

Gypsum Solutions

**Product News and Technical Reports from
the Industrial Products Division of United States Gypsum Company**

Application

Residential Construction

Product

ENDURACAST™ Gypsum
Matrix

Eurocast Architectural Stone Uses Precast Gypsum To Meet Hot Demand For Fireplace Mantels

*Lincoln, Calif.-Based Company Tops \$3 Million in Annual Sales,
Looks for National Growth*

When Bo Snell and Dennis Christensen, the co-owners of Lincoln, Calif.-based Eurocast Architectural Stone Manufacturing Inc., first met in 1998, the creative sparks flew almost immediately.

Snell, a former custom home builder based out of Sacramento, was installing a precast portland cement fireplace mantel in a home in a Del Webb subdivision in Lincoln Hills, Calif.

Christensen, also a former home builder, was installing a custom precast design made from extruded gypsum (gypsum cement pushed through stainless steel cutting dies) in the same subdivision.

“When I saw what he was doing and he saw what I was doing, both our eyes lit up,” said Christensen.

While Christensen admired the quality and upscale look of the white portland cement precast mantel that Snell was installing, Snell couldn’t help but notice the intricate detail and light weight of Christensen’s extruded gypsum work.

“We both instantly recognized the potential synergies between our businesses and we almost immediately began discussing a potential partnership,” said Snell.

A few months later, that partnership became a reality. Today, Snell and Christensen’s chance meeting has turned into one of the fastest-growing fireplace mantel manufacturing businesses in the country. Since its founding in March 1999, Eurocast has grown into a \$3 million business. And Snell and Christensen



A Very Hot Business

Ed Downs (left) and Bo Snell have turned Eurocast Architectural Stone Manufacturing Inc. into one of the nation’s fastest-growing fireplace mantel manufacturing businesses.

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Designs of the Times

The firm sells more than 50 different mantel designs, all created in-house by company designers.



Rapidly Growing Business

While production home builders account for most of Eurocast's business, it also sells to custom builders and remodelers, has a distributor network and sells products from its Web site.

both maintain that this is just the beginning.

"The precast fireplace mantel business has always been a local or regional business," said Snell, Eurocast's president. "The mantels are heavy, so there are geographic limits on how far you can ship product and still realize a profit. At the end of 2002, we began using an innovative manufacturing process that reduces the weight of our mantels by 75 percent, while maintaining the high-end precast stone look. And that will enable us to sell – and ship – our products on a volume basis virtually anywhere in the country."

Fresh Perspectives

Prior to founding Eurocast, both Snell and Christensen had been following parallel career paths. Collectively, they spent more than 30 years building approximately half a billion dollars worth of custom homes in the Sacramento and Orange County areas before launching their precast fireplace mantel business in early 1999.

"When I was building homes, I couldn't find a manufacturer to supply the types of fireplace mantels I wanted," said Snell. "So I started creating my own and I became more and more fascinated by that end of the business until I finally just quit building homes and started building mantels."

Similarly, Christensen had been building custom homes in the Orange County, Calif., market for several years before he, too, started his own fireplace mantel business in 1990.

As relative newcomers to the mantel manufacturing industry, both Snell and Christensen were open to new ideas and innovations.

"We didn't grow up in the mantel manufacturing business, so we weren't

tied to certain ways of doing things," said Christensen. "We were open to trying new things and being creative."

That attitude, perhaps as much as anything, has been a key to the company's remarkable growth. From day one, Eurocast Architectural Stone Manufacturing has relied on innovative manufacturing techniques to set it apart from the hundreds of other mantel manufacturers operating across the country. For instance, the company's high-efficiency gypsum cement casting processes were developed by simply listening to suggestions and ideas from their gypsum supplier.

"We had some new technologies for the marketplace that we knew would provide production advantages for precast manufacturers like Eurocast," said Mike Drinane, product manager with Chicago-based United States Gypsum Company. "Bo and Dennis listened to our ideas, tried them and, obviously, it's worked out beautifully."

The gypsum-based cements that Eurocast uses are made from the same gypsum mineral that is used to manufacture drywall. In fact, U.S. Gypsum, Eurocast's gypsum supplier, is the country's leading manufacturer of gypsum board panels. The company, which also manufactures a wide range of casting cements and other industrial products, not only helped set up Eurocast's manufacturing operations, but continues to provide ongoing technical assistance as Snell, Christensen and Ed Downs, the company's director of operations, refine and upgrade their production processes.

"Gypsum provides a number of key advantages for us," said Christensen, vice president of marketing. "It's more consistent than portland cement and it enables us to create much finer detail in our finished products."

“Color matching is one of the biggest problems in this business,” added Snell. “Our customers often want mantels that complement carpeting, drapes and other interior color schemes. That can be a problem when using other cement materials, but the gypsum cements are so con-

50 mantel designs, all created in-house by the company’s team of architectural designers.

Eurocast mantels are typically sold to production home builders like Del Webb, Centex, Kimball Hill and Lennar Homes, to name a few.

“Production builders account for



It's in the Details

The gypsum-based cements that Eurocast uses enable the company to create much finer detail and more consistent color in its finished products than other types of materials would permit.

