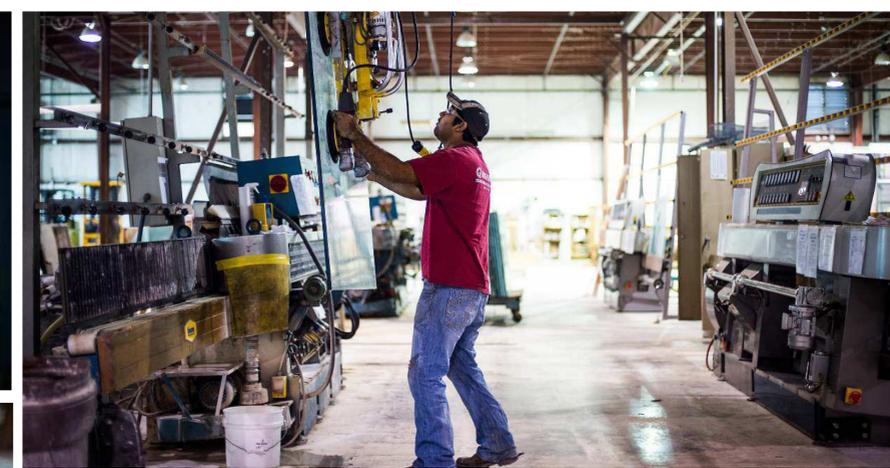


GLASS FOR HOUSES

That's what Andrew Pearson wants to design, if only the economy doesn't hurl another stone.

Photography by Mike Belleme

A water-cooled router shapes the edges of a soon-to-be cocktail table using a diamond bit.



Ultraviolet light activates adhesive that binds stacked glass. Workers use a variety of methods to shape orders. The scrap is recycled.

Sue and Hal Brownfield's calling was crystal clear. "Hal liked product design and was really good at it," she says. He designed his first piece — a spiraling, stacked-glass lamp table — loaded it in the trunk of his car, went to National Bank of Detroit and got a loan. So began the couple's sometimes-bumpy road from working in the auto industry to owning Andrew Pearson Industries Inc., a Mount Airy company that makes architectural and decorative glasswork.

They started Andrew Pearson — his middle and his mother's maiden names — in Troy, Mich., in 1989 to make glass furniture. Both had been engineers with Detroit-based General Motors Corp. She had degrees in industrial engineering from the University of Michigan, and he had one in mechanical engineering from the U.S. Military Academy. After graduating from West Point and serving three

years in the Army, he worked for Ford Motor Co. before joining GM, where his design job entailed shaping glass.

In 1994, tired of breakage from shipments packed next to auto parts, they moved the company to North Carolina to be near the nation's largest wholesale furniture market in High Point. But the 70,000-square-foot plant they built doesn't manufacture glass. That comes from Toledo, Ohio-based Pilkington North America Inc.'s plant in Laurinburg and Pittsburgh-based PPG Industries Inc. It arrives in rectangles about 8½ feet by more than 10 feet that is up to three-quarters of an inch thick. From them, workers create custom products for customers. Most end up east of the Mississippi — shipping heavy glass is expensive — such as in New York City office buildings. Simple glass can remain simple — cut-to-order tabletops — but some items take on new dimensions and textures. Company logos might be sandblasted into wall panels

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Ultraviolet light can paint brilliant scenes onto glass. Crackle-finish is created by whacking laminated glass — it cracks but remains in place — and sandwiching it between solid sheets. Customers can specify glass for almost any application, but Sue says Hal, the designer, tries to craft custom designs using similar manufacturing processes to keep down costs. "For example, a couple of other companies make countertops, but their prices might be 10 or 15 times higher than ours." Products can range from a standard dining tabletop for less than \$200 to custom-made conference-table-tops, which, after the contractor builds in his margin, might run \$10,000.

The Brownfield's glass isn't rose-colored. Their company is no different than others

linked to construction. It doesn't disclose sales, but orders have dropped, perhaps by half, from their peaks in 2005 and 2006. In the process, it dropped its wholesale business about five years ago to focus on supplying contractors and architects. "A number of our customers went out of business, furniture stores closed, and a lot of the big chains are gone," she says. Where once it ran two shifts with about 60 workers, it now employs 18. However, for her — she's president and her husband is chairman — the glass business is half full. The company is developing new applications, such as kitchen countertops, which could boost its presence in the rebounding upscale housing market.

— Edward Martin