

# Cooper Construction: Taking an all-encompassing approach to quality

With more than a century of reputable work on its resume, this Ontario firm is a reliable project partner from start to finish

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Bill Cooper Sr acknowledges he wasn't especially well-prepared to take over the family business at the time he did back in 1978. Nevertheless, in his 30 years as President, Cooper has overseen Cooper Construction's transition from a general contractor to an all-encompassing business engaging in land acquisition and development, Design/Build construction and facilities management.

Cooper Construction was established in 1905 and has been in continuous operation since. Bill

Cooper joined the business fresh out of university and spent several years in the field as an engineer before moving into the office, first as an estimator and later as General Manager. His quick elevation to President was a matter of necessity.

"I was a little bit young and not particularly well-groomed for the position but my dad became very ill and was hospitalized for over a year. I found out one morning that I was it [President]. Thankfully, we had a very good management team that stood behind me. You learn things



COOPER CONSTRUCTION'S SERVICES INCLUDE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT & DESIGN/BUILD

pretty quickly in a situation like that," says Cooper, a graduate of the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, NB.

Cooper represents the third generation of his family to guide the company. As its website states: "Cooper Construction is a leading Canadian best-practices company in commercial real estate development and leasing, Design/Build construction, construction management and property management [with] a 100-year history of innovative excellence."

"In the early days, we were

purely a general contractor and the majority of the business involved the construction of libraries, university buildings, schools and some light industrial and commercial," Cooper recalls. The company's shift to its current position started modestly enough.

"In the late '70s we were receiving some requests from clients to provide a broader range of services which involved relocating facilities and building new facilities which they would like to lease, but not own. That moved us into the area of real



estate development by acquiring land positions and locating long-standing customers. We then tended to concentrate more on the land development and Design/Build sectors and, by 1990 or '91, did very little in the general contracting field," he says.

Today, Cooper Construction finds itself with a steady stream of work throughout southern Ontario and annual revenues in excess of CAN\$125 million. The company's focus is largely on warehouses and logistics and distribution facilities as well as the suburban office market.

"We build both for third parties and our own account. We acquire land positions, undertake the planning, the permitting and approvals through engineering and servicing requirements. We will undertake the servicing of the property and develop a subdivision, like a business park. Our lands are then marketed for Design/Build sale or lease. We don't like to sell the land without having a building on it. The key to attracting clients and being able to



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do business is owning the land. The building is the added value we bring to the equation,” Cooper points out.

Flexibility and institutional knowledge have played key roles in the company’s longevity. “I think it’s helped us a great deal that we’re not a huge organization. With our size, we’re very flexible and we’re opportunistic. We’re not a national company, so knowledge of local markets is very important in how we do business,” Cooper says.

### CHOOSING DESIGN/BUILD

Cooper estimates that the company’s Design/Build operations

generate the majority of revenue. Land acquisition and development involves greater risks and Cooper Construction generally seeks financial partners to reduce that risk and allow the company to be a bit more creative with property development.

Cooper says that in the approximately 25 years the company has practiced Design/Build it has proven to be the most cost-effective and efficient method of operation. The company’s website cites proven reasons for choosing Design/Build: End-to-end responsibility, accountability and expertise; architectural and engineering provided at the

COOPER CONSTRUCTION IS A PROVEN DESIGN/BUILD CONTRACTOR WITH A STELLAR REPUTATION



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lowest costs; demonstrated quality and value; and faster delivery than any other construction method.

"We've been in land development and Design/Build for the last 25 years and we think those markets will continue to be quite strong. We have terrific people who are very knowledgeable about what they do," Cooper says.

The company relies on a deep roster of sub-contractors to perform roughly 90 percent of its work. "That's one of the elements of Design/Build I'm really attracted to. You can work with the same subs year after year. You know

they're reliable, you know their performance standards and you know the quality of their workmanship. A lot of them have been in Design/Build for years in their own fields. They understand what we're looking for, even at the conceptual stage," Cooper says.

## PROJECTS AND PARTNERS

In a somewhat unique arrangement, Cooper Construction has been involved in recent years with AMB Property Corporation of San Francisco. "They are an industrial Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) and we partnered with them for

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the first time a few years ago on some industrial property we were developing in Milton. They bought some of our available lands and we carried out the design and construction of the facility. Our most recent project was a 1.1-million square foot distribution center just north of Toronto. It's a little bit of an unusual partnership, but we've developed a very strong relationship with them. We understand what they need and they know how we operate," Cooper notes.

Cooper says a number of US companies entered the Toronto market six or seven years ago and

developed a considerable amount of industrial space. That trend has slowed somewhat but Toronto and surrounding communities such as Mississauga, Brampton and East Toronto make up the third largest industrial market in North America.

Long-term relationships are crucial to industry success. Cooper says the company has recently completed two 155,000-square foot Class A suburban office buildings for one private investor. "For this investor, we've built about 10 buildings over the last eight years," Cooper says.

