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Lease Crutcher Lewis: Concentrating on Clients

2009 AGC Build Washington Grand Award Winner

By Carl Molesworth



Inside renovated Garfield High School. (Photo courtesy Lease Crutcher Lewis)

Success is nothing new for Seattle general contractor Lease Crutcher Lewis, winner of this year's AGC Build Washington Grand Award for Construction Excellence. Over the past 123 years, the company has grown under one family's leadership from a humble dream into a \$500 million enterprise.

The company now called Lease Crutcher Lewis was formed in Montana by a union carpenter, N.T. Lease, in 1886. One of the standout projects from the company's Montana years was the courthouse in Great Falls, a three-story English Renaissance Revival structure built in 1901-03. Howard S. Lease took over the business when his father died in 1929, and he moved the company to Seattle 10 years later.

World War II soon intruded, but the company was well positioned to take part in the boom that followed, building

the main terminal at SeaTac Airport in 1949.

Jim Crutcher, newly married to the daughter of Howard Lease, joined the company in 1957 as an estimator. Over time, Crutcher moved into management of the business. The two men formed the Lease Crutcher partnership in 1972, and Crutcher became president of the company at Lease's passing in 1983.

Crutcher now serves as chairman, and his nephew, Bill Lewis, is the fourth-generation president and CEO. Lewis, N.T. Lease's great grandson, spent the summer of 1967 working as a carpenter's apprentice and joined the company as a project engineer 11 years later.

Lewis said one of the milestone projects of that era was the Second and Seneca Building, the company's first high rise built for Wright Runstad in 1991 for about \$35 million. By contrast, the >>



Members of Lease Crutcher Lewis' award-winning team: Gabe Stephens, Mark Kamin, Lydia Eckman, Geoff Anderson, Tony Johnson, Marsha LeMoine, Mariah Grife, Bill Lewis and Dwight Hansch. (Photo by Rebecca Ellison Photography)

21-story Four Seasons Hotel and Residences Seattle, completed last year and also an AGC Build Washington Award winner, was a \$150-million project.

"Understanding the clients' goals in business is the key to our success," said Lewis. "It's all about outlook and attitude. Hire good people, empower them to make good decisions and then back them up."

Geoff Anderson, a 14-year Lewis employee who served as project manager on this year's award-winning Garfield High School project, expanded on that notion.

"It's a culture of taking care of the client," Anderson said. "All employees are aware of that and are touched by that."

When it comes to safety, the company invests heavily to maintain a cultural emphasis on prevention, and it works. Lease Crutcher Lewis consistently ranks in the top 10 for safety among contractors in the state and currently maintains a 0.4932 EMR.

For all this, the company is not immune to downturns in the economy.

Gary Smith, general manager of the

Seattle office, said diversification has been an effective strategy for weathering the current market conditions.

"We work hard to diversify our portfolio with a broad range of projects," he explained.

"It's a challenging construction economy now, but we have been through these cycles before," he said. "We do a significant amount of special projects -- typically smaller projects. Currently the market is stronger for those than for the big projects."

"We also do a lot of self-performed work: concrete, rough carpentry, iron work, cement finishing. This gives us closer control on costs and gives us more options for keeping our people busy in slow times."

Lease Crutcher Lewis has a long-standing reputation for staying on top of the latest advances in construction technology, which further helps the company maintain a competitive edge. Managing technology -- for instance the current move into Building Information Modeling -- is essential, Lewis said.

"Our focus is on using technology where it really benefits the client,"

Lewis explained. "Technology can crumble under its own weight if it's not used properly. Our projects are focused on putting technology in the hands of the project team."

A good example of this was the \$88-million Garfield High School project, which involved renovating an existing 170,849 -square-foot building of three stories above grade plus construction of a new performing arts center/gymnasium building of 83,674 square feet with two stories above grade. Lead architect was BLRB Architects, and lead engineers were PCS Structural Solutions with Hargis Engineers Inc. Heery International provided construction management for the owner, the Seattle School District.

Project manager Anderson said his team used targeted 3-D modeling in congested areas of the renovated structure to ensure that modern systems would fit the available space inside the historic shell of the building. But BIM technology was only used in a targeted way where it provided real value.

The complex, two-year project was on a strict time schedule because students needed to be back in the facility in time to start the 2008-09 school year. By re-sequencing the work and getting buy-in from the multiple subcontractors involved, Lewis was able to finish the job on time with zero lost-time accidents.

As a result, Lease Crutcher Lewis won the AGC Build Washington Grand Award for the third time in the past 14 years. Lewis accepted the award with Don Gillmore, Building Excellence Program Manager for Capital Projects in Seattle Public Schools.

"We enjoy being builders, especially on projects that make a difference in our community," Lewis said. "Garfield is an excellent example. We're proud to be part of that." ■