

SUCCESS & MOTIVATION

THE BUSINESS OF BENDING STONE

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THE ESCOBEDO FAMILY BUSINESS BEGAN HUMBLY AS A MASONRY SUBCONTRACTING FIRM. NOW ITS INNOVATIONS ARE LEADING TO SUCCESS AND ATTRACTING THE ATTENTION OF ENGINEERING EXPERTS.



The long hallway was illuminated by a few rays of sunshine strategically planned to hit the space at certain angles, its Cordova cream limestone walls glowing in the early afternoon sun glare.

"There are 1,922 stones in this hallway," says Matt Escobedo, who was hired by his father more than ten years ago—he was a teenager at the time—to count the stones for a nominal fee. Every one of those stones was laid by hand to erect the Mayan House in Northwest Austin.

The house, designed by Austin architect Paul Lamb, rests on huge limestone walls, but stone was used beyond the load-bearing walls in a number of decorative ways. Every stone was carefully sculpted to produce the house's distinct features—the Mayan-inspired geometric patterns; the mortarless joints between stones used in several walls; the imposing yard ornament consisting of three

pairs of cylinders, each fabricated in two pieces of granite ranging in weight from 32,000 to 58,000 pounds. The house combines the massive and the delicate, the technical and the artistic, the essential and the ornamental in ways that are clever and fluid.

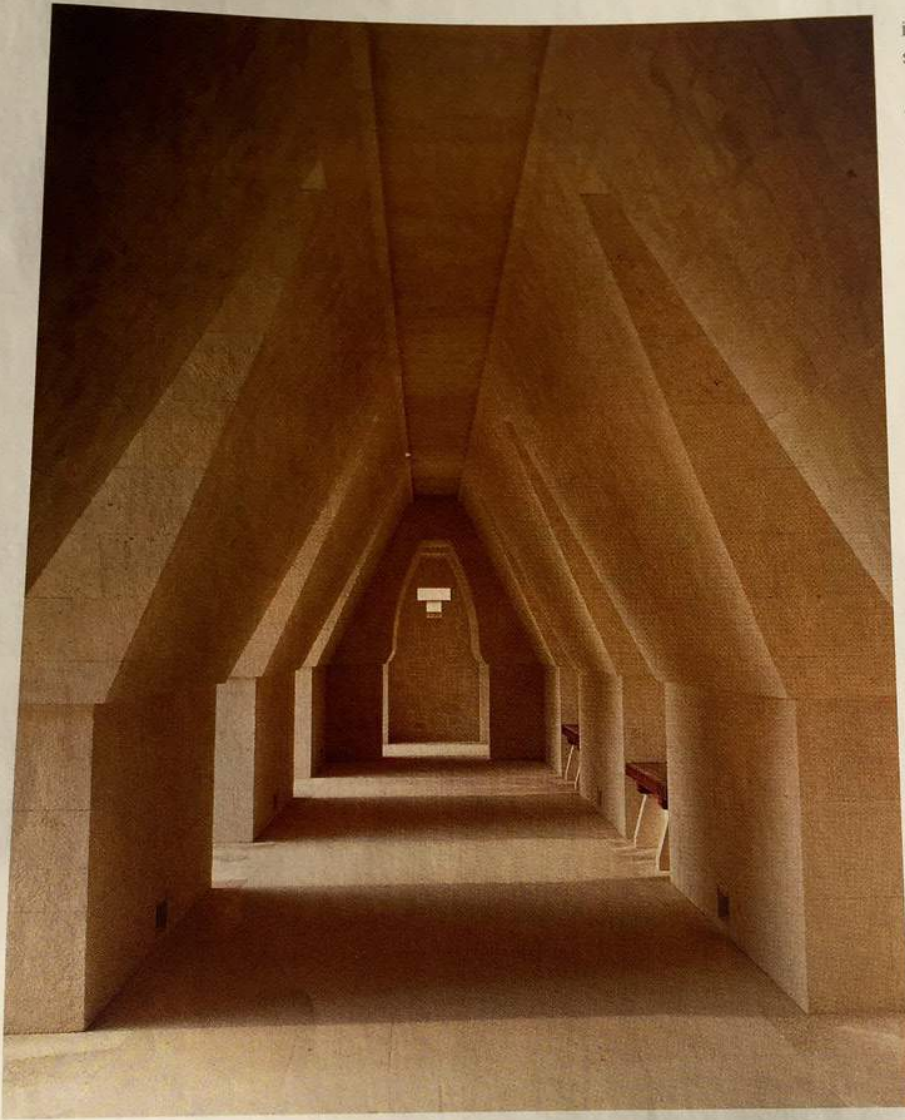
This kind of construction has become the trademark of Escobedo Construction, David Escobedo's Austin-based general contracting company.

