Creating Heavenly Interiors with Plaster

Triangle Plastering Systems, Inc. Utilizes Plaster for Aesthetics, Durability and Acoustics

Two different symphony halls—one wanted a heavenly look, and the other wanted a heavenly sound. Brad Baker, president of Triangle Plastering Systems, Inc., Mesquite (outside Dallas), Texas, did both. And, in both cases, the medium used to achieve the desired celestial effect was plaster.

The owners of the Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth wanted a theme of angels of the concert, so plaster, with its design capabilities, was the ideal material to create the domes, cornices and other aesthetic details to fulfill this concept of visual beauty.

At the Myerson Symphony Hall in Dallas, however, the musicians had the final say; they wanted the acoustics fit for a heavenly choir, and so the walls were overlaid with 2 to 3 inches of plaster. If aesthetics and acoustics are two key reasons why plaster is chosen, a third, adds Baker, “is durability. Plaster finishes typically hold up better than painted drywall.”

At one time, plaster was the primary finish for interiors. Then drywall, which was much cheaper and easier to apply, came along, and plaster went into varying degrees of eclipse, almost totally in some parts of the country. In recent years, however, plaster has been making a comeback, again in varying degrees. This
has been driven somewhat by renovation, the desire to restore older or historical buildings to their pre-drywall grandeur, as well as plaster’s intrinsic characteristics. An obstacle is that plastering today, as well as lathing, is a dying art, and the remaining practitioners are generally members of an older generation.

**Plenty of Plaster Work**

Although plaster took a downturn with the arrival of drywall in his market area, Baker says it has never really gone out of style, so has been able to sustain as a business focus. He has also benefited by plaster’s recent return to popularity. In fact, as says Baker, “Plaster is a niche for us. We’ve done more conventional plaster than any of our competition. We have the lathers with the qualifications to do the framing and the plasterers who have continued to keep up with the trade. It’s definitely hard to find skilled labor, and if everybody was drawing plaster jobs, there would not be enough people to do them. But we’ve had the same people working for us for years.”

As a result, continues Baker, “We’ve had limited competition on larger commercial projects for plaster, and the same for residential. Our residential accounts are estates, and are so big they are equivalent to commercial jobs. Builders will come to us for the experience they want for the larger jobs.” He adds that many of the residential projects he has done were because the homeowners wanted a specific look they could get only with a plaster finish.

The Lone Star Park in Grand Prairie and the Dallas Convention Center are a couple of Baker’s other large projects. He’s also done numerous hotels in the Dallas area, including a DoubleTree and a Hil-
ton in the past couple of years. There are many grand churches in the area, for which his company has done much work. The company is also involved in a variety of other projects, including shopping centers, retail stores and assisted living centers.

Hand in hand with his interior plastering is his exterior, or stucco, which offers both practical and aesthetic benefits. Baker sells plaster as a renovation finish, and not simply for historical designs.

“We tell shopping center owners that they can put on new façades with metal studs, sheathing and stucco, which is more lightweight than brick. Architects are drawn to features like this,” Baker says.

But architects are also drawn to the aesthetics of plaster. “We are just wrapping up an assisted living center in Dallas, called Edgemere, which has 300,000 square feet of stucco,” Baker says. “The architect wanted the appearance of an old Italian village, with the colors and textures of an older period, and plaster was the product of choice.”

For exteriors, Triangle does the metal studs and sheathing, then finishes with stucco.

In the Beginning

Baker came into his plaster heritage in a somewhat unusual way. His father, Bob Baker, formed the Triangle Plastering Company in 1974. In 1975, his older brother, Steve, went to work for his dad (and went on to become president of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International in 1996). In 1980, Steve took over the drywall aspect and formed it into the Baker Drywall Company. In that same year, Brad, went to work for his father.

