

Where Building is an Art

An Interview with Frank Scieme,
Chief Executive Officer, F.J. Scieme Construction Company, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE One of the tri-state area's leading construction management firms, Frank Scieme established F.J. Scieme Construction Company in 1975. In 1974, Scieme received a B.S. degree in architecture from the City College of New York and an honorary doctorate in fine arts in 2004 from that same institution. He is past Chairman and Current Executive Board Member of The New York Landmarks Conservancy and New York Building Congress, Director of the City College of New York's 21st Century Foundation board, and current Chair of the Council of Presidents and the Task Force on Construction Costs for the Building Congress.



Frank Scieme

COMPANY BRIEF A leading builder of highly designed and technically sophisticated projects, F.J. Scieme Construction Company, Inc. (www.sciame.com) has earned numerous awards for its innovative ideas and techniques. Scieme has applied its expertise to a broad range of projects, including museums and cultural centers, educational facilities, historic restorations, restaurants, retail facilities, residences, corporate interiors, research complexes, and medical facilities.

What was the impact on construction in New York City and the tri-state area from the economic downturn?

In 2008/2009, there was a meltdown in terms of private development work. There was a lot of product on the market that could not sell, and as a result, many projects that were just beginning were stopped and became the so called "stalled sites" that you see all over town.

As a result, the construction industry, especially from the private sector, was hurt. Unemployment for some trades was and still is 25 to 30 percent – a lot higher than the national average.

The industry was spared even higher unemployment because of the infrastructure work that was planned before 2008. Construction at Ground Zero was a huge help, as was lower Manhattan in general. Despite the recession, \$34 billion is being invested in the one square mile that is lower Manhattan.

In terms of New York in general, real estate continues to be relatively strong. Prices have gone down, but not nearly as much as they've gone down in other states such as Florida or Nevada. New York remains the place that people want to invest in and own a piece of.

We've had no layoffs to speak of and we're looking for record years in 2012 and 2013 primarily because we have positioned ourselves to do highly detailed, highly designed projects. Fortunately, private institutions and even public agencies are looking for well-designed projects, which suits us nicely.

You often use the phrase "Where building is an art." What does that mean?

When you get involved with these highly designed projects by Pritzker Prize-winning architects, the buildings are defining state-of-the-art and the architects want their building to be built exactly as designed.

There is an art to selecting the right craftsmen and subcontractors, and the right technology to realize the design intent cost effectively.

If you do this, it's a win-win-win. The owner picks a great architect because they want a great building; if we can have that building built to the vision of the architect, the owner wins, the architect wins, and we win because everyone is happy and we get another great project to add to our portfolio.

You remain relatively focused on the tri-state area. Is that a part of your mission?

It was, but that mission is changing and we are considering expanding nationally with highly designed buildings as our focus. If we can follow the architects we've worked with in New York to other states, that would be a good business plan.

If we expand nationally, it won't be just for volume sake – it will be to create a national niche to get more of these great buildings in our portfolio and thereby further increase our ability to expand locally and nationally.

How has the green focus impacted the way you operate?

It has had an impact. Cooper Union, for example, wanted their building to respect the environment. We secured a LEED Platinum Certification for this building.

In the U.S., the energy codes dictate a lot of the green aspects that LEED and the Green Building Council desire. It's important to be responsible to the environment and anything we can do from a construction standpoint to contribute to this is a good thing. Architects are designing environmentally responsible buildings. As this continues, the technology gets better and the return on investment gets better as well.

How much does new technology impact the way you operate?

It is changing things. We utilize BIM models, computer-aided design, and clash detection programs – tools that you need when you're building highly detailed buildings. Technology is allowing the architects to design buildings like never before. The contractors and subcontractors are utilizing technology to figure out how these intricate designs can be built.

I can't wait to see what buildings will look like just 20 years from now when the industry continues to take advantage of technology not only for design but also for computer-aided manufacturing, industrialization, and coordination. Technology has become vital to our industry.

Through the Partnership for New York City, business leaders come together to address the needs of the city. Doesn't that make this city special?

I think the greatest example of the ability of this city to come together was at Ground Zero. The clean-up was remarkable because everyone had one purpose – getting on with a swift rebuilding program in response to the horrific attacks of 9/11.

Out of necessity, there needed to be a consensus about how to move forward after the clean up and it took some time to decide on a design that was acceptable to all. Any negativity that has surrounded the rebuilding effort at Ground Zero was unfortunate and unnecessary. Everyone I worked with on this project passionately wanted to do the right thing – honor those who were lost that day.

No city in the world can pull together as quickly as New York City. This city can make things happen at all levels.

The Partnership for New York City is a great example of how New York business leaders can work together to assure that the city remains the greatest city in the world. ●