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Glassmakers go cutting edge

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SECAUCUS — Economic conditions already were headed downhill when cousins David and Richard Balik decided to spend a couple of million dollars 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 tiny number of 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's 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 last 30 years, David Balik said, walking past a row of clear 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 window sales in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the early days. Things haven't gotten that bad lately, but slowing sales have forced the latest generation to leave some positions vacant following employee departures.

Fabrication takes place in GGI's 100,000-square-foot warehouse in an industrial corner of Secaucus, where panels measuring nearly 11 feet tall and 17 feet long crowd the middle of the floor.

Much of that glass comes from factories in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Tennessee. The other side of the room is occupied by panels of decorative glass imported from Europe and elsewhere.

Panels are lifted onto a cutting bed with a suction-cupped mechanical arm, then ultimately 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 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 that employs about half its 100-member workforce.

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 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 — in particular the use of glass to create interior lighting and coatings that reduce energy consumption — 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."

In such a climate, GGI's longtime policy to ensure its credit and do business only with credit-worthy customers also looks smart. "By insuring receivables, if one of our clients goes out of business, we don't," Balik said.

The current owners also get plenty of advice from the preceding generation — David's father, Arthur, 87, and Richard's father, Albert, 84. Both men joined the company after World War II and still check in just about every day.

"They're excited for us that the company is again going in new directions," Richard Balik said.

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