

Feeding the architect frenzy

How a glass shop nets the big ones on Florida's West Coast

the power of imagination captured in glass." Faour Glass Technologies' tag line was written to speak to the architect's craft. The Sarasota, FL, company specializes in multi-million dollar homes designed by contemporary architects. It wasn't always so: From the mid-'70s to the early '90s, Faour's name and niche was the mirror business.

In 1975, a newly retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, George Faour, was looking to start a business, and, on the advice of a family friend and glass distributor, opened up a retail glass business selling framed mirrors and later, installing custom mirrored walls. By the 1980s, George and sons John and Mike de-emphasized the installation side of the business and enhanced their fabrication capability.

So did many others in that decade, and soon

there was a local glut of bevellers and polishers. "By the early '90s, we were at a crossroads," says John Faour, "We looked at what we were good at." Turned out, that was design, engineering, fabrication and installation. The business was

reborn, focusing on "clean applications and solutions" featuring large glass panels, floors, railings and bath enclosures installed by a focused and "conscientious" crew. Mirrors still form part of the business, but only because customers demand them.

By 1998, John bought out brother Mike, who opened up just down the road with a water-cutting machine for specialty-glass fabrication. The two companies do business together.

Three years ago, John attended a financial seminar and sat next to Angelo Rivera, then a 42-year-old former Mettler division president looking to buy into a business. The two were partners six months later. Today, John focuses on growing the company, selling architects and builders, and Angelo makes sure inside operations deliver. "We create a unique position and then educate the architect," John says. If the architect is not sup-

portive, FGT salespeople approach the builder, who actually places the order. The architect, however, is first choice. "If the architect endorses FGT, the jobs are easier to sell, and then it's much easier to work with the builder, John explains.

The hook: "We look at what's important to each architect," John says. "Maybe it's innovative products, maybe it's a bad experience with another glass shop." Certainly, vertical integration—design, engineering, fabrication and installation—is a primary selling tool. Projects with multiple product applications also increase the likelihood of a sale.

Can this success be translated into the commercial-building market? Until recently, FGT stayed away from commercial properties "because [owners] weren't interested in the kinds of details that a homeowner spending \$5 million-plus on a house is," according to John. When FGT does bid on commercial projects, the focus is on what John refers to as "gathering spaces" such as lobbies, bars and conference rooms.

Understanding the buying process represents the key to selling architects, according to John and Angelo. Talking the talk that demonstrates technical expertise is important, as is offering a unique product mix and corresponding applications. Holding the contractor's hand to ensure that the architect's wishes are executed is essential.

Last month in San Diego, I spoke to GlassBuild America exhibitors about their experiences with architects. Many seek the kind of relationships that FGT cultivates. Adding to the challenge of selling the artistic mind: the fact that the commercial-building downturn thinned the ranks. "There used to be layers of architects and specifiers who would research the glass and metal details and write the correct specifications," lamented one glass fabricator. Remember PPG Industries' Herculite? Or Polarpane by Hordis Brothers? Both of these decades-old glass products appeared on recent specifications. How can that be, with so many glass companies spending gobs of money trying to "educate" architects about new and exciting products?

Once a commodity business, FGT now partners with high-end architects who are, as John puts it, "drawing jobs with our name all over them." That's a hopeful sign. **S**



When finished, this Sarasota, FL, house will feature Faour's fabricated and installed 17-foot laminated units, a glass stairway, glass floors and an all-glass bridge linking to a "tree-house" office. One of three jaw-dropping homes on a Glass Professionals Forum tour in February, the other two featured spectacular etched bath enclosures—yes, accented by 24-carat fixtures—multiple stories of glass railings and 14-foot bent-glass windows—yes, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.