There are three stories here.

The first is how a wall and ceiling contractor failed.

The second is about exterior insulation and finish systems.

The third is how a contractor made a comeback by finding a niche doing high quality EIFS remedial work in a manner that points the way for other contractors who are struggling to repair the battered-yet-unjustified reputation of this system.

So let’s tell the stories one at a time, then see how they all come together.

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Atlanta’s W.G. Adam Corp. Is an Enterprising Contracting Company That Is Finding Its Niche by Repairing Others’ Mistakes
William G. Adams Jr.’s father started a plastering company, W.G. Adams Corporation, in Atlanta in 1954. If this was a story like so many others, Adams would relate how he started in the business as a child, sweeping floors, then, in high school, worked after school, weekends and vacations, started working in the field, and gradually worked himself up to president.

But the first thing that Adams relates is how he went to the University of Georgia, graduating in 1981 with a bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics and a minor in landscaping/horticulture. Plastering wasn’t on his mind. He got a job with a fiber company, worked in the erosion control division as a marketing research and development specialist for seven southeastern states. He remained there from through 1983.

But then he decided to go to work for his dad after all. He joined the company as a production manager in 1983, became vice president in 1985, president in 1989, and in 1991 he shut the business down.

The reasons were pretty basic. Unlike many wall and ceiling contractors, Adams focused not on the commercial but rather the residential market. In Atlanta, instead of there being a few relatively large contractors in this arena, there are very many smaller ones, so the competition is fierce.

Stucco had been used in commercial applications and didn’t reach the residential market until the early 1980s. And Adams started utilizing EIFS in 1988. But his main focus was plastering, which was largely superseded by drywall. His was a business still designed for a different era, so he closed it down and decided to return to horticulture.

Chapter Two

This brings us to the second story. The problem with EIFS, Adams maintains, is not with the product, but that the manufacturer’s instructions were not thoroughly followed in terms of application. And the reason for this, he explains, is that everybody thought the product was so good, the need was not perceived to apply it as carefully as it should have been.

“What it comes down to is supply and demand,” he says. “The owners, whether commercial or residential, didn’t demand that these products be put in according to specifications. And the general contractor never gave the wall and ceiling subcontractor a clear scope of work. That final step of sealing it off was just not asked for.”

What builders were really concerned about in the residential market were issues such as Corian countertops vs. granite. With the final steps involved of really putting in EIFS correctly not insisted on, along with what was insisted upon—the lowest price possible—it’s easy to see that the lowest price won.
“We never had a contractor or owner tell us we had to apply the sealing process,” Adams says. “As an applicator, we always tried to inform the consumer that extra steps had to be involved, and they should hire someone else to apply the sealant.” Why didn’t Adams offer this service? “We didn’t want to become involved,” he replies. “Waterproofing is another trade, like plumbing.”

Another factor that led to the reluctance of applying EIFS thoroughly was aesthetics.

“People didn’t want to see true expansion joints cutting through the system, or roof terminations or flashings that would deter from the visual effect, or a sealant around a window that’s a color different from the paint,” Adams says.

But then, over time, problems began to occur, accelerated by the fact that wood over the past 10 years has become softer, greener, with a higher moisture content. EIFS began to come...
Two-year-old residential project in North Fulton County, Alpharetta, Ga.

apart at the seams, and, as Adams says, “the great uproar fol-

lowed.”

To the Rescue

Here’s where the two stories intersect. Adams had gotten out
of the business because he couldn’t compete on the pricing.
For about a year he tried to get back into horticulture, but he
was not successful even though he had his education in that
field, because he had no real experience. So he returned to the
construction industry working as a general manager for an
Atlanta company for about six months. He saw that there was
a greater and greater demand for remediation where EIFS had
gone wrong.

So, in 1994, he started his own business again. “This time my
focus was in remodeling and restoration of plaster and gener-
al stucco repairs,” he says. “But, at the same time, we’ve diver-
sified into being moisture specialists for all systems termina-
tion, whether at roof areas, window and door penetrations or
openings, flashings at deck terminations, and EIFS to grade
terminations for the termite control industry—the latter with
above-grade terminations so inspectors have an unobstructed
view of the concrete foundation for any migration of termi-
nes into the house.”

