

Design for the times: R+B has long history of success



Lance Blake, president, Rotwein + Blake, in front of the CommVault building, which was designed by his company. --AARON HOUSTON

BY MARIO MARROQUIN

Lance Blake has earned loads of recognition from some of the biggest developers and property owners in the state over his 35 years as the head of the architecture firm **Rotwein + Blake**.

His work on major projects for companies such as **Advance Realty**, **Rockefeller Group**, **Normandy Real Estate Partners** and others helped him cement a reputation for excellence long ago.

Recently, however, the second-generation leader of the company has earned an unofficial title: millennial expert.

Don't be fooled, he hasn't cracked the code on what drives and motivates the generation. His two 20-something daughters can attest to that.

But he has figured out how

the generation likes to work.

"They don't want to be tied to a desk," he said. "They want to work on their laptops or tablets and be anywhere. But, also, I guess it's the cool factor."

Blake, the president of R+B since 1992, says workspaces today are about so much more than the individual's actual workspace.

"It's how you design the amenities and the common areas and the lobbies," he said. "If it's multiple buildings, it's how you connect the buildings and what happens in between the interstitial spaces between the actual work environment."

And while the "cool" factor can be addressed outside of the workspace in urban centers, acknowledging it can become trickier outside of cities.

"What I am being asked is, 'How can we urbanize our build-

ing in the suburbs?'" he said. "How can we make it more urban, more cool, with more places to blow off steam, more options, more informal spaces?"

Those are the type of questions **CommVault** was asking when it wanted Blake to plan and design its corporate center in Tinton Falls in 2014.

Blake and his team worked alongside **Jenkins&Grey** to produce a property that they felt would help **CommVault** achieve its ultimate goal: a workplace that would both attract and retain millennials.

"I walked through a couple buildings with a friend ... and, as we were walking, we were talking about not just the amenities, but the type of amenities, and how we can make the building more millennial-friendly," Blake said.

The most difficult part of the

CommVault job was not the design. It was getting the bid.

When **CommVault**, a data backup and management company in Tinton Falls, put out its request, a lot of big names made proposals.

To win, Blake had to do something different.

Edward Walsh, **CommVault's** rep, advised Blake to work alongside **Dana Jenkins**.

"She broke out on her own. She has longstanding relation with the Walshes and I have a longstanding relation with the Walshes," Blake said. "He didn't think either one of us directly could win the project, but, together, he thought we had a good chance. Because we were competing against **Gensler**, we were competing against **KPF**, we were competing with **EwingCole** ... **HLW** and **HOK**. We went in to-

gether and made our pitch, and we ended up getting the job.”

The facility, a three-building complex, includes a two-story dining area and customer training and data centers. And it was made to address the wants of millennials, Blake said.

“There’s a cricket pitch softball field, walking paths, basketball and tennis,” he said. “There are a lot of outdoor activities, outdoor dining and a lot of lounge-type settings inside to collaborate and to get away from the desk.”

The building also houses game rooms and a slide. Seriously, a slide (which goes down one full level).

Don’t be confused: Blake doesn’t necessarily want to be known as a millennial expert or the millennial architect.

In fact, he just wants his company to be known as being architects who can handle any type of project.

“We want to be whole architects, not just pigeon-holed into one thing,” he said. “So, we’re also doing retail, we’re doing schools, cultural centers. We diversified so when one genre went down a little bit, we always had something to rely on.”

Blake learned the importance from the company’s history.

R+B was established by a partnership between Blake’s father, **Edward Blake**, and **Donald Rotwein** in 1955. Before Lance Blake took over, the company was a well-known developer architect.

“We were, 20 years ago or more, pigeon-holed because we were primarily considered developer architects,” he said.

“We only did interiors for our clients like **Schenkman-Kushner, Murray Construction**. We did all of their work. So ... we

Game rooms seem to be standard when it comes to appealing to millennials. —PHOTOS BY AARON HOUSTON



never really treated it as a real business unit.”

Despite R+B’s success, Blake saw the adverse effect of a changing industry and economic hardship.

From 1979 to 1982 and from 1989 to 1991, the company saw significant contraction in business, prompting the president to expand into new markets.

“I remember my father freaking out a little bit,” Blake said. “We experienced a lot of downturns, and we really didn’t have a whole lot of genres of projects to fall back on, so, I really made a push to diversify. I also wanted to get more involved in the actual creative aspect of interior design.”

The company not only has added interiors to its business, but also residential, educational, adaptive reuse, medical, multi-family housing, cultural and corporate office to its portfolio.

Despite the additions, Blake said, the company has been able to maintain its success by following the same business principles.

“We run a very lean operation,” Blake said. “We don’t have that many layers of administration, and that’s partially because I’m kind of a control freak ... you’re always dealing with me.

I do all the design work, all the building design, all the conceptual aspects of it.”

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Being able to adjust to the times is one secret to success.

Another: Maintaining longstanding relationships.

Both are reasons that Rotwein + Blake are successful.

Edward Blake helped the young company make a name for itself when he worked alongside **Charles Evans of Evans Partnership** to develop parts of Piscataway. R+B also worked with AT&T.

Lance Blake attributed the success of his father, and R+B, to understanding the value of investment and getting the most bang for their buck.

“We really developed a building around AT&T’s module,” Blake said. “And we probably leased and built 5 million square feet of AT&T alone down in that Somerset, Piscataway area. Also in Fairfield and various other spots.”

Edward Blake also fostered a relationship with Kushner, which opened the way for Lance to work on religious centers.

“Because of our relationships, with the Kushners and others like that, we got involved with doing a lot of synagogues and religious schools,” Lance Blake said. “We typically have

two or three synagogues a year that we’re doing. So, community-based, and there’s a big interior component involved with that.”

Blake also said the company’s longtime relationship with **Denholtz Associates** — a two-generation relationship that started with his father — has allowed R+B to grow outside of developer architecture.

Blake is close with **Steven Denholtz**, the company’s current CEO.

“My father was doing work with Steve’s father for years,” Blake said. “They’ve been family friends, and Steve and I have a strong relationship, not just business-wise, but socially.”

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Blake has seen a lot of changes in the state and in the industry over the years.

And while Blake does try to keep in mind the millennials, he does understand that the market focus is, and always will be, economics.

“If somebody needs a job, and somebody in the suburbs is offering a good job, they’ll work in any condition,” he said. “So, this whole need to bow down to the millennials to attract them is a bit of an enigma for me.”