A cancer on the prairie?

A comedian once thought so, but Houston’s emerging association is one of the city’s many groups seeking a quality lifestyle

By Jim Van Loozen, Editor

Comedian Jack Carter once took the spotlight at the Houston Music Theater and broke into the easy banter of the well-briefed stage professional.

“I got into Houston yesterday,” Carter told his audience. “This isn’t a city . . . it’s a malignant growth! What are you people doing down here?”

Carter’s rhetorical inquiry is a question any native, or near native, Houstonian has asked himself a thousand times. Houston’s Drywall and Interior Systems Contractors Association is one of the city’s organizations dedicating itself to making the answer to the comedian’s question be “building a quality city in which to live and to work.”

DISCA, which is the brand new name for the former Houston Drywall Association, is taking a leadership role to ensure that the future growth of the Bayou City will be both orderly and of benefit to all Houstonians. Its membership is made up of contractors and manufacturer/suppliers from the building industry, but because each of these persons also lives within Houston’s many fine residential communities it expresses an interest beyond its industrial borders.

As DISCA continues the already phenomenal growth it has enjoyed in concert with Houston, it seems well postured to join other Space City organizations working to keep a good thing going in the Sun Belt region of the Texas Gulf Coast. And, frankly, Houston can use the help.

Jack Carter is not the only person ever to perceive Houston as a figurative cancer on the prairie. The city’s meandering bayous and rivers, its lush treelines and generally temperate climate made it a natural mecca for thousands of people prior to the 1940s. When industry discovered Houston was a great place to do business (Houston’s ordinances and tax structures are decidedly pro-business), the city underwent a phenomenal pattern of growth which has remained virtually unchecked since about 1961. Current estimates say its population grows by about 1,000

DISCA trade show resounding success

One of the major objectives of any group of contractors who band together to form an association is the exchange of fellowship and educational experiences.

Last September, Houston’s DISCA enjoyed its most successful exposition ever. The annual trade show, staged at Houston’s Red Carpet Inn, drew record numbers of exhibitors.

It also brought more than 600 people into the exposition area to view products such as tools, interior systems for insulation and demountable partitions.

Says DISCA President Bill Scott, the exposition was successful for three reasons:
• It brought together contractors who could discuss their systems and products on a peer-professional level.
• It gave manufacturers and contractors an opportunity to discuss various products on a professional level.
• And, it exposed the quality of Houston’s interior systems industry to a public that might otherwise be unaware of the goals of DISCA and its contractor and associate membership.

The show will be renewed this year, and DISCA manager Al Hyde expects the exposition to establish even more new records. The local association will release details on the fall program as it draws nearer.

Persons interested in exhibiting or attending the trade show should contact DISCA now.
persons a week. The city is unofficially the hottest construction market in the country.

But anyone who was around during Houston’s last two decades can tell you that all of the growth was not accomplished without a fair share of problems. Local governments were hard pressed to keep pace in providing services, and in many of the city’s largely unincorporated suburbs, county governments found themselves virtually powerless to bring order to the development.

The city’s political community, not wanting to kill the proverbial goose with the golden egg, seemed for awhile to be populated by an ever-changing cast of characters who could agree on nothing except promoting the growth of Houston. As the 80s dawned, however, the city’s politicos had already begun a subtle shift in attitude. The whole city has begun to work together to solve major problems. There are new commitments to mass transit. Air and water quality is being upgraded. Park space is being developed on a major scale. And whole organizations are cropping up like mushrooms to police any number of phases of Houston’s lifestyle.

The Houston Drywall Association had already put nearly two decades of effort into working for quality workmanship and superior craftsmanship within the building industry. With its recent restructuring and its brand new DISCA label, the organization has renewed those early goals. It is committed to giving Houstonians a quality industry to build the city’s homes and businesses and to evolve a membership comprised of superior citizens of its community. Like a lot of things in Houston these days, it’s working.

The by-laws of DISCA clearly spell out just what those goals are:

• To obtain better recognition of the drywall trade by impressing builders, architects and the general public that the drywall contractor is a skilled craftsman and a good businessman, and thereby improving the standing and prestige that the trade enjoys.

• To improve the quality of workmanship and service by sharing knowledge and solutions to problems that affect the quality of drywall work.

• To improve technical knowledge in the rapidly changing drywall field by taking advantage of improved materials and techniques.

• To improve business methods by conducting educational studies of modern, efficient business practices.

• To establish a standard of ethics for members that will reflect credit to drywall contractors.

• To obtain the benefits of fellowship that comes from meeting together and working toward common goals.

• To broaden viewpoints by affiliating with the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International.

(R.A.) Pete Peters, general manager for Houston’s Marek Brothers Company, says the DISCA goals represent a reaffirmation of the ideals the organization adhered to years ago. Peters was the organizing secretary of the old Houston organization and has remained an active member of the association for years.

“We wanted to accomplish many
things,” he recalls. “We knew changes within our industry were making drywall contractors more sophisticated businessmen, and we felt it was a time to encourage upgrading our image as an industry.”

Peters says the early days of the organization resulted in a lot of self-policing. As a result, the quality of contractors doing business in the Houston market was guaranteed. “We ensured our city it would receive the services of a qualified industry of craftsmen who were reputable businessmen,” Peters says.

