
OLD WORLD CRAFTSMANSHIP A FAMILY TRADITION

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R Gabe Reitter II says his company's Old World craftsmanship is a family tradition his great-grandfather brought from Klostermarienburg, Austria. "In that village, plastering was a local art," explains Reitter, "and just about every family had someone in the trade."

The elder Reitter immigrated to the United States in 1905, and ten years later founded the company that still bears his name—Reitter Stucco, Inc., of Columbus, Ohio. And today, five generations and nearly 75 years later the business is still very much a family affair.

"I've been working on the jobsite, helping out since I was 12," says Gabe, who's now 40, "and I've always known I wanted to be in the family business, because I always loved being around it." He joined the company full-time in 1968, and since 1976 has served as president.

Three generations of Reitters are in the business today. Gabe's father Dick participates actively, as do three younger brothers—Fritz, who is head of operations; Jack, who is in charge of residential and rehab projects; and Bobby, who is a superintendent.

"And this year," says Gabe proudly, "my son started as a plasterer, making the fifth generation to work in the company since it was founded." Reitter has three other children.

Reitter's grandfather, Gabe I, couldn't join the company until the 1920s—as World War I delayed his immigration from Austria. "But still," says Reitter, "it wasn't until 1972 that we moved the company office out of his basement."

Since then, Reitter Stucco has seen tremendous growth. Today the non-union company has 115 employees and performs 500-600 projects annually worth more than \$6 million, primarily in the commercial market.

DIMENSIONS: Is family tradition the reason why your company works primarily in "real" stucco, when synthetics seem to be the rage?

REITTER: We tried synthetics as early as 1973. But then we said, "Let's wait ten years to see if this stuff is here to stay." By 1984, we saw synthetics had a role in the industry, so the company decided that year to add synthetics to our services.

Architects like synthetics because they offer so much design flexibility. You can make them look like limestone, or sandstone, or just about anything. And synthetic stucco is very cost-effective when compared to other materials you would need to achieve the same look.

Manufacturers have done a lot to show architects what synthetics can do—which I think has also had a carry-

over effect, making people more aware of real stucco as well. In fact, most of Reitter Stucco's growth has been since 1982, when manufacturers really started pushing synthetics.

I would say synthetics right now are where drywall was in the 1950s, when drywall had started to find a market as an alternative to plastering. Today, of course, plastering is a lost art. But I don't think synthetics will ever push real stucco completely out of the picture.

Stucco has been around since the Egyptian pyramids, so the material has a tradition that gives people confidence. It costs about half the price of synthetics, and it lasts forever. In fact, you can still go see the first stucco job our company ever did, over on 6th & State Streets here in Columbus.

That's why about 60 percent of our business is real stucco, because customers see the product's low price and longevity—and know Reitter has the experience to do a really high-quality job. Stucco still dominates the residential market and, at least here in Columbus, there's almost no synthetics used in housing.

DIMENSIONS: Is Reitter Stucco, then, pretty much the same company it was 75 years ago?

REITTER: Well, stucco is pretty much a perennial product that doesn't

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come and go with the latest architectural fads. You can use stucco in everything from Tudor, to contemporary, to traditional. So we haven't experienced cycles where stucco goes out of fashion.

Also, one thing that's never changed about our company is our quality. A few years ago, we were going to open a branch in Phoenix (Arizona), since there's so much stucco in the Southwest. But we found people there are willing to accept lower quality—and since quality is our biggest selling point, the company's approach didn't mix with that market.

However, the type of work Reitter Stucco does has changed. The company started in the residential business, but in the late 1960s, we moved mostly into commercial projects. Partly as a result, our annual sales volume has grown from \$275,000 when I joined the company in 1968, to more than \$6 million today on about 500-600 projects.

DIMENSIONS: So you stick exclusively to the commercial market?

REITTER: No, we do about 65 percent of our business in commercial construction, and the rest in housing. As a company, we've made a commitment to keeping a presence in the residential market.

Our philosophy is that the architects, general contractors, and building owners of tomorrow live in houses. So if Reitter Stucco stays active in the housing market, our future customers will grow up with our product.

DIMENSIONS: But with synthetic stucco getting all the attention, you must do more to market your services?

REITTER: We really try to get one-on-one with our customers. For example, in the early 1980s we were written up in a national industry magazine as being the first stucco contractor in America to install a showroom.

But mainly we market the company through my involvements with trade associations like ABC (Associated Builders and Contractors), AGC (Associated General Contractors), ASA (American Subcontractors Association),

CSI (Construction Specifications Institute), ASTM (American Society for Testing of Materials), the local builders' exchange, and of course AWCI—of which we've been members since 1975.

We exhibit at many of the trade shows, and I have served on the boards of several of the organizations—including one term as treasurer of the local building industry association. I'm fortunate the business is situated so I have time for these involvements.



DIMENSIONS: So how do you see yourselves? As a stucco contractor that also does synthetics? Or as a full service contractor that does both materials?

