

# ISFA FABRICATOR PROFILE: MID-ATLANTIC SURFACES

BY KEVIN COLE, EDITOR

Mid-Atlantic Surfaces was initially founded outside of Richmond, Va., in 1989 under the name Mid Atlantic Manufacturing. However, the company has come a long way since then.

*Utilizing well-known solid surface designer Mario Romano's textured M.R. Walls products provides another quality option that helps drive alternative, unique vertical applications.*

The company was originally designed as a plastic laminate shop, but in the 1990s the business was expanded to include solid surface fabrication. With the introduction of solid surface, the company chose to focus on its use in residential countertop applications, growing its clientele and sales by leveraging the new product offering.

In 2015, Laurent Claudel acquired the company and took on the role of president. Claudel had spent the previous 25 years of his career working for various European companies, representing them in the United States, and had developed a keen eye for business. After reviewing the company and looking for opportunities for potential growth, it became apparent that the business was overlooking various areas of expansion.

With a thorough understanding of the versatility of solid surface, Claudel knew there were some real prospects to improve and develop the business. About a year after purchasing the company, he moved it to a new 30,000-sq.-ft. facility where the business operates today. This allowed for more advanced solid surface equipment. "It is fair to say that until five years ago, 100 percent of our business was coming from horizontal applications," he explained. "We probably generate now a third of our solid surface business from more complex applications such as cladding and thermoforming."

This broader, more complex work then led to an opportunity for what had by then become Mid-Atlantic Surfaces to move more into the commercial sector. Claudel also made the decision in 2017 to begin



*(From right to left) Laurent Claudel, president and owner of Mid-Atlantic Surfaces, took over the business in 2015 and utilized his management team (David Hawk, Jeff Naron and Brandon Fields) along with other critical staff and key connections outside the business to expand it in numerous positive directions.*

offering hard surface products. However, rather than making the major investment to handle quartz, granite, marble, etc., the company did so through establishing a partnership with another fabricator.

These types of partnerships, along with the addition of more advanced solid surface fabricating equipment, have been central in his ability to have a nationwide service area operating out of a single location with only 15 employees. That said, Mid-Atlantic Surfaces has 100 different

*Mid-Atlantic Surfaces shows how it combines unique aesthetics with functionality in this solid surface security desk installed at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.*

projects in various stages at any given time, but does focus the majority of its work within a three- to four-hour radius of the business.

### **Partnerships, Products, Capabilities**

A big part of the company's business and growth is based on the partnerships it has formed. "We have a distribution agreement with CREA Diffusion, a very innovative fabricator based in France, for the distribution of Plug & Play, a modular bathroom solution using Corian solid surface as material," said Claudel. "We are also a partner with Mario Romano to sell and fabricate his M.R Walls product nationwide."

Taking advantage of the highly innovative products these partnerships offer allows for additional opportunities for the company without requiring additional staff.

While solid surface accounts for 65 percent of the projects Mid-Atlantic Surfaces sells, 20 percent of the work is hard surfaces, which it subs out to expand its reach, leaving only 15 percent laminate work. Offering this broad product choice has been largely of benefit to the company. "Clearly to offer a one-stop shop to our clients and not having to explain what we can do and can't has been a plus," explained Claudel. "It also allows us to use our buying power across different products and vendors, as well as to institute cross-training of our employees on our different product lines and project type. This keeps things interesting for everybody, and having all of our team knowledgeable about all of our products reinforces our role as experts in our space."

Mid-Atlantic takes advantage of the digital fabrication process, using LPI's LT-2D 3-D Laser Templator to produce files it can easily couple with a CR Onsrud 3-axis 145M CNC machine using Alphacam. This use of more advanced processes keeps production high and labor requirements low, while also increasing output. The company also has a full-size sheet thermoforming oven from Shultz Forming Products as well as a Global Vacuum table. This setup allows the company to take on just about nearly any challenge in solid surface fabrication,



*This residential shower wall application is another example of using M.R. Walls products, this time in a Lake Pattern in Corian Glacier White, to increase its offerings.*

and further differentiates it from those fabricators that just focus on the more common flat applications.

On a case-by-case basis, Mid-Atlantic will even offer cabinetry when it helps to drive the core business or express the importance the company places on a valued customer. "We are pushing to be more of a solution provider rather than just a product provider," put forth Claudel. "But it's always a balance between achieving that goal while not moving too far away from our core business and what we can control. So, we tend to

be careful. It really comes down to the quality of the partners we have. Once we like a relationship, we push hard and it sometimes opens up new horizons."

While the company continues to handle residential projects, in the past five years commercial work has grown to be a significant 95 percent of the business. And Mid-Atlantic uses pretty much every outlet at its disposal to keep busy. Whether repeat business or cold prospection, millwork and exhibit houses account for a respectable 60 percent of its work. Another 30 percent can be



*Mid-Atlantic Surfaces takes advantage of advanced machinery as well as highly skilled, cross-trained staff to be able to offer quality, high-end products.*

attributed to general contractors, via repeat business, using bidding platforms and just reaching out directly. Of the remaining 10 percent, half is developed via reaching out to architects and designers through networking (via presentations, independent reps or social networking platforms, such as LinkedIn), and the other half is direct sales (residential) that is developed through word-of-mouth referrals or website traffic.