Since land prices in the Greater Toronto area have grown prohibi-

#### AUTOMODULAR CORPORATION



tive, Cooper explains the company is looking more to the suburban west market. "Looking ahead, being able to identify land opportunities that come with a reasonable cost will be a key to success. For that reason, we've taken positions in Milton and Guelph (a total of 160 acres)," he says.

Cooper says the growing acceptance of green building and LEED accreditation has changed the industry for the better. He estimates "25 to 30 percent" of the company's business today involves green projects "as compared to virtually nothing five years ago." The com-

pany involves itself in green building from the design phase through buildout and facility management.

"Some of the very large landlords in the States and Canada made a decision they wanted to build more green buildings. That led to standards that tenants have now come to expect. Buildings are now built to a higher level under LEED and each certification level as you go up the ladder over the long term should make the building more environmentally friendly and friendly for the tenants. It requires a lot of education, study and paperwork on our part,

COOPER CONSTRUCTION IS ENGAGING IN MORE DEVELOPMENT OF LOGISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION FACILITIES



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“We don’t like to sell the land without having a building on it. The key to attracting clients and being able to do business is owning the land”

- **BILL COOPER, PRESIDENT**

but it’s certainly worth it,” he says.

## CHALLENGES AND PERSONNEL

Cooper explains that while Ontario housed the majority of Canada’s manufacturing sector for years, there has been a definite shift west to the oil and natural gas operations of Alberta.

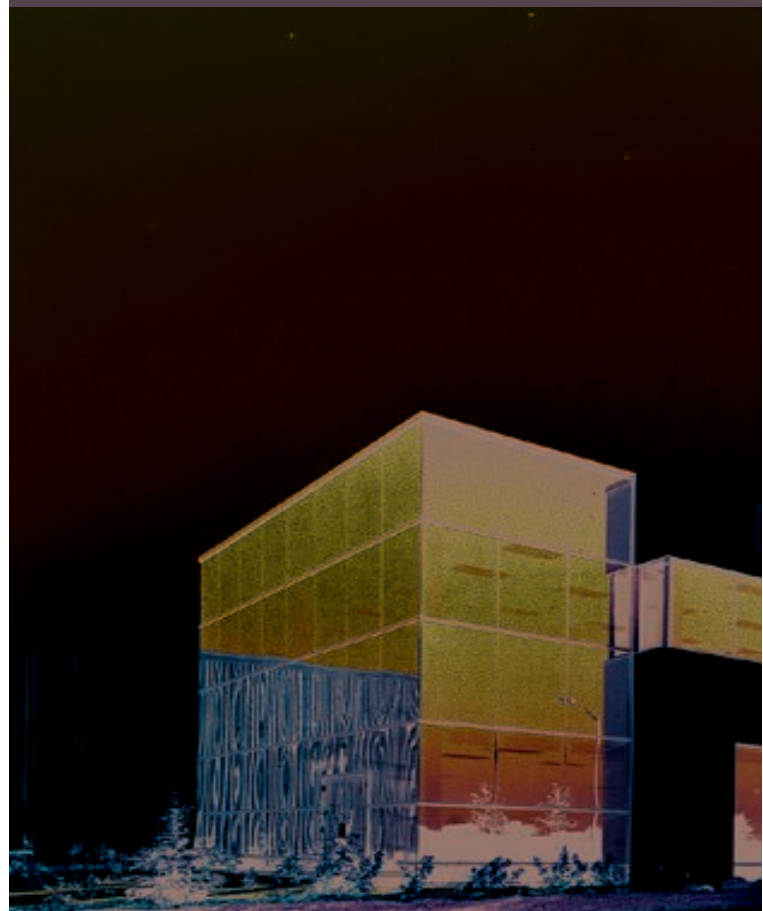
That change in dynamics has led to the company’s shift to development of logistics and distribution facilities while the high cost of commuting has given birth to the burgeoning suburban office market. “People have to be able to get to work, so you have

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COOPER CONSTRUCTION IS ENGAGING IN MORE DEVELOPMENT



to construct the facilities where the people are," Cooper says.

The company utilizes web-based estimating and scheduling programs and Project Managers have direct links to all job sites. Cooper Construction has approximately 45 full-time employees at its Oakville, ON office and Hamilton, ON yard.

The company recruits from area community colleges and universities and trains those recruits in project management systems. Additionally, Cooper says "there are always a number of young men in the field in apprenticeships, principally in

carpentry because we still do some of our own form work. They gain experience in the field, then we bring them in and train them as project managers. We've been quite satisfied with that arrangement."

All programs are designed to keep Cooper ahead of the competition and at the top of its field.

"On every project we undertake, Cooper Construction will strive to meet or exceed our client's expectations with regard to budget, schedule, quality, communication, safety, and environmental responsibilities," Cooper concludes ■

#### DEVELOPMENT OF LOGISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION FACILITIES



## COMPANY AT A GLANCE

### COMPANY NAME

Cooper Construction

### ESTABLISHED:

1905

### EMPLOYEES:

45

### REVENUE:

CAN\$125 million +

[www.coopercon.com](http://www.coopercon.com)

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