



## Rock Star

Thanks to the Web, Richard Rhodes leaves no stone unturned in his quest for the world's most fabulous materials.

Sometimes the best rock is in a hard place. Or at least a hard place to get to. Take for example, the 500-year-old stone road doomed to be flooded by the construction of China's Three Gorges Dam. Or the 100,000 square feet of dolomitic limestone that for two centuries served as the floor of an Indonesian military barracks now slated for destruction.

Such materials bear the imprimatur of history and are worth plenty to people who are constructing lavish or distinctive buildings. "Our customers are not building for shelter" says Richard Rhodes, CEO of \$10 million Rhodes Architectural Stone. "Our customers want beauty. More than that, they want emotional resonance."

Rhodes Architectural Stone is the CEO's third start-up. His previous ventures - Rhodes Masonry and Rhodes Quarry House- were also founded on stone. But the early companies treated the hard stuff as a commodity. By 1997, Rhodes wanted to sell a differentiated product. He liked the idea of antique and exotic materials, particularly the types found in

remote regions of China, North Africa, and South Asia.

But to procure such expensive stone Rhodes would first need a customer's approval, and he'd need it fast. Saving time up front was crucial to counter the four or five weeks required to ship thousands of tons of cargo by sea. The longer the delay from the initial inquiry to delivery, the more likely a customer would be to opt for a domestic source.

Rhodes's Agents tried taking photos of their finds and mailing them back to the United States, but the postal service was poor- and express delivery non-existent- in most of the areas that they were scouting. Even developing the photos proved difficult.

"In some of these countries they haven't changed the chemicals since 1948 and you end up with pictures

**Company:** Rhodes Architectural Stone, in Seattle  
**URL:** [www.rhodes.org](http://www.rhodes.org)  
**What we liked:** Richard Rhodes based his business on an unusual competitive edge- he uses the Web to quickly source exotic materials from the most inaccessible spots on the globe

that look nothing like what you've shot" Rhodes explains. When Rhodes was dreaming up his company, Web procurement was something that took place between technologically sophisticated entities. But the founder saw no reason that he couldn't use it in the ancient world. Armed with digital cameras and laptops, his 14 international scouts began snapping pictures of roads in Indonesia and walls in India. Despite limitations in bandwidth Rhodes and his customers received enough good visual information to be able to approve purchases and start the long, arduous process of moving material toward construction sites. Over the years, Rhodes's Web Offerings have become more elaborate. The company now manages projects online, creating protected areas where the design team, general contractors, engineer and installers can share information and updates. Those players also weigh in on the stone that Rhodes recommends for the project. "That's very powerful," says Rhodes. "We've found things I thought were surefire winners that we ended up not buying because others didn't see them the same way."



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