

Glass in the interior

Interior commercial applications are "hot" say float manufacturers, specialty fabricators, and contract glaziers

By Jean Verlich

m

ove over marble, granite, tile, and plasterboard. Make way for glass.

Glass is being used increasingly in interior commercial applications for everything from doors, floors, and ceilings to stairs, walls, partitions, and accent pieces. And while general commercial construction activity may be soft, this area is generating excitement among glazing contractors, specialty fabricators, and the flat glass producers.

"We are seeing glass being used in a greater variety of applications, everything from the normal office fronts and entry areas to wall claddings, ceilings, floors, vanity tops, and toilet partitions," states Ed Trainor, executive vice president of Trainor Glass Co., a full-service commercial glazing contractor located near Chicago in Alsip, IL.

Trainor notes that while sandblasted glass is still popular, decorative glass products are being specified more, "from fritted and back-painted glass to imported etched and pattern glasses, cast glass, and laminated glass with colored and/or decorative interlayers."

Decorative glass options are even being com-

bined into single products, Trainor points out. "It is not unusual to see an imported low-iron acid-etch tempered lite laminated to a low-iron tempered back-painted glass panel," he explains.

Growing Trends

Cast glass producers, like Nathan Allan Glass Studios in Richmond, BC, and Artwork in Architectural Glass (AAG) in Good Hope, GA, are seeing much demand for their products because of their ability to customize.

"Glass is hot right now," says Barry Allan, director of Nathan Allan Glass Studios. Even though the number of inquiries he receives is down due to the economic downturn, it's still higher than five years ago when there was a slowdown, he reports. And he agrees there are a lot more requests for decorative and cast glass.

Cast, or slumped glass, is made by heating flat glass to high temperatures over a custom mold so that it slumps into the mold and takes on its shape, resulting in what Allan calls "a spectacular looking decorative product that is very unique." It also is



Lots of different decorative glass can give a restaurant, such as this one in Charleston, SC, a distinctive personality. Designers like the versatility of glass and are increasingly using it in commercial applications. Artwork in Architectural Glass handled the decorative glass for the project.

translucent and easy to maintain, making it ideal for high-traffic areas, he points out.

"In offices, for example, it's very common to see a large conference room wall of glass that would separate, say, the conference room from a lobby or a walkway or a hallway. Instead of just using wall-board, companies are opening up that wall and doing it all in glass because it makes it decorative. It allows a lot of light into the room, but it still maintains the privacy."

AAG's Tim Czechowski, co-owner of the company, agrees that it is the ability of cast glass to combine unique aesthetics with privacy and light that has made it popular.

"On the West Coast, it's everywhere. The rest of the country is getting on board. People are looking to do things differently with glass, not so much to do the same pattern over and over and over again," he points out, adding that his approach is to give his customers the differentiation they seek with custom molds.

Jay Morphis, sales manager for Carolina Glassmasters in Mount Airy, NC, a manufacturer of glass tabletops, says that another growing trend is adding a color coat to glass. He started to see more demand for these products about three years ago, with colors in white and beige, as well as light green, silver, translucent copper, and even bright red and blue.

According to Morphis, adding a color coat to glass "helps the customers differentiate themselves from the competition. It gives them something unique."

Back-painted glass also is being used in partitions, doors, and even floors. Czechowski, however, prefers to use deep-tint float glass products, such as Evergreen glass from Pilkington and Azurlite glass from PPG Industries, to add color.

"Glass is beautiful for its inherent characteristics," he explains. "Why paint it and add an extra layer to it?" He also likes the effect of adding color with lighting, which is easy to change and customize.

Technological Advancements

Steve Mitchell, owner and president of The Rudy Art Glass Studio, a decorative glass fabricator in York, PA, believes demand for art glass has grown because of increasing awareness among architects and designers and technological advancements.

"I see an increasing awareness on the part of architects and designers about the wide variety of products available to them and the fact that they can use them in places that 20 years ago they couldn't think about using art glass in," Mitchell says.

Art glass, like traditional flat glass, can now be laminated, tempered, heat-strengthened, and cut.

One of the decorative glass projects done by Trainor Glass was the Agere showroom in Chicago, IL.

Mitchell believes the advent of resin laminating systems, for example, as well as his company's proprietary laminating techniques, have enabled art glass to be used in new applications to create special effects.

