He’s been bringing his special blend of British wit and charm to the United States for some 22 years now. And with each visit, he makes a full deposit of his own ideas and observations, watches and listens carefully for something to take home to Wales, and then is gone again, usually leaving more than he takes.

He is quite at home in the United States. But then he is also quite at home in Singapore, Tokyo, the Middle East, as well as most of the capitals and cities of Europe and elsewhere.

For Reginald Adams Atkin, a 68-year-old wall and ceiling contractor from Penarth, Wales, who has parlayed his skills as an ornamental plasterer into being head of a mini-conglomerate construction company of half-a-dozen firms, the traveling is all part of the business.

It provides him, he feels, with a better insight into the trends and directions of a rapidly changing industry and thereby gains for his string of companies quicker, more accurate response to emerging opportunities and problems.

That the formula is valid there can be little dispute. In Great Britain, hit particularly hard in the 1974-75 recession, Reg’s organization still managed to gross more, than $6,000,000 volume while many other companies were making disaster plunges.

At the same time, while his world-wide travels have helped contribute to his own business successes, the soft-spoken native of Liverpool has managed to develop and maintain more solid friendships in more countries than probably any other individual in the wall and ceiling business.

Through it all, he has remained somewhat of a mystery, too. Because none of his contractor friends, either in the United States or elsewhere, have ever been able to determine the precise junction where Reg Atkin’s skills as an unofficial British ambassador end and his acumen as an international businessman begins.

In a career that has survived crushing setbacks, he may usually be found these days—when not traveling—in his well appointed office in the headquarters of his company complex in Cardiff, Wales.

There he operates primarily as the public relations officer for the string of companies that spun off from the original company he founded in 1934, Plasterers (Liverpool & Cardiff) Ltd. His sons, John and Robert, handle much of the executive and administrative functions of the companies, leaving to their globe spanning father the high-level selling duties.

John, an award-winning engineer, heads up John Atkin (Cardiff) an engineering and building construction company, while Robert is management director for Atkin Trade Specialties, a subsidiary for drywall, suspended ceilings, specialty flooring, tiling, and sprayed acoustical materials.

Other companies include Radyr Joinery, a manufacturer of joinery for doors and windows as well as molded work and skirting; Adams Wharf, an import company for white granite chippings from Norway; and Western Precision Equipment, a company which produces machine tools for prime manufacturers.

A more recent venture is Asset Building Components, Ltd., a company to produce rigid pressed steel lintels.

Besides his direct business commitments, Reg is also active in industry affairs, an interest that was climaxd last year when the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors, in recognition of his service to iaWCC over the years, named him to the office of second vice president of the Association . . . the only person outside North America to ever hold office in iaWCC!

He was the first contractor from Britain to join iaWCC, attending his first convention more than 20
years ago in Pittsburgh. His membership in iaWCC dates back to 1955, and honorary iaWCC plaques hang proudly on his office walls.

In Great Britain, Reg has been a member of the National Federation of Plastering Contractors since it was formed in 1942, and served as federation president in 1954. He is also a member of the Liverpool Federation, the Council of Confederation of British Industry, the National Federation of Tile Manufacturers, the Cardiff Chamber of Commerce, and is chairman of the Cardiff Construction Group Training Association.

He was recently appointed national representative from Wales to the National Consultative Committee on Group Training, and is a member of the Construction Industry Advisory Committee of Llandaff College of Technology, Cardiff.

Like his wife, the former Ethel Balmer, to whom he has been married since 1932, Reg was born in Liverpool. His father, George Alfred Atkin, a gardener, was killed a year after Reg’s birth. After primary school, Reg was sent to school in Lancaster where he remained until 1918 when he returned home.

He worked weekends and evenings in the sheet and metal working shop of his stepfather, William Trussel, and then in 1922 (“as bad times as there ever were”) his stepfather went out of business. Reg went to work that same year for an uncle as a plastering apprentice and by 1928 had risen to sectional foreman on the Dorchester House Hotel job in London’s Park Lane.

