

Designing the firm's future

CEO Todd Liebert has architectural firm Clark Patterson Lee on a growth track

By KERRY FELTNER

To be an architect requires an individual to see the whole picture, not just the details of a structure. The design of the building is more than just the sum of its parts.

That holistic view has not only been filtered through the occupation of Todd Liebert, 55, but throughout his life as well, especially when determining his career moves.

Today he applies that vantage point in leading Clark Patterson Lee as its chief executive.

"We're in our second generation of leadership—it's very difficult for the firms to succeed beyond the original founders and we've done that now," he says. "It's been a great firm. It's changed a lot but it's been an intentional change."

Clark Patterson Lee is a full-service architectural engineering firm focused on transportation, municipalities, health care, K-12 education and academic and community projects. As a full-service firm CPL also has planners and interior designers on staff.

It was founded as Clark Engineering in 1975 by Phillip Clark. In 1992, the firm merged with John Patterson's firm to form Clark Patterson Associates. The company acquired Lee Nichols, a North Carolina firm, in 2002. Five years later the name was changed to Clark Patterson Lee to coincide with the company's growing presence in the South.

The firm employs 300 people across 12 offices, including its Rochester office, comprised of two buildings—one on Water Street and one on St. Paul Street. Other offices are based in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

Some 125 people are employed here by CPL. It has added 36 staffers this year companywide.

The firm has seven offices in New York, which make up about 75 percent of revenue. The company grew sales by 11 percent last year, and officials plan an increase of 25 percent in 2017. Net revenue is projected to be around \$40 million this year.

Clark Patterson Lee ranked second on the Rochester Business Journal's most recent list of area architectural firms.

Growing up here

Liebert, who grew up in Irondequoit and Webster, has architecture in his blood. His great grandfather, in Milwaukee, was a renaissance architect, an industry term similar to a master builder applied to individuals who are able to do a variety of projects without specializing in one area. In their day, they did everything from mansions to fire departments to public schools.

"I come from a line of architects," Liebert says. "My great-grandfather and his brother came over from Germany in the late 1880s. I always had an interest in building."

Growing up, he learned how to put things together. "I was always working with my hands," he says. "I just loved to draw; loved to design things. Not really knowing—the path of an architect just seemed glamorous to me looking at my grandfather's work in Milwaukee."

Despite a natural aptitude for design, Liebert received advice from a local architect to pursue something other than architecture, since the industry was not doing so well amid the energy crisis and economic changes in the 1970s.

Looking back, Liebert thought it was good advice that ultimately helped him widen his outlook.

"The '70s were a pretty bad time for construction and architects," Liebert says. "So I interviewed an architect in town here," and construction had "slowed down so bad that when I met with him he discouraged me."

"I just didn't want to starve so I went to school in Chicago for a couple of years trying to sort through what other options were out there."

He thought about becoming a politician or a lawyer but settled on pursuing a degree in math.

Liebert enrolled at Lake Forest College in Illinois in 1980 to study math and computer science.

But after taking some upper level math courses, he realized that path was not for him. He again sought counsel from another architect in Rochester. This time, the advice was more encouraging.

Liebert transferred to Syracuse University, earning a bachelor of architecture degree in 1986.

An architect has to keep the whole project in mind. With others focused on granular details, architects have to find the right balance in knowing the roles of others and seeing the project in its entirety, Liebert says.

"I say an architect knows a little about everything, but not a lot about anything," he says. "Clark Patterson Lee—we're full-service, so our construction engineers and our mechanical engineers, electrical, plumbing—they're all part of our team. They understand the details and we just need to make sure that we oversee it all and that we maintain the schedule and maintain the aesthetics of the building."

"Even though I'm the CEO I still practice architecture," he added.

Career start

During college, Liebert had interned at DeWolff Partnership Architects LLP where he focused on the health care field. His first job out of school was staff architect for Patterson Mossien Architects, where he focused on education.

After four years there, he returned to DeWolff Partnership Architects in September 1990 where he served as directing associate.

"The thing that college doesn't prepare you for real well is the reality of what you're doing," Liebert says. "In college you do some really cool projects and when you get out, reality hits and you start doing whatever you can make money (on). The actual process of building a building is what you learn when you get out."

Liebert's father was president and CEO of Rochester General Hospital and helped form the system that is now Rochester Regional Health. His father's post gave Liebert a unique view of the health care world, a connection that has fueled Liebert's interest in medical architecture.

The depth of the projects in health care are what keeps him intrigued today, he says.

"The larger the projects, the more complex the user groups become, and that's one of the things that intrigued me with health care," he says.

Liebert is interested in how hospitals plan for and think about different areas such as operating suites or emergency rooms.

In 1994 he joined what was then Clark Patterson as a project manager. The firm had around 55 employees then.

The decision to change companies was an opportunity Liebert was ready to take.

"I was young and had an entrepreneurial spirit," he says. "The one who was most nervous was my wife. The decision I made in '94 was fairly simple to me. Did I do it quickly? No, I didn't, but it became a very easy decision to leave where I was and probably the right decision in the end."

Liebert became a principal of the firm in 1996 and moved up the ranks to senior vice president, working on growing the firm's health care arm and also working on K-12 projects.

John Patterson, a founding member of Clark Patterson Lee, is semiretired and serves as the firm's principal consultant. He saw potential in Liebert from the start, he says.

"Todd has always been an excellent architect," he says. "Todd has always been a very conscientious hard-working individual. He's a very strong family person, (and) he could always be counted on when you had to have an extra effort to get something done."

Taking the helm

Liebert became CEO in December 2014.

Under Liebert's leadership, Clark Patterson Lee has soared, Patterson says.

