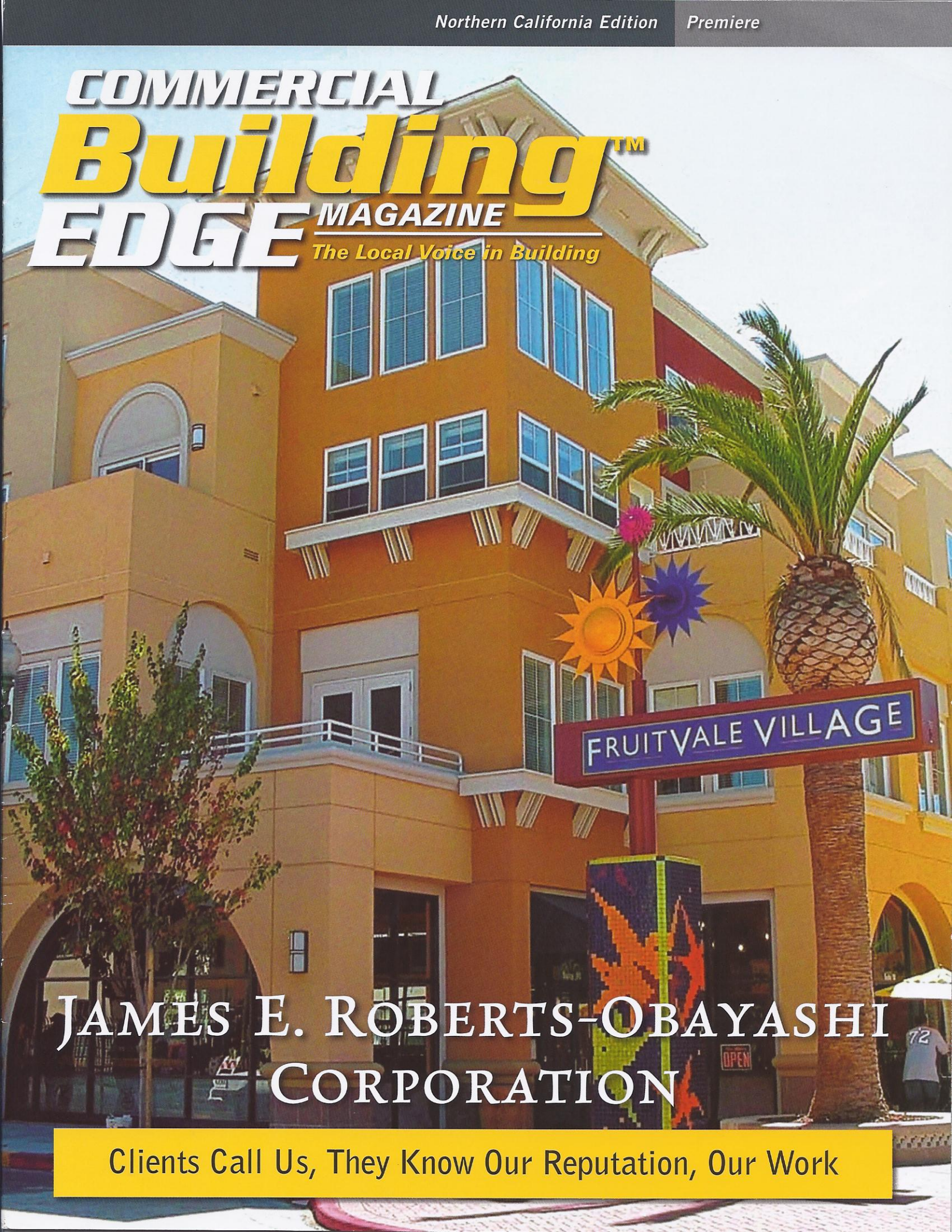


COMMERCIAL **Building**TM EDGE MAGAZINE

The Local Voice in Building



JAMES E. ROBERTS-OBAYASHI
CORPORATION

Clients Call Us, They Know Our Reputation, Our Work



JAMES E. ROBERTS-OBAYASHI CORPORATION

Clients Call Us, They Know Our Reputation, Our Work

By Malcolm Donahoo



With the same painstaking attention to detail that went into the construction of Fruitvale Transit Village and scores of other showcase projects in and around the Bay Area, Larry R. Smith has built a reputation as a general contractor who comes through for clients, on schedule and on budget.

