

Why
Thalden·Boyd·Emery
is
No. 1

By Amanda Huggett

When you think of Native American casino architects, who comes to mind? If it's not Thalden • Boyd • Emery Architects, get ready to meet the firm that truly is the company you need to know.

Four words that stand out to describe this team are dedicated, caring, experienced and fun. Dedicated because they're never really "off"—they're always working in their client's best interest, no matter the time of day or state of the economy. Caring because they're real people. Their doors are open, and even the top partners are very accessible. Experienced because all you have to do is look at the names of the partners to realize what they all bring to the table. Chief Boyd in Indian country and Brett Ewing on the Las Vegas Strip—it doesn't get much better than that. And fun because they're always smiling, always laughing, having fun while doing the work. It's hard not to like these guys.

And they are doing things right. All you have to do is ask their clients. The proof is in their recent award—No. 1 in client responsiveness from the *Professional Services Management Journal*. The results are from a nationwide client satisfaction survey that ranked more than 77,000 eligible architecture and engineering firms. With their experience in projects in Indian country and with commercial casinos, a process and philosophy built just for clients, and plans for the future, this architectural and design firm is definitely poised to keep its No. 1 spot. This is the story behind it all.

The Story and the Team

Thalden • Boyd • Emery Architects, as we know it today, actually started with the consolidation of two firms. Thalden – Emery was founded in 1971 by Barry Thalden, and the Boyd Group was run by Cherokee architect Chief Boyd. When they came together, the partnership reflected Thalden and Rich Emery's extensive experience in the design of casinos and hotels with Boyd's knowledge and experience with Native American tribes. And this year, the firm is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Emery came to the firm right out of college. Starting with an internship, he observed the firm's work getting bigger and better each year and, "I just couldn't see myself anywhere else," he commented. "We felt that the combination of the two companies would really make a powerful hospitality and gaming design firm, which it did."

Then in 1999, Linda Roe joined the firm. She had known Thalden for decades prior, and it was then that he convinced her to leave her job at the time and become a part of his team. "Our business philosophies agreed, and we saw a real need where we could help the Indian community and the tribes," Roe explained. "It was just a perfect

opportunity for both of us to work together in partnership within the Indian gaming sector of the business. It's been great ever since."

Brett Ewing is the most recent addition. Working for Marnell Corrao Associates for almost 22 years, he came to Thalden • Boyd • Emery two years ago. When Thalden was looking for someone to step into a new role in the Las Vegas office, Ewing was the perfect fit. "A strong Vegas person like Brett really enhances the ability to continue doing work on the Strip and to have a more significant presence in Vegas," Emery shared. "He spent his entire career building projects up and down the Strip."

Originally the firm specialized in hotel design, Thalden explained. At the beginning of the 1980s, that expanded to significant work on the Las Vegas Strip, including expansions Caesars Palace, Desert Inn, the Tropicana and the Sands Casino Resort. Thalden • Boyd • Emery was the first architectural firm designing riverboat casinos in Iowa, Mississippi and Missouri.

"When Indian gaming began to emerge in the mid-'90s, the firm focused its expertise in this area," Thalden said. "Our prophecy that Indian gaming would be a huge market segment has been proven true as Indian gaming has become a \$26 billion industry, easily outperforming Las Vegas and almost equaling all commercial gaming in the United States."

Today, the company has offices in Las Vegas, St. Louis and Tulsa. The growth of the firm has followed the growth of the casino industry, and continues to be at the forefront of casino design. Their range of services includes architecture, master planning, engineering and interior design. While they are the premier firm for Indian gaming projects, they serve all segments of the casino industry.

Work in Indian Country

The man spearheading Thalden • Boyd • Emery's work in Indian country is Chief Boyd, who himself is Cherokee. As someone with a close connection to his own heritage, he shares that he's always been fascinated and interested in helping tribes.

Boyd's passion for Indian country is quickly evident when you speak with him. He tells a story about how a man named W.W. Keeler was appointed to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to represent the Cherokees. "My connections and my thesis at the University of Colorado was a memorial to the tribe, and I worked through Keeler," he explained. "Back in 1963, they formed the Cherokee National Historical Society, and that's how I began working with Indians and getting involved. That year I was named the official architect of the Cherokee National Historical Society—even though I didn't have my architectural license yet because I graduated from college in '64."

Boyd says one thing that really sets the firm apart is that it understands very well how to work with tribes. They also make sure that the tribes they work with are set up with the proper financial backing.

"Typically, if we run across a tribe that's having finance difficulties, we'll introduce them to people who are willing to invest and help the tribe get it done," he said. "Typically, if you design and build to a feasibility study, there are people out there who will invest in tribes."

"Most Native American tribes have been struggling financially, and for those that have gaming facilities, it's made a huge difference in what the tribe is capable of doing," he said. "It's been

Casino Morongo's design has a "wow" factor that can be seen from miles away.

really exciting for Indian country to have the income from gaming, because most of the income the tribes had prior to gaming came from the federal government."

