

There's No Place Like Dome

Exporting Prefabricated Housing

by Doug Barry

U.S. Commercial Service



For developing countries in need of efficient, inexpensive housing, a Memphis company has just the thing: domes. In fact, domes are what the company is all about.

Domes International manufactures the bulbous structures out of molded fiberglass. Some look like igloos, others big marshmallows. Among the most attractive benefits is that they require little maintenance. Energy-efficient, the domes also provide protection against dangerous weather conditions including severe monsoons, which cause horrific damage and loss of life in certain areas of the world.

For more than five years, Domes International has been a client of the U.S. Commercial Service. It was through the Commercial Service that the company was able to begin exporting its dome houses to India.

Steve Pope, who does marketing for Domes International, says that India is

in need of several million houses right now: "In all my years of experience, I have never seen a product that has the appeal and demand that this product has produced."

After its initial success in India, the company decided to establish a manufacturing facility there, in order to better serve its new Indian customers, and with the possibility of later supplying nearby countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The factory opened in October, and the first customer is an Indian state government, which intends to use the structures to house the area's homeless.

DOMES SWEET HOME

Aren't modes of housing to some extent cultural and might people used to clay or wood or cinder block reject a domicile that could look to them like an inverted soup ladle? Pope says that clients in many countries are more concerned about a solid roof than about aesthetics, though he points out that local interior designers are hired to advise on room layouts and amenities

that might have a cultural basis. The domes also come in colors other than standard white, though no one has yet requested any.

Also, the domes don't have to be just domes. A square facade can be placed around the dome, if residents prefer a more geometrically familiar structure.

Pope says the real appeal of the domes, and one that sold the U.S. military on buying hundreds of them for housing on an island in the Pacific, is their low maintenance cost. The domes cost 50 cents a square foot annually, compared with \$15 per square foot for masonry and wood structures. Pope says that in addition to being virtually indestructible, upkeep consists of a "bucket, a mop, and some soap and water."

In addition to selling houses worldwide, Pope says that the company is also planning to donate homes to needy areas of the world.

According to Ree Russell, the U.S. Commercial Service's trade specialist

in Memphis who works with Domes International, "What's so impressive about Steve [Pope] is that he takes the time to go to these places." Where next? "We're trying to finalize a deal in Nigeria," says the globe-trotting Pope.

LOCAL ASSISTANCE

Pope and his colleagues are making use of government assistance to expand their business through exports. He says that the Commercial Service in India helped spread the word about his company and product, and soon the phone was ringing off the hook with prospective investors, partners, and government officials looking for solutions to their housing problems.

There was a brief glitch at the Mumbai port clearing components for the new factory. "We didn't know the Commercial Service could help resolve customs issues, too," says Pope, still annoyed with himself for not requesting help sooner.

With the help of the Commercial Service, Domes International received financing of \$1.2 million from the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. "This project offers many developmental benefits to the region," explains OPIC President and CEO Dr. Peter Watson. "It will serve a market of 50 million people by providing affordable housing that will survive even the harshest conditions, and could further support businesses and even schools and farms with much-needed facilities and storage."

Pope adds that Domes International also builds domed warehouses, office

buildings, and water collection facilities, among others: "We can fit so many needs for different countries."

Pope says that building dome assembly plants in other countries is a win-win proposition. "The jobs created help the local economy," says Pope, "while we benefit stateside because the master molds and other pieces are manufactured here."

The success of Domes International can be traced back to its founder, Joel Nichols, described by Pope as a Mississippi dirt farmer with a third grade education. He made all kinds of things out of fiberglass, and one day, so the story goes, a local investor, who was an undertaker by profession, asked Pope if he could make 50 fiberglass chicken coops. Nichols agreed but said it would take between five and 10 years to make the coops on his workbench. So the undertaker bought Nichols out and built a manufacturing facility. Nichols still works with the company as a kind of on-site guru. He is in India getting the new factory there ready for operation.

Says Pope, "He invented these designs, then manufactured, perfected, and

sold the houses out of his barn for 18 years."

Was the barn a dome? No, but that's not a bad idea for the "genius and artist" who is introducing dome living to thousands of grateful people all over the world. ■



Photos courtesy of Domes International.

