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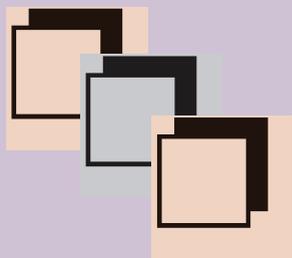
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Comment

A recurring theme at the recent Glazing Summit was the number of builders merchants that stock windows; or at least offer the service to source windows. The other side of that particular coin is that builders are getting in on the act too.

According to Insight Data's Jade Greenhow there are some 15,000 builders who actively sell directly to homeowners. While this puts pressure on the installation sector of the window industry it can only be good news for fabricators. At a time when the manufacturing sector is shrinking, Greenhow put the number of window manufacturers at 4,850, this trend, of course, opens up market opportunities for those that are still there.

The shrinkage is not entirely down to companies going out of business. There have been a number of high profile acquisitions and mergers in the past few years. Couple this with smaller manufacturers, which will often be fabricator/installers, giving up the fabrication side of their businesses to concentrate on domestic sales and installation. Many have discovered that it is more cost effective to source windows from large fabricators who have the economy of scale than to suffer the overheads associated with running machinery and carrying stock. Builders merchants may have a role to play here too.

At the Glazing Summit, Mike Morris of the training provider GQA had one caveat in regards to builders getting into the installation business. He questioned builders' expertise and proficiency in window installation. He pointed out that a builder will not have been trained in installation. I have to say that is not my own experience. It is a few years since I installed new windows in my 1930s built house. (And here I am admitting that none of my windows are up to current spec but I also have solid brick walls so the building leaks energy like a sieve anyway.) We had builders on-site building a kitchen extension so we took the opportunity to replace all of the windows at the rear of the property. The builders did the job efficiently and well. It seemed to me that the guys doing the job had more empathy with the whole building than the window fitters I had used previously. Their expertise seemed to stop with the 'hole'. Indeed it was extremely lucky that the front of the house did not collapse. A disaster was only prevented by a quick action with a couple of acro props and what damage there was they proceeded to repair with a tube of the installer's friend – silicone. And the builders seemed less 'on-the-clock' somehow.

Of course, I admit, that was along time ago and things have undoubtedly changed. At the time I am referring to there was little training other than 'on-the-job' and a route into window fitting was often through carpentry, not necessarily appropriate for PVC-U.

Perhaps what we are seeing is a trend; the replacement window industry merging into mainstream construction. I was around as the replacement sector got going. In the early eighties we saw PVC take over from aluminium as the material of choice. We saw some very aggressive selling too. But as an observer I always thought that it couldn't last, at least not in the form it was in. So we are now 'after the big bang' and the days of 'White Gold' are behind us. The window sector is creative and dynamic, an important part of the construction industry. But as someone once said, "Change is the only reality." *John Roper*