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Selecting the right façade installation firm - by Steven Powell

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As the owner of a major new property being developed, or an existing large building preparing for major renovation, you want your design and construction team to have the right experience, capabilities, and expertise to match the project demands. A critical member of this team will be the façade installation specialty firm, since the quality of this installation will impact the integrity and success of the entire project. Here is how and when an installation firm should be selected and what your design and construction team needs to consider.

Select Your Façade Installer Early in Development

Whether curtain wall, window wall, storefront system, panels, brick face, custom metalwork, canopies, skylights, or punched opening windows, the right time to select and engage the façade installation firm is early in the design phase. When the architect is planning the overall style and aesthetics of the façade, an experienced installation firm can provide valuable expertise in choosing the right materials for the building envelope. The façade installation firm may often supply the materials themselves. The right firm can make all the difference in meeting design specifications in an efficient, cost-effective way, and avoiding costly installation problems in the field. This is especially true for an urban mid- or high-rise multifamily or commercial building.

Subcontractor Options:

Façade Installation Subcontractor: A quality installation subcontractor typically specializes in façade installations and has extensive experience in all types of façade design and materials. These firms have experience in installing many windows, doors, and metal and glass systems and ensure the building envelope is completed efficiently, safely, and with minimal field interruptions. Their crews execute proper opening preparation, sealing, and caulking to eliminate air infiltration and water penetration from the start. The architect or general contractor usually specifies and orders the façade materials separately. An installation subcontractor may be the preferred choice for façades where the general contractor, developer, or others have effectively procured façade materials from reputable suppliers.

Full Service Installation Subcontractor: A full service installation subcontractor such as Vista Skywall Systems handles the entire façade phase of the project. Firms such as these have the expertise to evaluate suppliers and procure materials, prepare detailed field installation drawings, and handle all installation stages and material interfaces. Full service installers have strong relationships with vast networks of suppliers and can offer a wide range of material solutions. With experienced engineering teams that understand complex installations, full service installers anticipate potential challenges and develop installation procedures to eliminate field problems. The full service installer coordinates with other trades and the general contractor on scheduling material delivery, safety protocols, and field testing. This installation choice allows the general contractor to focus on other phases of the project.

Additional Considerations

Safety: What types of safety procedures, training, and oversight of its installation crews does your installation firm provide? Site safety is paramount for all crew members and for the successful completion of any project. Besides the obvious threat to workers, the public, and valuable materials, unsafe conditions can delay or stop a project completely with significant personnel and financial ramifications. Vista and other leading installers have outstanding safety records, conduct Job Hazard Analyses (JHAs), hold regular safety meetings and reviews, and conduct routine inspections at every jobsite. Be sure to review the safety record of any installation firm you may consider engaging.

Field Testing: What experience does your installation firm have with pre- and post-installation field testing of façade products?

Increasingly, field testing is used to evaluate product and installation integrity on mockups before the entire façade installation proceeds, and at times on actual façade components as installation progresses. A key to successful field testing of window wall, curtain wall systems, and other fenestration and façade materials is strict adherence to proper installation procedures. Installation firms such as Vista Skywall Systems have perfected outstanding installation practices to eliminate water penetration at material interfaces and joints, ensuring reliable and sustainable installations that unfailingly pass field testing.

Another key to successful field testing is isolating reasons for any failures and implementing corrective actions, whether caused by product flaw or other reasons. With extensive experience, top installation firms can often identify potential deficiencies during the design phase and develop the necessary custom installation techniques and materials to prevent test failure and delays. Should field test failures occur, firms such as Vista Skywall Systems have the experience to assess and take corrective action so as not to delay façade installation.

Construction Documentation: What documentation capabilities does your installation firm have?

Good construction documents are essential to a well-executed project. These documents include certifications, permitting documentation, detailed shop drawings and specifications, product data, all submittals, ongoing photographic documentation, and final close-out documents. The better the documentation practices, the less likely cost overruns resulting from ambiguity, delays, unaddressed punch list items, and rework will occur. Full service installation firms such as Vista have outstanding detailed documentation standards. They use the latest online tools and digital platforms allowing all involved personnel complete access to necessary information, and they have the depth of engineering and project management staff to manage the process expertly at every step.

Selecting a façade installation firm with extensive project experience, excellent safety and documentation practices, and a broad network of prominent material suppliers can eliminate many jobsite problems and guarantee an efficient and quality installation of your project's façade. Asking the right questions up front, and getting the correct answers, will help you engage the right façade installer for your project.

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