

Architect David Chilinski

Recovery, Reputation Fuel PCA Rebirth

BY MIKE HOBAN

BOSTON — One of the industries hardest hit and slowest to bounce back from the 2008 recession was clearly architecture. While other sectors began to recover in mid-2009, gross revenue there fell from \$44 billion in 2008 to \$26 billion by 2011 (a 40 percent decline), with staff cuts of roughly one third among surveyed firms, according to the 2012 American Institute of Architects (AIA) industry review.

REAL PROFILE



DAVID CHILINSKI

Cambridge-based Prellwitz Chilinski Associates was one operation fitting that bleak profile, dropping from a pre-recession high of 36 employees to 24. But PCA has come out of the recession much faster and is now enjoying the fruits of

its rapid resuscitation. PCA-designed lifestyle center MarketStreet Lynnfield is about to open and The Street in Chestnut Hill is continuing its high-profile re-positioning. Meanwhile, a slew of PCA-designed residential projects are either opening their doors, beginning construction or seeking approval.

“We came back in 2010, and for 18 months, we were hiring a person a month,” PCA President David Chilinski tells The Real Reporter. “That’s because all of our clients that had been suffering were starting to get back in the game.” With 80 percent of their business consisting of repeat customers, there was an existing client base ready to get rolling when conditions improved. And with revenues on the upswing, PCA got a jump on the free agent talent pool. “Being the first (firm) back, we were able to hire some really incredible people,” recounts Chilinski. Staff at its Inman Square headquarters has nearly doubled to 45, forcing expansion to annex space across the street.

But it is not just the early jump on competitors driving the rebirth, maintains



The Icon, Allston MA (RENDERING)

Chilinski, crediting a reputation among developers as creative problem solvers. “We hired PCA because they’re outside the box thinkers. And for us, in a neighborhood that needed some interesting buildings, we thought they’d be the best

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CEO HOWARD COHEN
Beacon Communities

..... fit,” agrees Jay Bisognano, VP of Acquisitions & Development for the Mount Vernon Co. “They have the ability to solve problems in a way I don’t think many firms do.”

PCA designed the second and third buildings for Mount Vernon’s innovative Allston Green District, a new eco-conscious community bordering Brookline. The first—dubbed “The Edge”——is a fully

leased 79-unit apartment building with structured parking in an 83,500-sf frame. “The Icon” is a planned five-story, 93,250-sf structure housing 108 apartments and a rooftop fitness center with connecting patio. The project was just approved and will be underway this autumn with a goal of LEED platinum certification. That and the Edge are part of a planned seven-building community meant to serve as a national model for green communities.

“It’s all about taking the things that are the ‘problems’ or the unusual, and turning them around,” says Chilinski. “They become the things that make them unique and interesting and powerful. So sometimes the unusual can be good and we can turn it into the thing that makes (a project) special.” That was the intention in transforming the former Ames Shovel Works in North Easton into 113 residential units with 1.5 acres of community open space, a venture done for Beacon Communities.

Recently among the top 11 Most Endangered Landmarks by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a previous continued on page 23

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developer planned to level most of the site and create a ground-up development. After the downturn eased, Beacon Communities tabbed PCA to work with various historic commissions and town officials to develop a financially viable project, preserve the landmark and achieve LEED Silver certification.

“We took a bunch of old factory buildings that are unusually narrow and “window challenged”—40 feet wide instead of 65 feet wide—and created different unit types and attitudes,” explains Chilinski. The design preserves seven structures dating from 1852 at the 113-unit complex set to open in October. PCA had previously done design work on the historic renovation of the Wilber School for Beacon Communities creating a LEED-certified, 75-unit luxury apartment complex in 2010. “PCA has a special role for Beacon Communities,” says CEO Howard Cohen.



Len Bierbrier

“We go to PCA when we have very challenging sites and it’s not obvious what we need to do when we need to create a sense of place and to connect to a piece of history.”

PCA has been bolstered by higher education projects (including the “hip” 30,000-sf Curry Student Center at Northeastern University and a LEED Gold dining hall for the University of Connecticut). New restaurant concepts for Legal Seafoods and Au Bon Pain have further bolstered the firm. But their sexiest work is reserved for retail, where PCA has paired with one of the region’s most successful players in WS Development, with PCA designing the uber-successful Legacy Place lifestyle center in Dedham,



Needham Street Village Shops, Newton MA (RENDERING)

and the aforementioned “Street” in Chestnut Hill.

Chilinski and wife/business partner Wendy Prellwitz began their careers with Ben Thompson Associates, designers of Faneuil Hall Marketplace, South Street Seaport in Manhattan, and Harborplace in Baltimore. “And that was fortunate for them, because it led them to be the kind of architectural firm they are. But for us, it was the kind of architect we look for to work on our developments,” says Richard Askin, Director of Planning and Design at WS Development and an architect himself who says it is rare to find such an accomplished retail architect.

The alliance began when PCA lost out on a competition for another WS project but was instead selected for Legacy Place. “PCA came in with the right type of philosophy for creating a destination,” says

Askins. “They had enough experience with (other retail) projects, so we knew they understood the qualities of what we were looking for and we thought they would get it, and bring something of inventive value to the process of thinking how to organize the buildings.”

Chilinski and PCA have done smaller retail centers, designing Bierbrier Development’s “Village Retail” concept, designing the 55,000-sf Arlington Village Shops, Wellington Circle Plaza and Needham Street Village Shops in Newton (scheduled to be under construction this year). President Len Bierbrier, who once taught Chilinski at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, says of his former student, “There’s always problems with development and you really want to have a team member that’s going to be creative. David’s our guy.”

Zipcar Zooms

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is on the cutting edge of design,” explains Labonte, who recounts that the project had its challenges. During demolition, it became evident that the tongue and groove floors on all six levels



Chris Crooks

Adam Subber

Dan Sullivan

would need a subfloor to make them uniformly level, for example, heaping days upon an already tight schedule. Despite that, the construction portion was completed in just nine weeks.

The project was also formulated with an eye on sustainability, from saving and re-using as much of the original structure as possible to the inclusion of a basement

storage room for 50 employee bikes, along with lockers and showers. Recycled materials were selected with their environmental impact in mind. All told, says Labonte, “we believe Zipcar’s creative new space will benefit current employees and help in the recruiting and retention of future employees,” both critical mandates for designing offices in the new millennium.

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