As general manager for New Zealand’s F. Biggins & Company, 39-year-old Barry Biggins keeps busy with such diversified interests as manufacturing and installing fibrous plastic, retailing direct, and operating a supply business.

Termed “The Beehive” by New Zealanders, the new national administration building in the nation’s capital, Wellington, does indeed resemble a beehive which was the interest of his British design-winning architect.

Making it Work in New Zealand

A Combination of Plastering and Drywall Technologies Pays Off For This Overseas Contractor

To New Zealand’s Barry Biggins it’s the perfect marriage of construction technologies, providing the strength and durability of plaster and the economies of drywall application.

Furthermore, while traditional plastering wages a holding action in most of the world markets against the quicker, more economical gypsum board techniques, the fibrous plaster approach in New Zealand continues to hold its own as a good alternative on its own.

That helps explain why Barry Biggins, the 39-year-old general manager of F. Biggins & Company, of Lower Hutt, New Zealand, sees a respectable future for fibrous plaster.

“I’m rather surprised that fibrous plaster — or Plasterglass — hasn’t caught on more in the United States,” Biggins told Construction Dimensions during a visit to New Zealand.

“The traditional plastering approach is experiencing the same high cost problems here in New Zealand as it is in other parts of the world, but we feel that the fibrous plaster technology which brings together the advantages of plaster and drylining (drywall) — is the perfect compromise for the customer who wants a plaster quality within a more acceptable cost range.”

The validity of Biggins’ comments is seen in the extent of the fibrous plaster industry in New Zealand. In the “Way Down Under” nation of 3,000,000 population, there are some 80 fibrous plaster contractors.

Most fibrous boards are manufactured in standard thicknesses of 8mm (about 1/3”) and 12.5mm (about 1/2”) with special fiberglass strands evenly distributed over the gauged plaster surface and then rolled through until the strands are thoroughly incorporated in it.

Not surprisingly, most manufacturing operations are carried out on large benches with smooth surfaces where the gauged plaster is poured
In the background is the new Australian chancellory, in Wellington, where Barry Biggins’ firm is installing fibrous plaster. On this job, Biggins is also doing acoustical ceilings.

to an even thickness. Various additives and release agents are added along with the requisite amount of approved glass fibre, and then the sheet is cut to the desired size.

On the job site, the installation of the plaster boards is performed in a manner similar to traditional drywall techniques.

Because of New Zealand’s outstanding lumber resources, wood studs are used extensively, especially in residential construction. Recently, steel framing has been making a more noticeable penetration.

When Construction Dimensions caught up with the fast-moving Biggins, he was checking out work on two current projects, the new national administration building—dubbed “the beehive” by locals in the nation’s capital of Wellington—as well as a new embassy structure being built by the Australian government.

“Actually, the economy here in New Zealand has been in a recession for the past year or so,” Barry explained, “and we expect that construction activity will remain at a low level for at least another year.”

What compounds New Zealand’s economic problems is not only the general inflation that is striking all construction materials, but the added burdens of fuel price hikes and the difficulty of finding ready markets for the country’s agricultural products.

Agriculture—more specifically the sheep grazing industry—has long been the mainstay of New Zealand’s economy. With the organization of the European Common Market and the United Kingdom’s entry into ECM, that principle overseas market for New Zealand has been reduced enormously. Under the Common Market rules, Commonwealth nations such as New Zealand have lost their special commercial advantage with Great Britain.

Until these markets are replaced, the business activity in New Zealand will be depressed. Construction, as expected, has been among the first industries to feel the pinch.

F. Biggins & Company, like other contracting firms in New Zealand, has been forced to exert a more strenuous marketing effort. At the same time, the company which was founded by Barry’s father, Fred Biggins, who acts as the Managing Director, is turning more and more into insulation services.

“Like every other nation which imports oil,” Barry said, “New Zealand has rapidly become energy conscious and insulation is a fast-growing aspect of the construction market.”

In addition to Plasterglass and insulation, F. Biggins & Company also manufacturers and installs acoustical tile ceilings as well as radiant heat ceilings. Unlike many American firms, the New Zealand organization also retails directly to the public and operates a supply business.

“Here in New Zealand,” Barry continued, “there are three main groups of wall and ceiling contractors—and they pretty much operate (Continued on page 28)
independently of each other. This, of course, includes the fibrous manufacturers, the solid plasterers, and the dry lining contractors.

“In the area of demountable and moveable partition systems, the manufacturers make and fix their own systems. So you would even have a fourth group by American definitions.”

While the contractor specialties currently go their individual ways, times are changing. Already several tentative moves have been put forth with the idea of changing association names to include drywall.

“As I said before,” Barry concluded, “the combination with the drylining contractor is virtually inevitable because so many traditional contractors find it necessary to add to their service lines.

“The involvement of drywall type contractors right now is the subject of a meeting set for August 29-September 3 between the association of plasterers, the wall and ceiling contractors and the drywall group. So, it could come this year.

“But in the meantime, we do have a viable alternative to straight dry lining and straight solid plastering. That’s something not too many other construction industries can offer.”