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How Chris Giattina's BLOX is building a giant, one piece at a time

For some time, many thought Chris Giattina had given up on architecture and was only building toilets.

But after a couple years and plenty of patience, it's clear Giattina was actually building one of the most promising new Birmingham companies.

Giattina, CEO of BLOX and Giattina Aycock Architecture Studio, took a hard look at the industry during the economic recession and figured out how to remain relevant for years to come. By taking a LEGO concept where his firm creates all pieces of a room or a building, molds them together in his plant and then pieces them together in the field, they have streamlined the manufacturing process to have it under one roof, with the same players, rather than countless third-party contractors working in the shell of a building.

BLOX's design-manufacture-construct concept has given the company a solid and scalable niche.

"The point was we were never making just toilets – we were always making a machine that could make anything," Giattina said. "Now, 10 years later, we have gone through enough iterations where our machine is starting to be powerful. It took us going from conception, which was about changing an industry, to the first tactical thread, which was to learn how to make a toilet. It was with the end game that we would come back to our roots, which was to make site-specific architecture that transcends the normal, and do it in such that you deliver it two times faster at two times the quality at two times the speed."

Giattina has been with the family business, GA, since 1992 and added BLOX in 2010, which started with four employees.

But in 2013, BLOX made some serious headway with moving to 50 acres in Bessemer to the old Pullman plant, winning Alabama Launchpad and securing funding. Now, BLOX has more than 350 employees and averages 200 percent annual growth.



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

How did auto manufacturing and Eastern manufacturing methods influence you? We believed that manufacturing was a key. I had done Honda and Kia training facilities that brought me close to the Japanese and to the Koreans, and that allowed me to be exposed to Eastern manufacturing methods, which I loved. Given the problems of our industry, we had a severe amount of fragmentation – architects were separated from engineers, were separated, from subcontractors, separated from contractors from suppliers. There was enormous amounts of waste in all these pieces. I looked at how manufacturing worked, and design became linked to the means and methods – with the way that you made the airplane, or the car, or the boat, or the electronics. So, by doing that, they remove a lot of waste, but they have to change the mindsets of all the people before them.

How was BLOX born from those concepts? In 2008, we defined our framework – design-manufacture construct (DMC). It's the linchpin of everything we do. There was no BLOX when we came up with it. We expected fully that we would leverage idle capacity of third-party manufacturers – that we would go and embed with them and take their idle capacity and make things that would help, and we did.

But every time we did it, we didn't have control of what was going on, so we had to work through surrogates. The second project we went to start, they didn't remember what we had learned on the other, and they had to start at the same point. After multiple iterations of it requiring the same amount of energy to get to the same place, we said we need to control manufacturing at least until we can communicate and build a supply chain that can do it better than we can find currently. So, we created BLOX in 2010.

What industries have benefited from your concepts, and where can your work be seen around town? Our first local project was Cardiovascular Associates. We were the architect. It was such a great project, and it was one where we designed the whole thing with the DMC application. But, we couldn't run before we walked. At that point, we had to back down what we were really able to do and we developed the 48 exam rooms that were all the parts for the inside, but we couldn't do the whole piece that we wanted to. So, from that, we then had a local example of here is DMC – it really works – it doesn't have to be the full monty. It can work in parts. It can create site-specific architecture that's pretty sublime. That's a pretty progressive piece of architecture. We're proud of it as architecture, but we're also proud of it because it hit new marks for operational efficiency. It hit new marks for a delivery method, which was partial design-manufacture construct, which was cool.

What do you see in the next five or 10 years for BLOX? We'll be at \$100 million in revenue in 2019. We see a clear quarter-billion-dollar demand in the near future. It's because we're changing an industry, and the industry is really hungry. That growth rate is not the growth rate we want. It's faster than we want, but it's as slow as the need can stay relevant. In other words, we're trying to intersect the slowest rate of growth that we can internally offer at the slowest rate that the owners won't lose interest. We don't want to be a bit faster than that.

If you could tell your 21-year-old self something, what would you say? Make new mistakes. Making old mistakes is stupid. If you can read about it, if you can learn from someone else, if you can ask, then that's not a good mistake. You should do all of those things first, and then you should set out with abandon to make new mistakes.