Smith, who has been president of James E. Roberts-Obayashi Corp. since 1983, talks with obvious pride about the Fruitvale project, citing it as a prime example of the mixed-use development that has become his company's specialty.

"It was a challenging, complex job,"

he said during an interview at the Roberts-Obayashi corporate offices at 20 Oak Court in Danville. "We took a great deal of satisfaction in how it turned out."

Completed in March 2004, Fruitvale Transit Village in East Oakland features several components, including 48 housing units. Retail space, a library, executive offices, a child-care facility, a medical clinic and a pair of parking garages are part of the package, which surrounds a Bay Area Rapid Transit station. "It is a community within a community," said Smith, whose company was asked to step in when the project seemed about to bog down.

The project's origins dated back to 1991, when BART first announced plans to erect a parking facility next to its Fruitvale station. The community was not receptive to the idea, and the news media paid close attention during the years of deliberations and broad-based community planning that followed. Likewise, the construction process was closely watched and widely reported.

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater was on hand for the formal launch of the Fruitvale project in July 1999. "Transportation planning should be about more than concrete and steel," he said. "It should be about building communities, and

(Above) Village at Petrini Place, San Francisco. Photo by Jim Pyle.



James E. Roberts-Obayashi Corporation Projects

International Hotel Senior Housing San Francisco, CA Eighth & Natoma Affordable Housing San Francisco, CA

DeAnza Gardens Affordable Housing Bay Point, CA Bernal Gateway Affordable Housing San Francisco, CA

Mandela Gateway Affordable Housing Oakland, CA North Richmond Senior Housing Richmond, CA

Union City Independent Living Union City, CA The Madonna Residence San Francisco, CA

Dalt Hotel Rehabilitation San Francisco, CA Heritage Homes Affordable Housing San Francisco, CA

Fremont Oak Gardens Senior Housing Fremont, CA Acorn Housing Rehabilitation Phases I, II & III Oakland, CA

Chestnut Court Affordable Housing Oakland, CA Coventry Park Retirement Residence San Francisco, CA

Linden Court Affordable Housing Oakland, CA Old Town Square Townhomes Oakland, CA

San Francisco Care Center San Francisco, CA Las Bougainvilleas Senior Housing Oakland, CA

San Leandro Senior Housing San Leandro, CA Alcantara Court Affordable Senior Housing San Francisco, CA

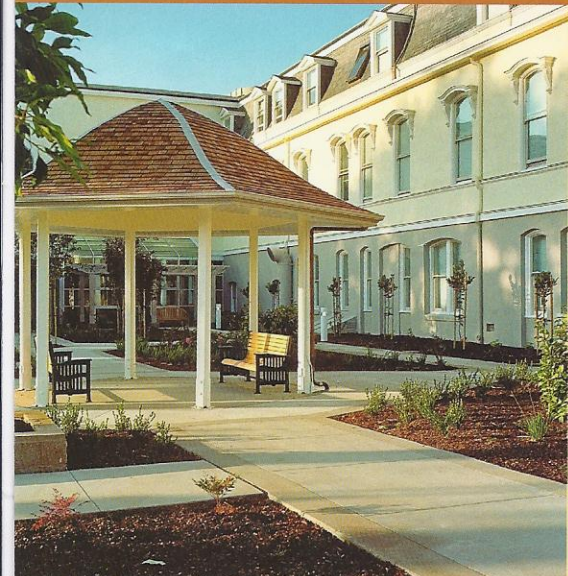
Main & Arnold Affordable Housing Half Moon Bay, CA Notre Dame Plaza Senior Housing Rehabilitation San Francisco, CA

AlmaVia of San Francisco Assisted Living San Francisco, CA Marin City USA Townhomes Marin City, CA

Kokoro Assisted Living & Temple Rehabilitation San Francisco, CA Tenderloin Family Housing Apartments San Francisco, CA

West Rivertown Affordable Housing Antioch, CA Hotel Oakland Senior Housing Rehabilitation Oakland, CA 94612

John W. King Senior Community San Francisco, CA



(Top) Market Heights, San Francisco. Photo by Victor Loverro.

(Middle) Loyola Village, San Francisco. Photo by James Orellana.

(Bottom) Notre Dame Garden, San Francisco. Photo by Ted Betz.

(Below) Fruitvale Village, Oakland. Photo by Evelyn Johnson.



we are all looking to Fruitvale as an example of how that can happen.”

