

with The Uni

Poellinger's, Inc. renovates a hotel while the guests enjoy their stay.

By Michael J. Major

Two years ago, the Radisson Hotel in Lacrosse, Wis., had a big problem. The structural panels put in when the hotel was first built about 15 years ago were failing. There was leakage within the wall systems, with water getting into the rooms and damaging the wallboard and carpets. Since the side walls and insulation were damaged, it was becoming increasingly difficult to heat and cool the rooms. Because the eight-story facility was one of the premier hotels in this town of 50,000 people, with a high occupancy rate, there would be a cost of \$250,000 a year in lost revenue while the repairs were being made.

Since the hotel owners, R. L. H. & Associates, previously had a bad experience with the original panel installation, they looked at some alternative exterior systems, such as metal panels or brick veneers. But the proposal that really attracted them came from Poellinger's, Inc., which offered a bright,

attractive, contemporary look and was more cost effective than the other bids. More importantly, it allowed the complete renovation to be accomplished without putting any of the hotel rooms out of commission. The solution, in a nutshell, was that Poellinger's put a demountable partition system just inside the rooms, while his crew was working outside on the scaffolding.



Mikel R. Poellinger, General Manager; Poellinger's Inc.

Here's how the general manager, Mikel R. Poellinger, and his crew went about it. Basically, the original building was a masonry structure with structural steel-framing infills. It had been clad in a 1-inch epoxy matrix panel. As the panels failed, the leakage increased-an embarrassing situation for a hotel connected directly to the city's convention center.

Since the eight-story hotel had about 15 rooms across on each floor, and windows were on only two sides of the building, Poellinger basically divided it into quadrants. The crew could work on only three floors at a

Unique Solution

time, one window and one return side.

The Solution

But inside—and here was the unique solution—Poellinger utilized GB350 wall-demountable partitions set 18 inches inside the window. This is a vinyl-covered Sheetrock system that can be put up, taken down and reused. “Once we had those partitions up, we could still do work on the exterior while the room was rented out,” Poellinger says. “The hotel offered a slight discount to the people who were cut off from a window view, but most of them didn’t mind.”

Poellinger’s work consisted of tearing out the outside walls and windows. “Since we had to take the windows out anyway, we convinced hotel officials to put in new ones,” Poellinger says. This meant that for reinstallation, the steel frame would have some portions cut off to allow for larger windows.

Basically, the crew tore the panels off of the outside, then took the insulation out of the stud cavity, replacing it with insulation with a new vapor barrier and new Sheetrock on the inside of the window wall. To the outside was applied exterior Dens-Glass sheeting. Then installed were 2 inches of

Dryvit foam, and then Dryvit’s Outsulation System on the exterior of the building.

“The idea behind the whole thing was to increase the insulation value by putting a higher quality window back in and reinsulating the side walls, then establishing a thermo break with foam insulation on the

construction season. The \$1.3 million project took two years and has just recently been completed.

Coming up with a specialty solution like this comes naturally to the company. It was founded in 1957 by Mikel’s father, John. It started as a plastering business, but, over time, grew into a specialty company offer-

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outside,” Poellinger says. “Finally, with the Outsulation System we were able to create a more contemporary look for the hotel. The foam allowed us to put accent grooves in, and we created eyebrows above the eighth-floor windows to make it all appear up-to-date.”

Because of the added thickness to the exterior wall system, all the roof caps and flashings were also replaced to accommodate this new thickness. Since the winters are heavy in the upper midwest, Poellinger decided to make it a two-year project, working on it only during the May-to-late-September con-

ing a variety of services, including drywall, ornamental plaster, stucco, interior insulation systems, light gauge steel framing, sprayed acoustical systems, fire proofing, ceramic and quarry tiles, demountable partitions, hollow metal doors and frames, door hardware, solid partitions and accessories.

The company has been involved with many projects, some residential, but mostly commercial, including cathedrals, airport terminals, libraries, chain stores and a fair amount of institutional work for schools and hospitals, including their maintenance. The firm also

does historic renovation work with ornamental plastering.