"He's taken the firm to the next level as far as growth is concerned, he says. "He's a good administrator."

In 1997, the company landed a \$30 million contract in health care—a major win for its growing division. It was at a difficult time in the industry when the reimbursement structure of hospitals was changing, Liebert says.

"When (we) started in '94—(hospitals) got basically 90 cents on the dollar reimbursed by the government, so construction projects were pretty lucrative," he says. "That changed in '96, so all of a sudden hospitals weren't reimbursed, so it basically stopped; there was no work."

When the industry leveled out a bit, Liebert seized an opportunity to differentiate the firm's offerings. He continued to spearhead the firm's health care segment, helping the company to grow and diversify its offerings. The firm also picked up municipal work

Revving up the growth



CEO Todd Liebert leads architectural firm Clark Patterson Lee.

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Photo by Kate Melton

at that time.

"Health care is not an easy market to break into," Liebert says. "It takes relationships and time, and once you develop those relationships you need to maintain them. We then started to diversify also into municipal architecture. (Now) municipal is actually the largest portion of our business."

Like any industry, there have been periods of challenge for architectural firms.

2010 to 2013 was a trying time, Liebert says. The combination of the aftershocks of the 2008 recession and the Affordable Care Act mandate for providers to create electronic medical records—which diverted funds to IT instead of construction projects—all contributed to difficulties in the field of medical architecture.

Clark Patterson Lee weathered that period thanks to a strong backlog of work.

"When that (recession) hit, people started to get hesitant," he says. "We made it through; it was not easy. 2013 was when we hit the low end."

Tom Hildebrandt, special assistant to the president and CEO at Hillside Family of Agencies, has worked with Liebert for over two decades.

Liebert designs in a way that respects the client, Hildebrandt says.

"He really understands the client's business from an operational and a mission standpoint, and has the opportunity to bring the architectural background into designing buildings and structures that will help the client fulfill its mission, which is kind of unusual and unique I think," he says.

By 2014 Clark Patterson Lee had expanded its reach geographically, which helped it stay on a growth trajectory.

Liebert was on the rise as well. He rose from executive vice president and managing director to president and eventually to CEO. Today the firm has a five-person leadership team.

"I'm not the sole leader of the firm," Liebert says. "I was the lucky duck to have the title of CEO but the reality is the five of us work together very closely to make sure that decisions are made that are appropriate."

Culture is key

A goal when he became CEO was to focus on cul-

ture. Liebert sought to set the stage for growth with an intentional culture that will help ensure the firm's staying power in the region.

The firm also rebranded around 2015.

"I felt that culture was the most important thing within the organization to help us succeed and grow," he says. "We came out of a very difficult couple of years."

"I wanted our culture to become about the people. I wanted us to become irresistible within our current employees, our future employees and our clients," he adds.

By educating himself on culture, working with different organizations and attending conferences on workplace dynamics, today CPL focuses on its people as much as on its projects.

"There's been positive change in every direction. There's a tremendous amount of consistency in our culture," Liebert says. "We want the people that want to work here want to be here, not because of money all the time. Money is obviously very important to people, but it's a happy place to be."

A company's culture is never completed, Liebert says.

"I think the challenge right now is maintaining the positive growth and the positive culture that we've built," he says. "We need to build that and keep maintaining without getting complacent. Complacency is probably the worst thing that can happen to anybody."

Leading a firm has always been a career goal, he says.

"I always wanted to be a leader of the firm or a firm," Liebert says. "When I was being interviewed by Phil (Clark) he said, 'what do you want?' And I said, 'I want your job.' It took 20 years to get there."

For Liebert, being a leader is largely about respect.

"I do delegate, I do not micromanage, I do have expectations of individuals and people but most importantly we try to help them get to where they need to be," he says. "The biggest thing that I believe in is trust. Also, I think the respect needs to be mutual. I can't ask for respect, I have to earn it. I also believe we should have some fun. This is at times a very grueling business."

Clay Osborne is the founder and president of True Insight Consulting LLC and former vice president of research for Bausch & Lomb Inc. Osborne has known Liebert for a decade, initially as his coach and now he

is a friend and mentor.

"Todd was a young man with lots of ambition," he says. "He's an architect but had a lot of interest in becoming a broader leader beyond his background and education. His interest is to continue to build on his leadership skills so he that can continue to grow the company as well as himself, and that's really what's impressive."

"He is really open to learning more. In this fast-paced world, I think that is a great sign that he will be able to sustain the organization into the future."

When at a crossroads, Liebert looks to a higher power.

"Faith (has helped)—there's been probably several forks in the road that I've made very thoughtful decisions on whether I stay or go," he says. "There's been times I've had offers, even while I've been here for 23 years, to change my career path, and I usually consider them before I say no."

With the firm's office remaining on the same block for over two decades, Liebert has been a witness to Rochester's changes.

Today there is a new era for the city, and the potential is there to make the city come alive again, he said.

"When I first came back to Rochester, Rochester was pretty hopping," he says. "The city was vibrant. I saw that and then watched the last 15 years everything kind of collapse. What I think's awesome right now is it's not government that's bringing it back, it's private interest groups, developers."

Growing into roles

Family always has been a major focus. He encourages that mindset, says Brian Trott, vice president of Clark Patterson Lee said.

"He's always been a strong leader and never a micromanager," Trott says. "He's always trusted us to do our job, checked up on us at appropriate intervals, and if we needed help with something or something was off track he was always quick to jump in and help. Family does come first for him, and he's really reinforced that in the firm for all of us."

"The thing that I've enjoyed most being at CPL is watching the younger talent grow and watching people that have been with us for 20 years flourish into a senior architect within the organization," Liebert says.

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