After the first month, he was put in charge of the night gang.

In 1929, Reg and his brother-in-law, Arthur R. Ball, joined forces in a plastering and roof tiling firm, A. R. Ball & Co., Ltd., specializing in multi-story and ornamental plastering work. The partnership dissolved in 1934 and that same year Plasterers (Liverpool) Ltd. was formed.

The Cardiff operation started two years later, as a subcontractor to an Edward Taylor Co. Ltd., of Lancashire, and one of its first jobs was a huge airdrome. Later, they landed the first contract for the Welsh Industrial Trading Estates, a massive factory building operation.

Despite economic ups and downs, World War II, and financial crises, Reg managed to keep his company growing and prospering. Now, two of his three children—he is also the father of a daughter, Heather—are in the business with him.

He lives in a fashionable two-story home in nearby Penarth with an extraordinary view of the Bristol Channel. And with a schedule that would tax a man half his age, he still found time to talk to Construction Dimensions about some of the things that makes construction, in Great Britain and other countries, such a rewarding challenge.

DIMENSIONS: As one who has been visiting the United States for some 22 years now, would you say there are distinct differences between the way American and British contractors approach things?

ATKIN: Oh, yes, there are distinct differences. And these differences can be found in the materials as well as the methods. For example, we use a great deal of concrete block partitions—brick partitions, breeze partitions—and these materials are not suitable for sprayed application due to the differences in absorption. There have been experiments but, frankly, most of them have been failures. Our supplier, the British Gypsum Company, had not been supplying us with a plaster that was suitable for spray application. They’re now manufacturing a type of plaster than can be applied in half-inch thickness, but I’m not especially impressed with it.

DIMENSIONS: Are there any differences in material movement?

ATKIN: Well, in the United States, of course, it’s pumped. But here we use big cranes and containers. The containers are filled below and hoisted up. Sometimes we have a mixing plant and materials on the roof of the building and then wheelbarrow it in.

We have just completed a three-acre roof with an average thickness of 75 millimeters—about 3 inches—by moving the plant as we progressed.

DIMENSIONS: Your organization is well diversified. Would you say this is characteristic of British contractors?

ATKIN: The average British subcontractor is not diversified. Indeed, we were one of the first to begin diversifying. The main contractors over here—or general contractors as you call them—have their own employees who perform many of the tasks that American subcontractors perform.

My intention now is to form a consortium — plastering, painting, (Continued on Page 20)
electricians, plumbing, heating—so as to be able to give the main contractors a complete tender for these services and which would take the responsibility out of his hands entirely. And I can see that here—as well as in your country—this is the future for the successful subcontractor.

DIMENSIONS: When and why did you first begin thinking diversification?

ATKIN: Our diversification movement all started about 12 years ago. In the back of my mind, of course, were my two sons, and most of the companies were started at about the same time. Up to 1958, I had been doing lathing and plastering in Cardiff and London locations. In 1960, I left the London market and it was shortly after that when I began setting up these other companies.

DIMENSIONS: Were your travels throughout the United States of benefit to your diversification efforts?

ATKIN: One could say they were of extreme benefit. I had met Bob Pierce (Los Angeles contractor), with whom I have had a long friendship, and he introduced me to the suspended ceiling business. There was a great opening in this field in this country.

I also sent my son, Robert, over to work in the Pierce company and Robert learned the art of drywall. This has resulted, I believe, in Atkin Trade Specialties becoming one of the biggest dry lining contractors in the United Kingdom. The volume alone from drywall in 1974-1975 was about 1,200,000 pounds.

DIMENSIONS: What first prompted you to visit the United States?

ATKIN: Well, actually, there were two things I was most interested in. I wanted to see the plastering machines. Our mixers are a pan type as opposed to the paddle type in the United States.