But it's not just art and decorative glass that is being used to enhance

interior commercial spaces. Glass in general is popular, even in traditional office environments.

According to Brian Martineaux, vice president of sales and marketing for AFGD Glass, Atlanta, GA, development of high-performing low-emissivity coated glasses for exterior applications has helped generate interior glass use.

"Occupants of buildings want a lot of visible light within their spaces," he says. Today's high-performing low-emissivity coated glasses allow a high percentage of visible light to enter a building's interior space "without the burden of the bad energy [the infrared or ultraviolet]," he points out.

"You can now let that visible light in without having a negative impact on the HVAC system and continue that light all the way into the core of the building. People like to be able to walk into a space and literally be able to see outside," he explains.

Martineaux notes that this open office atmosphere has contributed to increased demand for glass in building interiors.

"People want to be able to see their coworkers and the trees outside. Glass is one of the products that allows you to accomplish that goal, that feel, but also to have some sort of privacy."

PPG's Mary Ann Lydon, flat glass marketing manager, agrees.

"The whole idea of the use of glass is very consistent with the 'open office' concept that we're seeing today. You have some degree of privacy, but you also want to make sure the interior space is not taking away from the light that you're letting in."

But how much more glass is being used? It's hard to pinpoint. Quantifying the growth of interior applications is difficult, according to Lydon. "The use of glass, at least from an anecdotal stand-





point, appears to be growing," she says, but data to support that is hard to collect because interior applications aren't tracked as a distinct category.

Fred Wallin, vice president for marketing and business development for AFG Industries, Inc., Kingsport, TN, acknowledges the difficulty in quantifying the growth of glass in interior applications but does see evidence of it. He says AFG is seeing growth in extra heavy glass from 8 mm thick and up for interiors and furniture, with more glass in 15, 19, and 25 mm thicknesses being purchased.

New Applications

According to Paul Gore, building products business segment leader for Pilkington North America, Toledo, OH, "One of the things that does stand out is we are seeing an increased amount of glass used per capita in the United States."

This is due in large part to the fact that glass is being used in applications where it would not have been used before. The application that seems to be generating the most excitement is glass flooring.

AFG's Wallin says extra heavy tempered glass for flooring can be used very attractively, adding that with a light pattern, "it can be stronger than natural materials such as marble or granite."

AAG, for example, has Underwriters Laboratories approval of three cast glass textures for nonslip flooring and walking surfaces, Czechowski points out.

According to Greg Saroka, president and chief executive officer of Goldray, a producer of decorative glass based in Calgary, AL, his company's approach is to use "glass as a solid surface building material" in an unconventional way.

"When I started in this business a decade and a half ago, sandblasting was about the only thing out there, and there wasn't a great deal of demand other

A multitude of glass options is available to designers today. This glass at the very upscale Joel's Bar in Atlanta, GA, lends an air of elegance and helps to define the space. Artwork in Architectural Glass supplied the glass for the project which includes a total of three sets of panels.

than some decorative glass in restaurants and in homes. Now you see glass applications more and more as an alternate for other building products."

Goldray, for example, has produced translucent white glass panels for restroom stall partitions, which he describes as "stunning." They are easy to maintain, clean, and graffiti resistant; the white also affords privacy, he points out.

"If you think of a building material, you can replace it with glass," Saroka says. "I know the market is huge, and it's growing every year."

But as Allan and Czechowski point out, tapping into this market has its challenges.

"What we find frustrating is that the glass industry has not yet grasped the benefit of trying to market our product," Allan says. "It would be to the benefit of most, if not all, glazing companies to promote decorative glass products to the general contractors, designers, or architects they work with."

Czechowski agrees. "The hardest part of our business is actually teaching people in the glass business how to sell it," he says. Because it's a higher profit margin product, "they can make a lot more money selling it, but they're used to making the usual margins. It's a matter of educating them and telling them, hey, with this product you can make more money on one job than you can in 10 shower doors." ■



Jean Verlich, JV Communications, Pittsburgh, PA, is a freelance writer specializing in the flat glass and architectural metal construction markets. Prior to starting her own company, she was with PPG Industries, Inc., for 15 years in its corporate and glass communications departments.

On the cover

On the Cover: The registration area at the new Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa in Miami Beach, FL, is a showcase for the use of glass in commercial interior applications.

