



BuildingStone

M A G A Z I N E

Spring 2009 • Volume 32, Number 1

www.buildingstonemagazine.com



RHODES ARCHITECTURAL STONE: BACK TO BASICS | SERENITY IN STONE | STONE AT PLAY

Zen and the art of stonework

RICHARD RHODES BUILDS HIS BUSINESS AND HIS REPUTATION BY UNDERTAKING A QUEST FOR QUALITY

BY JON PASIERB

YOU MIGHT BE slightly skeptical if you heard a savvy businessperson—the owner of a thriving company obtaining prestigious contracts and boasting a client list that has been reported to include Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey—describe his work as an art form rather than just a money-maker.

But somehow when Richard Rhodes, founder and CEO of Rhodes Architectural Stone (RAS), headquartered in Seattle, Wash., says it, you can't help but believe it.

And you don't even have to take his word for it. Anyone who has visited the Tacoma Art Museum since 2003 can see firsthand one of the most famous examples of Rhodes' eye for using natural stone as an aesthetic that goes far beyond park benches and countertops. Rhodes has been praised and admired in both the art and architectural communities for his design and construction of a giant granite wave. Built inside a courtyard, the wave gives those viewing it the appearance that it's actually moving as the light hits it, causing it to "splash" up against the museum's glass walls.



A. This project, located in Seattle, features Silk Road sandstone and won the "2008 Excellence in Residential Masonry Design Award" from the Residential Masonry Contractor Association.

B. One of the largest masonry projects in the country currently is under construction in Greenwich, Conn. Antique material salvaged from the "rising tide of the Three Gorges Dam project in China" was originally from villages that were built 500-1,500 years ago. The copings and lintels are newly quarried and finished with traditional 12th century, hand-tooled finishes.

C. The fireplace stack pictured features a blend of antique and newly quarried limestone. Extensive split-face quoins up to 4 feet in height wrap the corners.

The sculpture could be considered an appropriate symbol for the one-time aspiring actor turned stonemason extraordinaire, who is still managing to make a splash with his accomplishments after 25 years in the industry. And even in the face of an economic tidal wave that has left businesses across every industry floundering in its wake, Rhodes' company, and his passion for what he does, remain as sturdy and resolute as the material he works with.

Rhodes acknowledges that the wide mix of endeavors RAS is involved with can make the exact numbers difficult to pinpoint, but the self-described "accidental entrepreneur" estimates the company handles about 100 projects a year of varying sizes and price tags. Although Rhodes started Rhodes Masonry, Inc., in Seattle in 1984 specializing in installation and small-scale fabrication, he says the "professionalization" of the company did not occur until 1998. Since

The torture of the craft

Rhodes is eager to explore the artistic possibilities that exist when working on new projects. He's very animated when talking about two current ventures in particular; one a classically carved limestone storefront for Ralph Lauren and another undertaking in Palm Springs he excitedly refers to as an "epic veneer." He also is acutely aware of the difficulties that can arise on the job. He enjoys being on the same page with his clients—when the project goals and skill sets are aligned between designer and customer—but confesses that working with people to achieve this sense of harmony may well be the most challenging aspect of his profession.

"The toughest challenge is educating the customer about working with natural stone. It's a constant process of education that doesn't end when the



then, RAS has seen its reputation and the demand for its services grow steadily, posting significantly higher numbers in 2008 than the previous year in spite of the dim shadow cast by the current tumultuous economic climate.

Quality counts

What his company does, Rhodes says, is all about quality. In every aspect of its operations—from the materials used to the look of the finished product to the skill of the workforce employed by RAS—the company strives to deliver something beautiful and inspiring for its clients.

Rhodes adds, "We offer a very distinct perspective. You see a sort of 'stamp of style' on a Rhodes project. ... The employees make that possible. The quality of the people you have working for you is the key to success. I live and die every day by the quality of my employees."

And even while heading up a company that has grown to encompass offices in Seattle and China and a showroom in San Diego, in addition to factories employing hundreds of people across the globe, Rhodes certainly isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. In fact, he insists on the value of handcrafting in stonework.

Rhodes has done extensive work overseas, notably in China where he salvaged a wealth of ancient limestone being abandoned by the Chinese government. He launched a new way of doing business by recycling the rescued material. Rhodes discovered stonemasonry in the early 1980s as an apprentice in Siena, Italy. It's there he learned the time-honored rules of bond work and 12th century-style hand carving and finishing that he still practices today.

contract is signed," he says. He explains that some customers can be finicky about what they want and that a person's perception of how something looks has a tendency to fluctuate, sometimes on a day-to-day basis. "We're not fixed in space. We're constantly evolving as human beings. The way we recollect things—the way a customer remembers something—can be a wild card on a project."

The real rub, Rhodes says, is that many of the characteristics that can make stone daunting to work with in terms of customer awareness and satisfaction, like the variance in color, texture and facade, are the same things that make it so beautiful and desirable in the first place. Referring to this sticky dilemma as the "torture of the craft," Rhodes believes the best companies are the ones that can work with these changing perceptions without sacrificing the core quality of the material and undermining its natural allure, and he seems to have made it a driving goal to put RAS at the top of that list.

Rhodes remains optimistic and predicts strong continued growth for the industry as a whole, mostly because of his unwavering belief that people have a strong aspiration for such a beautiful natural product. He thinks customers will continue to be attracted to the material, not only for its aesthetic versatility but also for the feeling of historical permanence that it conjures. "Ultimately, there is no product like stone. It never fades, never fails. Put it up once and it will stay forever."

Now that's quality. ◆

Jon Pasierb is a writer and editor with Naylor, LLC.