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Art of stone

By Steve Wilhelm Staff Writer

Richard Rhodes loves ancient stone - its satin patina, the stories hinted at in the polish of countless feet over centuries.

Rhodes, and his wife, Pamela, have turned that appreciation into Rhodes, Ragen & Smith, a Seattle company that rescues ancient stonework in some of the world's oldest civilizations, and gives it new life in this one.

Rhodes, Ragen & Smith has been buying and dismantling entire Chinese villages, 17 so far, and then carting them off by the barge-load to be recut at factories run by Chinese stonemasons. Skilled workmen shape the stones by hand, in most cases carefully protecting surfaces worn by centuries of use, and then pack them into containers bound for America to be reassembled into homes and mansions for some of America's wealthiest.

While Rhodes concedes that isn't exactly the same as preservation, he contends it's better than the alternatives of the ancient stone being 100 feet underwater or buried in a Chinese landfill.

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Some of the company's more notable projects have been a reproduction of a 15th century Japanese palace for a leading San Francisco Bay area software CEO; a 65-foot diameter stone swimming pool for a wealthy resident of Napa Valley; and a stone mansion, styled as an Irish cottage, for a wealthy Seattle coffee CEO. Rhodes declines to share the names of his clients, according to their requests.

Rhodes, Ragen & Smith saves ancient Chinese stonework from destruction and gives it new life in American homes.



"Rhodes is able to assemble magnificent fireplaces or beautiful veneers. In doing so they provide real stone masonry of an artisan quality that tends to disappear in a high-tech society that can't afford labor," said Bob Swain, architect and owner of Robert Edson Swain Inc. in Seattle.

As the Rhodes's have built Rhodes, Ragen & Smith on ancient foundations they've also developed an approach that is distinctly 21st century. The company's svelte headquarters near Madison Park is the hub of a Web-based network that links clients scattered across the United States with stone artisans in China, Indonesia and India. Only 30 people work in Seattle, directing nearly 600 stone cutters in China.

At any one time the company is working on 15 to 20 projects for customers in some of the nation's most wealthy enclaves: Aspen, Silicon Valley, the Hamptons, Mercer Island. The Web gives clients instant access to information and photos detailing their projects' progress.

Rhodes Ragen's Web-based system also gives Seattle-based designers intricate control over virtually every cut made by their Chinese workers. Working with computer-aided design systems similar to those used to design Boeing aircraft, Rhodes Ragen designers hone plans, sent to China over the Internet, that in the most sophisticated cases tell Chinese cutters the exact dimensions and angles of every cut for of every single stone.

Since many of the Chinese stonecutters are illiterate, even in Chinese, the company invented a Web-based "iconographic language" to communicate what's needed to them, Rhodes said.

When the containers arrive the entire project is assembled here with no waste, and no further cutting or trimming. The joints can be so tight a business card won't fit between the stones, and no mortar is needed.

"We are providing product that is ready to go. In the stone business, that's never been done before," Rhodes said. "We're basically running factories in the Third World, via the Internet."

The company has grown swiftly as it has refined its computer model, with \$4.8 million in revenues in 2001, up 48 percent over 2000 despite the abrupt sag in new orders after Sept. 11.

"We're in a very rapid growth mode. Our plan is to grow fivefold in five years," Rhodes said.

Rhodes' path to becoming a Web-based innovator in the ancient art of stone masonry was circuitous.

One of his first interests was theater, and in 1981 he traveled to Italy to research a thesis for a graduate degree from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. The thesis was to be about male behaviors in medieval drama, and Rhodes figured the best way to get in touch was that was to join an Italian trade union anonymously - so he became an apprentice stonemason and joined Italy's oldest trade union.

But it wasn't long before the ancient trade, the heritage of the stone, began to draw him. A turning point came when he helped rebuild an ancient Roman wall in the Italian city of Siena. He left the theater behind him, as he discovered he liked the permanence of stone, the imprints from human heritage.

Rhodes founded a predecessor company, Rhodes Masonry, in 1984 with \$1,200 from a MasterCard account. While the company was modestly successful, he gradually realized how severely the costs in the United States limited opportunities for even a skilled stonemason. When he added up the overhead of paying craftsman \$30 an hour to laboriously cut stone here, "that leaves you three customers in Seattle who can afford you," he said.

The conceptual breakthroughs came in rapid succession when in 1997 Rhodes visited China's Three Gorges Dam while on a trip to buy stone for a mansion being built for an exceptionally wealthy software magnate living in the San Jose area.

The first realization came when Rhodes visited a beautiful Chinese village made of stone, and saw that if someone didn't rescue the stone it would just be drowned by the dam's reservoir. The second realization was how many superbly skilled and underemployed Chinese stonemasons there were, people who "have forgotten more about stone than I'll ever know in my lifetime."