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Madison stone company's innovative database of quarries helps builders stay eco-friendly

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By KAREN RIVEDAL | krivedal@madison.com | 608-252-6106 | Posted: Wednesday, May 12, 2010 8:05 pm | No Comments Posted



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The Indiana Limestone Quarry, located outside Bedford, Ind., is one of 346 active natural stone quarries in the U.S., Mexico and Canada featured in a new database developed by Madison-based Quarra Stone Company as an eco-friendly resource for architects, builders and designers. They can earn points toward LEED, or "green building" certification, if the quarry selected is located within 500 miles of their projects. Indiana limestone is the most widely used stone in the U.S. The quarry area in the photo includes the former Empire quarry, used to extract stone for the Empire State Building. It's the

most common stone in Washington, D.C. institutions, used for the Pentagon, the Reagan Office Building, and the Commerce Department. Quarra Stone Company used Indiana limestone from this quarry to fabricate a new Neo-Gothic bell tower for the Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Photo by Quarra Stone Company

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What is LEED?

Created by the U.S. Green Building Council in 1993, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a points-based, nationally accepted certification program for the design, construction and operation of high-performance and sustainable, or "green," buildings.

To earn certification, projects must be awarded sufficient credits in six categories:

- Sustainable sites.
- Water efficiency.
- Energy and atmosphere.
- Materials and resources.
- Indoor environmental quality.
- Innovation in the design process.

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Quarra Stone Co. President Jim Durham knows how architects vying for a new project tend to work.

Too often, he said, they hold off on gathering all the needed information until just a few days before they're scheduled to make their pitch for the job, then scramble to get it done.

And that's where Quarra, a Madison stone supply and custom fabrication company, comes in.

With a phone call, architects can nail down one part of their presentations by asking Quarra to search its new eco-friendly database of North American quarries for stone needed for the project. And if the quarry chosen is within 500 miles of the project, the building earns points toward certification as a "green

building."

Quarra can even get overnight shipments of stone samples from the cited quarries in the U.S., Mexico and Canada so the presenters have something to show their potential clients.

"That's the cool thing," Durham said. "They have an interview to do and now they feel like they can walk in with some resources that make them look good."

"They appreciate that," he added. "And it could be that the stone selection gets done right then and there (at the pitch meeting), and we're the company that gets hired to supply it."

Formed in 1989, Quarra has 65 employees, including 15 to 20 master stone carvers who shape stone into columns, friezes and other intricate designs. The work is done in fabrication buildings at company headquarters at 333 Atlas Ave. on the city's Far East Side.

Information to compile the quarry database was researched last summer by a team of college-aged company interns who used phone books, the Internet, Google Earth, geologic maps, customer contacts and other means to find all the active quarries and interview their owners, often getting stone samples sent to the company.

Professional staff made the database operational starting early this year, with key information searchable by query including what type and color of stone each quarry holds and what kind of building work and climate it's best suited for.

The database is limited to "dimensional" stone quarries, or those with deposits that form as large slabs that can be cut into blocks and then to the exact dimensions needed for construction. Rubble quarries, or those with deposits that can't be cut to exact dimensions, aren't included.

Database developers suggest a 500-mile radius for quarry searches because that reflects a rule used by the U.S. Green Building Council for its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. Under the rule, using natural stone resources within 500 miles of a project earns one point toward LEED certification, a top environmental distinction that project owners and communities increasingly care about, Durham said.

"The idea is pretty simple," he said. "But the resource hasn't been available before. And people don't pay attention until they need it. Then it's just a matter of being (able to be) exhaustively complete."

The kind of detailed, site-specific information Quarra's database can provide is especially important for the 30 or so national and international architectural firms that Quarra works with frequently. Those companies are more likely to be unfamiliar with many of the markets in which they make pitches.

"We're talking about clients who want to sweat the details," Durham said. "They eat information. They

cannot get enough information."

"They're counting on us not to make them look foolish," he added, noting the local boards and owner groups that approve institutional and historic projects often want to make sure area resources have been considered.

The database also is valuable for Quarra, which currently is making the resource available only to new and potential clients. Staff members do the searches for free and e-mail the results quickly, hoping to help clients — including architects, builders or designers — get new business that Quarra might share in as the stone supplier or fabricator.

"It's in our best interests because we end up doing a lot of work with them," Durham said. "What we want to do is foster this idea that if you have a stone project, you probably need to call Quarra right away."

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