

World-class mall inspires greener technologies

by Randy Schultz

The old adage of turning lemons into lemonade can be applied to many of the world's discoveries and innovations. For Mer-Krete brands by ParexLaHabra, a particularly vexing situation inspired new ways of looking at traditional methodologies, ultimately leading to the focus on efficient new green products. In the meantime, Mer-Krete worked with another innovator, California Interiors, to solve the

immediate problem at hand under some very severe deadlines.

"In a sense, the catalyst was Westfield Topanga Mall," recalled Tim McDonald, vice-president of ParexLaHabra, Mer-Krete brands. "One of our conscientious clients,

California Interiors, called us to help them deal with a situation that had occurred as the mall's grand opening was drawing near. While working at



Mer-Krete's resourcefulness has gone into developing green technologies for new products.

the job site, we observed the vast number of different construction crews all working feverishly in what was a very large space, but still seemed crowded and congested. Returning to our offices, we began accelerating our quest to develop products that would help create a greener and more environmentally conscious atmosphere for the building trades. Before you knew it, Mer-Krete's dustless technology and other green products were born."

Now that it's open for business, Westfield Topanga Mall has received glowing reviews for its massive renovation and expansion. This \$355 million reinvestment by Westfield Group has created one of the largest shopping malls in North America. It includes approximately 300,000 square feet of

new small shop space plus anchor tenants Nordstrom, Target and a soon-to-open Neiman Marcus -- more than 250 stores and restaurants, in approximately 1.6 million square feet of retail space.

The job at hand

Working against a compacted 13-month deadline, the mall opened on time, with 189,000 square feet of new tile laid as the steppingstone to a whole new era for the modern shopping mall. The extensive tile work required the expertise of a company well-versed in large-scale commercial projects. Clearly, this was a job that required the hard work and resourcefulness that California Interiors and Mer-Krete displayed.

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Anna Maloof, president of California Interiors, depended on Mer-Krete for precision in setting imported stone in multi-stone patterns for the mall project – and fast – 3,000 square feet a day.

experience in the retail, hotel and casino industries, California Interiors won the bid to provide flooring for both the mall interior and various exterior elements, utilizing 10 different tile types in a variety of sizes and finishes.

“We worked closely with the Westfield design team, which wanted to be sure we could transfer the stone adequately into the space while maintaining the original design intent,” said Anna Maloof, president of California Interiors. “Since many of the designs incorporated multi-stone patterns, there was a real demand for precision. Yet we needed to still be able to set about 3,000 square feet per day. It was then that we noticed a potential disaster.”

California Interiors utilized tiles from Greece, China, Turkey and Israel. They included marble, granite, onyx and limestone, in various polished, honed and flamed finishes. The sand-colored Turkish stone, utilized in the dramatic spaces of the boulder and cacti-accented

“canyon” area and part of the upscale food court, immediately raised alarm signals for the installer. Delivered in a flamed form, which can cause the surface to become very rough and porous once the finish is burned, it proved to be brittle and noticeably unstable. To make matters worse, the tiles weren’t universally square nor did they have the same thickness, which made keeping the floor level a daunting task.

Personal attention keeps things on the level

“We needed Mer-Krete to supply us with a setting device that would hold the tile up in certain areas and also hold it into place without very much setting material underneath,” said Buddy Bellflower, vice president of operations for California Interiors. “Tim McDonald came out personally and tested a number of areas and tiles.”

Because of the heavy foot traffic and the brittle nature of many of the stones, there was a concern for mall customer safety. Maloof and Bellflower feared that many of the tiles would have to be pulled out later and re-installed. In addition, California Interiors was adamant about turning the client’s vision into reality: a vision that certainly did not include chipped or pockmarked surfaces.

To solve the problem, Mer-Krete provided its 750 Rapid-Setting Thin-Set product. Because it cures so quickly, grouting could proceed briskly after it was set. In addition, Mer-Krete custom-made a modified version of its 211 Thin-Set mortar, which offers high strength, long-lasting quality and flexible latex

additives. This new blend featured special additives and Thin-Set powder for mixing. The modified version used heavier grains of sand to properly support the product, necessary because the installers were applying a thicker bed.

