

One-Stop Shop

Omicron is growing by leaps and bounds. With its recent acquisition of OfficeWorks, a well-known design-build company, the Vancouver-based firm is on track to becoming a heavy hitter among integrated architecture-engineering-construction companies in Western Canada.

BY JENNIFER PATTERSON PHOTOS COURTESY OF OMICRON/TERRY GUSCOTT/ATN VISUALS



Partners in the firm, from left to right: Bill Tucker, Sally Mills, Bruce Knapp, Cameron Kemp, Doug Vincent, Lori Billson, Tim Loo, Greg Richardson and George Sawatzky.

THE AIM OF OMICRON is to become *the* leading integrated design and construction firm in Western Canada in terms of market share. That may seem like an ambitious goal for a seven-year-old firm, but the young company, whose portfolio includes the award-winning LEED® Gold City of Vancouver National Works Yard, is confident in its ability to grow and expand to match — and eventually surpass — the competition.

The firm's current market segments include retail, institutional, commercial, office interiors, and renewals and assessments of existing properties and buildings, including long-term upgrade and capital improvement plans. Construction brings in both design-bid-build and design-build projects, although Omicron

tends to do more design-build projects owing to its one-stop-shop nature. "We bring the full integrated architecture-engineering-construction approach to our assignments," says Bill Tucker, a partner in the firm who oversees business development.

While many architecture, engineering and construction firms team up to complete design-build projects, not many companies offer a completely integrated design and construction package, complete with in-house architects, interior designers, engineers and builders, says Tucker. In fact, there may not be another company of Omicron's size offering the same range of services in B.C., and with Omicron's recent acquisition of OfficeWorks, a well-known office design-build company, the 110-member company is

Connections

arguably the largest integrated design and construction firm in B.C.

Tim Loo, P.Eng., manager of construction, explains how the construction process at Omicron differs from that of regular construction firms: from the first startup meeting, architects, interior designers, construction managers and engineers get involved in the process, giving input on schedule, budget and constructability, he says. "Working as a team, we take all that information, as well as the esthetics and technical requirements, and with everyone having a say early on in the project, we find the project is more in tune with what the client wants."

No Surprises

The firm conducts milestone checks or reviews along the way on each project — at 30 per cent completion on working drawings, then at 60 per cent and 90 per cent completion, with checks on budget, schedule and constructability. "The traditional route is just get to the end and tender it out and see what happens," says Loo. "We do these checks along the way, so there are no surprises at the end."

As a result of Omicron's streamlining, projects are very predictable, says Loo. "The worst thing is if an owner tenders [a project] and finds out that he's 50 per cent over budget and all the things he's been promised and has in his mind, they have to go back to the drawing board and start again. That's a really tough process on everybody. Through that [streamlining] process we also get input from our subtrades. They're in there as well commenting on whether there's a better way to do it."



Omicron provided integrated design and construction services for the new \$23-million City of Vancouver National Works Yard facility. The Architect of Record was Scott M. Kemp, MAIBC.

To date, Omicron's projects range from designing and building the Krispy Kreme outlet in Delta to the \$23-million National Works Yard, a completely integrated design-construction assignment. Other projects include collaborating on the architectural design with Architects Alliance as well as mechanical engineering of the \$18-million, 96,000-square-foot MacLeod II building at UBC. Omicron also provided engineering and construction services for the interior fitout of Whole Foods Market and interior design and engineering for the interior fitout of the innovative smaller-format urban Home Depot store at the Village at Park Royal in West Vancouver.

"Where it makes sense, we'll collaborate with another firm, or we'll take on a single discipline construction or design assignment," says Loo. "However, our preferred methodology is to do it all in an integrated fashion; we really feel that's the strength of our company."