The \$100 million, 257,279-square-foot project had put Roberts-Obayashi squarely in the public eye. “It seemed like everyone was watching,” said Smith, but stage fright was never a factor. The company’s performance won rave reviews.

Two other recent triumphs for Roberts-Obayashi were The Village at Petrini Place, completed in May 2003, and Loyola Village, completed in August 2002. Petrini Place, which consists of 135 luxury condominium units above an Albertson’s Supermarket, is billed as an urban village in the heart of

San Francisco at Fulton Street and Masonic Avenue. The structures, including underground parking, total 137,052 square feet.

Loyola Village at the University of San Francisco consists of 136 units of staff and student housing, built into the north face of the University’s Lone Mountain campus. The complex totals 199,232 square feet.

Smith’s pride in his company’s accomplishments couldn’t be greater if he had hammered the nails himself – an idea that isn’t all that far-fetched. “These used to have calluses,” he said with a wry grin during the interview, displaying hands that still look strong and capable – and perhaps more

comfortable swinging a hammer than pecking at the keyboard of his new laptop.

Many of his contemporaries at other companies are products of MBA programs at one university of another. Smith, however, “came up through the craft.”

Smith was a San Jose State student in 1961 when he first went to work for the company he now heads, landing what was supposed to be a summer job as an apprentice carpenter. The work suited him so well that he never returned to classes.

“I was the first in my family to get into construction, and it happened by accident,” he recalled. “I was at home, on summer



break, and I went to a neighbor's house to borrow a wrench. He suggested I go to work with him as an apprentice carpenter, and the next day I was on the job."

After going from job to job for several years, learning his chosen craft and broadening his experience, Smith returned to Roberts in 1974 as a construction superintendent, and he knew he was "home." He became vice president of construction in 1978 and president and 50 percent shareholder five years after that.

Awards and photographs of dozens of projects Smith has overseen adorn the walls of the Roberts-Obayashi offices, and many

more potential triumphs are on the horizon. The company has another large Oakland project nearing completion, and eight others are in various stages of construction.

Today, the company's reputation is such that booking jobs is no problem, Smith said, and Roberts-Obayashi doesn't get involved in bidding wars with other contractors. "Clients call us," he said. "They know our reputation, our work. Most of them are repeat clients, and they trust our abilities."

Eighty percent of those clients are non-profit entities, he said, and housing and mixed-use developments comprise the bulk of Roberts-Obayashi's Bay Area work these days.

One reason clients keep coming back, he believes, is the "value engineering" his company utilizes, finding alternatives that allow clients to keep the project features they want most and stay within their budget. On one job, he recalled, closer study of the soil at the site allowed Roberts-Obayashi to suggest a less expensive design for concrete columns, footings and slabs, saving the client "a ton of money" while preserving the integrity of the design.

The formula has worked. Roberts-Obayashi has 17 employees in its Danville office, plus 11 superintendents and about 200 carpenters and laborers in the field. Smith



(Left) Awards.

(Below) Village at Petrini Place, San Francisco. Photo by Jim Pyle.



said he has never had to lay off a superintendent, keeping 10 or so jobs going even during the worst slumps in construction.

If fact, Smith sometimes finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having to turn down a potential contract. "You hate to say 'no,' but sometimes it's necessary," he said. "I've seen contractors take on too much, trying to do more than they can handle. That's a recipe for trouble. You can't overburden yourself and still expect to do your best work."

Success, he said, is in the quality of the work, not necessarily the quantity.

Smith's company traces its roots in

St. Francis Bay, San Francisco.

Photo by Jon Lucich



San Francisco to 1932, when the cutting of a 1,700-foot access road from Waldo Grade to Lime Point signaled the beginning of preliminary work on the Golden Gate Bridge. That bustling year brought the creation of a partnership known as Moore and Roberts Builders, which built homes, schools, hospitals, theaters and warehouses throughout the region.

In the mid-1950s, it became the James E. Roberts Company, and the 1980s brought a merger with century-old Obayashi Corporation, a Japanese giant with an international reputation.

The company today is highly regarded for its advanced research and development skills and its successful application of the latest building techniques and technology. It boasts expertise in everything from high-rise towers to underground sewer systems.

Despite Obayashi's 50 percent partnership, Smith said, corporate decisions are made locally. **E**

Reprinted Especially for Roberts-Obayashi Corporation
by Commercial Building Edge

(Right) Loyola Village,
San Francisco.
Photo by James Orellana



(Below) Fruitvale Village,
Oakland.
Photo by Evelyn Johnson.

