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**BRICK-STAINABLE**  
RE-THINKING BRICK

**PVB** PRESENTED BY  
POTOMAC VALLEY BRICK

### Brick-Stainable: Rethinking Brick: Potomac Valley Brick and Supply Company Launches Eco-Friendly Design Competition By Potomac Valley Brick and Supply Company

A local masonry distributor is launching an international architectural design competition in the hopes of redefining the foundation of eco-friendly building. When a consultant first suggested the idea of a brick-based international design competition to Potomac Valley Brick and Supply Company (PVB) president Alan Richardson, you could say the idea initially went over like, well, a ton of bricks. Richardson's immediate reaction was there was no way his mid-Atlantic area masonry distributorship could afford it.

Today, Richardson believes his company can't afford not to host the competition, which challenges today's most creative minds to find new, greener applications for a product that has been around for thousands of years.

#### Laying the Brick for Greener Building

What caused Richardson to reverse his position? His change of heart was driven by a curious combination of the downturn in building, a growing awareness of social media, a commitment to protect our planet and a healthy dose of vision. "While we're in a recession now, we want to be prepared for what the building environment will look like coming out of it," says Richardson. "We don't believe responsibility to build environmentally-smart projects will decrease over the next five years or so, so product innovations need to be part of that sustainable design trend. None of us want to be in the current slump we're in, but there isn't a better time than now to set the groundwork and foundation to thrive as the market recovers."

#### Foundation of an Idea

Over the past several years Richardson has seen a growing interest among his clients in environmentally-friendly or sustainable products. In response, PVB formed a "Green Team" to determine how the firm could be better prepared to support this rising demand. Green team members delved into research, reviewing Brick Industry Association (BIA) and U.S. Green Building Council guidelines and materials, attending the Green Build show held in Boston last fall and undergoing BIA Green Brick training. "It took us a while to sort it all out," Richardson says. "Trade associations and builders were going in different directions and our clients were primarily concerned with how to obtain points needed for LEED certification. We just felt we needed to look at the whole process differently and start fresh."

PVB's first step was to sponsor an employee to become LEED AP. Next, Richardson decided to bring in Peter Doo, a former AIA Baltimore president who now heads up Doo Consulting, a Baltimore-based sustainability consulting firm. It wasn't long before the idea of an architectural design competition was discussed. According to Doo, "The idea behind the competition was to draw attention to the inherently-sustainable nature of brick and make it stand out in the clutter of products claiming to be green."

By hosting a competition that asks people to use brick to design a sustainable project and provide evidence of how the proposed building will perform, Doo says the hope is to harvest the data, compile the best ideas and disseminate them via information bulletins on how to use brick in sustainable ways. "There is no one material that, by itself, will create a sustainable

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building,” Doo says. “Buildings become sustainable by the integration of materials and design. Depending on geographic location, orientation and other materials used you will get different performance results. Our goal is to share those results with the design community so they know how to apply it and capitalize on it during construction.”

#### More Than Just a Pretty Face

The first use of brick — broadly defined as a clay-based material fired in a kiln — can be traced back 6,000 years ago to the ancient Babylonians. Even industry outsiders can grasp the cooling properties of brick when they step into an old church on a hot day. A highly-durable product made from earth and often supplied locally — thereby minimizing its carbon footprint — brick is intrinsically sustainable yet, according to Doo, often overlooked, especially in the United States. Doo points out, “We have been building mechanically-heated and cooled buildings for so long that many designers stopped thinking about materials for anything other than their aesthetic appearance. With this competition, we want people to go back and rethink brick in the context of its material qualities and current construction technologies.” Richardson adds, “We are passionate about our product’s sustainable properties. Its inherent mass helps in passive solar and other energy-efficient designs, plus it offers great flexibility in terms of different colors and sizes and uses, from solid walls to veneer.”

#### Calling All Innovators

Hoping for innovative ideas showcasing the ancient building material in sustainable new design uses, PVB has issued an official call for entries for its “Brick-stainable: Rethinking Brick” design competition, with registration running through the end of September and completed entries due mid-November. For the competition, entrants are asked to design a net-zero energy building using clay masonry as a primary material. Detailed specifications will be provided describing the purpose, layout and location of the building to ensure consistent judging criteria.

Doo says that while full integration of ideas into a building design solution are encouraged, the specific wording of the challenge allows room for innovation and creative open interpretation. “People should not be limited by their preconceptions of a ‘brick,’” Doo says. “While entries should discuss the application and contribution of an idea to building design, entries limited to materials studies or assemblies will receive full consideration under a separate category.”

Richardson adds, “We want to send out the message that the clay brick industry is aware we need to look at new applications for our product. We are willing to go to a different set of individuals and firms who can add new thoughts about brick and masonry wall systems and their inherent energy efficient properties. We’re really looking forward to the results.” At press time, PVB still had additional sponsorship opportunities available, the four-person panel of jurors has been selected and include Carnegie Mellon Professor of Architecture, Vivian Loftness, University of Maryland Dean & Architecture, Planning & Preservation Professor Garth Rockcastle, Material Scientist Kara Johnson and Director of Marketing at AXIM, a subsidiary of ESSROC-Italcementi Martin Vachon. A grand prize of \$10,000 has been named and the awards ceremony will be held at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. in January.

#### Dollars, Sense and Social Media

One of the questions with which Richardson has wrestled from the start is how to successfully implement such an ambitious initiative on a limited budget. From promoting the competition to a broad pool of prospective entrants ranging from architects and engineers to environmental engineers, product designers and material scientists around the country and across the globe to providing attractive prizes, the cost to undertake such a project traditionally would be in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Fortunately for PVB, the emergence of social media in the mainstream business arena has made grassroots marketing both effective and affordable. With the help of Baltimore-based PR and marketing firm SPIN, PVB was able to quickly build a buzz for the competition and round up innovative, creative and eco-conscious members of the built environment with an interest in participating in a sustainability design competition.

Both PVB and SPIN are pleased with Brick-stainable’s strong online reception and are excited about the industry’s response. “This is our first venture into social media and I’m encouraged by the initial strong response to these tactics,” says Richardson. “While we don’t know how many entries we’ll get, I think the potential is very strong to receive a lot of entries and inquiries about the competition. At a minimum, it accomplishes the primary goal of raising awareness for our product and industry.”

#### Throwing the Mortar and Seeing What Sticks

Richardson and the rest of the Brick-stainable planning team are banking on passion and excitement within the sustainable design community to pique interest in the competition among a broad base of qualified entrants. But ultimately, Richardson admits he has no idea what kind of answers will come out of this competition. And to him, that’s just what makes it interesting. “What we hope to get out of this are ideas for new ways our product can be used in cutting-edge, energy-efficient construction as we move out of the recession, and also an increased awareness of brick that will keep it top-of-mind among designers.”

He concludes, “At this stage, each step of the process is an accomplishment and we look forward to the next one.” Which, when you think about it, is a lot like the brick-laying process. At least, until someone comes up with a better one.

*Founded in 1976, Potomac Valley Brick and Supply Company (PVB) is a leading distributor of*

*masonry materials in the Washington D.C., Maryland and Northern Virginia region. With showrooms and stocking locations in Baltimore and Rockville, Md. and Newington, Va., PVB supplies commercial and residential projects with a full line of products including brick, stone, block, masonry accessories, hardscape materials, clay pavers and mortar.*

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