And then I wanted to obtain the franchise on materials for spray coverage over steel when using external plaster. We did use much of this material, but the absorption problems that I mentioned earlier made it impractical.

“...The advantage of taking a selling approach is that it enables you to keep your ear to the ground, to obtain a good idea of trends and directions. Then you simply apply yourself and make a fender for the work.”

DIMENSIONS: Has diversification assisted your company during the current recession?

ATKIN: I should say so. The use of plastering in the United Kingdom is now only external. But we also do wall, floor tiling and cementitious flooring, finishes and this has helped to hold up our volume.

The other companies have contributed their share. As yet, the Asset Building Components firm which we formed in 1971 is, you might say, still struggling. But we expect it to be successful, too, eventually.

DIMENSIONS: The rate of inflation in the United Kingdom has been reported as high as 25 percent. How does a contractor survive under these kind of conditions?

ATKIN: Inflation had been as... (Continued on Page 44)
ATKIN:

(Continued from Page 20)

high as 25 percent, but at the present time the government has it about 8 percent. Should there be a coal or steel strike here, though, it'll go back up again.

The trade unions for building now realize that they may be pricing themselves out and we have a twelve month static period. This, of course, is subject to an unforeseen high increase in the cost of living.

DIMENSIONS: But isn't there a formula method, based on indexing, that British contractors have available as protection against their own cost increases?

ATKIN: There is although the government—and it's all public now anyway—has been trying for six month firm contracts lately.

As for the formula method, when we estimate a job we put in a unit price on each item. We tender the total price for the job and if this is accepted we then send in our unit prices plus basic costs.

Your tender is submitted, based on the Builders’ Index of Costs which is published monthly. If our costs change, that is, if they increase, we are automatically paid.

DIMENSIONS: How much has the cost of work increased here over the years?

ATKIN: Like most other things, it has increased significantly. As an example, in 1936 on a high-rise low rent project, you could figure on 9½ pennies a yard for plaster. By 1946 it was 2 shillings and 4 pence (about 50 cents), and today it's one pound 85 pence (about $3).

And you must remember that our labor here is about one-sixth of the American contractor's on an hourly basis.

DIMENSIONS: Has the credit crunch been particularly severe during the past two years?

ATKIN: Oh, I should say yes. We recently completed 21 houses and had them empty for 15 months.

"Despite poor business conditions—or perhaps because of it—we have three estimators constantly employed. With our diversification, we've kept our heads above water."

The capital loss on interest alone was indeed significant.

The last credit squeeze comparable to this recent period was 1966, I believe, and a number of firms went under, just as they are doing now. We were hit with nearly 60 thousand pounds and only because we did have reserves were we able to make it through. You must have reserves to recuperate, and with the tax structure we have here it can be most difficult.

In the United Kingdom we have a 52 percent corporation tax plus a short fall tax plus the personal tax. With that kind of tax situation and to accept responsibility in the manner that I do, I sometimes wonder if it's really worth it.

DIMENSIONS: You spoke of a close call in the 1966 squeeze. Were there any other close ones that you recall?

ATKIN: At the outbreak of World War II we had 35 contracts. Virtually overnight we were down to 4 contracts and it nearly put me under. All work just stopped completely and there was no way to get to the work sites for our materials and equipment.

People just walked off with things. I lost some 2000 scaffolding planks, mixers, equipment, materials—everything. From there it was scrape. I went back to work, keeping one female in the Cardiff office. We did plastering and flooring for munitions factories during the war, and then got other jobs such as the Tondu Power Station, the Ponty Pridd Hospital, and the Upper Boat Power Station.

DIMENSIONS: You have mentioned that much of your time now is devoted to the public relations, the selling, function. Just how valid is the selling approach in the British market?

ATKIN: A selling approach is valid in any market, of course. I have a considerable number of United Kingdom contacts among contractors and architects who accept my various companies on the basis of reputation and past performance. And I visit with the various clients and companies at least once a month.

In construction, your reputation does help, but the main factor here