

Maas leaves no stone unturned in restoration work

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Rhonda Maas loves old things. That's reflected in her company's focus: cleaning, fixing and replacing the old stones that built many Denver historic landmarks as well as the tiles that decorate them.

"We do anything that's old and has to do with mortar or the shell of the building," said Maas, co-founder and president of Building Restoration Specialties Inc. in Denver. "I like old things, and I like to have people recycle and reuse things."

Maas figures her company has helped to fix and repair about 85 percent of the old buildings in Lower Downtown, as well as projects around the state. The work can include picking out by hand the old, crumbling mortar between decades-old bricks, cleaning the bricks or stones, and adding new mortar in the same colors.

"They matched the mortar, even the stroke on the mortar that was used," said Merlin DeConti, vice president for facilities for Johnson & Wales University, one of Maas' clients.

Maas' company in 2009 cleaned and replaced stones on the Johnson & Wales' historic Treat Hall, a nationally registered Denver landmark that was built in 1890 as the original building for the Colorado Women's College. The work was part of a \$2.1 million overhaul of the building's windows and masonry, DeConti said.

"A lot of [the building] had deteriorated, but it's nothing you can just go buy someplace," DeConti said. "You can reproduce it in concrete, but they were able to go and find stone at a quarry that matched. And they had artisans, people on staff, who carved the stone to match the stone they were taking out. They did wonderful, wonderful work."

Tom Cella, president of Spectrum General Contractors Inc. in Denver, also praised the company's work. The two are working together on the \$4.4 million Better Denver contract to clean and restore the Greek Amphitheater, Voorhies Memorial and balustrade at Civic Center Park.

The project meant calling quarries across the nation to find sandstone that matched the stones used in the Civic Center structures. The original beige stones with purple-colored veins, called Turkey Creek sandstone, no longer are quarried; sandstone with similar colors was located at a quarry in Washington state.

"I was calling quarries all over the country and asking them to send samples; we were overnighting rocks," Maas said.

"I don't work with anyone else on historic restoration," Cella said. "Her experience is complete, she's one of the better sources for us to solve problems with masonry, and she's pretty rare in the construction business. Women aren't generally put in the position where their talents are used out in the field. She knows her stuff."

Maas started Building Restoration Specialties in the 1980s with husband Chris Wolf. The two split in 1996, and she bought out his share of the business in 2007. The company received certifications in 2009 as a disadvantaged, small and women-owned business through Denver's certification program, and also is certified as a Small Business Enterprise by the Regional Transportation District.

Maas said she's occasionally been teased at job sites for being a woman.

But she's also proud of the company she's built. The private company posted 2009 revenue of about \$3.6 million, up 19 percent from 2008, and Maas is projecting 2010 revenue to be about \$5 million. Employee numbers have grown from 24 in 2008 to 29 currently, she said.

About 50 percent of the company's work is on private buildings, with the other half on buildings owned by public agencies, she said. About 70 percent of the company's work is funded by grants from the State Historical Fund, which in 2011 will spend about \$4 million helping to pay for restoring the state Capitol's gold dome. That means less money will be available for other work around the state.

So Maas plans to look beyond Colorado's borders for work, and is creating a maintenance division focused on older buildings.

Maas credits a good team of employees and her keen attention to project management for the company's profitability and growth in the recession. Maas said she hasn't had to lay off employees or cut salaries during the downturn.

"I'm as lean as I can be with a profit margin, and that means managing the project," she said. "There's no rulebook to restoration jobs. So you figure it out, and by doing more of it, you learn how to figure things out faster. Every building we do we learn from, and we do it faster and better."

Details

Company: Building Restoration Specialties Inc.

Address: 3060 Walnut St., Denver, Colo. 80205

Employees: 29

Phone: 303-297-2004

Website: www.brsrestores.com

Rhonda Maas' lessons learned

- Plan ahead. We're looking at projects that we'll be bidding on in six months.
- Listen to others and learn from their horror stories.
- Have the business live within its means and be prepared for tough times.