



## Edward St. John

---

St. John Properties, Inc.

2009 University of Baltimore  
Distinguished Virtuoso Entrepreneur

**W**hen Edward St. John's father died having built 50,000 square feet of buildings, it became Ed's job to help his mother manage the properties as well as several other small family businesses. Ed managed to find a way to do all this while he finished high school and college, graduating with an electrical engineering degree from the University of Maryland.

In the mid-1960s, St. John recalls, "I began to wonder if you could build buildings and lease them, as my father did, and make a business out of it as opposed to just having some investments in real estate." But he was an engineer, not a builder. He met Leroy Merritt, who was a home builder at the time, and they became partners. "We each put up a little money and started building, and one thing led to another," St. John says. They built 500,000 square feet over four years before reaching a friendly agreement to go in different directions and establish their own businesses.

St. John started his company in 1971 with three employees and a big vision. Today, St. John Properties has 130 employees with more than 50 business parks across seven Maryland counties and over 14 million square feet of office, research and development/flex, industrial and retail space throughout Maryland. The company also has locations in Virginia, Louisiana, Colorado and Wisconsin. It serves business space requirements of more than 1,700 tenants and has real estate investments conservatively valued at \$1.3 billion.

St. John believes his most significant contribution to the real estate industry was creating the R&D/flex type of property. "It used to be that you had either office buildings or bulk warehouse buildings with truck docks. They weren't the prettiest things in the world," he says. "One day a tenant came to me and said he spends more time in his office than at home, and he asked me why don't I build something that looks good but still has the truck docks?"

So St. John went to an architect and they came up with an attractive brick design that looked like an office building in front with the truck docks in back "and everybody started copying us," St. John says. That first business park became the template for about 40 St. John business campuses that followed around the Baltimore area, says Gerard Wit, senior vice president/marketing for St. John Properties.

"We figure that 17,000 people work in St. John's buildings every day in Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties and Ed and his partnerships are probably the second or third largest taxpayers in those counties," Wit says. St. John currently has 138 business partners; many have been partners and friends for more than 40 years.

St. John suggests that entrepreneurs interested in starting a business like his try to partner with a company like his or get the kind of assistance that the University of Baltimore can provide. "When starting your own company, you make a lot of mistakes. There isn't an exact formula for what to do

to succeed," he says. "UB's Entrepreneurial Opportunity Center is a tremendous resource, teaching what not to do in order to be successful. It has a proven program of producing entrepreneurs and business leaders. I know, because a number of the senior executives at St. John Properties are UB alums."

Meanwhile, St. John Properties has implemented its own three-year training program for young professionals who want to pursue a career in development. They work in each major area of the company before going out on their own. "That's the

best way to do it, the easiest, painless way. We call it the Ph.D. in development," St. John says. He also urges beginners in the business to "get an experienced partner to guide you through all the minefields of development today."

As his company continued to grow, so did his commitment to "give back" to the communities in which it had a

presence. In 1988, St. John established the Edward St. John Foundation, which has given more than \$42 million to area charities.

St. John also is active in community organizations as a director of the Maryland Science Center, the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins University Real Estate Institute, the BWI Business Partnership, the Baltimore County Planning Board and the Anne Arundel County Economic Development Corporation.

— *Alan Dessoff*

UB ... has a proven  
program of  
producing  
entrepreneurs and  
business leaders. I  
know because a  
number of senior  
executives at St. John  
Properties are  
UB alums.