REITTER: Actually, we see ourselves as an exterior wall systems company that can offer whatever customers want. For example, about \$600,000 of our annual volume comes from doing cultured stone veneer.

DIMENSIONS: We've talked about the selling points for real stucco and synthetic stucco. But how do the two differ in their properties as materials?

REITTER: Applying synthetic stucco is very different than applying real stucco—especially in the “softwall” system we use, where you're putting foam on the substrate.

Synthetics are applied in a step-by-step process, whereas stucco you just smear on the wall. Also, in synthetics everything is pre-blended to minimize mistakes. But with stucco you've got to

observe all the ratios, and adjust for different times of the year; plus you've got to know how to mix colors precisely from various pigments. So your crews need to be much more knowledgeable to do a quality stucco job.

Also, synthetics are a lighter material than stucco.

DIMENSIONS: Does that mean synthetics don't take as much time to apply as stucco?

REITTER: No—and in fact,

sometimes, it actually takes longer to apply synthetics. There are a lot more steps in applying synthetic stuccos, so you can get the different design finishes. For example, you've got to sand down the foam in order to get true surfaces.

Synthetic stucco is also a less forgiving material than real stucco, because the material is so thin that you can't hide your mistakes as easily. With real stucco, you just slap on some more material and fill in your mistakes.

DIMENSIONS: How hard is it for workers to cross-train from one material to the other—from real stucco to synthetic, and vice versa? Are the skills readily transferable?

REITTER: Synthetics are fundamentally different than stucco,

because they're a "dimensional" material—that is, you've got foam and mesh that need to be laid out. On the other hand, stucco is a "non-dimensional" material, since all you have to do is smear it on the wall.

So it's not just a straight transfer of skills from one material to the other. People who work on stucco have to unlearn their old habits, because the rules are different in synthetics.

Often we find our lathers have an easier time learning how to apply synthetics, because they're used to dealing with dimensional materials. And when new guys are hired, now we train them on synthetics first—and stucco later, if at all.

I've got to add, also, that to be cost-effective as a stucco contractor, you've got to have a sufficient labor pool. That's why you see stucco in central Ohio but not in Kentucky. Stucco has been around the Columbus area for a long time, so we have a local labor force; but in Kentucky they haven't grown up with stucco—so consequently there's no labor pool, and no stucco contractor could set up shop and survive.

DIMENSIONS: Do you think the use of synthetics will continue to grow...

REITTER: Yeah, I'd say within 20 years or so the industry will be moving mostly toward the newer materials.

DIMENSIONS: Well, if you think

their use will keep on growing, isn't it going to be hard to find skilled stucco applicators?

REITTER: I think that's the biggest problem the whole industry has to face, and not just stucco. The industry is growing and, with demand so high, there just aren't enough skilled workers to go around.

These days, young people don't want to be construction laborers. So the new hires you get are the "leftovers," peo-

ple who aren't exactly the up-and-comers that you've got to put them on a wall after only six months. Twenty-five years ago, a guy would have to apprentice 3-4 years before he could get on a wall by himself.

DIMENSIONS: So what's the solution?

REITTER: With better apprenticeship and training programs, like the new AWCI program, we can make a start—because without such programs, the future for both stucco and syn-



ple who aren't exactly the up-and-comers

But even though people today need more training because they tend to be less apt, you can't give it to them. Demand is so high and labor so scarce,





thetics is going to be limited. And inevitably, such limits would force the growth of panelized wall systems . . .

DIMENSIONS: You think panelization is inevitable?

REITTER: In my opinion, panelization will be the dominant construction technique by, say, the year 2020. In fact, panelization is Reitter Stucco's next move, and we've already started the preliminary planning.

Labor is our biggest cost, and panelization is the only way our company can significantly increase volume without adding a lot of new employees.

DIMENSIONS: But what were you going to say about apprenticeship programs?

REITTER: First of all, manufacturers have to help in developing more

trainees—because sloppy jobs give black marks to the whole industry. They could help do that by supporting the AWCI training program, and other training programs.

Also, manufacturers need to be firmer about yanking the licenses of irresponsible or unqualified contractors. Manufacturers' reps are supposed to police this, but they're really salesmen interested in moving products. Sales mean more money in their pockets, so they'd rather sell products to questionable people than spend time monitoring quality.

DIMENSIONS: If voluntary regulation isn't adequate, then are third-party inspections going to be needed?

REITTER: Not only will third-party inspections be needed, but I support

them 100 percent! In fact, I'm on an ASTM committee looking into the matter. The manufacturers aren't doing the job, so the industry needs a governing body.

Some contractors may not like having to put up with more inspections. But without them, the industry's labor situation is going to keep pushing quality down, and eventually business will suffer.

That's what I see coming, and if contractors want their voice heard, they've got to get involved with the various associations. It takes time to be involved with AWCI, or a standard-setting organization like CSI or ASTM—but for the sake of the industry, and ultimately for their own survival, contractors have to get involved. 