“I THINK EVERYBODY HERE CAN bring a little claim to fame from growing up with Legos and going at it,” Baribeau says. “Even in school, I would use them for Blassey models.”

But since coming together to start their own firm, Baribeau and his partners—Josh Siebert and Jason Wright, all of whom met in the University of Arkansas architecture program—have moved on to bigger building blocks. Their work has not gone unnoticed: Modus was recognized with a 2011 Merit Award from the Arkansas chapter of the American Institute of Architects for the Green Forest Middle School project, Baribeau was named an A.I.A. Arkansas emerging Professional that same year, and the firm’s ecoModern Flats renovation is one of only four Leed Platinum-certified buildings in the state, and the only one that’s designated for residential use.

Not bad for a bunch of folks who are still in their early 30s.

The Green Forest Project was actually the genesis of Modus. The project came about in early 2008 when Siebert called Baribeau to say that his hometown wanted to build a new middle school, and the superintendent needed some drawings to show around and help drum up support for a millage election. Baribeau was game, even though the duo’s only experience designing a school had been partnering on an assignment in college. They provided the schematics, the millage passed, and they figured that was that. But the school district had other ideas.

“everybody’s high-fiving and excited, and then they looked at us and said, ‘OK…’” Baribeau says. “And we kind of looked at each other and asked, ‘Are we going to do this?’”

That was a tougher question than it may seem, as both men already had jobs with established firms—Baribeau with Marlon Blackwell Architects in Fayetteville, and Siebert at the Rogers office of San Diego firm Tucker Sadler Architects. But this was exactly the kind of chance they’d imagined in countless late-night dorm conversations during architecture school: Get that one project, that lucky break, and strike out on your own! Baribeau and Siebert decided to take the plunge, and Green Forest Middle School became the bedrock project upon which Modus Studio was built.

“I mentioned we had never done a school before. I have to say, that is the best situation to be in,” Baribeau says, “because it forced us to do research, look at other projects, have sessions where we sat down with principals and teachers. We learned all about design standards the state education system has in place. I think if we had showed up with preconceived notions, it never would’ve occurred for us to do two stories.”

Most schools are a single story, mostly for reasons of cost—elevators are particularly pricey items and required under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. But there were other reasons to build up, including preserving limited green space.

“Our project came in under budget,” Baribeau adds. “That allowed us to build out the landscape portion and also design a boulevard and pedestrian plaza between the high school and the green space. It’s a basic urban design tactic.”

And in this town of less than 3,000, that urban design worked surprisingly well. Matt Summers, who became superintendent of the Green Forest School District last July, says the new middle school has been a big success, both as architecture and as a learning environment.

“You look at it, and not only is it an area where learning takes place, but it’s impressive to the eye,” Summers says. “I really like all of the glass and natural lighting it has made for our students. You all know you feel better when the sun’s shining.”

The building is striking, outfitted in gray and white with bold splashes of red—the Green Forest Tigers’ team colors. The school’s materials were chosen for their durability, low maintenance and cost effectiveness, but Baribeau and Siebert looked for “inspirational and creative ways” to use them. It’s for that reason the floor plan feels more open and airy than many older schools, with lots of windows and a big skylight.
to help reduce the cost of lighting the interior. Polished concrete floors were low-cost and are almost maintenance-free. The windows of the library on the second floor are bumped out from the wall, with the wide sill providing additional seating that doesn’t take up floor space better suited for bookshelves. Outside, that bump-out is clad in bright red, a spark of color that really pops and is repeated in several other places. Inside, pipes and ducting are exposed instead of being hidden under a dropped ceiling, providing “a subconscious lesson in how buildings are put together,” Baribeau says. “It transforms a typical, rural campus into one people are genuinely excited to have because we make spaces people can interact with,” he says. “What a fun, inspirational place to be a kid.”

