

# Glassmaker is on the cutting edge

## Century-old firm picks up high-tech printing.

By **DOUGLASS CROUSE** *The Record (Hackensack, N.J.)*

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SECAUCUS, N.J. — Economic conditions already were headed downhill when cousins David and Richard Balik decided to spend about \$2 million on a direct-to-glass printer.

It was August, before Wall Street's nose dive. Nonetheless, General Glass International's move to become one of a few U.S.-based glass companies to offer color-image printing represented a gamble, David Balik said.

"With the state of the economy, we felt like we had to do something," he said. "Everyone is unique, and more and more people want to bring design elements into the mix, so we see this as making sense."

The investment is the latest in the glass importer and fabricator's 109-year history, one that has been characterized in the past decade by customized cutting and finishing.

"We've had to crawl out of our skin half a dozen times" in the past 30 years, David Balik said, walking past a row of polished panels in the company warehouse. "That's how we've been able to stay in business all this time — because we're providing a service. If these were standard-size items, they would probably come from China."

He tells visitors a tall tale that his and Richard's great-grandfather, Max Balik, shot out windows with a BB gun to stoke sales in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the early days. Things haven't gotten that bad, but slowing sales have forced the latest generation to leave positions vacant after employee departures.

Fabrication takes place in GGI's 100,000-square-foot warehouse in an industrial corner of Secaucus, where panels nearly 11 feet tall and 17 feet long crowd the floor. Much of that glass comes from factories in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Tennessee. The other side of the room is occupied by decorative glass panels imported from Europe and elsewhere.

Panels are lifted onto a cutting bed with a suction-cupped mechanical arm, then fed into a tempering oven, where 1,000-degree temperatures bolster the glass's strength.

On the commercial side, most of the glass winds up in interior spaces and entrances. Shower doors, meanwhile, have become a primary residential use.

GGI was primarily an importer in the '70s and a manufacturer in the '80s, and it entered the fabrication business in 1997 by acquiring the assets of The Glass Factory on Long Island. The company also operates a picture-frame plant in North Carolina.

But its latest division is anchored by Alice, the name the company gave its direct-to-glass digital printer (as in the character from Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking-Glass"). The machine, made by Israeli company Dip Tech, is one of the first sold in the United States.

GGI has done work for New York University Law School and The Juilliard School since starting its color

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printing service in January. Its latest project entails printing a 500-panel mural scene for a 13,000-square-foot facade.

Growing public appreciation of architectural style and the surge of green building projects have been good for the Balik family business.

Still, the owners are troubled by the industry's immediate future. "I talk to some developers who say they're '100 percent off,' meaning they have no projects in the pipeline," Balik said. "The people in the glass trades have no idea what kind of work is out there next year."

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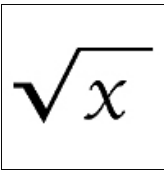
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