

Case Study

Local Artist and Unique Acrylic Help Civic Center Capture Essence of Young City and Achieve LEED Certification

More goes into the construction of a building than the mortar in the foundation, the supports in the walls, and the color in the paint. For a building to be distinct, to have character, the interior design needs to reflect something greater than the building itself. For officials of Shoreline, WA, that meant artwork for its new Civic Center had to capture the essence of the young city as well as be environmentally friendly enough to help the Center achieve LEED certification. The combination of a local artist's vision and a unique acrylic from Evonik Cyro made those lofty goals attainable.

The city government contracted 4Culture – a cultural services agency serving King County, WA – to coordinate the project and select an artist. Following an intense application process that narrowed the list of potential artists to four finalists, 4Culture selected Leo Berk.

A Cultural Design

Once chosen, Berk was given a few requirements. The finished piece needed to be a suspended sculpture, represent the community, fit in the allotted space, and help the building become LEED certified. Beyond that, Berk was given total control over his creation and he went to work immediately.

Berk invested a great deal of time researching the history of the young city. He learned that before being recognized as its own metropolis, Shoreline was a collection of 14 rural neighborhood settlements bound together by a school district. In 1944, the district was referred to as “Shoreline” for the first time. In 1995, it became a city incorporated into King County.

For Berk, this concept of a separate, yet unified group brought to mind another of Washington's defining characteristics: clouds. Every cloud has unique features that distinguish it from its neighbor, yet when joined together, they seem to move as one. To Berk, the neighborhoods that make up Shoreline are like clouds who have come together to create something greater, yet they retain what makes them special.

There was a problem, however. Washington clouds come with another stigma, in that they are sometimes seen as gloomy and unpleasant. To counteract this issue, Berk decided to use cool, soothing colors instead of grays. He visualized 14 suspended clouds made up of interchanging blue and green acrylic hovering over the lobby's greeting area, like a comforting blanket creating a more intimate space.

"I liked the idea of creating a lower ceiling. Psychologically, this allows people to be more casual with a 'roof' overhead. I wanted to make people feel closer, much like the city itself," Berk said.

The next part was finding a material that could make his vision a reality and meet the requirements of the city.

A Design Edge

Berk knew he was going to use acrylic. He was familiar with the material, having already used it to make a single frosted, opaque cloud a few years before. However, he wanted to go in a different direction with the Shoreline clouds.

"I started searching online and found some acrylics that I felt would do the job when I visited the Web site for Evonik Cyro. I ordered an assorted sample box of ACRYLITE[®] acrylic sheet," added Berk. "The ACRYLITE[®] Exotic Edge caught my eye."

Berk knew he wanted to use the material immediately. "The acrylic really draws you in. Evonik Cyro's commitment to the environment and green statement were factors in the project manager approving the design and material. All that was left to do was get the city's go-ahead."

Berk fabricated a prototype cloud using the acrylic sheet. After a brief presentation, the city's project team of local architects, developers, and representatives of 4Culture and Civic Center was captivated by the material. When looking at the face of the sheet, only a hint of color is noticeable but when viewed from the edge, color bursts forth.

A breathtaking visual display was only part of the decision-making process. The acrylic had to help the building attain its LEED rating, be manufactured in the U.S. and meet the project's budget. City officials gave Berk the green light once they were confident ACRYLITE met all the criteria.

Head in the Clouds

After receiving all necessary approvals, it was time for Berk to make his vision a reality. Using Computer Aided Design (CAD), he created 3D models of the 14 different clouds that would guide the CNC routing machine so it would make perfect cuts in the Exotic Edge.

Before starting to cut, Berk contacted Evonik Cyro tech support to learn how best to fabricate the acrylic so the material's unique edge effects would not be spoiled. After receiving the tech team's advice, Berk put his head in the clouds.

Each cloud had a different look and shape, though they all shared a similar overall design. In one direction, green cloud slices would run parallel to each other. Then, perpendicularly, blue slices would run parallel to other blue slices. From one vantage, the clouds would appear to be green, but then from the other, they'd be blue.

During fabrication of the clouds, slots were cut into each acrylic sheet. Aluminum tabs were inserted into the slots. Each tab was then connected to either a blue- or green-coated stainless steel cable. All in all, Berk used 300 pieces of acrylic, 600 cables and 900 tabs. When he was ready, the city gave Berk a two-week window to install the clouds in the Civic Center lobby. He did it in half the time.

Walking on Cloud 14

"What I created for Shoreline is exactly what I envisioned. My clouds are complete," Berk said.

Totally satisfied with his work, Berk was not the least bit worried when the committee from Shoreline viewed the finished art. Everyone involved with the project was more than pleased.

The alternately green and blue clouds capture the spirit of what was once just a group of neighbors who came together to form a community. As light passes through each sheet, the edges come alive in a brilliant display of color. Now, the people of Shoreline can visit their Civic Center, gaze up and be reminded of the splendor of their small city, the bond that unites them and their own individuality. All thanks to a visionary artist who is a perfectionist and the right acrylic material.