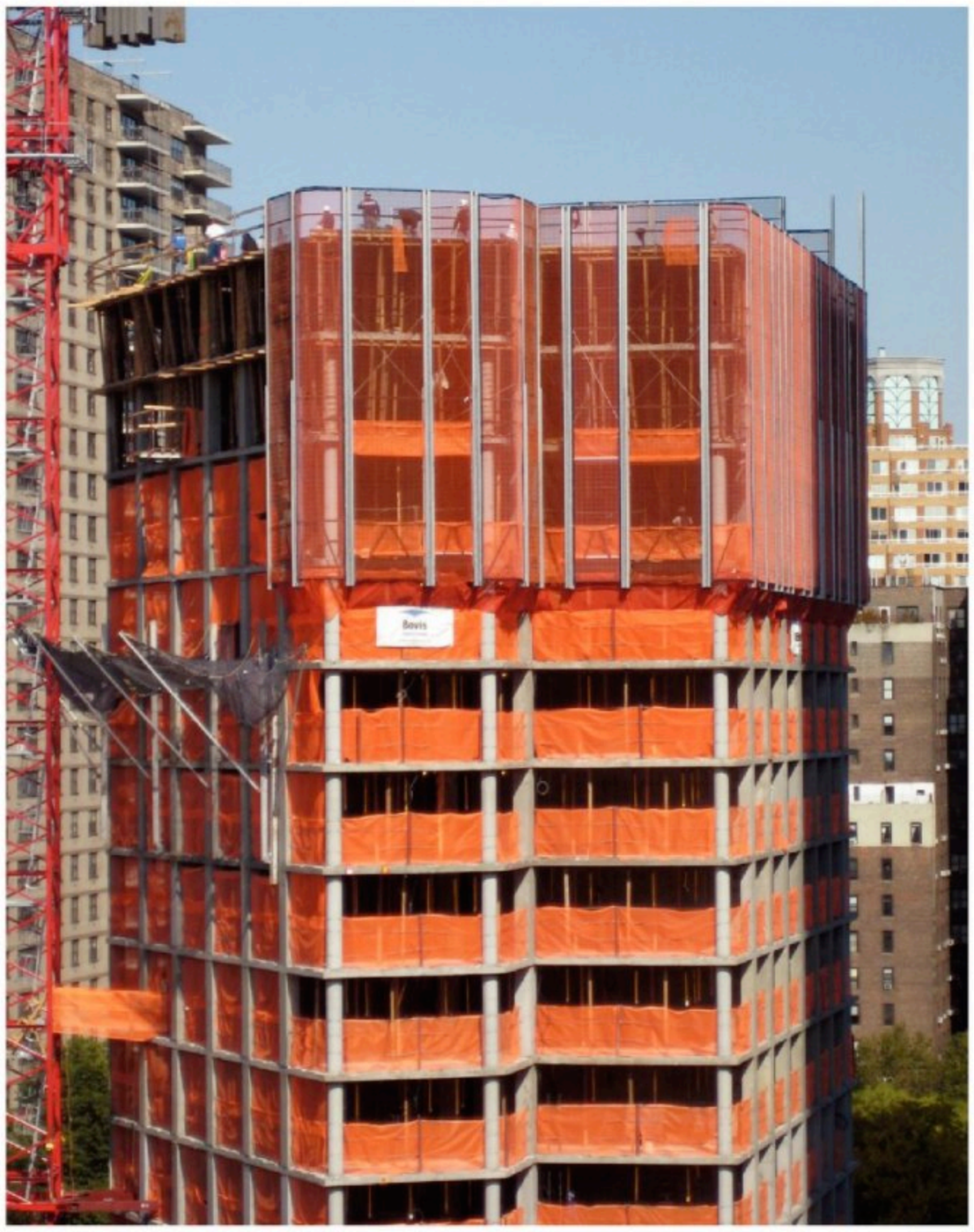


Cocooning New York

NEW YORK AND OTHER MARKETS BENEFIT FROM UBS'S PROTECTION SYSTEMS. BY STACI DAVIDSON

Universal Builders Supply (UBS) Inc. considers itself to be "involved in ensuring the safety of construction in New York City," explains President Kevin O'Callaghan. This is because, he says, the company has erected scaffolding and other protection systems for projects such as the terminal at Grand Central Station, Trump Tower, Yankee and Shea stadiums, Citifield and Trinity Church on Wall Street. In Washington, D.C., it has supplied products and systems to crews at the Washington Monument, the Air & Space Museum, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials and the 2001, 2005 and 2009 presidential inaugurations. UBS also maintains an office in London for its work throughout the United Kingdom. The company provided all the hoisting for the city's Canary Wharf project.

