



On the Rise: Metal Roofing Hits Home

by Shawn Holiday

One adage of education is that it can take a generation for reforms to produce real results. While the roofing industry's effort to educate customers isn't exactly comprehensive, the efforts by manufacturers, associations and individual contractors seem to be paying off. Homeowners, who have a reputation for only realizing they have a roof after a leak, are demanding roofing materials that last longer. In many cases that means a metal roof.

For the roofing contractor, residential metal roofing offers relief from the constant price pressures, even on reroofing jobs. When prices get into several dollars a square foot, the scenario provides better profit margins. Customers are already sold on quality and some simply must have that beautiful roof they saw on vacation. "People are tired of having to replace their roofs," says Clinton Sawyer, president of FE Sawyer in Tyler, Texas. "They go to Colorado and California and see them and wonder why the heck we don't have them."

Going All Out

The popularity of metal roofing on homes has become great enough for the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors Association to publish the first edition of "Residential Sheet Metal Guidelines." Available this fall, the booklet is a five-year effort to bring some uniformity to residential applications. Some believe that some of the commercial guidelines were too restrictive for many straightforward projects on homes. In fact, the commercial guidelines have been used against contractors in some lawsuits, alleging negligence because industry "standard practices" weren't used. The results are guidelines that address the specific needs of homes without over-engineering.

"We only do metal roofing one way," says Paul Keohane, president of Custom Metal Fabricators in Orange, Calif. He is a SMACNA board member and chair of the association's Architectural Sheet Metal Council Steering Committee, which produced the guidelines. "The guidelines are to guide the installer in some of

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Photo courtesy of Custom-Bilt Metals.

the ways to do things. It costs a little more to do it right, but you're not getting call backs."

For instance, most of Keohane's projects use a 30-pound felt nailed down as the underlayment. Occasionally he'll use a self-adhered membrane for lower slopes but considers any underlayment as protection against condensation, not as redundancy for a roofing system that doesn't shed all the water. "We figure the metal is supposed to keep the water out," says Keohane.

remodeling firm in Baton Rouge, La. The company, founded in 1982, has been installing metal roofs for about 10 years. "I'm really excited about it. I'm doing much more metal roofing than I do windows and siding now. When someone asks me for the cheapest everything, it's just not fun. I'm not trying to minimally survive."

His company reroofs over a number of asphalt shingles, which are more vulnerable to the high humidity of Louisiana. There was also a hailstorm in the spring of last year that convinced many homeowners to look for something more durable overhead.

Neyland still feels like he has to educate his customers on the cost of quality and will often work up separate bids for laminated shingles, structural panels with exposed fasteners and standing seam architectural panels. Sometimes the upgrade works or the customers already have something specific in mind. "They want it because of the look of the metal shingle," he says. "They see it on a house in the area and they like it."

Referrals are crucial to his business — which is primarily renovation work — and his company even offers financing. That's important, he says, when he comes across the local "predators" in roofing, siding and window replacements.

Top Guns

"There needs to be more sales training of the contractors so there are more of us," says Jade Sund of Viking Roofing in Denver. "We need training from above." Jade takes an aggressive

California has a mature metal roofing market, but demand seems to be increasing for metal roofs. Certainly there's a high-end market for customers who demand the very best. CMF has roofed homes designed by noted architect Frank Gehry, who can challenge the most seasoned journeymen with his unique geometric shapes.

Keohane recalls a surge in demand around 1993 that attracted some fly-by-nighters, but his strong relationship with local general contractors keeps him busy. Metal roofing isn't the fastest way to riches and the investment in training, time and equipment is nothing to take lightly. And the clients who want metal roofing have usually done some homework. "I don't see many people getting into it because customers want the experience. The cutthroat people don't last long here," he says, adding that some GCs he works with really keep their eye out for him. "In fact, if we're too low, they'll call us. That's the kind of relationship I like to build."

As if metal roofing weren't expensive enough, Keohane has been seeing a rather exotic material come into vogue in the area: titanium. A few prominent museums like the nearby Getty or the Guggenheim in Spain have showcased the lightweight metal that could previously be only found on missiles and spacecraft. He's working on a \$2 million wall-cladding project for a library using the durable titanium that can cost three times as much as copper.

For some projects, metal roofing is a whole other world. "I've gotten to the point where I prefer metal roofing over everything I do," says John Neyland, president of Remedies by House Calls, a



Photo courtesy of Owens Corning.

approach to customer service, a habit she picked up from her past experience in retail and food service. Her husband Scot has been a journeyman roofer for 20 years but realized that his boss was missing the boat by focusing more on installing roofs and not servicing needs. The two started their contracting firm in 1997 and install metal roofing almost exclusively.

While standing seam takes up a good deal of her business, stone-coated metal has become the company's preferred material. Light (under 2 pounds per square foot), durable, impact-resistant and attractive, are all qualities that her customers are

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seeking. She works primarily with three manufacturers and employs about six profiles — from flat shakes to S-curve tiles. The company even opened a showroom a few years ago so that customers could get a better impression of how the product will look on their homes. Those making such a large investment have a strong need to touch and feel the product, particularly if appearance is the driving force behind the sale.

"I don't sell roofs. I just educate people about metal roofing and they buy it," she explains. "I work by referrals. My customers pre-sell me every time." The company is religious about servicing the client, from doing everything possible to maintain its reputation to regular phone calls during the job to follow-up for surveys and referrals. Jade and Scot will both be speaking at MetalCon this month in Las Vegas and Jade also has her own consulting business.



Photo courtesy of Owens Corning.

Viking has set up a series of systems from bid to completion that ensures successful projects and happy customers. One important aspect is the database, which has been a gold mine for strong communication with past clients who become the marketing arm. Jade doesn't view other contractors as competitors and Viking is often the only company bidding on a project. "We have massive systems in place so we're not disappointing people," she says. "We try to under promise and over deliver."

Clinton Sawyer has been a builder for 20 years but recently got involved in metal roofing. Nearly all of his old installations were exposed fasteners, but the area is going for more high-end architectural panels with top of the line coatings like Kynar 500. Appearance and durability are big factors in the selection of metal roofing, with a lot of high-end homes demanding high-end roofing. A lot of his projects come from homebuilders whose clients often come to Sawyer's offices to learn about the different systems available. While he did a little metal roofing years ago, the recent trend appears to be more long term. "We saw something going on when the manufacturers were marketing, so we knew there was something there," he says. "They wouldn't be spending a lot of money on their product if there wasn't a market." 

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