Toronto: The Resurgence Has Started

In Toronto, Elmo Colussi Anticipates Improved Business But Still Wages Battle Against Non-Unionism, Reduced Job Starts

For the 20-year-old Italian immigrant, Canada was every bit as big, beautiful and expansive as he’d been led to believe—but his new career wasn’t exactly living up to advance expectations.

The signed contract that allowed Elmo Colussi to enter Canada and work on a Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) hospital was invalid: the contractor whose signature appeared on the paper had died unexpectedly. Despite valiant shipboard efforts by a friendly priest to teach the young Italian a smattering of English, Elmo’s vocabulary consisted fundamentally of his native tongue—not much help as the crews began shaping up for work.

He knew he was in trouble until he heard a series of familiar syllables coming from a terrazzo and tile foreman. Walking over to the group, Elmo shouted in Italian, “I need a job.”

“Terrazo or tile?” the foreman shot back.

“Give me a choice.”

“Where you from?” Foremen in those days, Colussi concedes, asked lots of questions.

The foreman told him, “You’re no tile man? I need a tile man.”

“I’ll be a laborer,” was Colussi’s answer

“Give him a shovel and get him started,” the foreman said briskly. And thus the Canadian career of Elmo Colussi started. Two weeks later the
“I think that unions are very necessary and vital. Furthermore, I think the unions see and recognize their problems, and they will act to accommodate the situation. It will take some time, but change will come.”

foreman, Rudy Faion, told Colussi, “you’re no laborer,” and handed him a tool box. That was in 1952. Today, Elmo Colussi is President of his own company, Opec Acoustics & Drywall Ltd., of 19 Oakland Ave., Weston, Ontario.

Born in Zoppola, Italy, son of the late Emilio and Maria Colossi, Elmo worked summers in construction and on the family farm while attending public school and the Technical School in Pordenone province. Once he’d completed his engineering studies, though, he opted for Canada and a new life.

Once he got started in Canada, he continued his education at night school while moving up steadily in the construction management ranks. By 1970, he was ready to launch his own business in the commercial and high rise market. It’s been a steady uphill climb ever since.

He and his wife, the former Silvana Vecchiato, of Porpetto, Italy, run the business together. They are also the parents of two children: Louise, 23, currently finishing up for a master’s degree in languages at the University of Toronto, and Stephen, 18, a high school senior. Besides his business commitments, Elmo serves as President this year of the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario where he had been a director for three years.

In Ontario, the construction business is beginning its comeback, and while work is not booming, the work level is far from a recession. For Elmo Colussi the last few years has been a test of survival—as with most North American contractors—and he looks now for a much needed resurgence.

DIMENSIONS: Throughout North America—and especially in some Canadian areas—the union contractor is hard pressed to compete. You’ve remained a union contractor, so what’s your experience been?

COLUSSI: I don’t think there is any doubt that the unions have lost much of their power . . . their impact . . . in this last recession. They may still have contract language and the like, but they aren’t exercising it as they did before. They can’t really, because it would kill off the union contractor’s ability to meet the competitive situation.

DIMENSIONS: But isn’t it true, that union and non-union contractors are working on the same jobs these days? If so, that’s just got to be something unique in Toronto?

COLUSSI: There’s no doubt that the non-union element is penetrating the Toronto market. As union employers, we pay the top end in everything . . . wages, benefits, health. In today’s market this is increasingly too expensive so many buyers are turning to the general contractor who hires non-union. That’s where the trend is coming from. Since 1982, more and more general contractors have closed down their union operations and gone non-union. Others simply hire non-union subs.

DIMENSIONS: And the subcontracting community has responded to this movement, right?

COLUSSI: That’s right. Ten years ago, you wouldn’t see non-union and union on the same job. But today we have to do it in order to stay in business so we bid non-union general contractors. Tough maybe, but that’s the way the construction business is today.

DIMENSIONS: Regardless of union or non-union affiliation, do you agree that it’s the general contractor who makes a profit—or loses one—
despite your best estimating or supervisory efforts?

COLUSSI: Whether the general contractor is good or bad is half as important as the talent of the superintendent. I know because I was a general contractor superintendent. If the superintendent runs the job well, you’ll make money or at least come out even on a bad job. If that superintendent is bad, you better be prepared to lose—and I doubt if there’s really much you can do about it—

DIMENSIONS: —but isn’t it true that the subs can get together and coordinate things themselves? They’ve been known to do that when an incompetent superintendent is the problem.

COLUSSI: That’s a defensive mechanism, but, yes, you try to work things out with the other subs. The problem is, though, that no consistent general organizational plan is in effect so it’s every sub for himself. Consequently, you just “grin and bear it.” When a dictator tells everyone what to do and the sequence in which it’s to be done, that’s when a job most likely will run smooth—and you make money.

DIMENSIONS: Elmo, earlier you mentioned that you didn’t like to take the general contractor’s or his superintendent’s word when they wanted you to crew up for a particular task. Didn’t you say that you wanted to check everything for yourself first?

