

THIS NICHE WILL KEEP YOU IN THE WEEDS

Behind all the puns about a “growing” market for cannabis facilities lies a truth—the increasing demand for design and construction of buildings for the cultivation, processing, and dispensing of cannabis products offers real opportunities for A/E firms.

Just ask Brant Fetter, principal and senior architect for Interactive Resources. The Point Richmond, CA, firm, which provides architectural design, structural engineering, and planning services to a broad range of markets, has developed a strong reputation in Northern California for cannabis-related building projects. And while this wasn’t necessarily a target market for the firm, Fetter says it’s proved to be an exciting and profitable area of specialization.

BEGIN AND GROW

“Our initial referrals into this market came because of our prominence in pharmaceuticals and light industry,” he explains. “As soon as we got a few of these projects under our belt, the rest has mostly been networking. By its nature, this has been an insular business, but the principals do a lot of talking at meetings and conferences and word got around about us.

“For our part, we’ve been cautious about marketing—our aim was to build a strong body of knowledge before promoting ourselves as experts.”

UNIQUE MARKET

What’s unique about this market? Among other things, there’s the question of receivables. Fetter says principals at other A/E firms are surprised to hear that payment for design services is often made upfront. The wide availability of cash and the need to manage risk, both on the part of the vendor and the client, make this the preferred policy.

The willingness to pay upfront also points to a certain unfamiliarity among clients about how the construction industry traditionally works, Fetter says. While emphasizing the business savvy and successful track records of his clients—“none of



these guys started out growing weed in their basement,” he notes—the market also tends to have a “go-it-alone” attitude.

“Again, because of the historical nature of their business, they are used to doing everything themselves. So they may not have an appreciation or awareness of everything your firm can do for them. To be blunt, they may not think they need you initially,” he says.

“But that leads to a lot of pleasant surprises when we come in with an innovative approach that might never have occurred to them.”

Technology is advancing rapidly as the market scales up, with Fetter pointing to integrated lighting and racking loads as two particularly challenging areas. Perhaps not surprisingly, clean room technology is an area of growing interest.

While it’s challenging enough to keep abreast of the changes coming to the market in the San Francisco Bay region—for example, California is now offering a micro-business license that is something akin to a microbrewery—Fetter says opportunities are growing across the country, especially as some firms begin scaling up nationally.

“It’s an exciting space to be in right now. We’re all learning as it evolves, and there’s a lot of room for ingenuity to solve a client’s problem.” ■