

Where to Live

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Glass takes architecture by storm

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GONE are the days when people used glass for just windows. Glass has become one of the main materials used for building exteriors these days. Since just last century, South Asian households have started to replace the iron rod and wooden windows with clear glass.

Even before, the use of glass was limited to making doors, doorsills and windows of different architectural buildings, which may include mosques, churches and museums in Bangladesh. However, growing urbanisation, changing tastes and building patterns have increased the use of different types of glass in Bangladesh these days.

Now, in a city of shopping malls and high-rise buildings that causes severe architectural congestion, it is no wonder why people use more glass to get adequate sunlight, be it at office or home.

Nahreen Tuba, a designer at an interiors company in Gulshan, said the use of glass has increased manifold, for both the exteriors and interiors, mainly for office buildings.

"These days, most entrepreneurs have a very small space for setting up an office. So in designing, we think about the maximum use of the sources of light to make the place look more spacious than it actually is," she said.

"We naturally prefer glass over wood and other metal components, because glass pro-

vides clear light that makes the entire space roomier. And that's the basics of the contemporary 'Open Office' concept," she added.

Apart from using glass for walls and doors that eliminates windows from modern offices, people are also opting to use glass to make certain furniture and partitions these days.

"For interiors, the entry to a particular floor is primarily very important, where now almost everybody uses tempered glass doors. Also, many prefer decorating their offices by using glass brick walls next to the door," said Tuba.

Therefore, the demand is high. It is further backed by the country's booming real estate and corporate sector that started growing mainly in the last decade. Local entrepreneurs are more than eager to cater to this growing demand.

According to insiders, entrepreneurs started thinking about manufacturing glass locally by the end of 2002. They noticed the growth in the real estate sector and the dearth of quality glass in the market.

Previously, the market was completely dependent on imported glass, while now, it imports less than 5 percent of its total demand. The demand for imported items is high for coloured and luxuriously designed glass from China, Thailand and Indonesia.

Local companies meet more than 95 percent of the total demand for float glass and glass sheets. The annual sales of the local glass makers stand at nearly Tk 600 crore, said industry insiders.

There are four companies operating in the local market -- Nasir Glass Industries Ltd, PHP Float Glass Industries Ltd, Osmania Glass Sheet Factory Ltd and MEB Glass Industries. Among the four, Nasir Glass Industries is the largest manufacturer of float glass.

Nasir and PHP produce float glass and the rest produce sheet glass.

At present, the demand is growing at a rate of 15 percent a year, while the demand for different types of glass stands at 550 tonnes a day.

"The demand for glass as a construction material is growing hand-in-hand with the growth of the real estate sector across the country and the corporate sectors in Dhaka and Chittagong. Now, the demand is growing at 15-20 percent a year," said Abu Sayed, general manager (commercial and banking) of Nasir Glass Industries Ltd (NGIL).

NGIL was set up at an investment of Tk 200 crore, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and machinery. It now owns more than 60 percent share of the glass market, he said.

Sayed said NGIL manufactures nearly 92,000 tonnes of glass, including float glass, reflective glass, tempered glass, coated glass, mirrors, clear and coloured glass a year.

The company can produce as much as 20mm of thick glass, while the maximum capacity of the other companies is 12mm.

PHP Float Glass Industries started commercial production in 2005, and the company accounts for over 20 percent of the total market share.



AMRAN HOSSAIN

A high-rise with a glass exterior. Glass has become one of the main materials used for building exteriors and interiors these days for aesthetic and cost-cutting purposes.

"We are the first company in the country to manufacture float glass with thickness ranging between 2mm and 12mm," said Zahidul Islam, a sales executive of PHP.

He said PHP produces around 65,000 tonnes of float glass a year and plans to enhance capacity further.

In addition to meeting local demand, the companies are now exporting their products to different countries, mainly to the neighbouring nations.

