

**Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)**

## **Leak fighter**

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Low mortgage interest rates aside, the current real estate boom has been a tough time to be a home buyer. Builder lotteries are common as a way to sell a limited number of home sites. Buyers feel compelled to sign contracts that are increasingly favorable to sellers, developers and builders. And prices are rising at historic rates.

On top of all that, says an engineer whose company advises developers and contractors, the demand is so great that it's difficult to guarantee the quality of the houses and high-rises going up. "There's just too much construction going on, not enough qualified people to do the work," says Mark Baker, whose company, IBA Consultants, works with contractors, architects and developers to prevent, detect or fix water intrusion in the walls, windows and roofs of high-rise buildings.

"There are not enough qualified guys who know how to work a caulk gun. And there are not enough guys ... to supervise it," said Baker, a mechanical engineer whose company has offices in Sarasota, Boca Raton, Miami and Las Vegas -- high-rise hotbeds all.

"They're spread out. Every contractor has a bunch of guys who know what they're doing, and a lot more guys who don't know what they're doing."

Orlando engineer Bill York agrees that quality is an issue compounded by the hurricanes of 2004.

"One of the things we are experiencing is such a huge construction boom in Florida, before the storms hit, and subsequent to the storms we have not only the construction continuing, but also the repairs," said York, who spoke at the Herald-Tribune's "Ask the Experts" forum in May. "So the quality of the work being done is critical. I'm not going to say if that's good or bad; I'll leave that to the people to draw their own conclusions."

Dr. Tim Reinhold, vice president of engineering at the Institute for Business & Home Safety in Tampa, says it's "an ongoing problem" in both residential and commercial construction.

"We don't build anything, but we're hearing that from a lot of people, that it's hard to find qualified people. And it's not just Florida," he said, noting that construction booms in the Caribbean and northern South America are diluting the pool of skilled labor.

Baker, interviewed in his Sarasota office with IBA vice president Wayne Offerman, said quality caulking is critical to the watertightness of a high-rise. Often he sees "a kid who

last week was working at the car wash, and now he's caulking. He doesn't know how to prime and clean (the joint to be caulked), or that the joint is too narrow to caulk."

And in a building with hundreds of windows and thousands of joints between glazing, frames and window openings, the chances of error are great, he said.

"The general contractors," said Baker, "don't have enough people to keep up."

It's not Baker's job to fix that problem, just its symptoms -- leaky windows, doors, roofs and walls in high-rise buildings. His company is either called in to consult on water-intrusion issues early in the job, when it's relatively inexpensive to do so, or once the job is done, when it's relatively costly.

"The guys who haven't done a lot of development before, or are very tight" are the ones who don't hire IBA or a similar company, said Baker. "They figure they are paying the contractor to build it and the architect to design it and they don't need it.

"And then when the building is done and they have problems, they call us in and we do a lot of digging around to find out how it got there, how to fix it and how to keep it from happening again. And those guys are the ones who become our best clients, because they never build another building without getting us in way early."

IBA has consulted on such notable buildings as the Petronas Towers in Malaysia and Canary Wharf in London. Sarasota buildings in IBA's resume include The Plaza at Five Points, Whole Foods, Beau Ciel, Orchid Beach, La Bellasara and Majestic Bay. Prominent builder clients include Kraft Construction, Turner Construction and W.G. Mills.

"They provide waterproofing expertise and detail review," said Tom Williams of Kraft Construction's Sarasota office. "They are one of our team members that we like to get on board early. Not every building, but a lot of them."

Williams said rain is an ever-present threat to buildings.

"The entire exterior envelope is at risk, especially your caulking joints and roofing," he said. But IBA's advice cannot simply be transferred from one job to the next, he added.

"The method and materials of construction changes throughout jobs," said Williams. "Details ... how things go together changes. It's better to get them on early in the process to review details as they're developed ... to make sure that bad details don't end up in the drawings for construction."

Making sure windows don't **leak** is a big part of what IBA does. Baker and Offerman are big advocates of impact-resistant windows, especially for high-rise condos, where many windows are inaccessible and whose residents may not be able to store shutters. For balcony and terrace sliders, They say accordion shutters are a suitable alternative to

impact-resistant glass.

"The most optimum form of protection would be impact glazing," said Offerman.  
"Realistically during new construction you can accommodate that. In existing buildings, basically you have to change the product."

**Caption: COURTESY PHOTO**

Mark Baker, president of Sarasota's IBA Consultants, uses an aircraft engine to simulate tropical-storm conditions when testing custom curtain wall systems used in high-rises.

**COURTESY PHOTO**

Jude Sosa of IBA Consultants tests a window assembly for leakage.

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