

Amsted Design-Build celebrates 25th anniversary with awards recognition and community service initiatives



Renovation contractor builds thriving, sustainable business on core vision, mission and values

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Renovation contractor builds thriving, sustainable business on core vision, mission and values

By Mark Buckshon

Impact! Special Feature

Amsted Design-Build staff attending the recent GOHBA Housing Design Awards gala had good reason to celebrate when they learned their company had been selected as the association's Renovator of the Year. Days earlier, the 25-year-old business celebrated a similar victory at the Ontario Home Builders' Association (OHBA) Awards of Distinction, marking the first time that an Ontario renovation contractor had won both awards in the same year.

The recognition is well deserved, as the business, founded in 1989 by Steve Barkhouse, has won dozens of awards through the years at the local, provincial, national and even international level, growing from a tiny business to a thriving enterprise with about 60 employees and a reputation for quality, service and community support.

These qualities may be seen as clichés, yet Amsted lives its core values and principles through a co-ordinated, systematic (yet evolving) set of policies and guide-



lines, based on its vision statement:

"We will be the most successful sought after company in its industry. To be highly respected for integrity, excellence and success. To provide a work environment that is enjoyable and achieves a balance between work and personal time."

The vision, combined with a related mission statement and a set of core values, are expressed in everything the business achieves.

lets, as it offers support in decision-making. They can reference their cards for any decision, and know they are following the company's principles.

"We begin every meeting, every full staff meeting or partial staff meeting by reading the mission and vision and one of the core values – and someone volunteers not just to read the core values, but explain how they've used them," he said. Employees are encouraged to share examples of how the core value has been used in practice.

The business planning concepts and values have evolved, with Amsted placing an increasing emphasis on community – both in terms of employees and the company contributing to community service and charitable projects, and making sure that its practices and projects align with community values.

The company has established "Living Rooms" – meeting areas and design centres in a home-like environment in Westboro and New Edinburgh, as well as

"I think what we've learned – and what we tell our clients – is that it is vital to have a very thoughtful and good plan from the beginning, and revisit that plan constantly," Barkhouse said. "We revisit our vision, mission and core values in every meeting, and annually at our company retreats, and we adjust the plan, and ask for input on it, and improve it."

Employees carry a card with the mission, vision and core values in their wal-

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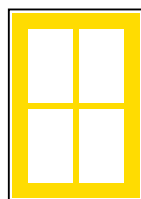
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its Stittsville head office.

“We work right in the neighbourhoods and invest in the communities financially and with personal commitments. So we may clean the park and we know what’s going on in the community and the types of development it values.”

Renovations often require minor variances and sometimes rezoning applications and it is here Amsted’s interface between the property owners – the company’s actual clients – and the community comes to the foreground.

“We have the current record for the most minor variances in a single project,” Barkhouse said. “When a client brings us a proposed project, we work with the city – we always make sure we have approval before proceeding, and before we make an application to the community, we hold an open house with coffee and treats.”

“My opening line at every meeting is very honest, to say: ‘This is my client and I’m going to work for the client’s interests . . . and we would like you to be our client tomorrow – so we care about our current client needs and the future client (your) needs as well.’”

Barkhouse says he encourages neighbours to review the proposed project and outline their concerns.

“The concerns often have nothing to do with the project requirements from the city,” he said. “Neighbours care about increased traffic, they care about the kids across the street, and cars backing into driveways – and the current bylaws often don’t address these issues.”

In practice, this means that Amsted will occasionally pull a project – even at significant cost both in time and finances – if there are true community concerns that cannot be quickly addressed. “In one case, we went to the Committee of Adjustment and learned that the community didn’t feel that we had addressed their concerns.” The committee was preparing to rule in Amsted’s favor, but the company still withdrew the job. “We had to reapply, because the community wasn’t in favour.”

Amsted seeks to work co-operatively with the city and the community – it doesn’t want to be seen as the “developer or

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renovator coming in, fighting with the city . . . we don't agree with that." Of course, "you can't please all the people all the time" but if you can satisfy 99 per cent of the people, the majority will convince the few holdouts that the project truly is worthy.

Amsted's systems and processes ensure that the company's employees – many of whom have been with the organization for 10, 15 or even 20 years – are selected because they share its corporate values and cultures.

New employees are only hired after existing employees interview them. There's a family feel to the organization, with more than one generation working at the company. For example, Stephanie Haw co-ordinates marketing, while her uncle (and founding partner) Kirk Haw oversees the company's Restore-All division, which handles emergency repairs and insurance restorations.

"We have a unique workforce," Kirk Haw said in a 2005 interview. "We have specialists, we have generalists and they are comfortable in what they do."

"You have to be comfortable in what you are doing," he said in the GOHBA Impact story published a decade ago, which continues to be relevant today. "You can have all the skills in the world, but you also need to be able to fit in as



well."

"We enjoy what we do. We work very hard because we are passionate about it, but we don't live to work. We do a lot of things outside of work together as well, including parties, sports activities and fundraising for various charities. We like each other's company."

"Not every day is sunshine, but who would you rather be with in difficult situations?"

Amsted, in fact, may have achieved the sweet spot for business and community success. The company's workforce is large enough that it can complete and

manage many aspects of its projects in-house, ensuring a seamless client experience.

"With the size of our team, we can offer the benefits of design-build, and have been successful in extending this to the design community at large," Barkhouse said. Its solid relationships with the community also extends to relevant industry associations such as the GOHBA, and respect for its trade suppliers, many of whom are advertising in this feature, without any arm-twisting.

What will the next 25 years bring?

"I'm not worried about the future,"

Barkhouse said. "We've got a great team. I know we take a leadership role in our industry and our community and North America wide."

"I'm proud of that – but that's not me. I'm painfully shy, but my employees push me to speak out because it is my job to represent the company."

"You've got to be on your toes at all times to represent these really great people," Barkhouse said.

"Amsted would not be where we are today without the support of all of our customers, whom we define as our incredible employees, valued trade partners, and cherished clients. Our success for the next 25 years therefore relies on the relationships built with our customers to date, and the future A-players we will add to our team."



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Amsted's "25 acts for 25 years"

As Amsted Design-Build celebrates its first quarter century in business, the company has initiated several programs to recognize its employees, suppliers, clients and community.

The company has already thanked its clients and supplier/partners with appreciation events, but "we also realized we needed to recognize the community at large," said marketing co-ordinator Stephanie Haw.

"Ottawa and its residents have given us 25 great years, and we decided this year was a chance for us to give back, bigger than ever before. That's why in 2015 we initiated '25 Acts for 25 Years.'

"We ramped up our efforts to give back this year, participating in school fundraisers, company food drives, large charity events and small community driven initiatives. We are well on our way to completing and even surpassing our goal."

The list of community service projects is impressive – and there's still more to come.

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Cardinal Creek Community Association
Ecology Ottawa
EnviroCenter
Glebe Community Centre
Glebe Neighbourhood Activities Group
GOHBA
Habitat for Humanity
Hopewell Avenue Public School
Hospice Care Ottawa
Jewish Youth Library of Ottawa
Kanata Artists
Kanata North community
Kanata South community
Royal Ottawa - Women for Mental Health Program
Old Ottawa South Community Association
Ottawa Community Housing
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