any wall and ceiling contractors start out with drywall, then branch out into one or more specialties to find their niche. With the Madison Heights, Mich.-based Turner Brooks, Inc., however, it worked out the other way.

Named after its founders and purchased in the 1970s by three of its personnel who represent the current ownership, the company was started in 1933 primarily as a flooring and carpeting business. It moved into acoustical ceilings in the 1950s and 1960s, got into interior partitions in the early 1970s, and in the late 1970s began doing drywall projects.

Today the business breakdown is 60 percent drywall/carpentry, 20 percent acoustical and 20 percent flooring. Yet, even though the company has moved steadily toward drywall, holding on to its previous roots helps differentiate it from its competitors. “If you match us up with other drywall companies, we don’t just do drywall and acoustical,” says Robert Halik, president. “We do the flooring and some of the millwork. It makes us a complete interior contractor, and allows us to offer one-stop interior work for our customers.”

The company has worked on a variety of different facilities, such as schools, arenas, transportation companies and a lot for the automotive industry including the prestigious executive area of Chrysler’s world headquarters. A major portion of the company’s contracts, however, have been for hospitals. And no doubt the most important project in this category has been for Detroit’s Henry Ford Hospital.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS ACKNOWLEDGED

Ted Baranowski, manager of construction services, explains why this effort won for Turner Brooks the INTEX Achievement Award, sponsored by the Detroit Association of Wall & Ceiling Contractors in conjunction with the Wall & Ceiling Contractors Industry Advancement Fund. “It was a major drywall and acoustical nightmare, basically,” Baranowski says, but adds they were able to solve all the problems and meet the various criteria such as quality, workmanship and aesthetics, not to mention factors such as getting the job done on time and coming up with imaginative solutions to difficult challenges.

The project, which represented an addition to the hospital, comprised 500,000 square feet of drywall and 250,000 square feet of acoustical. Baranowski illustrates: “There were rather large drops, with difficult radius, steps and light coves. We prefabricated a lot of the drops, with some of them designed here in the office to help the mechanics in the field. We designed our own templates, and some of the radiiues were segmented, built on benches. We didn’t have a lot of high stuff, but we still had a lot going on at the same time, especially with irregular
The drywall project at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit won an INTEX Achievement Award for Turner Brooks. *Photo by Les Newcomer*
stairways and some of the drops over the nurses’ stations. The main lobby had a rather large drop.”

Where the walls met the grid, ceiling hooks attached 50 percent of the walls directly to the grid system. The purpose was so that walls could be easily removed to form new areas, such as patients’ rooms, without having to remove the wall and re-grid the whole area. “There were hidden light fixtures running through the perimeters of the drops, washing the ceilings with light while the light itself remained hidden behind the drywall,” Baranowski says. “The ceilings we put in were Armstrong-hardware-friendly tiles, with syllables; a unique ceiling job in itself.”

Baranowski says that instead of the regular procedures of simply sending the shop drawings to the mechanics, “We got really involved, for we were concerned with quality and wanted the responsibility. There are so many different ways to go about solving a problem. We opted to really become a part of the entire process.”

One really interesting aspect of the job, Baranowski says, is that everything was done with metal studs. Baranowski notes that there has been an overall

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trend from wood to metal studs that has extended from commercial projects to institutions like hospitals and schools.

“We recently built an elementary school with pre-engineered trusses that we pre-engineered and hoisted into place instead of using wood,” he says.

Baranowski sees a further shift from wood to metal studs in residential projects. “We’re seeing that happen now,” he says. “We don’t know if it will take hold, but it is out there. A lot will depend upon how high the price of lumber rises and how close that price comes to metal studs. If the market is there, we’ll be there too, for a lot of our carpenters started out in residential.”

In fact, adds Baranowski, “A good portion of our guys have been with us for 20 years or so, which is pretty unusual for this industry. The usual routine consists of layoffs in slow times and jumping ship in better times.”

“We’re big on quality and service,” Halik says. “We stay large enough so that we’re always able to man our projects, and we maintain a quality crew that allows us to keep up the quality of the work.”

**LONG-TERM EMPLOYEES**

The company averages about 100 employees, with an annual volume in excess of $12 million. The company has basically two separate departments, one for the flooring and the other for the walls and ceilings. The expertise is kept separate and specialized in this regard. But, otherwise, says Halik, “We like our people to be well rounded so as
not to be pigeonholed into specific drywall or framing operations. It’s not that we don’t have specialty operations, for we do, but we also keep their skills flexible so they can adapt to whatever has to be done. We believe in attracting the best people and then creating an atmosphere that makes them want to stay here. We pay well and provide good benefits. But the main thing is we keep them working.”

The process starts with a four-year apprenticeship program, in which the employees work up to the journeyman level. Although they begin with reduced pay, they work their way up.

“The apprentices are not just given laborers’ work,” Halik says. “Rather, we have them developing their skills right away, so that after they reach their journeyman status after four years, they have opportunities to become foremen and superintendents. We like to think they learn as much on the job as they would at school. One of the firm’s fourth-year apprentices recently took first place in that category for the entire state.”

**GIVE THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT**

Halik has been active in AWCI and is on the executive board of the Detroit Association of Wall & Ceiling Contractors, which has recently undergone a name change to Architectural Contractors Trade Association of Michigan, reflecting an expansion to include flooring contractors. This is one reason the association has grown so rapidly over the past four to five years, from a five-member organization to one with 26 contractor members and 25 associate members or vendors.

Halik credits president Bob Walrich with spearheading the change in the employees to become more productive. “Labor negotiations are one of our main activities,” Halik says. “We’re all labor contractors, and have found we can be much more effective negotiating together.”

The association also has gotten involved in the political process, such as working with the legislature to get a law requiring prompt payment for subcontractors from general contractors. “We feel proud of our accomplishments,” Halik says. “We are making a lot of noise in Detroit that wasn’t heard here five years ago.”

**DIGITAL FULFILLMENT**

Halik attributes a good deal of the company’s success to computerization which, he says, “helps us with our estimating. We can set up the computer for the scale, and it then lays out the work, digitizing each room with costs per lineal foot, the amount of materials needed and scheduling reports that enable us to track the project.”

A sales staff of seven to eight people keep searching out new jobs, using the listings of new work from the Construction Association of Michigan, the Dodge Reports and other sources. But, adds Halik, “A lot of work comes to us from people knocking on doors, or faxes from local contractors requesting our bids. We sometimes get called out of the blue by strangers coming into the state who have been referred to us.”

Yet the firm also does a considerable amount of negotiated work—about 60 percent. “We get a lot of negotiat-
ed work because of our ability to build an office and move the tenants in on time,” Halik says. “We provide services like offering our own extruded aluminum door frames, which we make ourselves. They are a quality product that is very adaptable to different size walls and door thicknesses. This in itself can save several weeks of lead time it would take to order doors like these from a manufacturer.”

It’s through offering services like these that Turner Brooks has achieved its success. For example, as says Halik, “We’ve finished 25,000-square-foot office buildings in as little as a month.”

About the Author
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