with the private contractor to make sure the project is moving along smoothly.

"It's just very complicated when you have a limited urban setting," Stein said. "There are a lot of details to work out, and MMM Design has done it with aplomb."

With both engineering and architecture professionals, the firm is able to tackle such projects without subcontracting major pieces.

"Basically, the stuff you see is architecture and the stuff you don't see is engineering," Herbert said. "But obviously they have to work together."

"There are still architects out there who hire as a subcontractor the engineers," Wilson said. "We get to do it all in house."

This means that their engineers and architects have a wide variety of experience with different projects, Herbert said.

"For us, our engineers, for example, have solved problems in office buildings, in medical centers, in university buildings," he said. "So they bring a breadth of experience to the projects."

Herbert gives much credit to the staff. "The real assets to a firm like ours walk out the door every night," he said. "They have the ability on the front end to convince the client they can trust us."

Wilson notes that when the firm began, it didn't land big projects.

"Now we've progressed into an organization with strong leaders that can lead these tasks as well as a strong staff that can get these things done," he said.

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