The firm's dedication to safety does not only involve standard scaffolding products, however. *The Guinness Book of World Records* recognized UBS for erecting "the world's largest freestanding scaffold" at the Statue of Liberty. When working at the Washington Monument, the company built the aluminum scaffolding to conform to the structure's tapered walls so the public could continue to visit it during refurbishment. O'Callaghan notes UBS also had New York City's largest-ever hoist contract at the time –more than $12 million for supplying 12 hoists to the work on the AOL/Time Warner headquarters building at Manhattan's Columbus Circle.

Founded in 1931, UBS designs, engineers, erects and dismantles hoisting, scaffolding and "virtually every" kind of protection system and specialty access product, including mas climbers and swing staging, O'Callaghan notes. In the last few years, UBS has further distinguished itself in the marketplace with its "cocoon system," he says, which is safer, faster, stronger and more affordable than traditional safety systems.

UBS explains it uses on the "highest-quality products," which support its systems in a number of ways:

- **Hoisting** – Specializing in high-speed construction hoists, the company provides engineered hoisting systems that include structural set-ack systems and aluminum common platforms. Much of its work is custom.
- **Scaffolding** – The company says its scaffolding division has been "well-recognized around the world" for more than six decades. Using innovative engineering ideas, UBS says, it is able to offer a unique and high-quality aluminum frame access system.

» President Kevin O'Callaghan of Universal Builders Supply says the company's systems are responsible for "ensuring the safety of construction in New York City."

Universal Builders Supply Inc.

www.ubs1.com

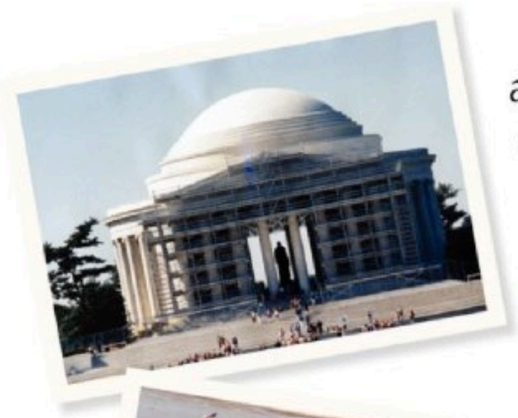
- Annual sales: $30–$50 million
- Headquarters: New Rochelle, N.Y.
- Employees: 150

"We look at our customers' views of utopia and determine how to deliver on that while balancing speed, quality and cost." –Kevin O'Callaghan, president

- **Protection systems** – This division offers products such as high-capacity sidewalk shed and vertical-perimeter protection systems, which allows UBS to provide customers with custom horizontal netting systems. The company says these products are a primary reason it can supply specialty systems for any application.

"As a specialist in high-rise access, we offer a first-class service, expert advice and excellent value from start to finish," the firm says. "The 'UBS way' encourages our business to literally achieve great heights, because the values underpinning our success are trust, open communication, flexibility, adding value and reliability. Our strategic aim of being the best determines how we do business."

Construction Today recently spoke to O'Callaghan about Universal Builder's desire to wrap large projects in cocoons and how its reputation for innovation helps it remain competitive in the market.



Construction Today: Can you explain how your product is a "cocoon system" for buildings?

Kevin O'Callaghan: Our system encloses a building as it is being constructed – it encloses the uppermost floor. This ensures personnel, tools and materials don't fall off during the work. It is an enclosed system, so if someone is working and drops a tool, it won't hit anyone below. Our system makes it much safer to do construction in congested areas and seamlessly maintains pace with the leading edge and upper floors of construction.