COLUSSI: That’s right. When a superintendent calls me up and wants me to bring in a crew with the comment that “he’s ready,” I generally don’t take his word for it. What happens if your crew gets there and they’re “not ready”—who pays for that? Any sub should check very carefully before he moves in. If you know the superintendent, if he’s worked with him before, OK—but not if you haven’t personally checked to assure that your men will be able to do their own assignments.

DIMENSIONS: Another example of “get in and get out?”

COLUSSI: If there’s any other way to run a profitable job, I’d like to know what it is. The sub trades want to push the job . . . everyone wants to get in and get out as quickly as possible. A good superintendent understands this and pushes toward the same goal.

DIMENSIONS: Again, though, it’s all a matter of knowing your customers, isn’t it? I mean, it’s so much easier to work and plan with someone you know?

COLUSSI: There’s a “yes, but” type of situation in that question. You might know the general contractor—indeed, he might be a first rate contractor—but you don’t always know the superintendent. That’s where the gamble enters.

If you’re lucky, you get a capable individual. Otherwise, it’s a crap shoot. Any experienced sub will tell you that.

DIMENSIONS: What’s your procedure for handling an unknown customer? Do you try and get a line on him... ask other subs for references, that sort of thing?

COLUSSI: The bulk of my work is with old customers. That’s my lifeline to the industry. They know and trust me and my company. They know that we provide good service and do quality work on time. At the same time, I realize I must work with GCs that I am not familiar with—and let’s face it, if you want to get information on someone it’s not all that difficult.

In the end, though, you simply must take the chance on a new customer. Don’t be foolish and go in blind . . .
you can call around and check things out . . . find out how well he operates . . . and how he pays. I get lots of calls for prices and estimates, and my first question every time to a request like this is, “who wants the number?”

**DIMENSIONS:** And accounts receivables? What does Elmo Colussi do to assure that his company is paid the right amount, on time?

**COLUSSI:** I don’t have all that much difficulty with collecting my money. If the general doesn’t have the money . . . if he hasn’t been paid . . . there really isn’t much that you can do about it. Of course, you can lien but that doesn’t always get you the money either.

Before starting a job, I like to know if the mortgage is already set. Then by the time I go onto the job, I can check with other subs on what the payment situation is. That’s one of the major benefits of being a wall and ceiling contractor: I’m one of the last on the job.

By the time my crews start working, there’s a history already in place. If others have been experiencing payment problems, I make adjustments on what I expect in the way of payment.

**DIMENSIONS:** “Too many subcontractors will sign anything.” That’s the comment I hear from so many in the business. How do you handle the subcontract form?

**COLUSSI:** I agree. Lots of subcontractors put their name down without reading what they’re signing. They’re hoping everything will turn out OK. That’s nonsense.

I read every word in a contract form. Then my wife — who has the eyes of an eagle — reads it, too. If there’s anything questionable, we talk it over and then act on the basis of our discussion. The construction industry in Ontario has standard forms of contracts, but they’re not always used because so many GCs prefer to use their own forms. I can’t imagine any businessman going to the trouble of developing his own form unless it contains some elements to his benefit: that’s why Silvana and I read every form carefully.

**DIMENSIONS:** In your opinion, what’s the biggest issue facing you as a subcontractor, say, for the next 10 years?

**COLUSSI:** I’d have to say the union vs. non-union issue contains the biggest challenge. That’s the one that could make or break the industry.

As for technology, it’s moving faster than before but it’s manageable if you pay attention. Steel is penetrating more and more markets and that includes heavy metal framing, metal siding, curtain walls. I look for precast panels to replace the traditional brick panel—

**DIMENSIONS:** —the apprenticeships among bricklayers is said to be comparable to plasterers. They don’t have all that many new craftsmen coming up, to they?

**COLUSSI:** That’s true. In this part of the country at least the availability right now of bricklayers is a problem— with no apparent influx of new people.

The situation is similar to plastering. The problem with these two old trades is that they involve one unit at a time. The wages are high and the speed of installation is much slower than new, modern systems. Of course, buyers can still have this kind of quality but you must pay for it and too many people aren’t willing to pay the difference . . . certainly not in these high money cost times.

**DIMENSIONS:** Right now? What’s the issue right before the wall and ceiling contractor immediately?

**COLUSSI:** The first step is for unions and employers to realize the need for greater understanding so they can solve their own problems. Unless we get something moving in Toronto, we’ll enjoy the same experience as our Western Provinces which is now essentially non-union. I think the union leadership here must be more flexible.

Don’t get me wrong, the unions here are making concessions. But we may need more.

**DIMENSIONS:** And these additional concessions? What are they? What’s needed to equalize the competitive environment?

**COLUSSI:** If I knew the answer to that, everyone would hire me to solve the problem. I just don’t know and only the experience of working with it will reveal an answer. Both sides will need to work on this because it isn’t strictly a union problem as such. We both—union and employer—must share the responsibility for things getting out of hand the way they did.

The one thing I do know, though, is that the tradesman and the contractor will survive. Now that will occur either separately or individually but we will all survive.

As long as there are people, there will be a need for construction.