Whatever method, the fabricator then concentrates on just what it can do, above and beyond, to set itself apart.

#### **Philosophy for Success**

Rather than just focusing on a particular brand or product to be a major driving force behind the business and influencing sales, Mid-Atlantic takes a different approach.

“More than a specific material, what moves our business forward is how we use the materials,” explained Claudel. “The architect and design community often just sees solid surface as a countertop material or used just for horizontal applications. However, there are so many uncharted territories that we are just starting to explore. We are working on bringing solutions that allow end users to interact emotionally with our products using their senses (sight, touch) instead of just using them for their function. There is so much untapped potential.

“We are not afraid of working outside of what we have historically done, both technically and strategically,” continued Claudel. “We also try to look at things differently with a different attitude. We work hard to see a solution where most people see a problem. We push to be a solution provider instead of a product supplier and prioritize building a network of relationships to stand up in a very crowded space.”

While pondering the nature of success as it relates to the business, Claudel heavily credited the human factor. “Success can be defined in so many ways, but in general terms I would say surrounding yourself, both professionally and personally, with the right people who are defining



*This curved bench at the Army Museum in Washington, D.C., shows how the Mid-Atlantic leverages the versatility of solid surface to go beyond just countertop applications.*



*Another way the company utilizes relationships to extend its reach is by subcontracting hard surface work such as these three quartz projects: (left) in the common area at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, (middle) at a nurse's station at the Sheltering Arms Institute in Richmond, Va., and (right) in the press area of the Richmond Raceway.*

success the same way you do and working hard on what you are passionate about is central. However, maintaining a personal balance so you don't forget what is really important in your life also is a big part of success."

Continuing on his expression on the importance of people, Claudel said, "From a more business related standpoint, having the best employees (and I do), and being curious and willing to consider and try new things are important. These things help to prepare your business for what it may need to look like in the future, but you also have to keep your eyes on the ball because the way you execute things today will define tomorrow. Overall success is a balancing act – easy, right?"

The last part of Claudel's discussion of the role of others in the success of his business was regarding networking and being part of industry organizations. Admitting that running a business and finding time to get involved isn't always the easiest endeavor, but that it is a must. "It is a long-term investment that can pay immensely with just one project; it is just difficult to know when and where it will pay off," he explained. "Because of our limited size and resources, our success can depend on who we know and how we can leverage other resources and capabilities. Networking helps us tremendously with that."

Of course the company has been faced with the same problems that currently face all fabricators during the difficult times that come with 2020. And of course, these things will have a significant effect on the future.

### Looking Forward

During the current climate all businesses, fabricators not withstanding, have had to make changes to mitigate risks, keep up sales, stay in touch with their client bases and generally figure out ways to continue to conduct business. Mid-Atlantic Surfaces certainly has not been immune to the effects of the pandemic as the world waits to return to some sort of normalcy.

The company has done well avoiding too many problems in the face of unprecedented conditions, although it had to overcome a few issues, including being at a jobsite where another contractor had tested positive for COVID-19. Thankfully none of the employees have tested positive, but the business did have to have some employees quarantine while waiting for test results, just to be safe. "Stress levels are definitely up even though we are very busy because our aptitude to see what is ahead of us is not as good as it typically is," said Claudel.

He went on to explain that he believes the shop is following the same risk mitigation procedures as most others, including daily temperature checks for all employees, practicing social distancing as much as possible and wearing masks when necessary, particularly on jobsites. However, Claudel said with the company mainly working commercial ventures it can get difficult because commercial jobsites tend to be crowded toward the end of projects when surfacing installation is taking place along with other trades finishing their portions of the work. That requires some additional precautions and the proper timing.

"A good portion of what we do can be considered a commodity, so keeping up sales in this environment comes down, as before, to making it easy for people to do business with us, expanding our offering both in terms of geography and product mix, and being even more flexible so the business is a solution provider more than a product supplier," Claudel said. "I believe that because of our small size, our overall success is much more affected by our own performance rather than what the market is doing. If we have a 0.01 percent market share nationwide, for example, it really is less about what the market is doing overall, and comes down more to how good we are at creating brand recognition, getting prospects to try us out and executing projects well.

"Think outside of the box," said Claudel when asked what advice he might give to other fabricators. "If you do what everybody else is doing, then by definition you will be average. Expand your social network, even more than ever these days because our future will depend on how much we help each other out.

"It feels good to help out and it's the right thing to do, anyway," he continued. "I am amazed sometimes how a small talk at a trade show or other event turned into something big a few years down the road."

With the positive attitude, ability to form partnerships with others for mutual benefit and focus on putting out consistently solid work that sets it aside from more traditional fabricators, Mid-Atlantic Surfaces has established a unique position in the market that puts it in a position for a strong, positive future.

*For more information about Mid-Atlantic Surfaces, 2559 Turkey Creek Road, Oilville, VA 23129, contact Laurent Claudel at (804) 798-7462 or [laurent.claudel@midatlanticsurfaces.com](mailto:laurent.claudel@midatlanticsurfaces.com), or visit [www.midatlanticsurfaces.com](http://www.midatlanticsurfaces.com).*

*Editor Kevin Cole can be reached at [kevin@isfa.now.org](mailto:kevin@isfa.now.org).*