In 1992, Brad recalls, “there were some hard economic times, and it seemed that the financially feasible thing to do was to liquidate the old company and start anew. As it turns out, this was the right thing to do.” Brad purchased the assets from his father and began a new business with the same employees and same facility.

Today, his father is 74 and has been in
the business for more than 50 years—and he still comes to work on a part-time basis.

Why haven’t the two brothers joined forces? Baker explains that when his brother formed his own business, it was nonunion; his father’s company was still a union shop. “Unions were declining in the late 1980s, and my father never was a fan of the unions, so he decided to break away. By that time, however, the businesses had grown in different directions.”

Baker defends his nonunion status, saying, “We provide benefits, 401K, profit sharing, insurance, paid vacations and training. We try to duplicate what a union would offer. It’s sometimes thought nonunion businesses are cheap. This is not true. We invest in our employees. We want to attract and keep good people.” He adds that the only thing a union provides that he misses is a pool of people to draw from.

Two brothers in the same area, one focused on drywall and the other on plaster, has its advantages, Baker says. “We’re in different buildings, but we’re both here in the same location,” Baker says. “We coordinate scaffolding and delivery. There are two of us to find different jobs, and on numerous projects we’ve worked in concert.”

**Business Is Good**

Although Baker focuses on his own market area, customers who like his work frequently ask him to move around a bit. He’s done work throughout Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana, and has had projects as far away as Kentucky and Virginia. “We stay plenty busy,” he says. He has 100 to 150 employees, usually averaging about 125.

“In terms of annual volume, our best year was 2000 when we hit $10 million,” Baker says. This represents a steady growth from the $2 million earned in 1992. Since 2000, revenues have dipped back a bit. “We couldn’t have kept up that pace, and don’t know if we’d want to do it again, even if we could,” he says. “We want to continue to shoot for growth, but what we’ve learned is that you have to control that growth or lose profitability by working...
too much overtime, and not working effectively because of too many long hours. We want growth, but not all at once. We want it with production and profitability.”

Baker has advertised his company via newsletters and other direct mail, and three years ago was the first in his area to get a Web site. “We wanted to set ourselves apart from our competition and find another way to get out in front of our customers,” Baker says.

The company goal, Baker says, “is to have the best equipped and best trained employees.” To further this goal, he has recently added a training room to the building, complete with all of the latest audio/video equipment, CD-ROM, PowerPoint and other presentation technology. This is the place for safety training. “We have a strong commitment to safety,” Baker says.

The new teaching facility is also where his employees are being trained with AWCI’s EIFS—Doing It Right program, a video/workbook program that provides generic instruction for the application of Class PB exterior insulation and finish systems. Sessions are held on Saturdays. “This program gives employees a chance to better themselves. With their added training, along with certifications, employees will be paid more,” Baker says.

**Important Memberships**

Baker has long been active in AWCI. He’s on the committee that has prepared the EIFS program’s curriculum and examination. As a lifetime member of the association, Baker says, “By belonging to AWCI, you help invest in the future of your industry. Another thing I enjoy about the organization is the opportunity to interact with your peers, to sit down with them and talk over common problems.”

In looking at the industry and how it’s change from his father’s early days to his, Baker says, “There were probably more skilled qualified craftsmen years ago, and there was not the emphasis on safety. That was not his fault. That was just the way the industry was then.

When asked whether he fit the model of the laid-back second generation compared to the hard-driving first Baker responds, “I’m definitely the laid-back generation. We watched our dad go to work from sunup to sunset. Not that we missed out on anything, but I have a different philosophy.” Baker delegates authority to qualified people, and takes time out to be with his family, his wife, Holly, and children, Gregory, 17 and twin daughter Amanda and Jessica, 14. He plays a lot of golf and attends his kids’ sporting activities.

But he’s still been focused enough on work to win several merit awards, including two national excellence in construction awards from Associated Builders and Contractors, one for a retail development, Southlake Town Square, and the second for the Bass Performance Hall, built for the “angels.”