“Gypsum provides a number of key advantages for us.”

—Dennis Christensen, Eurocast Architectural Stone Manufacturing Inc.

sistent, we know exactly what colors our finished products will be. There are no surprises.”

While the use of gypsum enables Eurocast to offer intricate architectural detail and consistent color, it also speeds the manufacturing process.

“Gypsum sets much more quickly than portland cement,” said Christensen. “And that’s a key advantage for us. We’re able to produce pieces much more quickly than portland cement precast manufacturers, while delivering finished results that are as good or better.”

Moreover, the precast process is also much more economical than on-site mantel construction that use finishes such as wood, stacked stone, faux stone or brick.

Growing Business

Since its founding in 1998, Eurocast has parlayed its unique line of architectural mantels with a robust housing market and an increasing demand for fireplaces to realize three straight years of 100 percent annual growth.

The company currently offers its products via a statewide network of distributors and sells mantels in virtually every major city in California, as well as locations from Nevada to Japan. It offers a variety of more than

about 60 percent of our business,” said Snell. “However, we also sell to custom builders and remodelers. We have a network of distributors and we also sell products directly off our Web site.”

“We’re having another excellent year,” said Christensen. “Following the terrorist attacks, production home building was slow, but it’s since recovered. Our business is booming now. We’ve expanded our manufacturing facility from 5,000 to 40,000 sq. ft.”

While pleased with the company’s growth over the past three years, Snell and Christensen have much bigger plans in mind.

“Our goal is to expand from a regional mantel manufacturer to a national mantel manufacturer,” said Christensen. “We want to sell to builders across the country.”

“We’ve worked with U.S. Gypsum technical personnel to develop an entirely new production process that reduces the average weight of our mantels from 800 pounds down to approximately 150 pounds,” explained Snell. “These lighter-weight products will feature the exact same appearance, quality and architectural detailing as our current mantels, but they’ll be light enough to ship anywhere.”



Streamlined Production Process

These cements have also enabled the firm to streamline its production process and expand rapidly to meet growing demand for its products.



Mantel Quality Enhances Appeal

A nicely finished mantel can enhance the value and aesthetic appeal of the entire room.

Technical Assistance

For more information about ENDURACAST™ Gypsum Matrix, contact the Industrial Products Division of United States Gypsum Company's Customer Service Department at (800) 487-4431, e-mail industrial@usg.com or visit the division's Web site at www.gypsumsolutions.com

The Industrial Products Division of United States Gypsum Company is a leading producer and marketer of a wide range of industrial products used in manufacturing, tooling, plastics, coatings, construction, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, food processing, statuary, ceramics, road repair and other applications.

The large-scale production of 150-pound stylish precast mantels would be a major step forward for the industry . . . and could lead to a huge growth in sales. Their new manufacturing process involves the use of an innovative U.S. Gypsum casting material called ENDURACAST™ Gypsum Matrix, which offers higher strength ranges than competing materials and requires no drying.

"By using gypsum cements, we've already streamlined our production capabilities and we're able to produce details and consistency that many of our competitors can't match," said Snell. "So we're going to continue to push the envelope and see where it leads us."

The company has geared up for continued expansion. "When a company grows as quickly as we have, all processes must be carefully managed to maintain quality," said Downs. "With that in mind, we've implemented a company-wide quality system that enables us to more effectively meet that growing demand."

That demand is virtually assured given the healthy state of home building in California.

"The only housing crisis they're talking about here is the fact that builders can't build homes fast enough to meet demand," said Christensen. "That's the type of crisis we like to hear about."

PRECAST MANTELS ARE IDEAL FOR ANY FIREPLACE

The fireplace business is booming these days, thanks in part to reduced installation costs and increased versatility.

"Over the past 20 to 30 years there's been a gradual move toward prefabricated fireplaces, gas appliances and most recently, electric fireboxes – all of which are much more affordable than the traditional masonry firebox and chimney," said Dennis Christensen, vice president of marketing for Eurocast Architectural Stone Manufacturing Inc.

While a traditional masonry brick firebox and chimney might cost \$5,000 to install, a prefabricated metal firebox and chimney flue costs less than half that. Further, according to Christensen, gas appliance fireplaces, which use ceramic technology to replicate the look of burning logs, reduce the cost even further.

Gas appliances require only a small vent pipe as opposed to a full chimney, so they're much cheaper to install," said Christensen. "They look like the real thing, they save on the budget and they reduce smoke pollution in the environment."

Electric fireboxes, which require no venting at all, are the latest trend. "These fireboxes now provide an amazingly realistic look and they can literally be installed anywhere," said Christensen. "We're now installing mantels for these types of electric fireplaces in hotel rooms, hospitals, retirement homes and other commercial locations where previously you would never be able to install a fireplace."

As the installed cost for fireplaces continues to fall, builders and building owners are spending more on fireplace mantels. Obviously, this is a good trend for mantel manufacturers such as Eurocast, but as Christensen points out, it's also a good trend for homeowners. "It's the mantel – not the firebox – that really adds value and aesthetic appeal to a room."

