

THE PRICE OF GREATNESS

BNIM's architecture is indeed distinguished—with a highly detailed, modernist aesthetic—but what sets this Kansas City-based firm apart is its focus on urban renewal, community involvement and environmental sustainability. This firm closely follows Winston Churchill's statement, "The price of greatness is responsibility."



Freshly chiseled into the American Institute of Architect's (AIA) granite Wall of Honor is the lengthy name, Berkebile Nelson Immenschuh McDowell Architects (BNIM). Grounded in the Midwest since it was founded in 1970, BNIM was recently bestowed with the 2011 AIA Architecture Firm Award, also known as the Firm of the Year Award, the organization's highest honor. Given annually since 1962, the award recognizes a practice that, for at least 10 years, has consistently created distinguished architecture.

"We set very high standards in achieving buildings that are healthy for its occupants and the environment," says Rod Kruse, FAIA LEED AP, principal at BNIM's Des Moines office. "We also have a passion for great architecture." Kruse, and everyone at BNIM, sees high-performance buildings and beautiful design as inseparable. They are both goals of every project.

BNIM practices what it preaches, with a portfolio of 19 Certified LEED® projects, including 10 Platinum-rated buildings. For three years in a row, the research publication *Design Intelligence* placed BNIM among the top five U.S. firms that are role models for sustainable design. Bob Berkebile, the firm's founding principal, was instrumental in the formation of USGBC's LEED system, and is the

founding chairman of AIA's National Committee on the Environment. "We start every project by talking extensively about how to minimize natural resources and be friendly to the planet," says Kruse.

The Des Moines office building for the Iowa Utilities Board and the Iowa Office of Consumer Advocate was completed by BNIM in 2011, and in addition to its LEED Platinum registration, it won both the 2011 AIA Iowa Merit Award and the 2011 AIA Central States Excellence in Architecture honor. The client had an optimistic goal of 28 kBtu (1,000 British thermal units) per square foot energy use. "Every design decision was measured with that goal in mind," says Carey Nagle, the project's lead architect. "And after a few months of occupancy, we found that the building was only consuming 24 kBtu per square foot," approximately 67 percent less than a code-compliant building of similar size and function.

Surpassing LEED Platinum, BNIM also recently completed the nation's first "Living Building" in upstate New York. The Omega Center for Sustainable Living, a biological wastewater filtration facility and visitor center, achieves net zero energy and water use, with 100 percent of its power coming from onsite renewable sources. Another example of the firm's soft-footprint-style architecture is manifested in a recently completed barn-like retreat in rural south central Iowa. Winner of a 2011 AIA Central State

Region Honor Award, the minimalist structure functions for both family and business gatherings. "The sustainable strategies revolved around the client's desires and needs," explains Jonathan Ramsey, BNIM project architect. "He wanted it to be very low-maintenance and inherently beautiful." The elegant result uses a geothermal system for heating and cooling, and incorporates low-upkeep concrete, a corrugated roof with no gutters, interior and exterior reclaimed wood and eight-foot overhangs for shading.

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—Rod Kruse, FAIA LEED AP

In addition to devoting itself to earth-friendly, high-performance buildings, BNIM takes its involvement in the community seriously, creating a culture of contribution and civic consciousness in its offices. The firm provides each employee paid time for volunteering at organizations of their choice, and much of the staff is involved in local renewal and leadership activities. Living by example, the firm's home office was built into Kansas City's historic Art Deco Power and Light Building, renovating not just the crumbling building, but bringing new life to a blighted neighborhood. "That was a big leap of faith for the firm," explains Erin Gehle, BNIM's director of communications. "But in the end, it benefited the entire city."

In more grandiose illustrations of community repair, BNIM has and is working on redevelopment plans for tornado-ravaged cities, including Tuscaloosa, Ala.; Greensburg, Kan.; and Springfield, Mass. Gehle likes to tell the story about BNIM's 35th anniversary party scheduled back in 2005. "Then Hurricane Katrina hit, and the firm chose to cancel the celebration and donate money to rebuilding efforts in New Orleans."

It would be one thing to win AIA's Firm of the Year Award, but BNIM has achieved a sort of "Lord of the Rings" status in what could be titled the "Academy Awards of Architecture and Design." In 2011 alone, the firm took home 10 regional and state architecture awards, three awards from the American Society of Landscape Architecture (ASLA), three awards from the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), two awards from the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and a first-place website honor from the Zweig Marketing Excellence Awards. "We're not disappointed when we don't win a design award," says Kruse, "but it's flattering when we do, because it tells us that we're succeeding in many people's eyes."

Succeeding, indeed. Pushing architecture well beyond simple artistic expression, BNIM takes its role as a shaper of the community and a leader of environmental friendliness very seriously. The firm's award-winning website includes a bullet-pointed list of nine core values, none of them speaking more loudly and clearly than the first: "We seek a better way." BNIM continues to find better ways, thereby embracing the responsibility that both comes with and creates greatness. **la**



With great respect for the surrounding landscape, the **Omega Center for Sustainable Living** seamlessly introduces modern architecture to a natural context. As the nation's first "living building" the center is powered completely by renewable, onsite resources.