We started developing the system about five years ago, working closely with the New York City Building Department, Mayor's office and some of the major construction managers in the world, and now we are on the fifth or sixth generation of it. Customers love it because it maintains the pace of the project and goes up along with the building. We use Preston Platforms from Australia and brought in hoists from Holland for our system because they were the best products we could find. We want our products to be spry, agile and push the envelope in terms of safety and technology.

CT: How does UBS approach its work on projects?

KO: We start by getting the contractor to lay out their parameters of utopia – how the project will go perfectly in their mind. From there, we determine the realities of how we can deliver the safety system that best

'Our people let their passion run – they come up with something new every day.'

works for them. Should we hang the system from cables? Should we construct large spans?

This is really a fun and interesting way to maintain a business. For example, the work we did at the Grand Central Terminal, part of the contractor's job was to clean the historic, barrel-vaulted celestial ceiling on the ceiling side, as well as add ductwork, lights and a new sprinkler system above in the crawl space. If we hung our system from the ceiling we would have delayed overall construction by many, many months. So, we created a 120-foot-long, custom-arched truss that conformed to the shape of the ceiling. It had work platforms that spanned the main terminal floor, which was more than 100 feet below. We were able to move the platform as work progressed by using two custom-built trolleys that allowed the rig to travel from one end of the terminal to the other.

There were 500,000 people walking underneath the platform each day, which presented us with a unique challenge. Our solution of not imposing construction loads on the ceiling allowed work above and below to be simultaneously completed, which saved as much as a year on the schedule.

CT: What other types of work has UBS done?

KO: My grandfather started this firm in 1931, and regardless of what type of work we do, our goal is always to run safely and profitably, and to be of service to our customers. We do a lot of standard scaffold and hoisting jobs, and those afford us the ability to look for new innovations. We built something for the construction of every building in Canary Wharf in London and we created a new hoist system for the AOL Time Warner building in New York. We do a lot of stock and trade work, as well as the big, exciting projects – all of it provides us with great experiences.

CT: Do you have a process for creating innovative products?

KO: Our development is really market driven. We look at our customers' views of utopia and determine how to deliver on that while balancing speed, quality and cost. Everyone wants projects that are safer, faster, better and cheaper. Despite the human element inherent in all construction, we do our utmost to deliver a risk-free and safe solution to every construction application. This is how the cocoon was first developed – our innovative hoisting solutions were enhanced and our scaffolding inventions realized. "Safer, faster and cheaper" is successful because it allows contractors to use less labor, improve efficiency, increase the speed of the project and deliver the end product safely and early.

High-Visibility Protection

Much of Universal Builders Supply's work is for "standard" scaffolding and hoisting jobs, but it also has provided systems for the rehabilitation of landmarks such as the:

- Statue of Liberty
- Lincoln Memorial
- Washington Monument
- Thomas Jefferson Memorial
- Air & Space Museum
- New York's Grand Central Terminal
- Yankee and Shea Stadiums
- Trinity Church on Wall Street
- Trump Tower
- U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

CT: Have you done anything recently to enhance UBS's operations?

KO: We try to run a lean operation, but we spend more money on overhead in engineering than our competitors do. We also use third-party engineering teams to oversee our work and brainstorm with us when we are trying to develop something new. That really makes us more competitive.

CT: Has the cost or limited availability of materials impacted your operation at all?

KO: We use mostly aluminum and we have a good supply of that right now. We have the largest inventory of aluminum in the world for access projects. Aluminum is what we prefer because it doesn't rust and is non-corrosive, which helps us give projects the access solution they require. Also, aluminum is the one-third the weight and 10 times the strength of steel in some of our applications, and that is hard to beat.

CT: What are the company's plans for growth?

KO: We plan to continue to serve the markets we serve and go where the needs exist. We will go wherever our customers need us. We are very agile and spry, and we can export our expertise and equipment as necessary.

CT: What are you most proud of about UBS?

KO: We've maintained our identity for 78-plus years and this company has always remained family owned and operated. I am the third generation in my family to run it.

I'm also proud of our willingness to invest in innovation and the components we need to make our inventions reality. We've remained innovative because of our people, and because of our innovation, we attract unique people to work with us. Our people invent things and let their passion run – they come up with something new every day. That is one of the primary reasons we are a success. ◆