By his own definition and admission, he is an unreconstructed plastering contractor. He has been one all of his working life—and doesn’t have a single intention of playing it any other way.

For 61-year-old Robert L. Maidt, head of the Maidt Plastering Company, Inc., of 716 NW 61st Street, Oklahoma City, OK, plastering is a way of life. It has been ever since his father, the late Robert G. Maidt, got together with his brothers as an 11-year-old and started the company business. Bob has continued in the plastering tradition and now a third generation Maidt, Robert Jr, is being groomed to continue the business.

From their 21,000 square foot one-story headquarters and warehouse complex in Oklahoma City, Bob and his son now operate a construction company noted for plaster, stucco, interior partitions, veneer plaster, and the new exterior insulated wall systems.

It’s been a good business for the Maidts over the years. Maidt is one of only seven companies in North America which is a 50-year member of the Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries-International, and Bob served as association president back in 1963-64 when it was still known as the Contracting Plasterers and Lathers International Association.

Born in Oklahoma City, Bob completed parochial school and the University of Oklahoma. His college graduation in 1947 with a BS in business was interrupted by World War II service as a B-25 training pilot, but once back in civilian life persued the same lathing and plastering career of his father.
“. . . there’ll always be plastering . . . because of its almost limitless possibilities to do free form, circleline arches, ornamental and the like.”

That he’d stay in Oklahoma City came as no surprise. In the summer of 1889 his grandfather, Henry Mekher Maidt, arrived on horseback and promptly staked his claim. Again like his father, by his teens, Bob was carrying a plasterers union card around, thanks to a family belief that any growing boy should be introduced to hard work early.

Married to the former Mary Jane Bell, Bob is the father of two daughters: Meri Gretchen and Margo, and three sons, Bob Jr., Lindsay, and Christopher. All three sons are in the plastering business.

His one move at diversification came in 1976 when he successfully launched a concrete pumping business. By 1980, the business was totally successful and his sons-in-law, Dean Imel, Jr., and Ron Winfrey, bought controlling interest of Sooner Concrete Pumping Service, Inc.

Currently, business opportunities—thanks to the financial explosion nationwide created by the infamous Penn Square Bank Oklahoma City—are not plentiful in Maidt’s marketing area. But a long reputation for quality and timely work, accounts for a steady flow of bid requests.

DIMENSIONS: Bob, nearly everyone else has diversified into drywall work and widened their bidding area. Why hasn’t Maidt Plastering done the same?

MAIDT: Don’t get the wrong idea that we’ve been sitting still. I’ve diversified and while I don’t go out looking for drywall work—the way the bidding is going these days, who in his right mind would want it?—we do selectively accept the work when it’s part of the bid documents.

But we’re into the Synergy exterior wall systems, and the concrete pumping venture — which was unusually successful represented, in my opinion, good solid diversification moves.

DIMENSIONS: Why did you sell out the concrete pumping business?

MAIDT: Because my son-in-law made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, that’s why. I still retain 40% ownership in the business, so it isn’t as if I took the risk and then walked away. I just didn’t have the time needed to run that business properly and was ready and willing to take an offer from my sons-in-law.

DIMENSIONS: Ask any plastering contractor and he’ll tell you, ‘there’ll always be plastering.’ Do you believe this, that work will remain in sufficient amount to maintain an industry of contractors and craftsmen?

MAIDT: Of course, there’ll always be plastering. Why? Because of its almost limitless possibilities to do free form, circleline arches, ornamental and the like. Oh, it’ll never be like it was, the last days of grandness, but there’ll always remain a reservoir of need.

DIMENSIONS: A number of manufacturers of exterior insulated systems contend that their system represents an application of the plastering arts. Do you agree with this?

MAIDT: To the extent that the outer coat is trowelled on, yes. But it won’t bring back plastering as we all know it. These exterior wall systems are a good saleable response to a marketing need because of the real or imaginary energy threat, but they represent a response—not a comeback of a construction technique.

