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Lebanon architectural firm draws big business from an unusual headquarters, the architect's back yard

Nashville Business Journal - by [Linda Bryant](#) Nashville Business Journal

Michael Manous is proving that a boutique architectural firm off the beaten path can compete - and blossom - alongside larger corporate firms in the big city.

With a diverse client list all over the country, Manous has scored a litany of projects worth more than \$250 million in construction costs.

And there's more coming.

Manous is a lead designer of the upcoming \$250 million **Cumberland Yacht Harbor** in Nashville.

He's designing several large projects in Wilson County, including a multi-million-dollar nursing facility, a mixed-use retail and commercial facility in the historic Castle Heights Academy District and Waters Hills, a residential 'new urbanist' development.

Revenue at **Manous Consulting** & Design has grown from less than \$100,000 to more than \$2 million yearly.

Manous pulls it off on his own terms from his unusual headquarters - an outbuilding he designed on his homestead near Lebanon about 30 miles from Nashville.

He's got four employees who enjoy views of cow pastures and family farms while they work.

"Sometimes clients show up unexpectedly and we are all in shorts and flipflops," he says. "My biggest challenge on my commute is to not waste too much time walking through the garden to the design studio."

Don't mistake Manous' laid-back attitude with a lack of passion or drive, says Sue Vanatta, executive director of the Wilson County Chamber of Commerce.

"He's a leader," Vanatta says. "Michael has done so much design work in our community. We



Todd Stringer, Nashville Business Journal

(From Left) Mark Kawczynski, Michael Manous, Melanie Hunn and Travis Tidmore of Manous Consulting & Design

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are so blessed with it."

After graduating from the **University of Tennessee School of Architecture**, Manous worked in Nashville for Lockwood Greene designing facilities for **Bridgestone Firestone**, and commuting to Nashville from Lebanon, where he designed and built his home in the late 1980s.

He looked in the phone book one day; didn't see one architect listed in Lebanon, and decided to make the area his home base.

"It was an incredibly fortuitous first step," Manous says. "I came right out of the box with paying clients."

One of the company's first jobs was to design the visitor's center for Spring Hill's Saturn plant. That gig saw Manous using an old horse barn as the bones of the new facility.

He's always happy to save a piece of history, protect the land or design in a way that harkens the past.

"We're going out and chewing up raw land and spending big money to recreate what we've already got," Manous says.

One of his favorite projects is a redesign and renovation of the headquarters for the Wilson County Chamber of Commerce. The result was an architectural marriage of two turn-of-the-century buildings.

"Michael took both buildings and took them back to their original splendor," Vanatta says. "People walk in, and all they can say is: 'Wow.'"

Vanatta credits Manous' leadership for developing Historic Lebanon Tomorrow, a local initiative that aims to preserve and restore Lebanon's historic downtown.

Manous recently finished designing the headquarters for the largest independent bookseller in the state, Sherlock's Book Emporium and Curiosities. **Performance Food Group**, a large national food service provider in Richmond, Va., is a long-term client that provides continual work.

Manous did the design work for more than \$60 million in construction done by Performance Food in the past few years and recently completed a customized distribution center.

One of Manous' greatest thrills is driving around his hometown and seeing the buildings he's had a hand in saving or designing.

"When I see some of these businesses thriving, it tells me I've done my job," he says. "I really couldn't have written a better script for my life."

| Lessons learned |

TOUGHEST BUSINESS DECISION: Where to locate my practice.

BEST BUSINESS DECISION: Locating in Lebanon/Wilson County

GREATEST BUSINESS CHALLENGE: Spending our client's money as wisely as possible. Groups and individuals hire us to help them spend millions; sometimes tens of millions of dollars in a way which best facilitates interests. This is constantly on my mind as I suggest solutions for their projects.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY: 1. Look at the site. It will usually tell you what it wants to be. 2. Understand your clients, their needs, budgets and expectations 3. Establish a logical and effective plan. In my experience the better a plan fulfills its function, the more aesthetically correct the spaces and exteriors will be. 4. Return to Step 2 and repeat.

GREATEST FRUSTRATION: I have no business frustrations. No wait; I do get upset every time they put new drawing programs on my computer. How about greatest joy associated with being an architect? We were all taught in school that architects could make a difference. After 30 years I still believe that.

FIRST MOVE WITH A CAPITAL WINDFALL: Give some away

FIVE-YEAR VISION: Continue to contribute projects to my community. Plant another 500 trees. Design a library of tomorrow, do another theater, work on another old building, whatever interesting comes along.

MOST DAUNTING ISSUE: Having to say no to someone. The role of an architect in a smaller town is an interesting one. You have to be as willing to tackle difficult problems, even though they are small as you are to do the community centers, office buildings and retail facilities.

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