KHS&S—

A National Wall and Ceiling Contractor

By Thomas G. Dolan

Politics may or may not be local, as the saying goes. But wall and ceiling contracting almost always is. Unlike, say, the brokerage industry, in which modern communications render geographical locations unimportant, wall and ceiling contracting is a very labor intensive business that invariably begins locally and almost always stays that way. You load a bunch of laborers and equipment on some trucks and drive to the jobsite.

The Green Eggs and Ham™ Cafe, which shows the EIFS handiwork of KHS&S, is at Universal Studios Islands of Adventure™ in Florida.

An Expertise in EIFS Helps Make It Happen
which you try to make as close to your home base as possible.

It’s rare for a wall and ceiling contractor to go regional, and even more rare for one to go national. But one that has successfully made the transition is the Tampa, Fla.-based KHS&S Contractors. This 1,300-employee company, which earned revenues of $118 million in 1998 and is expected to exceed that in 1999 by 15 percent, has been listed in

**Engineering News-Record’s 1999 Annual Ranking of Specialty Contractors** as the second largest wall and ceiling contractor in the United States.

KHS&S’ status as a national company is unusual in itself, but the story about how it got there is also unusual. Not surprisingly, the company began as a local contractor, in Michigan, in 1981. However, a contingent moved to Orlando, Fla., to do work on a theme park. Usually, the outreach aspect of a business returns to its home base after the job is complete. But instead, as relates Chairman/CEO David Stowell, the outreach contingent settled in, acting as its own home base. As a result, the company moved its headquarters to Tampa in 1986, and the original Michigan business was sold to its employees. The reason, explains Stowell, is that the Michigan market depended on the automotive industry, which was in a down cycle, while the Florida market was opening up vast new potentials.

**EIFS Makes It Work**

Starting in 1995 and continuing to the present, new offices have opened in Orlando and Tampa, Las Vegas and Reno, plus Anaheim and San Francisco. The driving force was a continuation of that first Florida job—the construction of the Epcot Center. Though KHS&S is a national interior/exterior specialty contractor that offers full service in commercial interior/exterior construction such as drywall, stucco and EIFS; exterior panel manufacturing and installation; concrete/tilt-up construction; and water feature and rockwork technology—its main specialty is themed interior/exterior finishes. KHS&S is, in fact, the nation’s leading themed contractor, having completed more than 4 million square feet of themed finishes.

The full range of KHS&S projects across the country includes theme parks, gaming/entertainment facilities, hotels/resorts, convention centers, office buildings, healthcare facilities, museums, government facilities and industrial buildings. About 25 percent of its work is theme-related, 35 percent of the work is other large wall and ceiling jobs, and the rest is traditional work. KHS&S has earned from $7 million to $30 mil-
lion on overall projects that have cost from $70 million to $350 million. Its largest single drywall job encompassed 12 million square feet.

Stowell explains that while KHS&S, like every other contractor, began small and local, it grew to be large and national. How? Mainly by building on its relations with general contractors such as Clark Contractors, Perini Builders and Whiting Turner, to name a few, to its special relationship it developed with its giant clients such as Universal and Disney.

A key reason the company has grown on the scale that it has is its expertise in theme work. Part of it is due to its mastery of EIFS, and the great flexibility of that material in being able to be shaped in different ways. “Theme building requires a highly specialized construction process, which has become possible because of modern materials,” Stowell says. “Probably the driving material is EIFS.”

Dr. Suess Goes EIFS

“Under ordinary circumstances, we’d be judged on how many straight lines we laid down, but, this time we were judged by the crooked lines—they all had to be crooked,” says KHS&S Project Manager Jeff Reinking, Orlando, Fla. “If we had put down any straight lines, we would have been penalized.”

If a statement like that seems strange at first, it will appear less so when you realize it refers to Seuss LandingsSM at Universal Studios Islands of AdventuresSM in Florida. Seuss Landing is a recreation of the topsy-turvy world of Dr. Seuss in which “ordinary circumstances” can hardly be said to exist. This $9 million contract for KHWS, which encompassed building everything from the
To create the curved exteriors required by this project, KHS&S Contractors applied a specially formulated EIFS that enabled more on-site foam shaping.

metal studs out—a total of 115,000 square feet in eight buildings, including the Green Eggs and Ham™ Cafe and the Cat in the Hat™ building, a gift shop that features a 40-foot gloved hand “tipping” the building, or “hat.”

