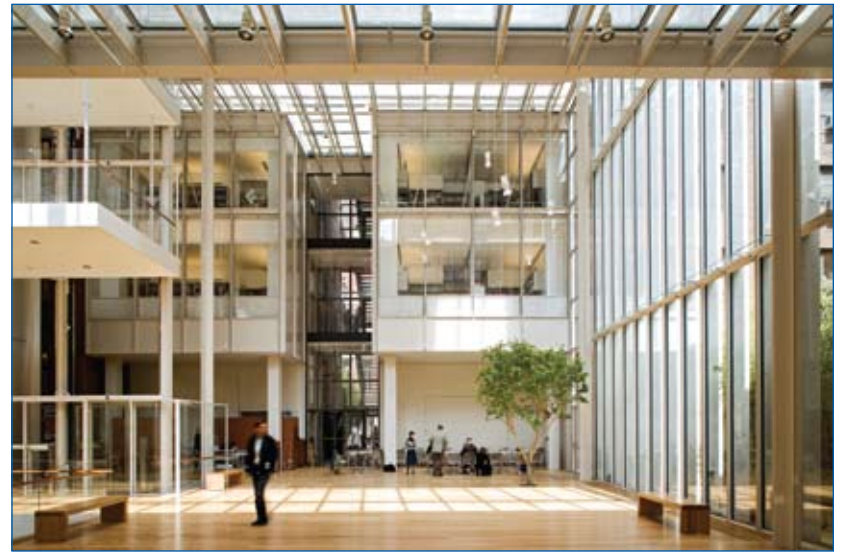




# Preserving Design

**An Interview with Frank Scieme,  
Chief Executive Officer, F.J. Scieme Construction Co., Inc.**



**EDITORS' NOTE** In 1975, Frank Scieme established F.J. Scieme Construction Company (Sciame), which is one of the tristate area's leading construction management firms. Sciame received a BS degree in architecture in 1974 from the City College of New York, and an honorary doctorate in fine arts in 2004 from the City College of New York. He is Chairman of the Board of the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the South Street Seaport Museum, Director of the City College of New York's 21st Century Foundation board, and current Chair of the President's Council and the Task Force on Construction Costs for the New York Building Congress.



Frank Scieme

**COMPANY BRIEF** F.J. Scieme Construction Co., Inc. ([www.sciame.com](http://www.sciame.com)), is a leading builder of highly designed and technically sophisticated projects. With its innovative ideas and techniques, the firm has earned numerous awards for its work. Sciame has applied its expertise to a broad range of projects, including museums and cultural centers, educational facilities, historic restorations, restaurants, retail facilities, residences, corporate interiors, research complexes, and medical facilities.

## How would you describe Sciame's business?

Currently, we have close to \$1 billion worth of work in progress or on the books. We have a very healthy backlog, and we continue to be able to refuse work. Ninety percent of our projects are New York-based. They all vary by design.

## Why has your brand been successful in winning high-demand, high-profile projects?

We work with many leading, world-renowned architects, including Pritzker Architecture Prize-winners, and we have a real passion for good design. I graduated as an architect, and used that love of architecture to develop a company that works hard to preserve design. Many of our senior executives, including our President, have degrees in architecture. I like to think that we make a humble contribution to the field of architecture by finding cost-effective means and methods to realize the architects' visions.

## Has your business progressed the way you expected when you founded the company?

It's progressed beyond expectation. I have to be honest: there wasn't a business plan; it was survival – doing something I loved and making a living at it. But as we did the right thing, we continued to grow. We've always had to refuse work in order to satisfy our demanding clients. If you put the B-team or C-team on a project, you get B or C results, which doesn't set you apart. You need a capable and passionate staff, and we're blessed with just that.

## How did you find your niche working on museums?

When we did the Morgan Library, Joseph Mizzi – now Sciame's President – was the Project Executive. He set out to make that building peerless in terms of quality and execution – and he did just that. As a result, other museums saw or heard about the Morgan and wanted to hear what they had to say about Sciame. I guess the good news spread fast to other museums.

## Have you been involved in lower Manhattan's redevelopment?

We were called on by Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg in 2006 to reconcile the vision for the design with the budget for the Memorial at Ground Zero. It was a significant accomplishment. After successfully completing this assignment, we thought it was appropriate to step back and not work on any project at Ground Zero.

Downtown at Cooper Union, we're doing the new academic building, designed by Thom Mayne; to the south of that we're near completion on the Cooper Square Hotel; further south we completed the New Museum of Contemporary Art; and after completing the Cooper Union academic building, we will move across the street and build a major commercial office building for Edward J. Minskoff Equities designed by Maki and Associates.

## How has Sciame Development evolved?

The development side of the business is growing nicely. We have some projects in progress right now, but we like to walk before we run. Being in the development business has educated me about the challenges that are out there. It's not as easy as it appears. On the other hand, the thing that is of real concern to most developers is the construction process, which is something we are extremely at ease with, so this is a natural evolution for us.

## Are we on the right track to addressing safety issues in this risky business of construction?

You can never do enough with regard to safety, but I do think the New York construction industry, given its unique challenges in terms of density and site constraints, has done a remarkable job. All the leaders of the major construction companies are committed to safety. The industry has recently had a number of serious accidents, and as a result, the consciousness regarding safety is being raised even higher. I think that because of the stellar record the construction industry has had for the past 15 years, it's making us look a little bad now. That's not to say we shouldn't have a zero-tolerance approach when it comes to safety.

## What makes New York so resilient in an economic downturn?

Since the Giuliani administration, when crime was cleaned up and the city took on a new look, the perception of New York has changed. Now the Bloomberg administration is doing a remarkable job bringing business and people to New York, helping them by trying to create a business-friendly environment. The world still wants to be in New York and still recognizes that New York is one of the safest investments you'll ever find. Smart developers are looking for opportunities. In my opinion, this is not going to be a long period of slower development. As soon as the lending opens up, you'll see continued development in New York. It's a unique market, and the world wants to be a part of it.

## How challenging is it for you personally to turn off the business?

For the first 25 years, I would compare running a construction business to running in front of a tidal wave – it could not be turned off. Now we're at the point where we have great people, starting with our President, Joseph Mizzi, and they understand exactly what we're trying to do. So I now have the opportunity to act as CEO and Chairman and not be involved in day-to-day operations. I take great pride in realizing that the organization we have today, with Joe at my side as President, is doing an even better job than when I was the only one at the helm. ●

*The Pierpont Morgan Library in Manhattan, restructured by F.J. Scieme*