Before arriving at the optimal mixture, McDonald and his Mer-Krete team calculated various ratios, continually re-checked the mix and solicited neutral party opinions. The PSI rating needed to be high enough to ensure that the stone would hold under pressure, with minimum breakage. Fortunately, the 750 Rapid-Set and modified 211 Thin-Set mortar worked extremely well, and it allowed the installation team to work quickly and efficiently.

For California Interiors, the project represents a prime example of success

over adversity. While Maloof and Bellflower have already moved on to new challenges with other structures and installations, there is a real feeling of achievement at Westfield Topanga.

Resourcefulness reflected in green technologies

In that same vein, the resourcefulness that Mer-Krete demonstrated there can be found in the green technology it has since developed. One of the most well-known examples is Mer-Krete's 7d10 Dust-Less Thin-Set, one of the first low-dust technologies in the U.S., combining innovation and proven efficiency. Emitting 80 percent less dust than ordinary thin-set mortars, 7d10 was designed to improve air quality, promote healthier working conditions, reduce

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The \$355 million Westfield Topanga Mall includes approximately 300,000 square feet of new small shop space plus anchor tenants Nordstrom, Target and a soon-to-open Neiman Marcus.

mess and accelerate cleanup, thereby lowering total application costs.

The Sound Shield 7000 sound-reduction mat provides a look at another Mer-Krete “green” innovation. This thin, load-bearing mat that also works as an anti-fracture membrane is composed of recycled tires, making it a popular choice for many “green building” projects across the country. Sound Shield 7000, as well as Mer-Krete’s versatile new Mer-Stik mastic adhesive, is designated as a zero VOC product.

Mer-Krete has also re-introduced industry-acclaimed Hydro-Guard 2000 and HydroGuard ONE waterproofing membranes as low-odor products, once again reflecting a commitment to the environment and optimum working conditions. Though virtually free of the odor, which was harmless even in its original form, these proven membranes still contain all of their unique performance characteristics that have made them a preferred choice of tile and stone installers worldwide.

“Mer-Krete has made a concerted effort to develop environmentally sound ideas and solutions that, at the same time, are cost-efficient and easy to apply for our customers,” said Jim Whitfield, technical manager for ParexLaHabra, Mer-Krete brands and a certified LEED® Accredited Professional. “Not only are we creating new ‘green’ innovations and increasing our use of recycled materials, but we’ve even strategically located our various manufacturing facilities so as to reduce transportation. We are actively involved in the LEED programs regarding sustainability of buildings and have been consistently awarded LEED credits for our efforts.”

Mark Cooke, product manager for ParexLaHabra, Mer-Krete brands, says that the green approach started by the Mer-Krete brand has now branched into the entire ParexLaHabra corporate culture.

“We are continuing to look at new avenues, such as lighter weight products



Mer-Krete’s 750 Rapid-Setting Thin-Set mortar meant grouting could begin quickly. A custom-made version of 211 Thin-Set mortar provided installers with the proper, thick bed to evenly support the troublesome sizes and thicknesses of the stone tiles.

that will reduce transportation and create a more comfortable working environment,” Cooke added. “And we are taking our dust-less technology to other powdered goods in various other divisions of our company.”

For the hundreds of thousands of people who will ultimately shop and dine at Westfield Topanga Mall, they will marvel at its dramatic presence, at its wealth of designer shops and its diversified choice of dining venues. Little will they realize that an eleventh-hour mixture of powder, sand and ingenuity lies beneath their feet as a testament to walking that extra mile -- a mile that has since grown into many additional miles of research and discovery for Mer-Krete, a member of the United States Green Building Council.



More than 250 stores and restaurants occupy approximately 1.6 million square feet of retail space.

Randy Schultz is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer with more than 26 years of experience and over 25 national and local writing awards to his credit. He has written articles for a number of magazines, in addition to commercials, video scripts and live productions.

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