DIMENSIONS: —and I suppose they respond also to the trend toward lightness?

MAIDT: No one doubts that buildings are built and bought by the pound. With steel structures and framing you have less weight, lighter footings — the whole thing is toward the faster, lighter approach.

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“What a subcontractor needs most these days is a good banking relationship . . . and a good line of credit.”

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The exterior systems are innovative and marketable. I avoided them for awhile, but they’re just good, sound business for today’s contractors. Customers are sold on the concept—and they’re buying it. About half of our jobs are bid on the Synergy system.

DIMENSIONS: Many individuals are not familiar with the famous Penn Square Bank fiasco that has left Oklahoma in such a tattered economic condition. Is much of the problem today traceable to that bank bankruptcy?

MAIDT: I’d have to say, “yes,” it was the Penn Square bankruptcy that did Oklahoma City Construction in—plus the turnaround of the oil industry. But then Penn Square and the oil industry were intermixed, so it was the same issue.

It’s bad here, no doubt about that, and Penn Square was primarily an oil lender’s bank. When the bottom dropped out of the oil patch, so too went the bank and the area’s economics.

A lot of the people involved with the bank and oil business all bought million-dollar homes, ordered big buildings, bought Mercedes . . . and then they lost everything. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what happened to construction — and why Oklahoma’s building vacancy rate is the highest in North America.

Furthermore, it’ll stay that way until we get a new economic base under us.—

DIMENSIONS: —and that’ll be, when?

MAIDT: —what’s your guess? It’s as good as anyone else’s.

DIMENSIONS: When one goes, so goes others. The domino theory—

MAIDT: —is alive, well, and functioning in Oklahoma.

DIMENSIONS: Through all this difficulty, Bob, your company has remained union. Isn’t the non-union movement hitting this area?

MAIDT: It’s hitting the area all right. But the local unions here simply won’t enforce their own bylaws—and that’s a fact of life.

I’ve got union craftsmen working for me one week, working non-union the next, and then bidding against me on the third. It’s economically tough in Oklahoma these days and it’s every man for himself. We’ll remain union contractors as long as we are signatory to the contract—but I can’t fault a man for wanting to live and eat.

DIMENSIONS: How about traveling? Many contractors, faced with a work pinch in their own backyards, go elsewhere—

MAIDT: —yes, and they get their britches beat off elsewhere, too. There’ll be no traveling for me. I can’t successfully compete against a guy in his own backyard.

My marketing area is central and western Oklahoma. Now that’s a sizeable chunk of real estate and there are plenty of hospitals, court houses, and the like for us to bid.

DIMENSIONS: How about asbestos abatement? That’s apparently a booming market?

MAIDT: We haven’t ruled it out, but the market is still young and relatively uncontrolled. There’s only one way to do that kind of work and that’s “by the book.” We’ve even called government enforcement agencies with some of the outrageous safety violations we’ve seen. Some of the people involved with asbestos are handing out cheap respirators, useless clothing . . . they have no insurance and even less knowledge of what they’re dealing with . . . and it appears that some of
them have gone out of their way to hire every wino they can find.

**DIMENSIONS:** But isn’t that all the more reason for you—a longtime, legitimate contractor—to get involved?

**MAIDT:** For one thing, there’s no insurance to be had: at this time the work apparently is uninsurable. We won’t move until that problem is resolved. Then we will probably do one of these jobs. One thing is certain: when we do the work you won’t find asbestos all over the floor, in empty barrels in corridors and the like.

**DIMENSIONS:** You’ve been in this business a long time. Do you see any appreciable movement on the retainer problem?

**MAIDT:** It’s still with us. It still hurts. And, no, I don’t see much happening to correct the situation. Even though a 10% retention represents the cash flow on a job for most subcontractors.

What a subcontractor needs most these days is a good banking relationship . . . and a good line of credit. You can have your net quickly tied up in retainages from the last 10 jobs.

