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## How BLOX's CEO made the economic downturn a pivotal moment, his plans for Bessemer

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Thinking outside of the box is pretty normal for architects, but finding a way to revolutionize a company and an industry is another matter all together.

That's what Chris Giattina did for the company he grew up watching and then took over as CEO. A hard look at the future helped Giattina Aycock Architecture Studio add another company called BLOX that has both added prosperity to the city of Birmingham and to the health care field. Giattina's design-manufacture-construct (DMC) concept has changed the way buildings are constructed, and investors and entrepreneurs see future in it, considering the Alabama Launchpad win under the company's belt.

The BBJ featured Giattina in a recent executive profile, and here's more on the company's plans in Bessemer, how it is influencing the health care sector and what the CEO does to get away from it all.



Chris Giattina , CEO of BLOX, on the company's production floor.

## **Have you had any challenges to overcome that changed the trajectory of your career or a pivotal moment?**

It was the 2008 downturn. We were on top of the world and looking at the bottom. I thought I was going to take a 50-year firm under my leadership and ram it into the dirt. In 2007, I wrote an industry assessment. We were sitting on top of the food chain. We were as big as our architecture company had ever been. We were doing Children's Hospital's replacement, we had a number of really big projects and they were coming to a close. While we were on the top of the world – my job was to figure out what the future was. I looked and saw nothing. At that point, I made a decision based on my industry assessment was that we were going to reposition our firm so that we would be relevant in any condition.

## **Was it the Cardiovascular Associates project and work with Children's of Alabama that helped your company launch into other health care projects?**

From that, we then began to focus on health care, because health care at the time was really the only thing that was funded, and there was a large barrier of entry to it and we understood it. We have always understood hard problems and challenging and complex structures – that's what we're about. So, we went to health care instead of an easier spot because we knew that if we could do health care, there was a demand and there also was a need to improve. I looked at it as improving outcomes in the construction of health care, and lowering costs is a parcel of doing it at the clinical side. We started there and we got some traction. It was a lucky move. We hit thanks to the idea that we really had sophisticated design tied with burgeoning sophisticated manufacturing, to solve a sophisticated problem. We got the attention of the big players. The largest health care companies in the world grabbed us.

## **What are your plans for your 50 acres in Bessemer?**

We bought it all this year and are renovating it and using it. We're only using 350,000 feet now and will begin to take over and prepare for more. We have, in the past, influenced community. When we moved downtown to Jemison Flats, we developed Jemison Flats and put our architecture office there. That is when it was really inconceivable there would be much development west of 20th Street. That was in 2000. I found that laughably nutty spot. We studied the master plan of the city, which we helped make, of UAB and of the would-be Railroad Park and we said this is ground zero of where all of that can happen. So, we catalyzed that community with our business acumen but also with our design pieces. If you go there now, you'll see Pizitz, the Intermodal, which we designed right behind it. We worked on UAB, Railroad Park, the Children's extension. We were original planners for the baseball stadium, so we had an impact on the community. And then we left because there wasn't a million square feet available. But now, our objective is to take that culture, that concept and catalyze Bessemer.

## **Do you see your concepts continuing or do you plan on adding any other interesting components?**

In the beginning, what we were just trying to do is demonstrate we could make conventional buildings with our design-manufacture-construct concept. As soon as we were able to do that, the next iteration for us was can we make the things that we're making, the standard parts, the best in class. Can we make them all as good as your iPhone. Can each part then have a materiality, a special ease of construction that made it exquisite. Then could we make the buildings be transcendent – could we have gone all the way backwards.

## **How has your staff handled all the changes, from starting a new company to building toilets to managing explosive growth?**

This is a really smart team that's been committed for a long time. This is not a solo endeavor – if it was, it would have never gotten off the ground. This is a group of driven people that believe that Birmingham can be anything it wants, including changing a trillion-dollar industry. We need really smart people, passionate people – it's not for the faint of heart. It works great for younger people who want to look back at their career and see how they were at the very beginning of something that changed an industry.

## **Is there an interesting fact about you that most people don't know?**

I found intellectually that CrossFit suited me perfectly. I get up at 5 a.m. to work out with young people who run me into the dirt. For some reason, I like that. It has been an important thing for me because as I got older it gave me the physical confidence to take on new things like competitive horse jumping. When you're jumping a meter 10 on a horse and you're not paying attention, there's a good chance you'll die. So when I'm on a horse, I'm not at BLOX and I'm not at GA and I'm not thinking about strategy. I'm thinking about the horse, and I'm living in the now.

## **Do you have a mentor that you look up to?**

My father – he has been an enormous influence on not just me, but on our firm. His legacy of the culture that he established is what's allowed GA to develop DMC, to start BLOX and to disseminate that culture throughout the 300-plus people that are here.

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