One of the major accomplishments of those early efforts, he adds, was enabling contractors to purchase building materials directly from suppliers. “It was always the practice that we purchased everything from lumber suppliers. It meant a lot to the upgrading of the industry and the sophistication of the contractor/businessman when we moved into materials handling. We were then able to diversify and to offer a better, well-rounded package,” he notes.

“If there is one thing that has helped us to achieve our goals and maintain the growth of our organization, it has been our ability to adapt to changes within the industry,” Peters concludes.

Houston contractor and DISCA President (W.S.) Bill Scott agrees the sensitivity to the changing role of the contractor as a skilled businessman has played an important role in building the DISCA organization.

He points out the current membership, which includes both open and union shops, represents a significant share of Houston’s prolific building market.

A survey of the DISCA membership, completed last year, indicated a ballpark estimate of the association’s penetration within the Houston market. “We felt that our membership represented about $80 million worth of contracts. We have approximately 2,500 employees. That’s not the majority of the buying that is done in Houston, but it is pretty healthy,” Scott says. “Most of Houston’s active, long-term contractors are members of our association.”

Scott points out that early meetings of the organization involved attendance by about two dozen people. More recently, the number has averaged better than 70 and has, at times, pushed over 80. DISCA’s annual trade show, staged in Houston’s West Side Red Carpet Inn, drew more than 600 people to view exhibits by DISCA member companies and its associate member manufacturers. Scott says the show was successful for the industry and carried the additional benefit of “exposing the drywall industry to the rest of the city of Houston.”

Scott’s own company exhibited demountable partitions, which his firm is solidly committed to, and he points out the show’s reflection of the changes within the industry and DISCA’s expanding to a more di-
versified membership. “Our contractor members are not only dry-wall contractors, we have a varied mixture. We have fields such as interior decorating, painting, acoustical ceilings and other forms of total interior systems packages,” he notes.

Scott also zeroes in on a specific purpose of the association: to promote a better Houston. “I hope to see us continue to grow and to become a dynamic organization for the city of Houston,” he says. “I would like to think we can give some vital information to the contractor who gives us his time. I would like to think we can provide for a closer relationship between the contractor member and the manufacturers of products for our industry. We would like, in some cases, to eliminate certain risks of the industry, and we’d seek, to some degree, a better selection of products from our manufacturers and suppliers.”

Scott says he openly courts involvement between his contractor members and manufacturers and suppliers. He considers it “wrong when a manufacturer or supplier contributes money without involvement” in association affairs. “We’re all in this business together; we take the materials they manufacture and distribute and we turn them into a finished product. If we don’t have proper rapport with them, they can’t possibly furnish the things we need.”

Both Peters and Scott consider DISCA to be an emerging benefit for the city of Houston. They point out the association has always enjoyed a growth in the service and fellowship it offers to its membership. And both give significant credit for its most recent upsurge in membership to Al Hyde, who directs a multiple management firm that administrates DISCA and several other Houston area allied construction associations.

Hyde, who came onto the DISCA scene about two years ago, refuses to take too much of the credit for DISCA, however. He terms himself a “professional manager”, but says he could accomplish nothing without the commitment DISCA’s members make to the organization.

“I keep saying the same thing over and over when I am asked about the success of the organization,” Hyde says. “It takes planning and coordination, yes. But I don’t care who you are or how good you are at what you do, if you don’t get commitment, involvement and support from the people you work with, you can’t accomplish a thing.”

Scott agrees. “I served on the association’s boards for three years, and it’s an excellent board,” he says. He adds that DISCA has added to its growth largely because its membership decided it was satisfied with its status quo but wanted to “see what it might do if we kicked it in the funny a little” and pushed for more growth. He’s pleased with the results and especially with a sudden upturn in the interest of younger industry people now moving into the leadership of DISCA and the industry.
Hyde says the combination of new youthful energy and the quality of experience among the established membership makes DISCA "one of the best organizations in the country for what we do," He says the organization survives and prospers on just three key ingredients.

"We have central management. We have a fine and active committee structure. And, we receive the most vital element to success of them all . . . volunteerism," he says.

What all of those ingredients equate to for Houston is a positive building future. In the last major economic crunch, Houston survived almost without noticed impact. And that led a lot of Houstonians to believe the city was recession-proof. Peters, Scott and Hyde all disagree.

All three realize that not even Houston can maintain its 20-year pattern of runaway growth. And they note they have already seen signs of a general slowdown in early 1980.

Says Peters, "Recession proof? No, I don’t think so."

Adds Hyde, "I think we’ve already experienced some slowdown. Tight money and high interest rates are with us, and that means less construction."

Says Scott, "I believe we’re entering into a period of general levelling. I don’t think we can avoid a slowdown, and we can’t predict what might be ahead of us in 1981. But even with a slowdown, we can look to the city’s growth and the general Sun Belt growth and I think we can still look for the future to be pretty dynamic."

Scott concludes by noting that DISCA’s role in that future will be to bring the city a contractor who is a "pretty smart cat", one that has the knowledge to hoist a multi-story building, install an elevator shaft-wall, meet demands for energy efficiency, keep abreast of new technology and product development and run a good, sound business.

"I think we’ll give Houston the kind of quality building industry it needs and demands," Scott concludes.