

## Company casts its fate in marble

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Bored with your videotape player? Uninspired by your fancy leather bar? Tired of your brass bed and sick of your custom-made desk set?

Consider one Denver millionaire's idea of a luxury item.

The millionaire, whose girth was almost as legendary as his ability to make money, decided he wanted a marble bath tub custom-designed to fit his physique. He instructed an engineer to make a life-size casting, had that trans-

ferred to plaster and then called Phillip Brown in to create the tub. Only problem was, the millionaire ran out of his fortune before the project could be completed.

Not everybody's taste is that extravagant, but Brown makes his living catering to the whims of area residents who want — and can afford — to buy one-of-a-kind sinks, bathtubs and shower panels.

Brown is foreman at Kast Marble, a Colorado Springs firm owned by Tony Howell.

Their center of operations is a small plant on North Stone Street and their stock in trade is marble

culled from what Howell calls "a great big mountain of rock" at a quarry in Wheatland, Wyo.

The marble is ground into a fine powder for shipment and reaches Kast Marble in what looks like flour sacks. Inside the plant, it is transferred to small cement mixers and combined with plastic resin and a tiny amount of hydrogen peroxide to form what Howell calls a "slurry."

And that's where Kast's products begin to differ from everyday bathroom fixtures.

Not far from the cement mixers is a set of shelves that looks like

it recently has been removed from the art room at an elementary school. In paper cups and old tin cans are row upon row of pigments and popsicle sticks for stirring them.

Nearby, there is a "recipe book" full of color combinations which Kast employees use to transform the slurry into a variety of colors and designs. There are several "stock" patterns which have proved popular over the years including a bright orange which sells well in fall and a dark "espresso" with gold swirls. But Howell, who serves as design con-

sultant among his other chores, usually recommends that his customers choose neutral colors and relatively quiet designs.

"You can change your wallpaper a hell of a lot faster," than you can change bathroom fixtures, Howell explains.

But Kast Marble employees will also cater to the customer who wants a tub and sink to match a particular wallpaper pattern. Experimenting with the variety of pigments available they present sample squares of marble the way a tailor might offer a swatch of fabric. And when the color meets a customer's approval, the design is transferred to the product he has ordered.

There are several ways to apply the pigment. To make a solid color, it is mixed into the slurry with an industrial size hand mixer. Or, the workers can drip the pigment through the slurry in streaks.

"It's the same idea as a chocolate marble cake," Howell explains. The third, and most expensive technique, is to paint the pattern on a piece of paper and then pour the slurry over it. Once the slurry hardens, the pattern is superimposed.

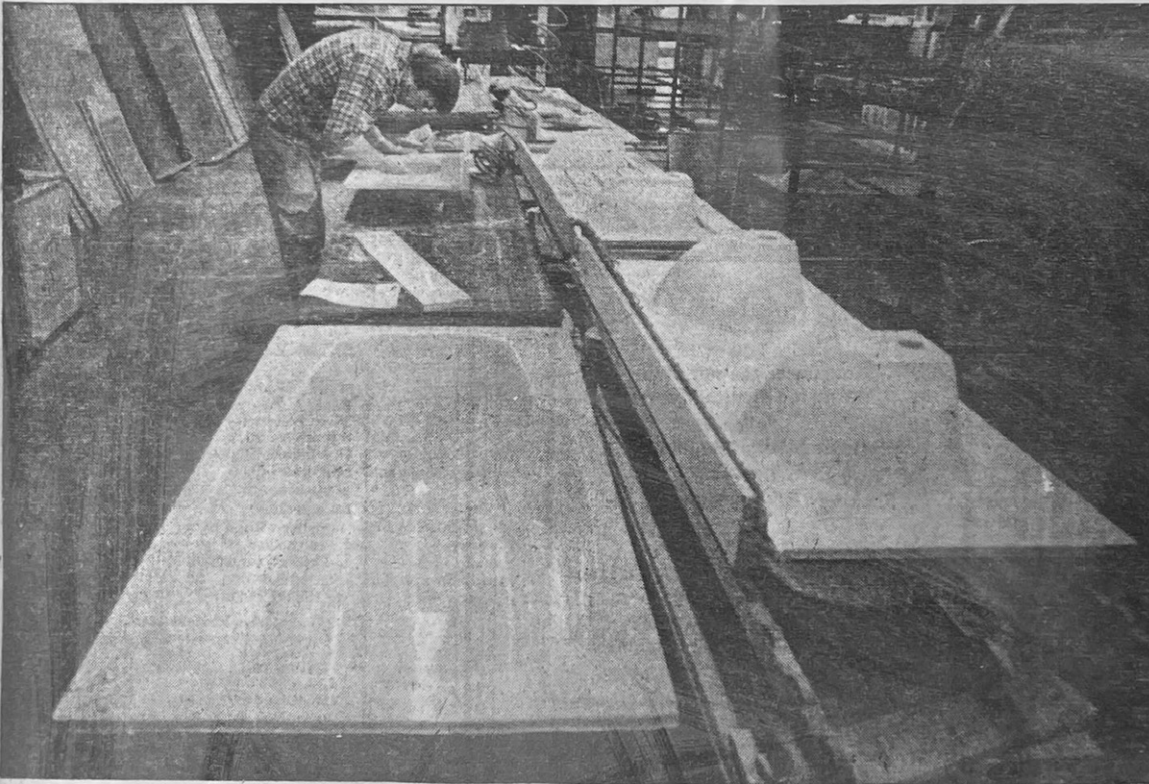
After the color has been applied, the slurry is poured into molds. The company makes several types of sinks and vanities, four different sizes of tubs and panels for the walls of showers. Panels, Howell says, don't have grout lines so they are easier to clean than tile.

"Practically any place you would use tile you can use panels," Howell says.

After setting for at least a day, the new tubs, sinks and panels are "dropped" out of the molds, buffed, polished and stored until they are ready to be installed in the home. Kast Marble employees go to the homes, fit the new appliances to space, trim them to exact size and fix them in place.

About 80 percent of the appliances go into new homes, Howell says. Another 18 percent are sales to existing homes and about 2 percent are purchased by decorators on behalf of clients.

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GT photo by John Morgan

After several days in molds, Kast Marble's bathtubs, sinks and shower panels are ready to be placed in homes

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Howell says. He prefers to deal directly with contractors or homeowners, he says, because decorators usually request a substantial discount.

Despite the concentration of business from contractors, Howell says his company has weathered the housing industry's recent problems well.

"The other end of the coin is remodeling — and there's an awful lot of tile in this town falling off the wall," he says — tile which

must be replaced.

While it only takes two or three days to make Kast Marble's products, Howell says, the company has an order backlog of four to six weeks. At the height of the housing boom, the backlog was up to 16 weeks.

Howell is Kast Marble's third owner in 10 years. He bought the company in January 1978 after several years as a computer salesman.

"I got tired of computers and wanted to own my own company,"

he explains. "This was for sale and I bought it and walked in." His experience in marble craftsmanship, Howell admits with a grin, was limited to what he had read in books.

"But I inherited a bunch of experts," he says.

Today, Howell handles customer relations, finances and some installations while Brown is charged with running the plant.

Neither man is interested in rapid expansion. They have limited sales to the immediate area to

retain quality control.

"If something goes wrong, I want to be able to fix it," Howell explains.

Shipping costs are a factor too. "Freight is just about prohibitive in the weight and the breakage," Brown says.

Without shipping and distributor costs, the men claim, their product is competitive with many formica and porcelain appliances.

"The big benefit of our product is, you can have a color coordinated bath," Howell says.