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Harvard Grad School Design Instructors Use Vycom's Celtec to Bring Natural Gardens into Cityscapes

Scranton, PA (9/25/2013) — David Mah and Leyre Asenio, visiting lecturers at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, presented their students with a Design Challenge: how to merge modern city architecture with greenscapes that engaged the public. In a project that uses design to bring ecology to the concrete jungle, they turned to Vycom's Celtec® Ultra White as their platform for a compelling sculpture series. Celtec Ultra White is a solid PVC material designed for outdoor applications where resistance to ultraviolet degradation and impact strength are critical, making it perfect for Mah and Asenio's outdoor garden displays. They were also attracted to Celtec's post-industrial content, recycled from scraps in the manufacturing process.

The designs of Mah and Asenio, who have an international practice called asenio_mah, were featured at the 2012 Canada Blooms garden show in Toronto and the Grand Metis International Garden Festival Show at Reford Gardens, Quebec. The Quebec installation, called Surface Deep, is an intricately carved garden wall that incorporated moss into the hollows. The Toronto design is a spiraled, twisted planter featuring a diverse range of plants.

The design partners are part of relatively new movement in design to rethink cities and city planning, away from the isolated fields of architecture or civil engineering, That consider the landscape and ecology. "In the past people who planned cities thought in terms of buildings and roads, not greenery and the environment," said Mah. "The result is a less sustainable model of living that isolates us from the environment."

"Simply putting moss on roofs prevents heat and run-off from spilling into cities, added Asenio, "so cities have a less destructive effect on the local environment."

To see how these new ideas could work, the pair worked closely with their students to create an example for a garden show in Toronto and a semi-permanent installation in Toronto. They integrated moss into the mock walls, which introduced micro-ecology in the way of creatures depending on the moss.

In the same structure, they placed plants in the shade and some in sun, and were able to accommodate moss with very different growing requirements. "We're essentially creating micro-climates in the same structure," said Mah. "These ideas could be applied to buildings with vertical green walls applied to buildings."

For two framed sculptures called Surface Deep and Surface Deep II, the designers needed a frame material that combined “lightness, recyclability, a good finish and the ability to withstand outside conditions,” according to Asenio.

Freeman, Inc., a distributor near the Harvard School of Design recommended Celtec Ultra white, since many of their customers used it for outdoor signage and it seemed like a good fit that could stand up to the abuse the designers anticipated.

“We really appreciated the product’s lightweight, since our shop at Harvard GSD is in the basement,” said Mah. “Also, we were back and forth to Canada prior to installation so we needed transport costs to be low.”

“At first, the students were a bit uncertain... PVC?” said Asenio.” But now that they work with it, they love it.” She said Celtec was very easy to fabricate, from the card mills to the computer controlled routers. “It even responded well to more primitive methods we had to do afterwards, like sanding or shaving with a knife,” she said. “And since Surface Deep had so many intricate designs and cuts, a material that was difficult to work with would really be frustrating.”

“Now, the students at Harvard GSD keep coming up to touch it,” said Mah.

“And the four-year olds at the public events as well,” laughed Asenio. “Children at the garden shows in both Toronto and Quebec were drawn to it. We had hoped to engage people with the notion that the sculptures are something they appreciate for their beauty and want to interact with.”

“That’s really the whole point of our design movement, she adds, to get urban areas to interact with ecologies, with the people that live within it, and with the larger environment.”

What’s in the future for them? More installations, some of them reconfigured from the pieces they’ve already made. The designers were very pleased to discover that when they brought the Toronto sculpture back it had not been damaged at all. “All of our sculptures are specific to the installation, but that shouldn’t mean we can’t re-use parts that work well,” said Asenio.

“Celtec stood up to being kicked around which is important,” said Mah. “And it cleans up so well,” they both agreed. “It came back from Toronto very dirty, but we cleaned it up and it looks brand-new.”

The designers don’t even know when the Quebec installation will come down. It was intended to last a single year but has lasted an extra year and may even still be up for a few more years.

The designers agree that the Celtec material has really showcased a new way of thinking about structures, one that doesn't choose between the sustainable, the beautiful, or the durable. "We can bring together all three," said Asenio.