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Crescent Planing Mill burnishes reputation as one of the finest millwork companies in the Midwest

For 118 years, St. Louis-based Crescent Planing Mill Company has forged a reputation as a high-end shop that produces top of the line millwork, the examples of which can be seen in prominent buildings throughout the Gateway City. Washington University in St. Louis, meanwhile, is one of the top colleges in the nation and expects nothing less than excellence and top quality in its architecture.



At Wash U., as some locals call it, all new construction must be built in a “collegiate Gothic style,” melding new technology and advanced bulking materials with traditional exterior architectural design. The new construction standard was modeled after the law library, which was completed five years ago. It was a natural fit for the school to partner with Crescent Planing Mill Company to accomplish the lofty building standards.

Crescent Planing officials say being awarded the job to do the millwork for Washington University’s new \$43 million student center was both an honor and a challenge.



“We spent a fair amount of time with the architects and the contractor (Clayco Construction Company, Inc. of St. Louis) prior to the awarding of the job, just in consulting,” said Bill Fikes, the president of Crescent Planing Mill. “We have a long-standing relationship with architects and general contractors throughout the Midwest and we pride ourselves on keeping communication flowing to ensure a quality project.”

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Specialized skills & computer technology gives St. Louis millwork and cabinetry professionals a competitive edge



In 2007, the North American architectural millwork and cabinetry industry achieved revenues of about \$4.5 billion, according to global tracking firm, Marketresearch.com. Competition for slices of that pie is fierce, with reputable shops within our borders battling each other for business, while also struggling to fend off foreign imports.

There is no room for non-productive work crews, or employees who don’t possess a superior understanding of the industry, and its tool, methodology, fabrication and installation advances.

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Crescent Planing Mill burnishes reputation

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The three-story student center, known as the Danforth University Center, is a 116,000 square foot structure.

“On a job of this size and quality, Washington University knew that they needed a local shop that has a history of turning out quality jobs,” said Brian Doerr, Business Representative with the Carpenters’ District Council of Greater St. Louis and Vicinity. Doerr works on behalf of contractors such as Crescent Planing to help secure work for them. “Crescent definitely has a history in St. Louis and has been a part of the Carpenters’ Union for decades.”

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Fikes said his team welcomed the challenge. “This was the type of quality job we were looking for. This is what we do,” he said.

The Danforth University Center entailed intricate custom-style rails and wood door frames. Many of the interior spaces sport the red oak millwork created by Crescent for which Washington University has become known.

The student center was a special challenge to build because it was designed atop a new, 520-space underground parking garage that was nearing completion at the time the Danforth project launched.

The concurrent projects presented some logistical issues because Clayco, the general contractor, had to build special temporary walkways and other features to keep campus users protected during construction.

Crescent Planing faced another challenge with the two-level atrium inside the student center, near the front entrance. Crescent’s staff had to create octagon-shaped column covers made out of red oak for the atrium. Four of the columns measured 32-feet high and ran from floor to ceiling. Other columns were cut to go from floor to mezzanine or mezzanine to ceiling.

“There was a fair amount of cutting pieces to make it look right,” Fikes said. “We do a lot of specialized entry ways and vestibules and reception areas in hotels and office buildings, where when you walk into the door you want to be impressed.”

Students and faculty no doubt would be impressed by the beautiful atrium at Washington University. The details included Poplar trim on the ceilings and intricate moulding work around the columns and the window frames.

“There was a fair amount of curved pieces that had to be made, and that takes a lot of time,” Fikes said. “The time frame was somewhat challenging, but we were able to stay within their schedule.”

The student center project came in on budget and ahead of schedule. It officially opened Aug. 11, 2008, in time for the fall 2008 semester. The student center also received LEED certification, yet another feather in the cap of Crescent Planing Mill, which needed to work within the green construction parameters to help achieve the LEED designation.

Working from a Solid Reputation

Crescent Planing Mill, which employs 26 men, three of them apprentices, has a reputation of getting the job done on time and with very few callbacks. All of the employees of Crescent were trained by the Cabinet, Display and Millwork (CDM



Apprenticeship Program, sponsored by the St. Louis Carpenters’ Joint Apprenticeship Committee (CJAP). This program is designed to provide the skills and knowledge involved in the manufacture of products including architectural furniture, cabinets, trade show displays, and millwork.

“The cabinet apprenticeship program is second to none and offers everything from old school, hands-on training to working with the most modern equipment available,” Doerr said. “By having our members attend this apprenticeship program, our millwork and cabinetry professionals are the most productive and skilled workers available to our shops.”

Crescent Planing Mill works on 80 to 100 projects a year, from small residential jobs to those over \$1 million, like the Washington University student center. With highly skilled union carpenters, office personnel and modern technology, Crescent can produce a high quality product for any customer.



“Most people have heard of our company locally. We don’t normally have to put out any marketing or reference materials because we have been around so long and people know about our quality,” Fikes said. “On the other end, you are competing with people who don’t do the quality work that is expected. The new guy on the street may get the job but not necessarily perform the job to standards. With us, if price is always the object then maybe we’re not the right ones for the job.”

True to its heritage, most of Crescent’s projects are high end like golf country clubs, major hotels or some of the most prestigious homes in St. Louis. In fact, Crescent works extensively on country clubs. For the Old Warson Country Club, a Robert Trent Jones-designed course that has hosted the Ryder Cup, Crescent redid all of the locker rooms and the men’s dining area, a job that consisted of raised paneling, wood ceiling beams, and custom-style and rail doors.

“It’s a very high-end club,” Fikes said. “The members are used to the highest quality. Most of the private clubs set a high standard for interior finishes, and high standards are what Crescent Planing Mill Company is all about.”