In effect, Adams says, “We have grown from being a plaster-
ing and EIFS contractor to becoming a flashing and sealant
contractor as well.” Now there is a demand that EIFS be retro-
fitted or repaired and a demand for Adams in the new niche
he’s discovered. In fact, Adams says, the problem in residential
homes is not just with EIFS but rather with brick, lap siding,
conventional stucco or, in fact, any point at which different
materials come into contact and have to be sealed properly.

Although the demand is now there for the kind of work
Adams is able to provide, it’s not easy. “It takes an enormous
amount of energy and time,” Adams says. “Because, unlike a
commercial account in which you have an ongoing relation-
ship, every residential customer is a new person.” Adams typ-
ically works $300,000 and up homes, and it takes anywhere
from one to three hours going over as many as 15 different
items and how they have to fit together.

“I tell them never to take the word of any applicator, but get
the opinion of an expert third party,” Adams says. “We rely
heavily on inspectors for that, but this is difficult because the
remediation of flashing and sealants is a relatively new process,
and some inspectors are not yet up to speed. It’s really a chal-
lenge for the industry as a whole.”

It’s a tedious process to get right and usually takes five to six
weeks on a home. Another quality that Adams brings to his
work is aesthetics. “In the past, form dictated function, and
that created problems,” he says. “Now we’re putting form first,
but we’re doing it in a way not to sacrifice aesthetics.” There
are many textures, complimentary colors and ways of con-
struction that can make the finished product both look good
and be good, but, again, this takes painstaking detail.

Meeting the Demand

In the 1980s Adams had 70 employees and worked for five
builders. Now he has about 1.5 employees, and each job is with
a different homeowner. From 1994 until 1997 Adams was
basically a one-man operation, but in 1997 the combination
of market demand and the completion of his learning curve
came together, and his business began really taking off.

“In 1998 we had a record year,” Adams reports. It would be
nice if we could end this article right here by writing “happy
ending.” But it doesn’t work that way. Competition has rushed
into this new market.

“A lot of contractors have gotten into this who don’t know
how to install the systems in the first place, and there’s a lot of
“Our competition is applying sealants without any bond breaker; a sealant without a bond breaker is not the way EIFS manufacturers originally wrote their specification.”

subjective opinion about how remediation should be applied. Our competition is applying sealants without any bond breaker; a sealant without a bond breaker is not the way EIFS manufacturers originally wrote their specifications,” Adams says.

He explains that for any particular application sealant, a bond breaker has to be applied in the proper configuration so that you get strong attachments to two sides of dissimilar material. Adams mentions that Dow Corning offers a 20-year warranty for its sealant in the commercial market, but none in the residential arena because of the predominance of wood windows and because of the variance of quality of the trades working in this market.

“People are trying to find an easier way to do remediation and are deviating from the specifications, so we’re getting right back to the problems we had in the first place,” Adams says. Cutting corners is cheaper, and Adams is again hurt by the price competition. “Last year was a record year, but this year revenues are off 50 percent,” he says.

On the other hand, he says, “We’re developing a phenomenal reputation for doing things right, so we just have to hope this will pay off in the long run.”

What to Do?

Adams believes governmental regulations will create as many problems as they will solve, and that the real answer must come through applicator education and industry standards. Adams is adhering to the ASTM C-1397 code for barrier systems. He and his key staff completed AWCI’s education and certificate program for EIFS mechanics in March 1999 and in June went through the National Association of Home Builders’ course in remediation of wood structures.

Adams is co-chairman of the marketing committee for the Georgia Lath & Plaster Association. “What I’m working for is the promotion of the licensing program we have for contractors with the certification of EIFS mechanics and the inspector program—utilizing the guidelines being evolved by AWCI,” Adams says.

Adams, whose web site, www.wgadams corp.com, shows the right way to seal an EIF system, says, “Let’s face it, the residential is a smaller, more fragmented market than the commercial, with fewer dollars attached to it. But it’s still an important one, and I would like to become more of a voice for this residential market.”

Adams is determined to make people forget the first two stories, and give the third one the happy ending it deserves.