



Going platinum

KEITH WINN, president of Catalyst Partners, stands in front of the sustainability consulting/certification firm's new quarters at 502 2nd St. near downtown Grand Rapids. Up until two years ago, it was a worn-out old commercial building more than 90 years old. Winn and fellow owner Chris Muller completely renovated the building to LEED Platinum specifications. See story on page 14. **Photo by Michael Buck**

Focus: Green Businesses

14 GRAND RAPIDS BUSINESS JOURNAL APRIL 25, 2011

Sustainable construction picture is changing

Pete Daly
Grand Rapids Business Journal

The Great Recession didn't put an end to sustainable construction, but it is a field that "keeps changing all the time," according to one consultant whose career in sustainable construction and products goes back decades.

Keith Winn, president of Catalyst Partners, said companies are still interested in reducing their carbon output, but there is "probably more interest in reducing operating cost — and who wouldn't do that during a down period in the economy?"

Catalyst Partners was founded nine years ago by Winn, who at that point had spent 25 years at Herman Miller directing the design of buildings, interiors and products. As a member of Herman Miller's Environmental Quality Action Team, he helped develop corporate environmental goals.

The Grand Rapids-based Catalyst Partners has five full-time employees and is affiliated with 15 sustainability experts who have their own independent businesses. They include architects in Chicago, Atlanta and Ann Arbor, and an engineer in Muskegon. The firm also works with an engineering firm in Chicago and two in the Grand Rapids area: Sustainable Mechanical Engineering and Fishbeck Thompson Carr and Huber.

"Our business is sustainability consulting and certification for buildings and for products," said Winn.

Sustainability in construction is best summed up by the triple bottom line: Every project should be based on a positive economic outcome and positive impacts on society and the natural environment.

"That's the essence of sustainability," said Winn.

In Winn's experience, the average size of a sustainable construction project has changed during the recession. "There are fewer big projects and more small projects," he said.

Another factor reflected in the West Michigan sustainable construction market right now has to do with major nonprofit organizations that have built new facilities in the last five years, in which LEED certification has been the norm. "Those are huge projects, and most of that is complete. So certainly things are slowing down — but Grand Valley has a new library under construction and is working on plans for a new business school." As mandated by GVSU for all its new construction, both projects will be designed for LEED certification.

Winn has an impressive track record in American sustainability circles, starting with Herman Miller. He has worked with McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry and its Eco-Effective Partnership; the Athena Institute North American LCA Database Project; the Institute for Market Transformation to Sustainability's Smart Product Standards; and the National Institute of Standards and Technology BEES (Building for Environmental and Economic Sustainability) LCA Project.

Winn is a founding member of the U.S. Green Building Council, where he served three terms on the board as treasurer. He also has been an active participant in the development of LEED standards and has served on several USGBC committees, including being vice-chair of the LEED Steering Committee. He is a LEED accredited

professional and certification review manager and has participated in 10 LEED certification projects.

In fact, the USGBC is a client of Catalyst Partners. "We assisted them with the development of the LEED for Commercial Interiors rating system and have participated in the development of LEED for Volume," said Winn.

LEED for Volume are standards for corporations that build multiple identical facilities, such as Starbucks. Starbucks announced in 2009 that it was committed to LEED certification for all new company-operated stores by the end of 2010. Under the LEED for Volume process, said Winn, "once they certify one prototype, they can replicate it over and over."

Catalyst Partners is involved with Brewery Vivant at 925 Cherry St. SE in Grand Rapids, which opened in December and entailed the renovation of a more than 80-year-old former funeral chapel. The owners are going for LEED certification, with such sustainable attributes as a high-efficiency heating/cooling system and the capture of rainwater off the roof for use in watering plants in the beer garden.

Technology and controls and the art/science of sustainable construction has advanced so much since LEED was introduced 11 years ago that now "it's becoming more mainstream," said Winn. "Easier to do, at less cost. In other words, you're not paying your designer twice as much; the technologies are more affordable, and the savings are significant because of higher energy costs."

So the sustainable design/construction business is changing, but the economy also seems to be changing direction. Since late 2010, said Winn, "we've probably written

more proposals than we have in the past three years," on a "lot of new project opportunities. Not a lot of them are huge projects, but they're really good, quality projects — the kind we like to work on a lot."

For example: Built around 1917, 502 2nd St. NW was a tired-looking two-story commercial building near downtown just south of I-196. The building has been born again — and it is Winn's baby.

A little more than two years ago, Winn and his partner, Chris Muller of M Retail Solutions, began renovating the 3,500-square-foot building, which is now home to Catalyst Partners and M Retail.

"We are targeting LEED Platinum certification for our building. It's one of our favorite projects right now," said Winn. They call it the Watson Higgins Building in honor of the original owner, a milling company. Technically, it was finished a year ago, but Winn said they are "still trying to button up a few things. We plan to have it (LEED) certified by summer."

The renovated building has: a one kilowatt solar panel system that also shades the south side of the building; geothermal heat-

ing, using the ground under the vacant lot next door; windows that can be opened to allow natural ventilation three months of the year, and a big ceiling fan in the high bay area; plumbing that uses less water; high-efficiency, daylight-responsive lighting that is 50 percent more efficient than that required by the building code; storm-water storage in a 1,000-gallon cistern "for watering the vegetable garden"; native landscaping requiring no irrigation, fertilizer or pesticides, including an apple tree and wild strawberries; use of "repurposed" items including bleacher seats, doors, flooring and sinks from Harrison and Iroquois Schools and brick pavers recovered from an alley discovered during excavation.

"We keep fine tuning it," said Winn. "It's been kind of a prototype to experiment with using different technologies and design strategies. It's really a learning lab for us."

"Part of our strategy was to reach the highest level of LEED certification possible within a budget, within a reasonable range that anyone would invest in a building," he added.