Trying Harder: 
Vancouver’s John Reeve

A Vancouver contractor’s view of the changing conditions in Canada’s construction industry

One thing you can say about wall and ceiling contractors in British Columbia, Canada’s western mart Province: they are trying harder than ever.

There’s a reason. Massive changes are underway in Canadian construction and nowhere is this more evident than in British Columbia. With a pending labor bill that would in effect gut the power of unionism in that historically unionized province, Canada’s western contractors are holding tight for possibly a completely new way of doing business.

The individual sitting at the cortex of the British Columbia whirlwind is John N. Reeve, Director of the Association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors of British Columbia, and himself a contractor: John is owner of Alpine Drywall, in Vancouver, and is largely responsible for leading AWCC into a number of projects that could ultimately result in Canadian wall and ceiling contractors enjoying their own national association.

Born in Regina, John was a sales engineer for 12 years for Westroc Industries, a subsidiary of British Gypsum. He worked in Regina and Toronto before going to Vancouver where he ultimately started his stucco and plastering business in 1968.

A member of the old Gypsum Drywall Contractors International before it consolidated with the International Association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors to become AWCI, John has been a union contractor throughout his career.

John and his wife, the former June Oliver Reeve, are the parents of two sons and a daughter. For John the current union situation is the principle subject of concern, but his long range plans include far more than provincial pursuits.

DIMENSIONS: You mentioned that British Columbia right now is facing a critical issue concerning unionism. Would you mind elaborating a bit on that?

REEVE: Here in Canada, labor legislation is strictly a matter for each Province. In British Columbia we are now through the second reading of Bill #19 which will allow extraordinary freedom to union members. The government is determined to break union power here—and most voters and business interests, despite any personal advantages because of unionism, are inclined to support the government.

It really will put an end to union political power—all unions, not just construction—in this province and perhaps usher in an era of non-unionism.

DIMENSIONS: I should imagine that the union leadership is dead set against any such legislation. But what led to such intense feelings?

REEVE: A number of things. Keep in mind, though, that the attitudes of unions in Canada vs. the U.S. are radically different. U.S. unions are primarily concerned with economic issues whereas Canadian unions are more social and political minded: they ape the socialistic orientation so evident in Great Britain.

DIMENSIONS: Such a movement would indicate that the union sector is losing ground to non-unionism, a condition similar to the U.S. What is the status of union construction in Vancouver?

REEVE: Two years ago we union contractors performed 80 percent of all commercial/industrial work and 100 percent of in-city high rise work. Non-union contractors did residential work.

The non-union are now doing 20 percent of the high rise and moving...
into the other sectors as well. Unemployment among union workers is 60 percent.

A year ago, the members of the association figured most of us would be out of business. We’re still here, but struggling hard to keep afloat.

**DIMENSIONS:** I assume from your comments that the unions haven’t made too many concessions to alleviate the pressures?

**REEVE:** That’s right: they’ve refused to budge on anything. We’re not crying wolf. I’ve historically averaged 60-100 men. I’m down to two mechanics—and I’m not alone either.

The new legislation will make it possible for non-unionism to function in this province. The issue is really manpower control. Right now the unions can dispatch personnel and we can’t refuse their selections.

**DIMENSIONS:** But this legislation could end up hurting you union contractors. Other Canadian contractors seldom came into your market area because of this union umbrella, right? I mean they did protect you?

**REEVE:** That’s absolutely correct. We do recognize we’ll lose some advantages, but the overwhelming feature is evident: this legislation is most probably beneficial for the economics and political systems of the province.

**DIMENSIONS:** But isn’t it simpler to go double breasted?

**REEVE:** In British Columbia you must either be union or non-union. The law prohibits double breasted operations and the penalties are severe if you try and play games.

**DIMENSIONS:** But if unemployment runs that high, you can be sure that unions are feeling the money pinch, too, aren’t they?

**REEVE:** Yes, they are hurt financially. The apprentice programs have laid off their people and that’s an issue with us: we don’t want to see these training programs go down the drain.

But the unions are intransigent: here, it’s a political movement, a philosophy so the government must take them head-on. Once non-union contractors couldn’t do commercial work because they couldn’t get electrical hookups, concrete . . . that sort of thing.

Now the government sees to it they can get these things, so jobs can now go non-union.