Before moving his family to Austin 25 years ago, David Escobedo framed wood houses in Houston. He began working with stone almost by accident. While working on a project as a subcontractor, he found himself giving advice on stone arches to the masonry subcontractor. When the mason suddenly quit the job leaving his workers behind, Escobedo took charge of both the masonry and workers. Today, two decades later, two of those workers are still part of Escobedo's team of multi-skilled artisans.

The stone yard was busy the first time I visited Escobedo Construction on a cold November morning about two years ago. A dozen men worked in a light but per-



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vasive cloud of white dust. Some of them were using diamond blades to shape big blocks of stone into a circular wine rack while others were chiseling a rough texture into several pieces of a pink variety of limestone. Escobedo employed about 70 people then. In the past four years, however, the company has more than doubled its work force, and today is up to 140 employees. The company's headquarters, too, have grown—from 5,000 square feet to nearly 30,000 in the past five years.

But an even more telling measure of the growth of David Escobedo's business might lie in its capacity. Escobedo Construction is capable of handling a grow-

ing volume of work, thanks to its emphasis on efficiency.

As a general contractor, Escobedo Construction is not a labor broker. The company self-performs most major subcontracting jobs, which facilitates coordination among different areas and makes it possible for different trades to work in parallel.

"The main excuse [for not delivering] in construction is always the labor," Escobedo explains. "But in construction, even two months can make or break you. So we've eliminated that excuse. We're in control. We don't have to count on anyone else."

The company works with concrete, steel, stone and wood. Through its cabinet and millwork shop, stone mill, and steel fabrication space, Escobedo Construction has the capacity to handle a variety of projects through all stages, from design and management to fabrication and installation.

Escobedo recognizes the burden of his independence, but he has chosen this as a business model because he's confident in his abilities and sees an opportunity where others might find mostly risks.

"There's a lot of liability," he says. "But if you do 70 percent of the work, and if you know how to handle the responsibility, there's also profit."


Escobedo, who co-owns the company with his wife, Kathy, explains that the recent growth of the business is in part a response to greater demand, but also a deliberate attempt to diversify its areas of operation. The cabinet shop, for instance, is a new addition, and so is the company's interest in becoming a supplier for other projects on a national level. Escobedo knows that his company has developed a reputation locally for quality and innovation, and he recognizes this as a "brand" on which he can capitalize as he branches out to other products and services.

Like the company's growth, its systems and processes have developed to some extent in response to specific projects, and they keep morphing to meet new challenges, whether posed by a desire to innovate, materials of special qualities, scheduling demands or sites of tricky accessibility. A few years ago, for instance

the company designed and built a bridge crane system just to be able to set three massive stone sculptures in place near the top of an 86-ft. tall observatory tower made out of concrete and stone.

Escobedo laughs when he says he is "in heaven" when he gets a chance to weld while listening to "obnoxious" music, even if he has to do it at 4 in the morning. He's very much an artisan, but he prides himself in being good with numbers, too. In order to build a business both artful and efficient, Escobedo has enhanced traditional craftsmanship through the use of 3D-computer modeling and full-scale computer plotting.

The use of 2- and 3-axis CNC (computer numerical control) machines allows him to cut stone and wood with a great precision, but he emphasizes that artisans working by hand remain essential to the process. As part of a Tuscan-style village in Northwest Austin, for example, the company designed a stone and masonry stairway whose balustrade is made out of a single twisting piece of stone.

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"Creating this piece would have been a trial-and-error process for old world craftsmen," Escobedo says. "We have the craftsmen to perform the work effective-

ly, but we also make full use of modern technology to perform it quickly and efficiently."

The result is nothing short of perplexing; to the untrained eye, Escobedo seems capable of bending stone. And apparently to the trained eye, too, his work is exceptional. Recently, the company caught the eye of John Ochsendorf, assistant professor of engineering at MIT, whose interest in stone as load-bearing material has sparked a collaborative project involving an internship with Escobedo Construction. David Escobedo tells this news with the same mix of pride and modesty with which he seems to take most compliments. "It's pretty cool," he says.

Escobedo's eagerness to explore the details of this collaboration is just another manifestation of his innovative approach. As the drive for greater efficiency and self-reliance continues to propel this company into the future, Escobedo's vision to diversify the operation of his business is likely to strike gold—or at least, perhaps, to produce an incredible line of stone furniture. ■