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Money - Business Monday

Metal roof eco-friendly, lasts a lifetime

ENTERPRISE: They are more expensive than traditional shingles, but metal roofs come with a transferable 50-year warranty

By CHRISTOPHER CLARK, Special to QMI Agency



Joe Malec, president London Eco-Roof Manufacturing Inc., holds a sample of the roofing that his company produces. This style is called BRVO. Shown behind are the raw painted rolls of aluminum. (SUE REEVE, The London Free Press)

What's the first thing you think when you see your neighbour is getting a new roof? If the two houses were built around the same time, isn't your first thought: When will I need a new roof, too?

No one puts "new roof" on a Christmas wish list; no one asks for a new roof for his birthday. But if the roof springs a leak or has deteriorated to the point that parts of it blow off in strong winds, it suddenly becomes a priority.

The next question is how much to spend. Going cheap solves the immediate problem but guarantees you'll be back in the same situation in less than 10 years. The best fibreglass shingles tend to last between 15 and 20 years in this climate, despite being rated for 25 years.

The longest-lasting solution is a metal roof, and in most neighbourhoods these days there are a few metal roofs shining through the sea of asphalt and fibreglass shingles. They are distinguished by their shiny texture and the ice stoppers that jut out just above the eaves to break up potential sheets of ice and snow that can slide off during the winter.

They are also distinguished by their high prices, typically two or three times the cost of traditional shingles. If you see someone putting a metal roof on her house, you know she has no plans to move. It's a long-term investment.

For the last four years, Joe Malec has been working to start a company that could offer metal roofs at lower costs, not on par with shingles but close enough that metal becomes a realistic alternative for more homeowners.

"I pursued investors for four years," says Malec, 42. "It took a long time, but I finally found the perfect investor in Poland. We finally got things going in the last three months."

His company is London Eco-Roof, a testament to his own persistence and also geo-political changes in the world in the last 20 years.

Malec spent the first two decades of his life in Poland and emigrated to Canada in 1988. Then a communist country, part of the Soviet bloc, Poland was hardly a hotbed of capitalist seed money. But shortly after Malec left, the Berlin Wall came down, leading to the end of Soviet influence over Poland and so many other Eastern European countries. Sparked by the courage of Lech Walesa, the country held democratic elections in 1989 and chose Walesa as president in 1990.

Two decades later, Malec returned to Poland to find an investor for his business here in London. There are four partners in the roofing company. Malec's cousin is in Poland and works with the investor, whose company supplies the metal rolling machines used here in London to produce the roofing sheets.

Malec's brother, Darek, is vice-president of the firm and works here. There are six employees so far and three installation crews.

"We sell our product two ways," Malec explains. "We sell directly and install ourselves, but we're also building a network of distributors who will sell our roofs themselves."

Steel roofs, he says, are better than traditional shingles in every sense. They are lighter, more durable, last longer and are better for the environment. Most shingles comprise of fossil fuels of some kind and are difficult to recycle.

London Eco-Roof offers a variety of steel and aluminum roofs. Aluminum is the newest product, although it is even more expensive than steel. "Steel is lighter than asphalt tiles, and aluminum is lighter than steel," Malec says. "Plus aluminum will never rust."

Either way, steel or aluminum, the roof comes with a transferable 50-year warranty, so it's almost certainly the last roof you'll ever put on your house if you continue living there.

Malec offers a basic steel roof for about \$4.50/square foot, a price he says is somewhere between high-end shingles and other steel roof options.

"Our whole focus is giving people a choice," he says.