

A Role of Different Parts

SEATTLE – For many people, being a success in one thing in life is enough. Richard Rhodes isn't one of them.

The founder and owner of Rhodes Architectural Stone (RAS) started his life in the industry as a skilled craftsman; he's the only foreigner ever admitted to the stonemasons' guild in Siena, Italy.



"I never intended to be a stone mason," says Rhodes, shown here at work in the stone yard.

Back in United States, he felt the call to create what he labels "expressive" stonework. To do that, RAS became a different sort of stone-fabrication operation, buying and fabricating stone internationally and acting as a consultant on high-end projects.

The latest step in his development: In 2009, he turned the operation of the company over to managers and followed his muse into a sculpture practice that's part figures and part forms.

FALLING IN LOVE

The greatest irony of Rhodes' career in stone is that he arrived in Italy to study something else entirely: acting.

As a graduate student at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, he began to study ritualized male behaviors in medieval drama. To get a better sense of those behaviors close-up, he decided to view them firsthand by seeking to join – undercover – one of the few remaining organizations dating back to the Middle Ages.

After four months of hauling material 14 hours a day, he was accepted as an apprentice in the Siena, Italy, Freemasons' Guild.

"There are two sides to the Freemasons," he says. "One is the sort of mystical political organization. But there is also the 'operative branch.' These are the people who are the real masons who still work with the tools.

"My 15 minutes of fame is that I'm the first foreigner in 726 years to be formally initiated into the operative branch of the Freemasons, the guild that is heir to the cathedral builders of Europe."

The greatest irony of Rhodes' career in stone is that he arrived in Italy to study something else entirely: acting.



One of four massive stone forms in the Big Horn residence

STONE | UPDATE

Rhodes spent 18 months with the masons, learning ancient principals governing geometric relations and proportions (Sacred Geometry), core attributes (Sacred Rules of Bondwork), and the expressive qualities of building stone. He departed his Italian apprenticeship as a journeyman mason.

Rhodes finished his graduate degree, came back to the United States, and worked in the theater for a couple years. His interest, though, turned back to stone masonry.

“I never intended to be a stone mason,” he says. “I was trying to relate it back to medieval drama, but I ended up falling in love with what they were doing. It was a funny twist of fate.”

After three years, he utilized \$1,200 from a credit card and opened his first business, Rhodes Masonry, in the San Francisco area. He says he never thought of going to work for someone else.



“It was important to have my own business because the work being done at that time was not expressive work,” Rhodes says. “I had come from a tradition in Italy where stone masonry is a medium and you’re trying to express something; you’re trying to make something beautiful and something expressive in a material that lasts thousands of years.”

“I thought by creating my own firm, I could bring something different to it,” he adds. “That’s turned out to be a very successful strategy.”

In 1986, Rhodes relocated his business to Seattle.

“I have always wanted to show people what’s possible and aspire to bring some imagination to my projects,” he says.

“It was important to have my own business because the work being done at that time was not expressive work...”



Rhodes’ public sculpture, permanently installed at the Tacoma Art Museum

STONE | UPDATE

EXPRESSIVE STONEMWORK

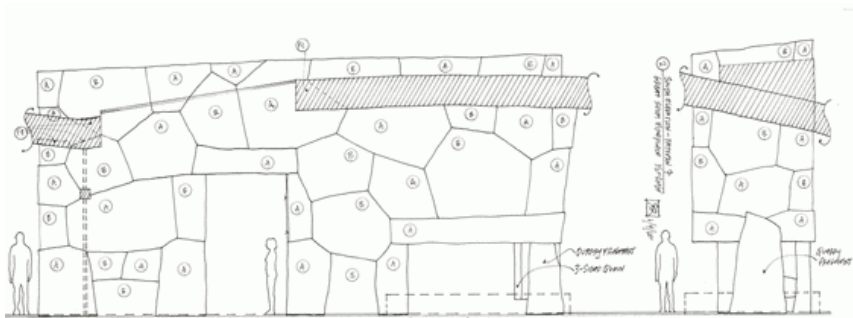
Later, Rhodes reached the point where he could pick and choose the jobs on which he wanted to work, with many of them being what he saw as the most-interesting projects being built in the country.

He also built his reputation by careful marketing. A regular speaker at the annual meetings of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), he's also lectured at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America in New York and at San Francisco's Classical Institute.