We don’t have that situation ourselves because the last 10 jobs are pretty well separated. But we know what our costs are and we can control the condition.

**DIMENSIONS:** But shouldn’t every prudent contractor know his costs?

**MAIDT:** I’ve been in this business for years and it’s astonishing how many contractors really don’t know their costs. If a contractor doesn’t know his costs, chances are he’s got a sick job on his hands.—

**DIMENSIONS:** —well, there’s always BLAP—bid low and pray—and then hope for change orders?

**MAIDT:** Maybe. But it you want to shoot craps, go to Las Vegas. Contracting is hazardous enough without improving the odds.

**DIMENSIONS:** The problem of retention should be resolved right up front, when the contracts are signed. How about you, do you have your own subcontract form or do you go along with the general contractor’s form?

**MAIDT:** I don’t have my own form, but I read every contract—you’ve got to!—and I’m seldom eager to sign. I don’t alter a contract without first discussing it, but there are a few things we want in a contract, too. The GC gets what he wants: what’s wrong with me getting what I want?

For example, I want unrestricted access to the work area for fireproofing. It’s in our contract. That way, we get in and out quick and the client loves it. Would we get this access if we didn’t ask for, or insist on, such rights? I don’t know, but you don’t get something if you don’t ask for it. And they can only say, “no.”

**DIMENSIONS:** But what about your own special subcontract form? Are you saying you don’t ever write contract language?

**MAIDT:** On special jobs or with a customer with whom I have no working experience, we write our own language. We have our own bid proposal form, and on big jobs we go for the amended GC contract.

All this fighting over subcontract forms is a bit of a mystery to me. You can do business with a knife and fork at a luncheon table. That’s when it’s easier to explain that I’m not going to guarantee some architect’s system for a year when I know it’s going to fail.

**DIMENSIONS:** How do you approach progress payments, Bob? You’ve undoubtedly been to the well on this issue a time or two, haven’t you?
The one thing about construction that is predictable is its amazing flexibility, its resourcefulness. That’s been our strength — and maybe our weakness.”

MAIDT: What contractor with any experience hasn’t been to the well on payments? I expect timely payment three days after the GC is paid, and I know how to check if he, has been paid. Because we often get conversation, I write an interest clause of 1.5% per month on the unpaid monthly estimate and this goes on the GC’s contract — nearly everyone else — department stores, gasoline credit card accounts, etc.— all charge this 1.5% . . . why not a subcontractor? The GCs don’t like it. The obvious answer is, “pay us timely and there is no interest?”

DIMENSIONS: —but can you really get that extra interest charge?
MAIDT: There’s no argument if you have it in writing. But like I say, get it BEFORE, not after, the ink is dry. The world just turns that way. Subs are just too eager to sign.

DIMENSIONS: You’ve remained a plastering contractor all these years, you’ve served as association president, and chaired just about every national committee In the industry. From your perspective, what’s been the biggest change in construction?
MAIDT: Oh, that’s an easy one. It’s simply the shift to unskilled manpower. A number of systems today don’t require all that much skill content in the mechanics. Consequently, this lack of skill and industry tradition leads to supervisory shortcomings.

It’s a people problem: they simply don’t have the knowledge of construction. The construction manager concept certainly, in my opinion, is not the answer, nor are some of the highblown construction systems they introduce in order to get the jobs done.

DIMENSIONS: Given the lack of supervisory skills, what does Maidt Plastering do when it encounters a job superintendent who obviously is having trouble lacing up his shoes?
MAIDT: Do what every other smart contractor does, watch the job carefully and make every effort to cut or reduce your loss exposure. You certainly can’t control the superintendent, so you make the best of it by closer supervision.

DIMENSIONS: Do you see a continuing decline in competence? Or is this a temporary thing?
MAIDT: I think the industry will adjust to its own needs. If the systems today require less skill, the industry will provide that kind of skill.

The one thing about construction that is predictable is its amazing flexibility, its resourcefulness.

That’s been our strength — and maybe our weakness.