

Reroofing: where the profits keep pouring in

"The quality of a built-up roofing membrane depends more on good application practices than on the specific quantities of the membrane components specified."—William Cullen in his article "The Perfect Square: Can It Be Built?," February 1987 Roofing Spec.

It's true that the major factor in the equation that describes any successful roofing installation is workmanship. As systems proliferate, the one thing that separates professionals from the pack is the quality of their work. But in today's construction environment, good workmanship is not always a top priority. Where can roofing contractors find the most appreciation and highest rewards for good workmanship? It is definitely wherever contractors can work closely with the owners.

Unfortunately, in new roofing work the contractor has little contact with the ultimate roofing consumer. In recent times this has led to a decline in workmanship. In 1947, when my grandfather founded R.D. Herbert & Sons, everyone on the building team understood the importance of good workmanship. To satisfy this concern, my grandfather immediately set the policy that any job worth doing must be done right or not at all. During Nashville's steady growth in the '50s and the '60s, this policy led to the firm's participation in the construction of many of the buildings that now dominate Nashville's skyline. Because excellent workmanship, reliability and financial stability were recognized by owners, architects and general contractors, the firm prospered.

A roofer finds retrofit a lucrative specialty

by R.D. Herbert III

New construction quality declines

The recession of the late '60s changed the ground rules, and the firm found it difficult to adjust to the new conditions. The reliable old contractors were replaced by young, brash and hungry individuals who sought low prices from their subs and demanded fast, trouble-free service with no delays. Obeying these contractors' requirements was of paramount importance. A reputation for excellence no longer had much to do with contract awards. Low price became the rule.

During these competitive times, general contractors began to indulge in practices that would not have been accepted in the previous decade. Arbitrarily holding back a sub's payments was one of the contractors' most pernicious practices. At times, the generals would use these withheld funds to force unusual services from the subcontractor. The generals might, for instance, insist that the roofing contractors apply the new systems during unacceptable weather conditions. With such demands being made, less attention was paid to the pursuit of good roofing.



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At about the same time, the roofing manufacturers diabolically conspired to market a system using coated felts that demanded almost perfect conditions and workmanship (the so-called two-ply roof that equaled four plies). With good roofing practices being such a low priority, the introduction of these exacting systems spelled disaster for the roofing industry. Many of these roofs did not last three years. Lawsuits became endemic, and the roofing contractor became the villain.

Workmanship suffered even more when some of the more desperately ambitious general contractors began to seek lower prices by either forming satellite roofing firms or shopping bids. Unscrupulous roofing contractors moving into Nashville exacerbated the problem. Because of low budgets, architects could no longer supervise the jobs, and quality control was almost non-existent.

The hostile construction climate in Nashville during this time forced honest roofing contractors to agree to things they would never have done if they had been in control of the jobs. Regardless of the weather, general contractors were demanding that roofs be installed immediately upon completion of a deck, even before the walls were built or the perimeters were prepared. In addition, roofs were expected to be installed over wet decks even though adequate drying time had not elapsed. Roofing contractors had to comply with these demands to survive. I believe that this was a common scenario throughout the country, and was the basic cause of the rash of roof failures that developed nationally at this time.

Heil Quaker Corp.

*Thicket & Sons
roofing project*



The Hi-Tuff roof being installed at Heil Quaker.



The Heil Quaker roof before work began.

Owner: Heil Quaker Corp.
 Owner's Representative: Bud Devaney
 Consultant: Gresham, Smith & Partners
 Specification: 2,162 squares; tear off existing roof to deck; vacuum the deck; mechanically attach 1/4-inch Owens-Corning roof insulation; mechanically attach J. P. Stevens' Hi-Tuff Hypalon membrane roof.
 Substantially Complete: April 30, 1986
 Consideration: \$ 718,597

Schedule and traffic problems

New construction continues to be plagued by problems, making this type of work unattractive to most roofing contractors. Successful roofers also dislike the fact that with new roofing they have no freedom to schedule their work to conform to the size of their work forces or their crews' abilities. With new construction, when the job is ready, roofing contractors are mandated to begin work with whatever crews they have available.

New work's cyclical nature (called the "feast-or-famine" syndrome by some roofers) puts stress on the roofer both logistically and financially. To complete projects, built-up

crews may have to work on elastomeric jobs or vice versa. There is also the danger that several jobs will be ready at the same time, forcing a contractor to pull crews off projects that aren't complete. This can result in poor performance and increased cost for all the jobs concerned.