Boyd's philosophy is that each facility should be an expression of that tribe. "I believe very strongly that buildings have a spirit—it's not a living spirit like a human has, but there's a spirit or an expression that comes about from a building," he said. "I want that spirit or that flavor, to represent the tribe that we're working for. We work hard at trying to achieve that."

Indian gaming has just exploded, he mentioned. "I'm excited for that for several reasons. Indian gaming is a great market to be in. When the economy struggles, there will still be people gaming. Profits may drop a little bit, but the bottom line is people will still be gaming. Gaming is entertainment. It's kind of an escape. That's the value for the company."

Partnering with Clients

Roe works closely with Boyd, and affirms that the firm, above all others, is totally committed to Indian country. As VP of business development and client relations, Roe says her duties are twofold. First, she identifies clients and potential clients and finds the opportunities with them. Second, once the client and project is in place, she becomes an advocate, maintaining relationships and keeping the lines of communication open.

Part of that process is partnering. "There is the client, the architect and the contractor, and it's truly a team. It's a triangle," she said. Once a project begins, they bring in a professional facilitator to have meetings with the whole team for a full day, offsite. "We provide this service to our clients because we believe it is so important to keep the team moving forward in a positive direction, identifying any possible potential problems that might come up," she said. "By having an outside professional facilitator monitoring this process throughout the project, it's an unbiased objective approach."

Accessibility is a key word for Roe during a project. "There's no such thing as 8 to 5, she said. "If there's a situation that needs to be taken care of, I'm going to make sure that I'm reachable and accessible so that I can direct the client to the appropriate person that's going to be able to take care of it right away. This is the most important thing in [the client's] life, and we're going to be there available to them. It's kind of like the doctor being on call 24/7—that's what we do."

Project Philosophy

Just as much care goes in to Thalden • Boyd • Emery's design philosophy, which simply states that each project is unique and to treat it as such. "We take really the uniqueness of the site, the owners, the management and the gaming customer, and we make that uniqueness into a great design," Emery commented. "One way to put it would be we deliver 'wow' on time and on budget."

When it comes to planning for a new project, Ewing said it's all about questions. "We take a look at the team on the other side—the owner, the management—and we ask a lot of questions, as they will of us," he said. "We really like to understand who's on the other side and what their strengths are. We try to get as much information out of the team before we start drawing."



The Hard Rock Tulsa is Oklahoma's largest casino property.

Nick Schoenfeldt, Thalden • Boyd • Emery's senior project manager, agrees. "Being able to satisfy the individual client is something that's extremely exciting," he said. "As company, we like to listen to what the owner and the operator wants out of the property. We do a lot of taking notes; we do a lot of asking questions. We do not have a style that we want to force someone into. We want them to tell us how they want their property to stand uniquely above the rest."

On a large project, the best way to approach it is to break it down to its basic elements, Ewing explained. By breaking it down in pieces, it can be very simple. It's all about organization, planning and

communication. "Communication is key, from owner to architect to builder," he said.

Ewing also says you must understand the history and heritage if it's a Native American project versus a commercial project where you're working with a corporation. "When it's a Native American project, you want to respect their history and their culture. We find out real early how much of their cultural heritage they want to display in the end project."

Another important factor to projects the firm does is always looking for a way to make it environmentally friendly. Emery himself is a LEED Green Associate, which is an accredited licensed qualification. "Green and environmentally friendly is a really strong trend in the industry of architecture and design, and it really is a consideration on every project, even if the client doesn't ask for it," he said. "Architects are given the task to save the environment, use less energy, use renewable resources. Green really is the way of the future."

Trends and Technology

Having been in the industry so many years, the firm has seen trends come and go. Some stick; some don't. One trend Thalden references is the creation of larger projects. Even if some start small, ongoing expansions provide a valuable opportunity for future growth and revenue. "Customers have come to expect that the casino is a great place to spend an hour or a week," he said. "We strive to make these properties a fun place, where customers always know that they can come in and have a good time."

One of the firm's biggest challenges in this technological age is staying on the forefront of technology itself. Boyd explained: "We've led our profession in utilizing Building Information Modeling (BIM). In other words, you don't just do a drawing; you build a model in the computer of the design and the project. When you build a model, you have to make decisions earlier. That requires a whole new attitude and approach."

To ensure they stay on top, the firm has a BIM manager whose entire task is to understand what technological advances are out there. He constantly monitors new software and hardware and incorporates them into the firm. "The world changes technologically at light speed, and our task is to stay ahead of the rest of the world," Emery stated. "We pride ourselves on being very high-tech in the use of BIM and modern software and how it applies to architecture and construction."

Emery says another trend he's witnessed is casinos becoming more efficient. "Our emphasis has moved back to the money machine, which is the gaming floor, and less on the amenities," he said. "The days of the billion-dollar casinos are at least on pause. With the technology that's coming out of the computer world, I think there's going to be a lot of changes in how those gaming experiences are achieved."