Superintendent Summers says his favorite part of the school is the classrooms in the center of the building, adjacent to the stairwell, that have glass walls you can see into as well as out of. Granted, he says, this being a middle school, that can be a sore thumb. But there’s actually a long history of the idea of transparency that Summers says should be elevated for public-school design. And that bodes well for the long term. “There’s a whole legacy of postwar, modern architecture the Fayetteville area is known for,” Blackwell says. “There’s a whole legacy of postwar, modern architecture the Fayetteville area is known for,” Blackwell says. “There’s a whole legacy of postwar, modern architecture the Fayetteville area is known for,” Baribeau says. “There is no doubt I long to be part of other communities out in the state. Right: The green Forest Middle School is one of four LEED platinum-certified constructions in the state. Right: The Forest Middle School is one of four LEED platinum-certified constructions in the state.”

“IT MIGHT STRIKE THE CASUAL observer that, in a region as soaked with tradition as the Arkansas Ozarks, this kind of up-to-the-second architecture would be an anomaly, perhaps even a sore thumb. But there’s actually a long history of modernist design in the area, says Marlon Blackwell, principal of his eponymous firm and department head of the Fay Jones School of Architecture at the University of Arkansas. “There’s a whole legacy of postwar, modern architecture the Fayetteville area is known for,” Blackwell says. “That comes first out of Edward Durrell Stone, the predecessor of Fay Jones.”

“Among many other things, Stone designed the Museum of Modern Art and Radio City Music Hall in New York, as well as the na­tions first collegiate fine-arts facility for the University of Arkansas. He was followed by the likes of Jones, John Will­iams, Cyrus Sutherland, Herbert Foosler and Warren Segraves. “Of course, there’s us and other progeny of Fay Jones, and others that did contemporary architecture,” Blackwell says. “I think for the most part, it’s pretty well accepted in the area. It speaks to the diversity of thinking I think occurs in Northwest Arkansas.”

Having been an instructor for all three Modus partners while they were at the University of Arkansas, Blackwell has a pretty good handle on their talent level and the bona fides to assess that talent. “They haven’t done a signature project yet, but a lot of the projects are what I call building blocks toward some really significant work,” he says. “I just know they’re operating on the scale of the city, which is pretty exciting, you get to contribute to the fabric of the city at that scale. It’s a good opportunity for them, and I hope they can do that well.”

Having brought Baribeau into his own firm after he graduated, Blackwell is also confident in the young architect’s abilities. “I think Chris has just got an intensity about him and has got natural talent, and that he just needs a chance to develop,” Blackwell says. “Architects have a long curve, and he’s right on target, as far as I’m concerned, in terms of developing into a fully fledged architect. I think the key for him now is … to really channel that into some really significant work. And I believe that the work is coming.”

Blackwell does see Forest Middle School as a “breakthrough” for the firm, one which he believes elevated the idea for a public-school design. And that bodes well for the long term. “I think it’s good work with high aspirations,” he says. “That’s the key in every project they do, I find the aspirations are high. What they’re learning is how to execute. That’s the challenging part, and that’s what I see [their] commitment to.”

Baribeau says that even if there are skeptics among many other things, Stone designed the Museum of Modern Art and Radio City Music Hall in New York, as well as the nation’s first collegiate fine-arts facility for the University of Arkansas. He was followed by the likes of Jones, John Williams, Cyrus Sutherland, Herbert Foosler and Warren Segraves. “Of course, there’s us and other progeny of Fay Jones, and others that did contemporary architecture,” Blackwell says. “I think for the most part, it’s pretty well accepted in the area. It speaks to the diversity of thinking I think occurs in Northwest Arkansas.”

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Baribeau says that even if there are skeptics of the modern design in Northwest Arkansas, he believes they will find the buildings Modus turns out are a good fit for the community and the region. Why? Well, he points out that many of the traditional “agricultural forms” people see on the landscape were based on pure function, and when you look at an old barn, you find a merge of man and nature that’s unlike what he tries to accomplish when designing a building. “We feel very influenced by the place where we are,” he says. “In the Ozarks, you can go from urban to mountains quickly. That relationship is very important to us.”

Again, why? Because, Baribeau says, Northwest Arkansas isn’t just a stopover for the foundation of the firm. It’s where they plan to pursue their careers. “There is no doubt I long to be part of other places, and my goal is to expand our work to those new places and communities out in the big old world,” he says. “[But] this is The Place.”