About Crescent Planing Mill Company

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Specialized skills & computer technology in St. Louis

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In St. Louis, Missouri, millwork and cabinetry members of the Carpenters District Council of Greater St. Louis and Vicinity are well-supported in their commitment to become the best resource of knowledgeable, experienced, productive professionals in this industry. The Cabinet, Display and Millwork (CDM) Apprenticeship Program, sponsored by the St. Louis Carpenters Joint Apprenticeship Committee (CJAP), is designed to provide the skills and knowledge involved in the manufacturing of products including architectural furniture, cabinets, trade show displays, and millwork.

Support for this industry’s labor education comes from the top in St. Louis. The District Council’s top official, Executive Secretary-Treasurer Terry Nelson, is the labor co-chairman of the Certified Customer Woodworkers Association (CCWA), a national labor-management committee of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and its millwork contractors. Nelson is a staunch supporter of intensive training for this trade.

Every day, Terry O’Reilly, coordinator of the CDM apprenticeship program in St. Louis, implements Nelson’s training commitment by preparing local men and women to be outstanding assets for area millwork contractors.

“Our contractors depend greatly on specialized skills,” said O’Reilly. “In the last 10 years, we have seen computer technology enter the field, easily the biggest change we’ve seen that advances the industry.”

Specialized skills mean more than just being familiar with a computer. The 55 apprentices – “an historically high number,” O’Reilly said – are learning first-hand the benefits of how computerization is increasing productivity throughout the industry.

The image of the old craftsman sitting at his bench whittling out a cabinet has pretty much gone by the wayside, replaced with technology advances like computer numerically controlled (CNC) routers. While there is still a place for craftsmanship and while carpenters still use block planes and chisels at times, computer programming has changed the dynamic of the architectural millwork.

For example, rather than the older, traditional way of machining a part by hand, that same part can be cut 95 percent of the way on the CNC, with the millworker then manually adding special finishing touches and assembly indicative of the hand- made craftsmanship. Thousands of man hours over the course of a year can be saved with this technology, with no degradation in productivity, quality or craftsmanship. In turn, the extra time that a CNC tool affords a shop can be reinvested toward new, more complex designs that were previously not cost effective or within the reach of conventional woodworking tools.

“For architectural millwork, there are many advantages with CNC routers. Time savings is a big one and accuracy – accuracy is spot on,” O’Reilly said.

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Specialized skills & computer technology in St. Louis

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This positive transition is embraced at the St. Louis training facility, where apprentices learn on some of the latest machinery available – and from experienced professionals who are already successful within the modern environment of the trade.

“More of our shops are keeping pace with new technology,” O’Reilly said. “It is our job to provide our employers with productive professionals to keep our employers competitive, in what is certainly an extremely competitive market.”

Instilling an Attitude of Productivity

Before entering the training program, millwork and cabinetry apprentices must first secure a job from a union millwork contractor, and then obtain a letter of intent from that employer. As O’Reilly explained, “We don’t provide any preliminary training or preliminary help. We will talk to people who are interested in the program and have a list of mills interested, but basically the apprentices go out and pursue their own job.”

The program uses the PET (Performance Evaluated Training) system for its students. In this system, the apprentices work independently on a project under the supervision of an instructor. There is no formalized classroom instruction. “The instructor works closely with apprentices to make sure they are learning to work safely and properly,” O’Reilly said, adding that the school keeps a student-to-instructor ratio about 4-to-1.

Apprentices are required to complete six terms, each of which consists of 900 on-the-job-hours, plus eight skill competency

tasks (or blocks). Students have a minimum of six months to complete each term, which become more advanced as they work their way through the course. Journey-level status is reached after totaling 48 blocks and 5,400 on-the-job experience hours.

Safety and mathematics are central to all portions of the program. The hands-on tasks present the main knowledge, skills, and theories of the cabinetmaking, display, and millwork industry. Topics include: Wood Joinery, Reading Shop Drawings and Stockbills, Hand Tool Use, Equipment Operation, Laminating, and Template Design and Use.

Even appearance is honed for productivity. Apprentices must wear work pants, safety glasses, and hard-soled work shoes in the shop areas. And attendance is not only a must, but arriving to training on time and ready to work is a key component to advancing through the system.

The St. Louis CJAP has an agreement with six area colleges so that a journeyman’s status is transferred to satisfy part of the college’s core curriculum requirements for an Associate or Bachelor Degree. Apprentices can earn up to 45 credit hours through this arrangement.

“We push them to get ahead and get it done, but it’s ultimately up to individual,” O’Reilly said. “It comes down to how badly they want it.”

An apprentice could theoretically complete the program in two and a half years but it

usually takes three to four years, according to O’Reilly. New apprentices work with those who are ready to journey out. “There is good peer support here. They do look out for each other.”

Graduates of the program receive a diploma from the United States Department of Labor’s Bureau of Apprenticeship and

Training and the apprenticeship school.

O’Reilly said the success of the program is grounded in Nelson’s support, and from the



foundational work done a few decades ago, with coordinators Ray Brown and then Scott Drewes, who has been with the program for more than 20 years and was Brown’s assistant.

The St. Louis staff includes part-time instructors Tim Stratman, Jim Clarkin, Scott Heger, Jim Vonk and Doug Brunkhorst. These industry veterans work for contractors and millwork shops during the day and then share their knowledge by teaching for the apprenticeship program one or more evenings a week.

“I feel very fortunate to inherit a program that already ran so well,” O’Reilly said. “There are a lot of people that don’t get that opportunity both from an equipment standpoint and the program itself. The real beneficiaries, however, are our employers who can utilize these trained professionals to stay competitive, and ultimately, the customer, who gets a quality product.”

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