Project Portfolio

Thalden • Boyd • Emery has been involved in many major casino projects, but the one everyone at the firm quotes as a favorite is Buffalo Thunder Resort in New Mexico. "The Buffalo Thunder resort and casino is one of one of the most spectacular resorts in the United States and the largest resort in the state of New Mexico," Thalden commented. "Its unique rambling Pueblo character design is totally consistent with its environment and the character of the Santa Fe area. It was thrilling to work closely with the tribal chairman George Rivera who, being a famous artist in his own right, participated in all of our design meetings."

For Emery, the two most significant projects have been Buffalo Thunder and Paragon Casino Resort in Louisiana. Both of those projects were listed by *Indian Gaming* magazine as two of the 10 Sexiest Casinos in Indian Country, he said. "Those were memorable,

because in both cases there was a client that appreciated big ideas and gave us the freedom to make them happen."

Another notable project is the Hard Rock Tulsa for the Cherokee tribe in Oklahoma. It is the largest casino project in the state of Oklahoma, and the firm had been expanding the property for the past 10 years. Thalden shared that when he attended a Hall & Oates concert there, Daryl Hall himself specifically applauded their spectacular theater design.

Boyd says he most enjoys when a tribe wants to show off their heritage in the property, such as at the Hard Rock Tulsa. "Catoosa is a takeoff on the art deco history of Tulsa and the Cherokee tribe," he explained. When you start looking at the art deco-style details, you realize they're all Cherokee design."

Thalden also references the firm's work providing the themeing drawings for The Venetian in Las Vegas as something they're very proud of. "It was the last of the wave of themed resorts in Las Vegas, and probably the best," he said. "All the work was done on an exciting, wild, fast-track basis."

There's also Casino Morongo, "which towers above the relatively flat inland California landscape. It is the tallest building in inland California and can be seen for over 5 miles along the approaching highways," Thalden said.

In the Works

Among the seven projects Thalden • Boyd • Emery anticipates opening this year, one that is particularly exciting is an indoor water park hotel for the Saginaw Chippewa tribe in Michigan. This project is near the Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort, but is non-gaming itself. Schoenfeldt describes it as very family-oriented, whimsical and fun, yet with certain elements of their heritage that have to be preserved and presented in their purest form.

On the other side of the country, Ewing is leading the expansion of the Wildhorse Resort & Casino for the Umatilla tribe in Oregon. That project, under construction now and slated to open later this year, is a 200-room, 10-story hotel expansion with a 2,700-square foot casino and cinema complex. "It's been memorable to me because it's allowed me, working in this firm, to get back to the roots of what architecture is about," Ewing shared. "It's been real hands-on. I work with all the different disciplines of the project, and am really enjoying the process."

Schoenfeldt is also working on a high-end hotel and event center expansion at the FireKeepers Casino in Michigan. This project is more about gaming and less family-oriented, he said. Referring to his work on this and the water park, he said: "That's what I love about this



Buffalo Thunder Resort and Casino honors the Pueblo heritage, while creating a unique and spectacular resort.



Wildhorse Resort & Casino



Soaring Eagle Waterpark

job. No two projects are alike. It's very personal to me when I get involved with a client. What we're doing is ... helping these tribes become financially secure for generations to come."

Award-Winning Firm

Cheryl Nervez, Thalden • Boyd • Emery's marketing and media coordinator, says the daily work at the firm is truly exciting. "The work flow is fast-paced, but meticulous," she commented. You could compare it to a heart surgeon: specialized, fast-paced and meticulous attention to detail."

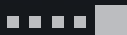
It is this attention to detail, especially when it comes to their clients, that won them the award for client responsiveness. But rather than being surprised at the honor, it more so affirmed for them all that they're doing things right. "It is recognition of what we've always known," Schoenfeldt commented. "The award is just a validation of how Barry, Rich and Chief have empowered us to make our clients happy as we move forward."

"Everybody likes to know that they're appreciated by the client," Emery said. "To get responsiveness in a very tough fast-moving world like casinos is significant. We work really hard for our clients, and it's nice to hear back from them giving us such high marks. You can't achieve something like that without 100 percent commitment by all staff members."

When Roe heard about the recent award, she used it as an opportunity to interview each key person in the management team. The goal was to digest the meaning of it more and identify the key issues that they're doing right to continue with this process. "Once we have them truly identified, we can make our process better for the next client," she said. "It really did confirm and validate for me that we are not just talking about client responsiveness; we're actually doing it."

The Future

Looking ahead, Thalden • Boyd • Emery has a very bright future. Through continued refinement of their craft, investment in their people and commitment to clients, they will continue working, like their mission statement says, to improve the lives of Native Americans through the development of outstanding and successful casino and resort development.



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Partner



Chief Boyd
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Rich Emery
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Brett Ewing
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