ONE ENTIRE BLOCK IN THE heart of Fay- etteville is transformed by Modus right now. Bounded by Lafayette, West and Maple, the project is a student-housing complex—a 220-unit apartment building wrapped around a parking ga- rage that will accommodate 640 residents. It’s the company’s biggest project to date, and if anything they’re doing is likely to generate public feedback, this is probably it.

The apartment building is a project for Special- ized Real Estate Group. It’s been an eye-opener for the trio, Baribeau says, because they’re having to work very closely with the city to make sure they meet all the zoning and building requirements while taking advantage of every inch of space on the 3-acre site, as well as being responsive to a very attentive and sometimes critical citizenry that wants to know exactly what’s happening to their city.

“There will always be naysayers,” he says, “but my motto is to always keep them with kindness.” Specialized is the same client for which Modus did its first multifamily project, the Eco Modern Flats—a 1976-era, four-building apartment com- plex the firm transformed into 96 highly efficient, environmentally friendly studio residences. The project was full of challenges. Baribeau pointed out during a tour. The units below the pool were exposed to direct sun during summer, making them hard to cool. Modus planted climb-
ideas and reculpt them into a physical form, or body of architecture, that really starts to be an expression of the community or the people that use it or the program involved in it,” he says. “I love seeing that because it’s not about Josh or Chris or Jason or anybody else at the firm. It’s really about taking on what the client is interested in.”

One of those clients, as it happens, is the firm itself. Modus has purchased, not far from the firm’s current office, a building in Fayetteville—a vintage brick and concrete shell with big bay entrances and an attached garage. Modus is renovating the property for a new headquarters and will finally be able to have the firm’s fabrication shop, which has always been separate from the office, on-site.

This is the bailiwick of Jason Wright, a native Kansan who is the third partner in the studio and the chief fabricator. It’s his experience in tooling and metal fabrication that allows Modus to present clients and builders with physical examples of ideas of elements—to be a handrail or a wall panel—that the architects want to look just so, in order to further the design of a project.

“We have the ability to design something to human scale and go into the shop and actually fabricate it,” Wright says. “We make a concentrated effort to incorporate some level of Modus design-and-build elements into our projects.”

And he believes that’s important in a field where so much of the design work is ephemeral—drawings, computer renderings, small-scale models. In fact, they’ve found the ability to fabricate can sway even the most doubtful contractor. One recent project for the University of Arkansas’ sports department included wall panels of an intricate, layered design. Wright says that when the contractor saw the designs, he basically shook his head and said, “No way, can’t be done.” So Modus came back with a single panel, fabricated in Modus’ own shop. With an actual example in hand, the contractor could not only see that it could be done, but that it wasn’t as complex as it had appeared in the plans.

The ability to make converts out of doubtful clients and builders by giving them concrete—or, more likely, steel or wooden—examples of a design is invaluable, Baribeau says. And in modern times, when the architect has largely been removed from the actual, physical creative process, the ability of the team at Modus to actually turn out prototypes and see if they work as intended is a huge boon, Wright says.

For example: The classrooms at Green Forest Middle School are marked by a simple steel lintel that extends out from the frame, where the room numbers are printed, cut out from steel and painted bright red. It is in many ways far more real, more tactile, than printing out numbers on a piece of paper and slipping them into a frame by the door.

“The craft side of architecture—the ability to manipulate it, shape it, execute it, build it—keeps a designer grounded,” he says. “It keeps that person plugged into the effects that a design will have on somebody, on how you experience this space. It’s linking design and craft.”

“As soon as Wright came on board, we were able to do that,” Baribeau says. “We’re really trying to integrate that approach.”

The fabrication shop also wins Modus some points with other firms, Wright adds.

“I think it’s every architect’s dream to have a shop,” he says. “You have drinks and cocktails with people at A.I.A. conventions, and as soon as you say, ‘We have a shop, their eyes light up.’ In a sense, it’s not so different from having a grown-up Lego set.

Far left: Baribeau adjusts the roof on the Green Forest Middle School model. Above left: process sketches for the firm’s new office. Above right: Jason Wright at work in the firm’s fabrication studio.