Rhodes Architectural Stone also has employees in the United States, China and Australia who call on top design firms.

"At this point we're pretty well known in the industry," Rhodes says. "There are very few people who do what we do, and within the circle of top architects and designers who are looking to push the envelope and really looking for expressive stonework, we're pretty well known."

Perhaps the most unusual part of the business is that RAS is involved with projects literally from the beginning.



Drawings for the sculpture at the Big Horn residence

"We're invited to the design team as peers and we cast ourselves as sort of interpreters or translators of the design intent into the medium of stone," he explains. "We're at the table, speaking the language of the designers and helping convey their architectural ideas into this medium where we have developed mastery. That can make us a powerful resource."

That presence, Rhodes believes, helps the designer achieve a project's full potential in a way that doesn't happen if a consultant is brought in after the design is already conceptualized.

"We're invited to the design team as peers and we cast ourselves as sort of interpreters or translators of the design intent into the medium of stone."



Sculpture pre-assembly for the Big Horn residence

STONE | UPDATE

It also requires the company to have a much closer relationship with the end client than most people in the industry ever experience. Part of that is because of the people with whom the company works.

“These clients are exceptional people, and there’s a reason they’ve been so successful in their lives,” he says. “I found it a gift to be able to work with them and learn from them and find out how they think about things and what’s important to them.”

Some projects, he adds, may take half-a-dozen years to come to fruition. And, because these people aren’t building for simple shelter, their projects become important statements about their lives and what they’ve achieved.

“It’s a very personal experience for them,” Rhodes says. “For many of our clients, this is the most creative and expressive thing they’ve done. They’re tremendously charged to be working with creative people, and they love finding somebody who can help them take their ideas and give them expression.”

While that part of the process may sound a bit esoteric for someone who started as an apprentice stone mason, Rhodes Architectural Stone is also strongly anchored in the nuts-and-bolts of the business.

On a typical project, his crew will write the specifications for the job, consult on hiring the masonry crew, and make sure that the work is done correctly.

“There’s a tremendous amount of work in the engineering and specifications and shop-drawing process,” Rhodes explains. “Design-and-specification is one of our largest groups.”

However, the hands-on part of the operation stops with fabrication; the company stopped doing its own installations in 2003.

A MATTER OF CENTURIES

The other employee-intensive part of the operation, Rhodes says, is the fabrication. He may have started his career as a mason in Italy, but today a large part of the business is based in China.

Again, it goes back to his desire for expressive stonework.

“We found that the part of stone that’s most expressive is really hand finishes,” he says. “And, it’s just not possible to do hand finishes in the United States anymore. We did hand finishes for 10 years in Seattle, and we were certainly among the last people to produce them in the United States, but it’s just not possible now with labor costs.”

“These clients are exceptional people, and there’s a reason they’ve been so successful in their lives,” he says. “I found it a gift to be able to work with them and learn from them and find out how they think about things and what’s important to them.”

STONE | UPDATE

Initially Rhodes went to China because of a large project he was working on for a software billionaire outside San Francisco. The client had what he called, “a personal trade imbalance,” with China, meaning he had currency he needed to spend in that country.

The plan was to have Rhodes buy the stone in China and ship it to Seattle for fabrication. Once onsite, however, Rhodes says he was struck by the arrogance of the plan.

“These people in China know more about stone than I’ll know in my lifetime,” he says. “They’re enormously skilled and they’ve been processing and working with stone for 3,500 years.”

Rhodes went back to his client and proposed setting up a factory in China, then shipping the finished stone directly to the site, with the stipulation that at the end Rhodes would own the factory.

“I said, ‘In the end, it will cost you less,’” he says. “The client agreed and that’s the start of how I came to work in China. Ultimately, I moved my entire manufacturing operation there because I could do so much more.”

To many, Rhodes is best recognized as the man who bought 17 Chinese villages for their stone. It’s a small part of the resources that were otherwise lost to the Three Gorges dam project on China’s Yangtze River.

As he explains it, while he was working in that country, he opted to visit the Three Gorges construction site. It was only then that he realized some 1,600 communities – some dating back 3,500 years and containing stone structures and stone streets – would be underwater at the completion of the project.



