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REAL ESTATE PROFILE

IBA, waterproofing specialists, moving upward

By [Kevin McQuaid](#)

SARASOTA -- With four offices in Florida and Las Vegas, including one in Sarasota, IBA Consultants is considered one of the most respected specialty engineering firms in the country.

Capping its work waterproofing dozens of skyscrapers, IBA's local office has been selected to work on the \$220 million Trump Tower Tampa, a 52-story condo project slated to begin construction later this year.

At Trump Tower, IBA will work with designer Smith Barnes Santiesteban Architecture to review construction documents, provide site inspections and test the 190-unit tower's roofing and glass to prevent leaks.

For IBA president and owner Mark Baker, the Trump project could be somewhat of a milestone, a long way from the days 13 years ago when he ferried himself to job sites in an old van with little more than a laptop computer for assistance.

"It's remarkable what's happened with the firm since 1992," said Baker, 43, a mechanical engineer who became interested in investigating building collapses and forensics while in high school.

Baker's own journey has been just as extraordinary. After five years of "basically seeing how not to do things" with a New York firm, a chance meeting at a pizza place with engineer Israel Berger led Baker to London.

There, he represented Berger's firm on Olympia & York Development's Canary Wharf project, at the time the largest construction job in the world. Canary Wharf led Baker to Malaysia, where he planned to be a consultant on Petronas Towers, a 1,483-foot monster that was until 2004 the tallest building on the planet.

Faced with a gap in the developments, Baker set up a Berger office in Miami, a stopgap measure until work in Kuala Lumpur was set to start.

Then the storm came ashore.

"Hurricane Andrew hit and everything changed," Baker said.

In the aftermath of the storm, Florida adopted a series of stringent building codes and suddenly, waterproofing was hot.

In 1995, Baker and Berger formed IBA to handle all the Florida work, along with jobs in

Mexico and the Bahamas.

Four years later, Baker was drawn to Sarasota and opened the second IBA office.

For a year afterward, the phone didn't ring -- at all, and Baker even began questioning his instincts.

But in time, construction concern W.G. Mills became a client, as did developer EcoGroup, which was building a Longboat Key condo project.

Before long, one local project led to another, for Beau Ciel and Orchid Beach Club developer U.S. Assets Group; Plaza at Five Points owner Ersa Grae Corp.; and Casto Lifestyle Properties' Whole Foods Market Centre.

"Mark has done an excellent job of recruiting top-notch people, some of whom have been with him for years," said Jay Tallman, a U.S. Assets principal. "I know I can count on them to help oversee a project and make sure we don't have any water-related problems."

While Baker was solving problems for clients, he was also grappling with a few of his own, including ownership issues with Berger.

In May of last year, Baker successfully bought the last of Berger's stake, which allowed him to focus on promoting worthy associates and fulfilling his overriding goal for IBA. "Essentially, we'd like to grow the company nationally," Baker said.

One major step in that direction happened in March, when IBA opened an office in Las Vegas. Unlike IBA's experience in Sarasota, the firm had 50 active projects within six weeks of opening.

Baker hopes to open an office in the Florida Panhandle this year, and perhaps in Seattle in 2007.

In all, he'd like the firm, which posts \$6.5 million in annual revenue -- to grow at a 25-percent clip for the next five years.

Along the way, Baker intends to sharpen IBA's focus, to more consulting, testing and inspections. But he's decided IBA is through with forensic work.

"We can prevent problems by getting hired at the start of a project, which I'd rather do than have to deal with a crisis later," he said.

Meanwhile, today the Sarasota office -- set to move this year to the Lena Commercial Condominiums, in Bradenton -- has eight employees.

In all, IBA has 49 employees, four dozen more than when Baker started with his rusty van and equally rusty computer. He's clearly proud of the progress.
