

## Reconstruction plan

As development dries up, IBA focuses on diagnosing defects

South Florida Business Journal - by [Darcie Lunsford](#)

Mark Baker started his engineering career to investigate why building design, construction and materials fail.

But, he spent much of his career advising owners and developers on how to make sure they don't.

Now, the fallout from the national building boom has Baker sharpening his investigation skills. As demand for engineering and design consultants wanes for new construction, it's mounting for experts to investigate existing construction failures.



Mark Freerks  
IBA Consultants President Mark Baker with plans for the glass of Jade Ocean in Sunny Isles Beach.  
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Baker's 12-year-old [IBA Consultants](#) is now focusing on forensic engineering for growth.

"During a boom, everyone is time-stressed," he said, adding that pressure to get it done fast – even in the face of labor and material shortages – breeds the potential for construction problems. "When you are doing a forensic investigation, you really want to start with seeing if the design has failed. Then, you see if they put the materials in right or if it was material failure."

Boca Raton-based IBA specializes in window, cladding, waterproofing and roofing design, installation and failures. The 80-person firm has acted as a new construction consultant on some of South Florida's highest-profile projects, including the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and Miami International Airport's Concourse J.

While the new development pipeline is drying up, Baker said IBA is now being hired to diagnose and solve defects in the boom-era towers just now opening their doors.

IBA has created a diagnostic and forensics division to capture this new business.

"We used to make everyone do a mix [new design and failure diagnostics]," Baker said of the firm's long-standing strategy.

Much of the time, he said, post-construction problems can be traced back to a lack of training or supervision.

Steve Kessler, a project manager with Aventura-based [Turnberry Associates](#), has hired IBA to monitor waterproofing and window installation at more than a dozen new construction projects and one leak investigation at an existing building.

"If there are leaks, they can easily become a monumental problem," Kessler said. "When you have a company like IBA looking out for you, it gives you a sense of comfort."

### Following clients to new markets

IBA has steadily grown its business by expanding into new markets as its existing client base did. Turnberry went to Las Vegas – and IBA followed.

The firm also has offices in Tampa, Miami, Seattle, New York and San Francisco. Last year, it generated \$10.8 million in billings.

But, managing – and even slowing – growth in a torrent of opportunity has been a challenge.

At the dawn of the millennium, real estate was booming and the firm had designs on opening offices in China, Latin America, London and other bustling places.

Instead of jumping, the firm paused to plan.

In 2004, IBA hired its own professional consultant to help it draft a strategic plan. At first, the consultant's advice of conservative growth in favor of focus seemed extreme, Baker recalled.

“The big event in the company was the strategic plan. It just kind of focused what we were doing,” he said. “It forced me to analyze how the company was structured.”

Baker, who founded the firm as a one-man operation in 1993, began delegating oversight of specific functions of the company, including operations and marketing, to his top VPs.

The strategic plan also slowed IBA’s growth goal from 25 percent to 15 percent a year, and reeled in new office openings to one a year for five years.

“It was a great challenge,” said Ceasar Soto, the senior VP who was put in charge of technical operations. Soto also oversees IBA’s South Florida operations.

But, the slowing economy presented a new challenge. Soto and Baker said they weighed – then rejected – straying from the growth plan by moving forward with the opening of a San Francisco office this year, despite the real estate downturn.

“The current challenge is not to panic and abandon the plan,” Baker said. “Right now, what we are struggling with is ‘let’s stick to the plan.’”

#### **THE CHALLENGES:**

- Slowing growth by turning down opportunity.
- Finding qualified staff to operate satellite offices.
- Maintain technological advantages.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED:**

- Focus energy on doing core mission well, instead of being scattered.
- Don’t micro-manage. Find the right staff and let them do their job.
- Delegate executive functions to senior staff.

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