The Colorful Themed World
Created by KHS&S
The construction industry in general, and wall and ceiling contracting in particular, is not supposed to be colorful. The job is to construct solid, safe and functional buildings; leave the aesthetics to the architects and designers. A colorful exception to this norm, however, is the Tampa, Fla.—based KHS&S Contractors. Through its imaginative use of exterior insulation and finish systems, KHS&S has become the nation’s leading themed contractor, completing more than 5.5 million square feet of themed finishes.

KHS&S provides construction services for a full range of projects across the country, including gaming/entertainment facilities, theme parks, hotel/resorts, retail centers, office buildings, convention centers, healthcare facilities, museums, government facilities and industrial buildings.

But, says Senior Vice Resident Peter Costello, KHS&S’
most imaginative EIFS work falls into three venues that, not surprisingly, require a lot of pizzazz: the Universal and Disney themed parks, and casinos.

Costello recalls that when KHS&S first got into the theming business in 1986, it was through a somewhat unusual concurrence of similar jobs done for both the Universal and Disney parks. Both were called “New York Street” because, as says Costello, New York is filled with interesting architecture. Universal first contracted with KHS&S to do a mock-up for the project planned in Orlando, but the first one to be built was for Disney on Hollywood Boulevard. “We weren’t used to cutting the unusual shapes, but we did so many of them that pretty soon we got good at it,” Costello says.

The company has also done the main entry to the Universal Park.

“It’s the grand arch opening, the focal point of the park and statement Universal wanted to make,” Costello says. “It’s close to 30 feet tall and probably 100 feet wide, all compounds, curves and angles, foam and EIFS.”

Another highlight at Universal is the Jurassic Park complex of about eight buildings, including the ride buildings, and the restaurant with the dinosaur exhibit that mimics the one in the movie.

One advantage to EIFS in these large projects, Costello points out, is that expansion and contraction joints have to be put in only where true control points are needed for the building, or perhaps for aesthetic reasons. However, stucco, because of its considerable weight in comparison to EIFS, requires many more of these joints.

A standout for Disney, Costello says, is “the Tower of Terror Ride. It’s a tower with a big elevator. You go to the top of eight or nine stories and then plunge to the bottom. It’s made to look like an old mansion, with parapets blown out to the side. EIFS was the basic material, and it has held up quite well.”
EIFS works well in projects like these, Costello says, because it’s lightweight, provides good insulation, you don’t have to paint it, and it’s long lasting. He adds, however, “You do have to maintain it. Because EIFS comes with a warranty, five to seven years, sometimes longer. Compared to stucco, which averages one year, people sometimes feel you don’t have to maintain it. But we make clear to owners that you do have to maintain the caulk joints to protect against mildew and other deterioration. You can’t just fall back on the warranty.”

Bet on the Casinos

Casinos have always been a good bet for EIFS. KHS&S is currently doing two in Florida, in Tampa and Fort Lauderdale, for the Seminole Indian tribe. And Atlantic City is providing two upscale projects with the Borgata and Tropicana.

One of the big gaming/hotel projects in Las Vegas that KHS&S is proud of, says Dave Suder, president of the Western region, is Paris Las Vegas. This 150,000-square-foot project, $150 million overall and $20 million plus for the exterior skin was, Suder says, “very unique in that it represented an almost historical representation of Paris, France. Structures like the Arc de Triomphe and the Paris Opera House have a 60 percent replication. The combination of EIFS, fiber reinforced plastic, and glass fiber reinforced concrete gives, Suder says, “the exact look of French limestone.”

Another example of EIFS’s chameleon-like ability to change its colors is represented in its current project, the Las Vegas World Market Center,” says John Platon, vice president, development. This 10-story building, $150 million for the first phase, and $20 million plus for the exterior skin, Platon explains, “has the outside EIFS panels designed to look like the red sandstone in the Utah cliffs. After carving the base coat there are faux paintings on the outside with blond streaks through the sandstone as you see in nature. The samples we have turned out are very nice. I don’t think this has ever been done before.”

One difference between projects in Las Vegas and on the East Coast, especially in terms of casinos, says Costello, is that less paneling tends to be done at the latter. The reason is that the rain and moisture require each panel to be especially prepared and caulked around the joints. The desert dryness of Las Vegas does not carry these demands. But perhaps more important is that the East Coast cities that have added casinos have had previous histories. The only history of Las Vegas, however, has been gaming, so, as
Costello says, “Each casino that goes up has to say, ‘Can you top this?’—Each new one has to be fancier and more glitzy than the one before, so this means more panelization.”

**How Do They Do It?**

When asked how KHS&S has managed to maintain its leadership in this large and lucrative arena of theming, Suder replies that the company comes in early in the conceptualization process for a new project. Unlike most contractors who take the plans from the architects and designers and then implement them, KHS&S offers complete construction services from precon-
struction through to project completion.

These services include comprehensive estimates, architectural collaboration, detailed drawings, comprehensive scheduling, value engineering, conceptual budgeting and product mock-ups. The company employs more than 2,000 craftsmen (including faux painters, plasterers and other artisans), architectural specialists, CADD operators, estimators and management personnel. The company has 10 full-service offices throughout the country.

“One of the exposures the owner of one of these big projects faces is having to over-bid,” Suder says. “Different architects and designers come up with their plans, which are put out to bid; contractors try to implement them, and there are inevitable problems and cost overruns. By taking control of the entire project, we can offer the owner one price, so he knows it will not cost him more than that.”

Suder says that EIFS also gives the owner a lower cost alternative to other materials. “In some of the hotels we are working on, we are using EIFS to mimic precast concrete,” Suder says. “In some cases, the buildings were designed for precast concrete, and we provided EIFS as a lower cost alternative. And, in other cases, EIFS with the precast concrete look was part of the original design.

But one of the attractions of EIFS is not only that it can be made to look like other materials, it can also be made to look like what no other material can approximate. A good example of this is the Seuss Landing at Universal. This recreation of the topsy-turvy world of Dr. Seuss, in which “ordinary circumstances” can hardly be said to exist, is in bright and vivid greens, purples, oranges, yellows and blues.

Moreover, in an industry where quality is usually judged by how many straight lines are laid down, this complex of some 115,000 square feet, in eight buildings, virtually all crooked. The eight buildings include 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” are made up of swirls of lines. The challenge was not only to provide a world to delight children, but also to balance them all to provide a soundly engineered structure. With all that EIFS can do, or, at least tries to do, it might appear that it has invited problems. And problems associated with EIFS have certainly been in the news for the past few years.

What Is KHS&S’ Response?

“We’ve never had an EIFS failure,” is Suder’s response.

The reason, Suder explains, “is we have a very detailed quality control program. For instance, in our panel construction, every person who works on one, whether the framing, sheathing, foam installation or the application of the base/mesh and finish, we know who did it. It’s signed off on that aspect, and not only on stickers. It’s logged in a book so we can be certain who built it, and who inspected it. Sometimes on a project we will bring in an independent third party to inspect it.

Suder explains: “As a quality company, we feel it is incumbent on us to take every precaution. I look at it as a form of risk management. By making sure we install EIFS correctly, that is our insurance. ☑