The construction side is a combination of design-construction

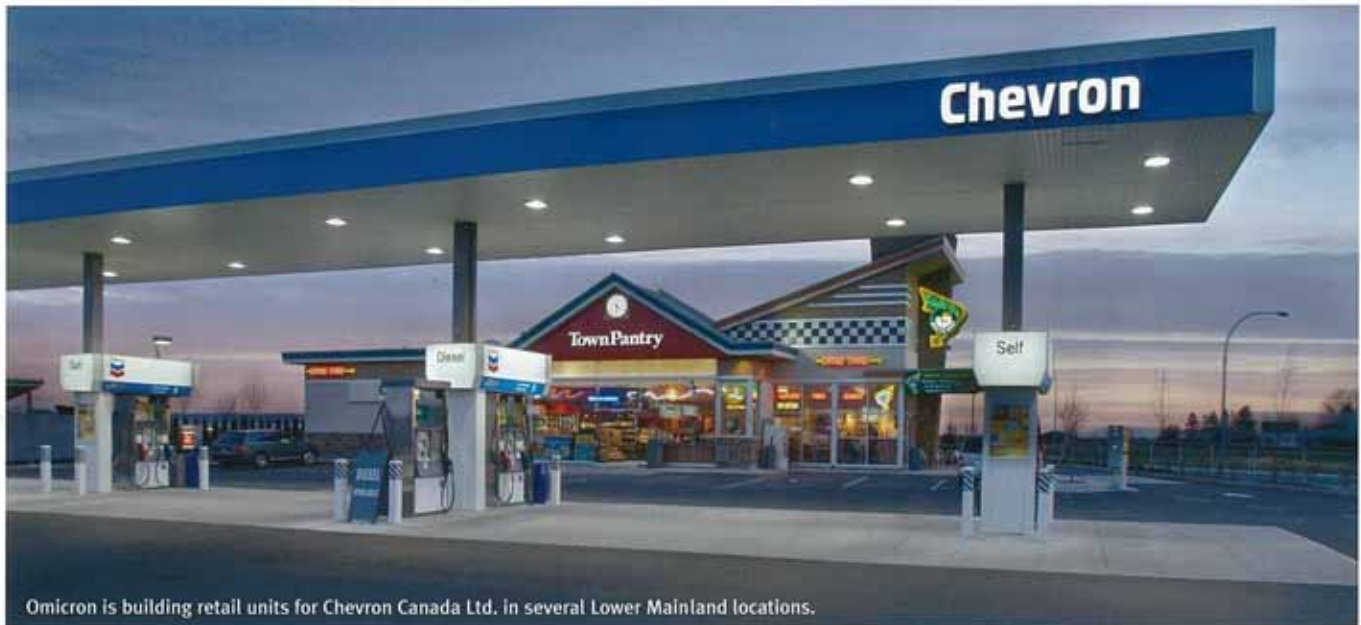
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Omicron is building retail units for Chevron Canada Ltd. in several Lower Mainland locations.

management, design-build and general contracting. In 2004, Omicron built about 25 per cent of what it designed, while design volume is between \$120 million and \$135 million annually.

On the retail side, Omicron has strong business relationships with national retailers such as Loblaws, Home Depot and Staples. In the institutional market, the company works with municipalities, universities including UBC and SFU, and health authorities such as the Fraser Health Authority. Its commercial portfolio includes work with larger commercial developers such as Bentall.

Founding Partners

Founded in 1998 by three partners, Cameron Kemp, Tim Loo and George Sawatzky — who met while working for Dominion Construction — Omicron was born out of the idea of providing one integrated source for design, engineering and construction, something the trio had experienced during their tenure at Dominion. Loo recalls the trio meeting one weekday evening at Ricky's Restaurant on No.10 Hwy in Cloverdale. "We always knew that we had the right solution — that totally integrated

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architecture, engineering and construction was a great thing," says Loo. At that time, Dominion had decided it wanted to get out of design, even though the format had been successful for some 25 years.

"It came pretty naturally to us," says Loo of the integrated approach. The trio came up with a business plan that evening at Ricky's with projections for the first year and the first five years. The ever-organized Kemp brought along some spreadsheets, and the rest of the plan was etched out on the back of a napkin. The meeting was over sometime before midnight.

Today the company, which is owned by nine partners (including the original three) — all of whom are involved in the firm's day-to-day operations — offers streamlined design and construction services with its staff of about 110 professional architects, engineers, interior designers, project managers, cost estimators and builders.

According to Tucker, Omicron's construction operations are growing rapidly by more than 50 per cent year over year. In its first year, the company did roughly \$1 million in construction. By contrast, the projected construction volume for 2005 is estimated at \$35 million for all of Western Canada, with the bulk of projects centered in the Lower Mainland.

The company's team is broken down equally: 30 per cent architecture, 30 per cent engineering and 30 per cent construction. The remaining 10 per cent represents corporate support staff. The company works as a cohesive team and the office is open-concept, with no enclosed offices, only meeting rooms. At Omicron, an architect will be seated next to a structural, mechanical and electrical engineer and a construction team member. The office is clustered according to sectors, with multidisciplinary teams seated



Engineering and construction services for the interior fitout of Whole Foods Market in West Vancouver were provided by Omicron. The Architect of Record was Musson Cattell Mackey Partnership.

together. This team-oriented attitude helps move the project forward, from the conceptual stage right through to construction.

So how do architects, engineers and construction managers work together? "Everyone has a common goal," says Tucker, namely, "to create a great building product and they understand what it takes to do that."

Over the past six to eight months, the company has been branching into maintenance as part of its design and construction package, with four or five staff members providing services such as millwork, restoring damaged walls or adding an extra loading dock to an existing warehouse.

As for the effect the OfficeWorks merger will have on Omicron, Loo is enthusiastic: "It is definitely going to strengthen our group, both in design and construction. OfficeWorks has strong expertise in a market that we're just developing. We're hoping to learn things from them and they're going to learn things from us. We're expecting that their [construction] volumes will grow and ours will as well." **CB**



The inaugural Krispy Kreme Doughnut outlet in B.C., for which Omicron provided integrated design and construction services.