**DIMENSIONS:** What’s kept you union contractors alive then?

**REEVE:** Expo last year which
“The Vancouver ‘Specifications Standards Manual’ represents the best such document in North America.”

meant a lot of new hotels and buildings. We union contractors still got the bulk of that work. Business activity is slower but still rather good and we expect it will be for at least another year.

Without something like Expo, though, we must have concessions on the things that are allowing non-union competitors to take our work. And, yes, we did agree to them in the past, but times have changed.

DIMENSIONS: John, wasn’t it the Vancouver contractors group which did so much work on a “Specification Standards Manual”? I’ve heard this is a rather outstanding piece of work?

REEVE: Yes, we’ve published such a manual. Actually, we invested some $100,000 to produce the document which covers all W4C work.

In 1983, Canada started going metric and we even provided for measurements to be in metrics as well as imperial. To keep it current and up dated, we’ve now added a EIFS (exterior insulated finish system) section.

We sold publication rights to the contractors association in Alberta and we’re now negotiating with the Toronto group.

DIMENSIONS: Could you describe the manual, its contents, its thrust . . . that sort of thing?

REEVE: We’ve been told by designers that it represents the best such document in North America—and we’re not inclined to disagree. It simply establishes standards for wall and ceiling work based on the Canadian Standards Association, the Canadian counterpart of ASTM.

Some slight editorial changes would need to be made for use in the U.S., but the specs are essentially the same as the Construction Specifications Institute in the U.S. I don’t think there’s any doubt that such a document could be a tremendous boon for all of North America if the industry got behind this document and supported it.

DIMENSIONS: How are you promoting it now?

REEVE: It’s free to professional designers. We encourage contractors to provide a copy to their customers. The more this document gets around the better it will be for anyone specifying wall and ceiling work.

It’s good for the contractor because
if we do work according to the specs, we’ve performed our duties. This obviously protects the consumer and it likewise protects the designer who is interested in quality performance.

The designer particularly likes it because they avoid the flock of “use our product” salesmen, and gets the “or equal” situation under better control.

**DIMENSIONS:** Canada has one national code body whereas the U.S. has three. And in Canada you still have to get it assigned from the National Building Code Advisory Committee before it becomes officially recognized.

Aren't you biting off a rather large chunk?

**REEVE:** I recognize what we’re biting into and that’s been my major thrust in behalf of the association. It’s a goal well worth pursuing, don’t you agree?

**DIMENSIONS:** I think it would be a tremendous benefit to Canada and the U.S. You also mentioned a high interest in the International drywall contest?

**REEVE:** The Vancouver contractors support this totally. The International Drywall Contest started in Southern California 10 years ago and we’ve won eight times. I can’t think of any other activity that promotes—and encourages—quality apprentice training.

In Ontario, they have no formal apprentice program. It’s strictly on-the-job training but no course work. We’ve supplied Ontario with our course materials and guidelines and we’re urging them to get an instruction course. And now, Ontario will host the international contest in September and they’ll have entrants. That’s how this contest grows—and stimulates interest
in the trade. To avoid it being labeled as a West Coast phenomenon, we held the contest in 1986 in Maine.

**DIMENSIONS:** Do the Vancouver apprentices head up for the contest? Do you use it as a motivator?

**REEVE:** Of course we use it to motivate. Truth is, this contest supplies its own motivation.

Our apprentices go to school for four weeks in their first and second year and for six weeks in the final year. We’ve just recently increased the course to four years because of new systems coming in. Throughout, they all know about the contest and look forward to earning the right to compete.

Is it any wonder that our apprentices do so well in the international contest?

**DIMENSIONS:** What are you aiming for? Contest entries from each province?

**REEVE:** Yes, I would like to see that happen. Actually, what I’d really like to see is for Canada to have its own national wall and ceiling association.

I think the time is right. Vancouver has its regular publication, “The Trowel,” and perhaps we can initiate a movement that would lead to such an organization. Certainly, it would be good for Canada and would allow us to work even more closely with AWCI.

**DIMENSIONS:** Who would lead such an effort? It appears that Vancouver is the only organization with such a capability?

**REEVE:** Well, we do have British Columbia. Alberta is already well organized with strong contractor groups, and Toronto has a number of outstanding contractors.

Quebec has great possibilities. And we are all wall and ceiling contractors—not just drywall, or lath and plaster, or acoustical—so we have a common purpose and common needs.

It would be good for North American industry. And that’s what an association is all about—to serve the needs of the industry and its customers.