Nasir Glass Industries Ltd exports to India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

"Sixty percent of our produce is sold in the local market, while the rest 40 percent is exported. To enhance exports, we are working to find new export destinations, including the US and the oil rich Middle East countries," said Sayed of NGIL.

Despite the overall success, the industry as a whole is facing some difficulties that need to be addressed, the insiders said.

They said the main hurdle to growth is an energy crisis, which often makes companies suspend production and make workers stay at work for long hours to cover for lost production time.

Also, the import duty on raw materials is still very high, which the government is yet to act upon. Industry leaders have long been urging

the government for prompt action.

Most raw materials, including dolomite, limestone and chemicals, for float and sheet glass need to be imported. However, the specialised sand, another essential material for producing glass, is available in the local market.

The general manager of NGIL identified the weak transportation system as a major problem in the sector.

He urged the government to take steps to ease the border difficulties to smoothen the shipment of consignments, as glass is usually exported through the borders.

Industry insiders also suggest the government provide export incentives for the sector at an enhanced rate. They cited an example from China, where the sector receives an incentive of 25 percent. The government currently gives around 5 percent as an incentive to the export sectors.

But these problems cannot hold back the innovators.

NGIL plans to expand operations further and open a new factory in a year or two, depending on the gas and electricity situation, said Sayed.

"The country will receive huge new investment from both local and foreign entrepreneurs within the next three years, as the market will grow further. And we hope to be a part of that," he said.

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Art glass at the centre of choice

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GROWTH of the real estate sector last decade boosted many other related sectors, like timber and teak, ceramic and glass. But the most remarkable metamorphosis was seen by the glass industry, which alone grew from nothing to a multi-crore taka industry in just a decade.

Demand for different types of glass is increasing at a steady rate of 15 percent a year, said industry insiders.

Now along with float glass, reflective glass, tempered glass, clear and coloured glasses, the demand for art glass -- including etched glass, beveled glass, traditional stained glass, stained glass overlay and sandblasted glass -- is growing fast among the urban users.

Nazneen Haque Mimi, an interior consultant of Journeyman, a reputed interior decorator, said the demand for coloured art glass and luxuriously designed glass has started rising from 1999, but reached peak in the last seven years.

"The main reason behind this is a chang-

ing urban lifestyle that demands an aesthetic view and also a cost-effective option while building and designing homes or offices," she said.

"The price of glass is way more competitive than the price of wood. For example, if a square foot of glass costs Tk 950-Tk 1,000, the price of a cubic foot (cft) of Burma teak, ranges between Tk 3,000 and Tk 7,000."

Apart from the cost, designed art glass can be frosted, an option that gives the glass a foggy view that maintains privacy as well, she said.

"Also, people want to use glass both as a construction material and for decoration these days," said Mimi.

At present, the market for decorative art glass accounts for nearly Tk 85 crore a year. Local manufacturers are capable of meeting more than 70 percent of the total demand for the specialised material, said insiders.

They said the demand is high mainly among corporate houses. The use of glass in residences is limited to the higher-middle and higher income groups of people.

The insiders said most local manufactur-

ers of decorative art glass are small and medium enterprises, who have a minimal level of investment.

Among the local companies, Reflections is the leading crafted art glass manufacturer, holding nearly 40 percent of total market share.

The company produces seven types of glass -- stained glass overlay, traditional stained glass, sandblasted glass, engraved glass, coloured glass, etched glass and beveled glass.

This segment of the glass industry also suffers from an acute shortage of power and an unavailability of raw materials in the local market, which affect production badly.

Since a majority of the manufacturers belong to the SME category, they cannot afford large generators to overcome the losses they incur due to a shortage of electricity, said the insiders.

They urged the government to develop local expertise to produce raw materials like different colours, bonding material and equipment for designing decorative art glass that will make the industry more cost-effective.

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Employees display products at Reflections, a leading crafted art glass manufacturer that holds nearly 40 percent of the total market share.