



The Pacific Northwest was the ideal setting when Richard Rhodes formed Rhodes Masonry Inc. in 1984. “There weren’t really any other companies specializing in stone” said Rhodes. “My company was able to quickly penetrate that market by having the expertise and a strong focus.”

In fact, Rhodes went a step further. He identified a new market - preserving and reworking stone from ancient civilizations – and spun off a sister company, Rhodes Architectural Stone, to develop that niche. Today, both Seattle-based operations are thriving, and Rhodes’ success has earned him a Small Business Administration HERO award for outstanding small business achievement.

Rhodes Masonry concentrates on high-end, multiyear custom residential projects and commissioned works ranging from a mansion styled as an Irish cottage to

building walls on Mt. Rainier for the National Parks Service. The company works exclusively in stone.

Rhodes Architectural Stone has operations around the world and rescues centuries – old stonework threatened with destruction.

The company retools the stone to project specifications and supplies it to masonry contractors across the United States, including Rhodes Masonry. In addition to 21 employees at the Seattle

The two companies are currently collaborating on a high-profile garden installation at the new Tacoma Art Museum, a \$25 million facility designed by renowned architect Antoine Predock. Rhodes was personally commissioned to design the stone-sculpted garden space. His companies will fabricate and install it using 500-year-old granite road pavers salvaged in China.

## A revelation in Europe

Rhodes’ entrée into masonry was a twist of fate. He was in Europe doing graduate work in medieval studies at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art when the lure of masonry sidetracked his acting aspirations.

“I was investigating ancient stone guilds as part of my thesis,” he said. “I wanted to understand how the work was done so I went to Italy to study the Freemasons Guild, which was founded in 1266.”

Rhodes was intrigued “These people were the heirs to the cathedral builders of Europe.” He said. He soon found himself doing a formal, hands-on apprenticeship during which he helped rebuild an ancient Roman wall. He quickly took to the work and was even initiated into the Guild.

This experience led him to establish Rhodes Masonry in 1984. “It was a boot-strap startup with \$1200 on my credit card, but the company offered design capabilities and the skills of European craftsmen,” he remembered. The fledgling company enjoyed annual growth as high as 35% in the early years.

## A vision in China

Another turning point for Rhodes Masonry came 5 years ago. The company had landed a multimillion-dollar residential project for a software magnate in the San Francisco Bay area. The summer home was to be modeled after an ancient Japanese estate, and the owner wanted to source the stone from the Far East.





“He sent us to China to buy the materials, and we thought we would ship them to our manufacturing plant in Seattle,” said Rhodes. “We quickly realized that was a silly idea. Chinese craftsmen knew more than we did about stone fabrication since they have been doing it for 3500 years.”

While in China, Rhodes and his former partner visited the site of the Three Gorges Dam construction. They realized that many beautiful villages built in stone would soon be submerged. The pieces began to fit together. Here was a vast supply of rare, aged materials alongside a mine of exceptionally skilled, underemployed Chinese stonemasons. Thus came the idea to harness and market these unique resources, and Rhodes, Ragen & Smith, the predecessor to Rhodes Architectural Stone, was born.

“We decided to invest in Chinese factories and teach the people how to make products competitively to Western specifications,” stated Rhodes. “We set up training and packaging capabilities.” The company has expanded its model of contract manufacturing to include eight factories in China, one in Indonesia, three in India and one in North Africa. The company subcontracts the salvaging and demolition, supporting crews of up to 150 local laborers for periods of 3 to 4 months.

Since its inception, Rhodes Architectural Stone has been salvaging ancient materials around the world, sometimes reclaiming entire villages, and hand shaping the stone at the local factories. The company acquires only materials that are being lost or destroyed by threats of many kinds, such as the expansion of cities and ports, building of dams, natural disasters and seismic upgrades of old unstable structures.

For example in India, Rhodes is collecting materials from Havelis, the Princely estates that were destroyed in the 2001 Gujerate earthquake. Beijing is currently demolishing 200 square blocks a month in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.

“We get incredible pieces, such as beautiful patina on the surface,” said Rhodes. “You could never create the color or the sheen. It takes centuries of wear.”

Designs are created by Rhodes and his wife, Pamela Ottaviano Rhodes, and officer in both companies who has a background in landscape design and construction management. The designs are made into CAD shop drawings and posted to a Web-based network where they can be approved by customers nationwide and then received overseas for manufacturing to specifications.

The finished pieces are crated and palletized for shipment by ocean freight. Masonry contractors handle the reassembly and installation when they arrive at the final project location.

There are labor cost efficiencies in extraction and fabricating stone overseas, but the important advantage lies in being able to provide something that customers could not get elsewhere. By tapping that niche, Rhodes Architectural Stone has grown tenfold since 1998 reaching annual sales of nearly \$10 million.

The unique nature of Rhodes’ business has attracted plenty of press coverage. In addition to being the subject of a 7-minute segment on Martha Stewart’s program and a planned Voice of America documentary to be broadcast worldwide, the company has been featured in Architectural Digest, Newsweek, Sunset Magazine, and local news and business publications.

But the most effective marketing technique, according to Rhodes, is word of mouth. “The people who use our services like to share the unusual stories connected with their residences,” he said. “They are also the kind of people who trade information. Our goal is to be the best-kept secret that everybody knows.”