This is only one of the most recent EIFS-driven and highly imaginative theme projects in which KHS&S specializes. In this fantasy world, designed to surprise and delight small children, it’s hardly surprising that the design and construction was not an uninterrupted delight. The project had more than its share of challenges—even over and above making all the lines crooked—but somehow balanced, including protrusions several feet out from the main structure, such as the hand tipping the hat.

One of the challenges, explains Reinking, is that, “Typically with the Styrofoam that comprises EIFS, you can go up to only 4-inch thickness on the wall. But to make the walls required here, we had to go up to 2 feet of foam. So we went through special fire testing procedures with the manufacturer, Omega Products, to make sure that the thicker foam would not be a fire hazard and would meet all the required codes.”

Also, KHS&S assumed that it could have one of its vendors carve the 2 x 4 x 4-foot sections at the factory, then bring them to the site and put them together like a puzzle. However, somewhere in the first 2,000 to 3,000 feet of this first 50,000-square-foot section, it became clear that the pieces to this Dr. Seuss puzzle wouldn’t fit.

“We didn’t have to re-engineer the whole thing,” Reinking says. “But we did have to get the pieces to fit. So we brought the carving crews from the manufacturing facility to the site and used scale models side-to-side to the actual construction.”

The finished structure looked like synthetic stucco, all cartoonish and painted
in bright and vivid greens, purples, oranges, yellows and blues.

Another big challenge was getting the job done on time. “The entire duration was 14 months, but there were constant design changes coming in from the client, which, together with an ever-accelerating schedule, made meeting the schedule, which we did, very difficult.”

Moreover, KHS&S worked with Universal in the conception stage and for an entire year before the actual construction began. This is not atypical for KHS&S. What was unusual, however, is that normally the company is paid for the preparatory work. The intent on both sides is that KHS&S will get the final negotiated work, but if that doesn’t work out, the company has at least gotten paid for its work.

In this instance, however, KHS&S did the preliminary work with no firm agreement that it would either get paid or be awarded the final contract. In fact, after KHS&S gave Universal the initial bid, the latter rejected same and went out to bid. But then, says Reinking, “They got nervous, and even before the bids came in, they came back to us and asked if we would do it for our original asking price.” Reinking surmises that Universal took a closer look at the numbers and realized it could not obtain the quality it wanted for a lesser price, anywhere else.

A big advantage for the client in this preliminary work is that it knows it can hold KHS&S to its asking price without its asking for change orders. The advantage to KHS&S, on the other hand, says Reinking, is that “we have a clear understanding of what the core job is, so when we take over, we have a clear control.”

There were other challenges as well, engineering tasks such as providing three-dimensional overlays to make sure that the primary structure fit neatly within the unique exterior building envelope.

But perhaps the single most important factor, which made the project work, is EIFS.

“EIFS was chosen for its flexibility in achieving the different shapes that were required for the Dr. Seuss look,” Reinking says. “In fact, the only material we could have used for this project was EIFS.”

Keeping Good People

But the building materials don’t just one day appear and then toss themselves together to form a structure.

Stowell’s highly talented faux painters, plasterers and other artisans, as well as architectural specialists, CADD operators, estimators and management personnel, offer his clients not just project completion but also intensive pre-construction services, including comprehensive estimates, architectural collaboration, detailed drawings, comprehensive scheduling, value engineering, conceptual budgeting and product mock-ups.

In an industry that is hurting for qualified personnel, KHS&S not only needs top people, it also needs to ask its higher-level management people to make sacrifices—many have to travel to various sites around the country and live there for extended periods. In addition to providing the pay and benefits that will keep these top people from seeking another employer, KHS&S has a very aggressive recruiting program, through universities, trade schools and its Web site, and then its own thorough training program.

For its labor on remote sites, instead of competing with local wall and ceiling contractors, it cooperates with them. “Contractors not in major cities might not have the major finances and capabilities that we can offer with our financial strength, management team and other resources,” Stowell says. “For our part, we’re able to rely on the local labor force. We’ve developed close friendships and business relationships with quality-oriented wall and ceiling contractors throughout the country. For everybody involved, it’s a win-win situation.”