

East & West Alum Craft Ltd.



ALUMINUM RAILING SUPPLIER SPAWNED AN INDUSTRY

IF IT WEREN'T FOR ITS FOUNDER WINNING a high-stakes poker game in the 1960s, East & West Alum Craft Ltd. might never have been launched, let alone become B.C.'s leading aluminum railing manufacturer. And without East & West, the largest conglomeration of aluminum manufacturers per capita in North America might never have developed in this province.

But Joe Zen, self-described "Guru of Aluminum Railing," was as adept at card-playing as he was at building a trendsetting business from scratch. In its 44,000-square foot Burnaby facility, East & West manufactures over 1,000 lineal feet of railing daily and offers a wide range of products across North America and beyond, from balcony rails and fencing to trellises and handrails.

Zen's sons, Paul and Sergio, along with general manager Tony Dente and a 100-strong crew of highly experienced ironworkers, differentiate themselves from the competition by making custom-welded products that stand the test of time. East & West has broadened its product range to withstand economic slowdowns, and as a result is currently working full-tilt on over 35 projects in the highrise sector alone.

"We're swamped with commitments," says Paul Zen. "At the moment our custom work is the busiest part of our business, but we adjust our services according to market needs, so next year when all our present projects are completed the economy may have improved and we'll be pursuing a different marketing tangent."

He clearly enjoys discussing East & West's success, and with good reason. "We've been pioneers and trendsetters, but we've also experienced the hard times and learned from our mistakes," says Zen. "This business was built because Joe was a risk-taker, and for the last two decades we've enjoyed year-over-year growth – in fact, double-digit growth since 1999."

Joe Zen passed away in 2008, so it's difficult to discuss East & West without relating stories of his ingenuity and tenacity. "Joe immigrated to Canada from Italy in the 1950s and got into welding simply because



he needed the work," says Paul Zen. "He applied his skills on the pipelines up north, and one night while playing poker with some other welders he noticed the cards were marked. The upshot was he won \$5,000 that night, used the money to pay off his debts and the balance to start up his own business, Pacific Iron Works."

Vancouver-based Pacific Iron Works' early years were spent welding steel, once the material of choice for residential balconies. But one day in the late 1960s a salesman from Alcan came to see Joe. Joe asked him if he could weld aluminum, and the salesman said yes. "Joe, being very much a seat-of-the-pants person, initiated the first welding assignment and it proved to be a success, and before long we were sold on the material: it was quicker to cut, faster to weld and of course much lighter to hoist than steel," says Zen.

The business moved to its current location in Burnaby in 1977 with the new name East & West Alum Craft Ltd. It worked on many single-family homes and outfitted many then-new West End Vancouver highrises. "At first, end-users had to be convinced aluminum was just as strong as steel," recalls Dente. "But eventually the aluminum 'revolution' began and we scrambled to meet demand." Over time, some East & West employees went on to form their own aluminum manufacturing companies, and today B.C. is home to over 100 such businesses – the greatest number of manufacturers for a region of this population density in North America.

East & West has proven adept at growing its market. Dente was responsible for establishing the company's powder paint shop in 1977, and today it offers two types of paint:

East & West Alum Craft

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Paint capabilities were quickly followed by a shift in operational emphasis, from installing products to selling through distributors. "We did this by creating a package deal in the late 1970s," says Dente. "The package consisted of pre-manufactured rail with end posts that could be delivered instantly instead of in two or three weeks, which was the norm for standard railings. This really opened up B.C. for us, plus it substantially increased revenues because we no longer needed to install the product and could focus on other activities."

In the 1980s, East & West created the Star system, a snap-together railing product sold in lineal lengths to distributors that enabled the company to gain a foothold in Eastern Canada and the U.S. Yet another service developed by East & West is custom manufacturing and installing, which was used recently when the company was tagged to supply railings for new additions at the Atlantis Hotel in the Bahamas and a similar project in Miami.

It's impossible to summarize East & West's influence over the past four decades. "You can point to a building in Vancouver and chances are we'll have supplied aluminum railing for it," says Zen. "That includes icons like the Wall Centre, the Shangri-La, the Waterfront Centre – the list is endless."

But an innate humility compels Zen to credit others beyond his own management and staff for East & West's success. "High-profile development companies such as Bosa, Decotiis, PCL, Ledcor, Concord Pacific, Westbank, Wall Financial and many



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others have advanced East & West by using our products," he says. "We also enjoy a great working relationship with the architectural community." Zen also credits his financier, CIBC, for helping East & West develop.

For his part, Dente credits a partnership with Ironworkers Union Local 712. "We've never had a strike or major grievance in our 40 years of business," he says.

And as busy as East & West may be in 2009, its management has found time to create Citizens Care (www.citizens-care.org), a registered foundation that encourages individuals to donate money to help locals who live below the poverty line.

Looking to the future, East & West is gearing up for many new opportunities. The company recently purchased an automated water-cutting machine that facilitates the manufacture of elaborate aluminum designs and will result in a greater selection of products.

"And we'll continue to expand in the East and in the U.S.," says Zen. "There's a lot to look forward to, and by pursuing a plan of expansion and self-improvement, we're helping to ensure our prosperity in the long run." With a grin, Zen jokes, "Who knows? Maybe one day we'll start up a new division and call it North & South."

For more information, visit the company's website at: www.ewalumcraft.com. ■

This promotional feature was prepared for East & West Alum Craft Ltd. by BCBusiness magazine's Special Advertising Features Dept. Writer: Robin Brunet. For information contact BCBusiness VP of corporate features John Cochrane at 604-299-7311. Email: jcochrane@canadawide.com.

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