Poellinger's market area is interesting. Lacrosse is located in southwest Wisconsin, between Chicago and Minneapolis. The city is on the Wisconsin border, and Poellinger, in fact, lives in Minnesota. Lacrosse is only 20 miles from the Iowa border. Poellinger also has worked in Madison and Racine near the Illinois border, and has, on occasion, worked in

that state, as well as the other three.

Poellinger, who took over the business in 1986, describes the market as competitive, and he often has to bid against large contractors from cities like Minneapolis or Milwaukee for institutional projects such as hospitals. Poellinger's, Inc., which does \$3 million to \$5 million in annual business, has a construction-season staff of about 100 employees, but, unlike many exterior

cladding contractors, he also does interior plastering with a core staff of 70 through the colder months.

A key to the company's success is its reputation for quality, which allows it to contract for generally over 50 percent of its work on a negotiated basis. This was the case on the hotel project. And, in fact, because of Poellinger's central role in that renovation, he was named the general rather than subcontractor.

Marketing That Works

John Poellinger started a marketing strategy that continues to this day: finding new ways for the company to develop long-range relationships with manufacturers, architects and clients. For instance, once or twice a year, Poellinger's, Inc. offers a noon luncheon at a local hotel, bringing in a major manufacturer's representative, who gives a talk, usually on a technical subject, such as steel framing. "What makes this work is that, because of our geographical location, we're not a prime target for a manufacturer to send his representatives. So, instead of taking a day to see one architect, we can now see 25."

It's because of services like these, the fact that the company takes a proactive role in marketing its manufacturers' products, that the manufacturers, in turn, provide Poellinger with the on-time delivery and other support he needs.

"Basically, we do what product salesmen do: visit architects and developers directly," Poellinger says. "As a result, we are often called in to work with them early, when their projects are just getting under way. We do a lot of budget pricing and use our contacts with manufacturers to bring in technical or engineering expertise. By getting involved early, we often are able to achieve a negotiated contract. Even if not, since we have a good understanding of what the owner is expecting, we have a good idea of what is involved and know what to offer to meet those expectations."

Poellinger does not charge for

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- Mikel Poellinger

those initial services, but rather regards them as a part of his marketing budget. “Another thing that helps us develop this trust and relationship is that, even when you do everything the right way, there can still be minor problems. Part of our reputation is that we will do everything we can to satisfy a customer; we go a little beyond what is expected.”

Membership Matters

Poellinger is active in the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International. He’s on the board of

directors, chairs Technical Subcommittee #6 and works with the fundraising and membership committees. "Being involved with AWCI allows me to stay abreast of what is happening," he says. "I'm able to participate and help change things when they don't work, as well as critique what does work and make it better. What I especially enjoy is the exposure to other contractors, the camaraderie, the ability to talk over things with a contractor in South Carolina that you couldn't talk about with a competitor across the street."

Poellinger likens the combination of the AWCI and CISCA exposition last April in Nashville, Tenn., to his luncheon meetings, which bring together manufacturers and contractors for the mutual advantage of each. "Contractor participation will grow as we offer increasing better service and better programs. The participation is coming. It will be there."

Poellinger, 34, is married, with one 4-year-old son, the potential third generation of the business. He's taken on his father's habit of starting early. Dad is at work at 5:30 a.m., and generally works until after 5:30 or 6 in the evening. Poellinger is also very active in community service. In his little town of LaCrescent, Minn., a rural community of 4,500, which he calls "the apple capital of Minnesota," he has been on the volunteer fire department for 15 years, is active as a Rotarian and is currently mayor.

"One of the best things I've learned over the years, and what I've learned from my father, is that your goal should always be to do the best possible job," Poellinger says. "For, any time you take a short cut, you take a quality cut, and somewhere down the road it will come back to you. On the other hand, if you always follow through with your best, you will have a good outcome." *CD*

About the Author

Michael J. Major of Port Townsend, Wash., is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.