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# METROPOLITAN BUILDER


INSIDE STORY



Asking One Question Leads to  
The Ark Cast Stone's Success

Houston, Texas





# Asking One Question Leads to The Ark Cast Stone's Success

By Kathy Bowen Stolz

“What else do you need and want?”

That was the question that Harry Durham, general manager and co-owner of The Ark Cast Stone, asked his builder clients over and over as he “tried to find something that would get us a steady income.”

How builders answered that one simple question led Durham and his partner Brian Penso to expand beyond bird baths and concrete animals (hence its name The Ark) to manufacture concrete splash blocks, then address blocks, then keystones, then window mouldings and sills, then balustrades, fireplaces and columns, and now all things cast stone, including building facades.

The Ark's craftsmen can create molds onsite, thereby being able to produce any custom product – whether residential or commercial – no matter what the size. The staff can also arrange for installation for a complete turnkey job.

Although The Ark employees produce only one or two pieces of concrete animals or birdbaths each year, they keep the distinctive name because it sticks in clients' minds, Durham explained.

During its 28 years in Houston, the company has grown

from two to 30 employees and from a 3,000-sq.-ft. to a 30,000-sq.-ft. showroom, manufacturing, warehousing and office facility, according to Durham. Those employees include a mold maker, an estimator, three salesmen, three deliverymen, seven office workers and 15 plant workers.

Nowadays The Ark also provides pieces in cut natural stone (including limestone). Its products are most likely found in homes costing more than \$750,000. Residential cast stone now accounts for about 60 percent of the company's business, he added.

But commercial entities, such as Restoration Hardware, are also customers. Restoration Hardware became a customer 10 years ago when The Ark was able to match a specific color for its Houston store columns. It now supplies four to eight 20-foot x 20-inch columns whenever Restoration Hardware opens a new store. Those columns are currently in 12 of Restoration Hardware stores, with The Ark contracted to provide columns for two more new stores, thanks to its attention to detail, Durham said.

Penso, who grew up making concrete animals and bird baths in his father's business (which was called The Ark), knows how to work with concrete and cast stone better than





most after more than 40 years of total experience, with 18 years working in cast stone.

“Cast stone is a little bit different technology than concrete. There is not any detailed written technology on how to manufacture cast stone products. It’s a bit of a mystery,” stated Durham.

Cast stone, “a refined architectural concrete building unit manufactured to simulate natural cut stone, used in unit masonry applications, can be made from white and/or grey cements, manufactured from natural sands, carefully selected crushed stone or well graded natural gravels and mineral coloring pigments to achieve the desired color and appearance while maintaining durable physical properties which exceed most natural cut building stones,” according to the company website, [www.arkconcrete.com](http://www.arkconcrete.com).

Exceptional customer service is a core value of The Ark. “We took a real hard look at our competition years ago. We used similar quality products. We had similar pricing. We decided what we could excel at and control was customer service.

We take pride in our customer service as well as speed







of service,” Durham said. “Each piece is handmade and quality inspected before leaving our plant, but problems happen.

We ship extra pieces, such as 52 in an order of 50, at no charge because we know pieces break or come up missing, and we don’t want the builder to stop production. If a truck backs up over a pallet of pieces, we put that replacement job at the front of our production line and get those pieces out the door in two to three days. Then we worry about who’s going to pay for them. We work that payment out after the pieces are on site and production is not stopped.

All of our salespeople take calls on weekends because building goes on seven days a week. We want builders to know if there’s a problem, we’ll handle it immediately,” Durham stated.

Although the trends in the building industry change, the one question The Ark employees will continue to ask is the same one they’ve always asked: “What else do you need and want?”

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