Rhodes’ public sculpture, Sentinel II



Antique Yangtze Limestone installed at the Keller Winery, CA

“I thought that was a shame,” he says. “It’s beautiful material and I thought we should try to save and recycle it because it’s part of the world’s patrimony.”

“I thought that was a shame,” he says. “It’s beautiful material and I thought we should try to save and recycle it because it’s part of the world’s patrimony.”

Rhodes came back to the United States to raise money, and then began a two-year negotiation to buy some of the villages. Ultimately, he obtained 17 of them. The rest were dynamited.

STONE | UPDATE

He admits the Chinese thought he was crazy, but he has been able to recycle the material, although negotiating their purchase was only the first step in a complicated process. “They had to be demolished carefully, then processed,” Rhodes says. “These are huge blocks, and we don’t build that way; we build in a veneer system. We have to saw the faces off, being careful to preserve the hand-chiseled marks and the patina. Then we further make it into a usable product by kerfing it for attachment. It’s also no small feat to ship stone 10,000 miles without breaking it, so it has to be crated and packed very carefully.”

SOUVENIRS

Not surprisingly, it’s also a product that isn’t just for anyone. However, Rhodes says it has plenty of appeal for clients he describes as being, “at the very highest end.”

“Certainly, there’s a lot of handling and a lot of cost,” he says. “But when customers have a choice of anything they want in the world, this is not only a beautiful material, but it has an exceptional story, and that story is very powerful.”

He adds that while many of his clients have traveled extensively, typically stone isn’t something you can pack up and bring home. In a way, it’s the ultimate souvenir.

China is not the only country from which Rhodes buys new materials. Many of his projects utilize natural stone from India and Indonesia. In addition, he’s continuing to acquire antique materials from around the world that would otherwise be demolished for an unusual form of stone recycling.

“We have lots of different stone,” Rhodes says. “When it comes to the antique materials we only collect antique granite and antique limestone, but in new materials we work extensively in sandstone, in granite and in hard limestone (also referred to as high-density limestone).”

All along, Rhodes says he’s been trying to help people express themselves through stone, which easily explains why in 2009 he decided to quit working day-to-day in Rhodes Architectural Stone and focus on sculpture.

All along,
Rhodes says
he’s been
trying to help
people express
themselves
through stone.



“In a way, [antique stone is] the ultimate souvenir.”

STONE | UPDATE

“I had always done sculpture commissions, but on the side while I ran and built the company,” he says. “Now I’m working on sculpture and design much more full time. I remain deeply involved with RAS, but am trying to give my artistic and design abilities first priority.”

And, he’s become one of his own customers for works such as construction of a private residence in Palm Desert, Calif., that utilized more than 550 tons of granite RAS quarried specifically for the project.

“We fit them all together, with very tight joints,” Rhodes says. “The assembled volumes are huge. Some of them measure 60’ X 18’ and divide the interior spaces almost as walls. Other areas are just abstract.”

He was also honored for his creation of the “Stone Wave,” the 2,000 ft² of stone at the center of the Antoine Predock-designed Tacoma Art Museum. Another series of pieces he calls “Sentinals” are abstract forms that explore simple gestures.

“The idea is that if a work is ‘suitably blank’ the viewer will read into it something much larger,” he explains. “I’m taking a hard material like granite and through abstract gesture imbuing it with meaning supplied by the audience.”

Whether his company is completing a complicated commercial project or he’s working the stone himself, Rhodes wants to continue to share the knowledge he picked up so unexpectedly years ago in Italy.

“Within the industry, I’m known as one of the last apprentices,” he explains. “The guild has collapsed in Italy with the deaths of the people I trained with, and there is no apprentice system in the United States.

“It’s one of those things I didn’t understand at the time, but I was given an incredible gift. I’m taking that sacred knowledge that has been passed down through the ages and I have a chance to share it in my lifetime.”

As part of that, for several years now he’s been working on a book to share what’s he’s learned through his career. And, Rhodes believes sharing his knowledge is a very important thing – almost as important as getting the most from the stone itself.

His goal: “We’ll continue to do the work that I’m most-interested in, when people are trying to express something in stone, something fundamental.”



Residential granite wall

“It’s one of those things I didn’t understand at the time, but I was given an incredible gift.”



Orinda Public Library



RHODESWORKS design studio
a division of Richard Rhodes Masonry, Inc.
3201 East Republican Street
Seattle, Washington 98112
206-420-7687