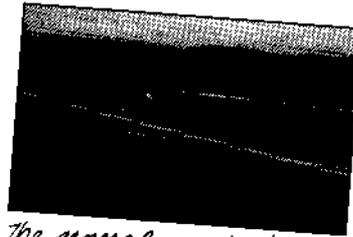
Even after a system is installed, jobsite conditions make it difficult to maintain a standard of quality. Many times the general wants the building put in the dry as soon as possible so that the roof may be used as a staging area for the mechanical trades or other subcontractors. At one recent job, the sheet metal contractor set up a shop on one of our most delicate elastomeric roofs, causing irreparable damage to the membrane and soaking the insulation. The new roof may also be damaged by heavy mechanical equipment that is constantly dragged across the surface. When this happens, it is often very difficult for the roofing subcontractor to prove that the roof was harmed and obtain compensation.

Scheduling problems, jobsite conditions and the competitiveness of the industry all conspire to reduce the quality of workmanship on new roofing jobs. Contractors who pursue new work find that they are rewarded most for high productivity, low price and speed. Completing the job with no problems is recognized by the generals as superior subcontractor performance. Good application is commonly left out of the equation.

The positive rewards of reroofing

With success so difficult to obtain on new construction, it's no wonder that most roofing contractors prefer retrofit over new work. However, contractors shouldn't concentrate on reroofing simply to avoid new construction's problems. There are also some positive rewards to this kind of work. In reroofing, roofing contractors enjoy much faster payment because they are dealing directly with the owner, who is the source of funds. Contractors also can be confident that there is some recourse if payments are not made because they have control over the lien rights, and in most states, a much longer period in which these rights are in effect.

Oscar Mayer Foods Corp.



The general condition of the Oscar Mayer roof before reroofing.

Owner: Oscar Mayer Foods Corp.

Owner's Representative: Ralph Fiedler

Specification: 914 squares, loose lay 3/4-inch perlite board and install Carlisle Design "B" .045 EPDM roof with 10 pounds of ballast per square foot.

Substantially Complete: April 30, 1983

Consideration: \$174,189

Hubert & Son - reroofing projects

By working directly with the owner or owner's representative contractors also have the chance to use their experience, knowledge and expertise to influence the design of the new roof. The contractors' suggestions help build the owners' confidence in the roofing firm, and eliminate the adversarial relationship that usually exists between the owner and the subcontractor.

R. D. Herbert & Sons Co.



Built-Up Reroofing

We have found that a roofing company's quality, integrity and sophistication are important to the owner. Once an owner recognizes a roofing contractor's professionalism, he begins to see the contractor as a roofing resource. When a roofing problem comes up, the owner knows where to turn. By building a cadre of satisfied customers who regularly turn to the firm for roofing solutions, a contractor can stabilize the company's volume of business and ensure future profit.

As reroofing sales tools, high-quality work and an impeccable reputation are more important than expensive marketing programs. We have found that by concentrating on workmanship we can make our company al-

most recession-proof. During Nashville's last building slowdown, our volume and profit actually increased because more money was flowing into reroofing projects than into new construction.

Varied menu essential

Roofing contractors who want to jump into the reroofing market should be ready to do all types of retrofit work. Specializing in any one type of reroofing can limit a contractor's appeal to the customer who needs a full-service roofing contractor. By refusing to do residential work, the roofing contractor can lose important customers who won't understand why they cannot count on their trusted, competent roofer to work on their own residences. And contractors who won't do restoration work will find themselves left out of another growing market.

Our ability to perform a wide variety of reroofing services gave us the chance to become involved in two highly visible and profitable projects. We received media attention and recognition from the community when we installed terne coated stainless steel on a Nashville-area antebellum mansion named "Rattle and Snap" (it was won in a dice game). We also gained notoriety last year when we worked on the turn-of-the-century Cathedral of the Incarnation in downtown Nashville. For the cathedral, we had to number and remove the old terra-cotta Spanish tile roof, repair the deck, dry-in the roof and reinstall the tile.

I have never regretted my decision to concentrate on reroofing work. A reroofing specialty is the only way to market professional roofing services in Nashville's current construction climate. I have also found that as we vigorously pursue reroofing projects our confidence, expertise and reputation has grown with each job we successfully complete.