



Through the Looking Glass

The curtain wall/glazing industry in Utah is taking on added meaning as owners/designers look to convey and reinforce messages to tenants and the community at large.

By Rebecca Burton

“We depend on our surroundings [...] to embody the moods and ideas we respect and then to remind us of them,” writes Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness*. “We look to our buildings to hold us [...] to a helpful vision of ourselves.”

While 2017’s market outlook for Utah’s curtain wall and glazing industry is similar to that of 2016 — robust growth, a tight labor market, and continued innovation for energy efficiency—a new trend of using the glass facade to reflect a building’s purpose is emerging. Owners and designers are using curtain wall not only to enhance aesthetics or let in light, but to tell a story that might inspire passers-by.

At the Cottonwood Corporate Center, for example, LCG Facades of Salt Lake just completed a building with an ultra-sleek exterior to align with its future use of housing technology firms. “This four-story (building) has a new, high-tech product — dynamic glass,” said Ted Derby, LCG’s Business Development Manager. “It’s able to get lighter when the sun goes behind clouds or go darker when the sun comes out. It’s all computer controlled and programmable. It not only follows the sun, but it is also programmed for the four

seasons and can be custom programmed. Instead of pulling blinds, you just darken the windows.

At the new district attorney’s office downtown, curtain wall plays an even more conspicuous role in communicating a message. Installed by Steel Encounters, Inc. and designed by MHTN Architects (both Salt-Lake based), the facade’s patchwork of blue, green, and white glass is emblematic of the department’s purpose.

“Inasmuch as it appears to be random, there is organization to that pattern,” explained Robert Pinon, Vice President at MHTN and Lead Architect on the project. “As a building, it demonstrates how chaos can be organized. Aesthetically, it has a delineation of order within chaos. By organizing colors and the rhythm of glass, we were able to demonstrate what is going on in the building. It represents layers of truth leading to justice. It is representative of the transparency in the system.”

While design firms often take the lead in determining a building’s aesthetic, it was Salt Lake County District Attorney, Sim Gill, who drove the design. “It was Sim’s vision the whole time,” said Pinon. “It is an outward appearance of who they are as a

department.”

Steel Encounters brought the vision to life while maintaining careful oversight of public dollars. “Attention to the budget was paramount,” explained Ben Hiatt, Chief Estimator. “The design team, general contractor, and key general subcontractors worked through the design build process to utilize and specify products that would meet the performance requirements and aesthetic design, while maintaining the budget.”

“One of the main challenges was all of the different glass types,” said Brad Ney, Project Superintendent. “There are nine different glass types. Often, there are one or two glass types in a building. Nine is extreme. Keeping the pattern was a challenge. If you get off the pattern, it can cost a lot.”

Another challenge — and another unique feature of the building — will be integrating an art piece into the facade. While the installation will be revealed during the building’s opening in early 2018, the artist and subject have been selected.

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The new Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office in downtown Salt Lake is a prominent example of curtain wall/glazing conveying a message. The exterior will also include a piece of unique artwork incorporated into the façade. (rendering courtesy MHTN Architects; photos (right) courtesy Steel Encounters, previous page photo courtesy LCG Facades).



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“The type of art that was specifically requested by the district attorney was an enhancement to the glass. He wanted it very specifically to be part of the skin of the building.”

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– Robert Pinon

very specifically to be part of the skin of the building,” said Pinon. “We put out an RFP and the artist [Gordon Huether] was selected because of his qualifications and story. He interviewed the district attorney to understand the storyline and developed a concept of organizing how the public uses the justice process.”

Integrating an art piece directly into a building's glass curtain wall has not been done before, at least not in Utah. “It is very unique in that we don't usually explore art on a façade,” said Pinon. “It will be highly visible and a reinforcement of the story.”

Steel Encounters is taking great care to ensure the piece remains hidden and protected until the building's opening. “We got a sample piece from the artist with a protective coating and we're currently taking a strip off each week to see how long we have until any film might be left on it. Once we hit June, July and August, it will start sticking a little more,” said Ney. “We're keeping it a secret until they unveil it. That will be a challenge.”

LCG Facades has also addressed very project-specific challenges this year, though of

a different nature. In order to complete work near the East Bench, teams adapted their equipment to work within topographic and space constraints, including during recent work at the Huntsman Cancer Institute.

“That project has some very complex faceted curtain wall,” said Derby. “It has about 15 different angles, that were intersected with sloped skylights. To add to its complexity, it was built on the east elevation. We had to use a crane to place the equipment into a hole in the back of the building because there wasn't enough room for trucks. That's a very tight site, but we've gotten used to doing that type of tight site construction.”

While both companies used innovative approaches to meet different design challenges, they share a common predicament — one that is common to the broader industry. There continues to be a severe shortage of skilled/craft labor in Utah, given that the state is among the nation's leaders in construction growth.

“Right now, we're booming. We're having a hard time finding any help,” said Ney. Then, he added with optimism, “It's a good problem to have, in my opinion.” ■