BUILDING

Modular design is changing the way we build, and one Alabama company is leading the way.
If you’re coming from nearby Birmingham, Exit 13 lands you in Bessemer, the Magic City’s southwestern neighbor. While looking for the BLOX plant, you will drive over a pair of railroad tracks and past the red-brick Bethel Baptist Church. In your search, you may mistake it for the abandoned remnants of the city’s manufacturing pass, which line the long stretch of open road. And when you do find BLOX, it rises from its barren surroundings, an impressive million-square-foot campus, in character with its own ethos: unexpected and wholly ground-breaking.

“Necessity is the mother of all invention.” That’s what Chris Giattina, CEO, tells me when I ask him how he established BLOX; a novel offshoot of Birmingham architecture studio, Giattina Aycock, Inc. BLOX is blurring the line between architecture and construction in order to be pioneers in a field of their own creation—modular hospitals. Where traditional construction can be a lengthy and expensive process, BLOX applies manufacturing and design principles to create medical modules off-site. BLOX constructs facilities that range from patient bathrooms to free-standing ERs. Up to code and complete with electric and plumbing, units are shipped across the country, ready to be added to existing structures.

Chris describes BLOX’s inception as “the perfect storm.” It was 2008 and Giattina Aycock (GA), a legacy of Chris’ father, was facing the end of their best year-to-date. They had completed a number of successful projects, including the Regional Intermodal Facility on Morris Avenue, but found themselves looking at an empty barrel in the wake of the financial crisis. This need spurred GA to ask, “Where can we create value within architecture, engineering and construction?” From this analysis, the framework of traditional ABC was traded for one of DMC, a term coined by BLOX, which stands for Design, Manufacturing, and Construct. Instead of architects working in “vertical silos,” Chris explains that they would trade specialization for a practice that emphasized collaboration from paper to plant. Under this model, architects would be trained to create products that Chris defines as “operationally excellent, aesthetically exquisite, and constructed brilliantly.” Productivity would rise, and with it, costs would fall.

There is perhaps no better evidence of the need BLOX has filled than its own success. When I talk with Emma Khalil, a GA employee who handles marketing for BLOX, she tells me that people ask her, “Why do we need marketing?” BLOX has grown more than 200 percent since its start, and the company’s biggest problem is hiring fast enough to scale with their level of demand. Emma tells me that her job is often finding new employees, rather than finding customers.

At first, GA Studios tried to use outside manufacturing to bring their vision to life. But a schism in mission led them to take manufacturing into their own hands. GA, a studio with half a decade of experience in architectural problem-solving, would function as design, while BLOX would manufacture and construct. To understand the setup at the BLOX plant, it helps to think along the lines of a Ford factory model, an analogy which Chris himself draws upon. The enormous warehouse is lined with parts and final products in set stages of assembly. On one end, rooms sit fully assembled, wrapped, and ready for shipping. In 2017, GA moved from its longtime office space in downtown Birmingham to Bessemer, where the architects

Above: Chris Giattina, CEO of BLOX
Following pages: BLOX at various stages of development.
who design the BLOX modules sit feet from the door that leads into the manufacturing plant, fully embodying the DMC model of innovative collaboration.

Chris tells me that while not all construction projects are ideal for manufacturing, hospitals are a place where the BLOX framework makes sense. “Hospital rooms are more like your car than your living room,” he explains. While a living room is a place of personal expression, hospitals have to function in a way that is vital to both patient and caregiver experiences. BLOX has the ability to standardize components such as hygiene, proximity of features, and even natural light, all while staying up-to-code and cutting down on the lengthy time it often takes hospitals to renovate. By standardizing these components in a top-of-the-line product, BLOX can have a real impact on patient and caregiver experiences. Much like a car, BLOX hospitals are customizable, but rely on building blocks that keep customers safe and happy. You would never expect somebody to build your car by hand. It would take longer, cost more, and you’d run a much larger risk of mistakes in a product where you can’t afford them.

So what’s next for BLOX? The team at BLOX has a vision of continual growth. Chris tells me they are excited by the notion that this is only the start, and that what one sees now when they look at BLOX is not what they will see in a year, or even six months. “We have launched the unthinkable,” he says. “And we’re in orbit and we have to rebuild our spaceship in orbit, and because we’ve done it multiple times, we will continue to do that.” With demand coming in from all over the country, the company is planning to build a small west coast facility, but it’s roots will remain in Alabama. Chris himself is a Birmingham native, and in discussing BLOX’s role in the city he tells me they aren’t going anywhere. If anything, he adopts the same attitude toward Birmingham that he does toward his work, telling me, “We’re here to make it better.”