



FACULTY PROFILE

THE AESTHETIC IS THE INTERACTION: GORBET DESIGN

By Leanna McLennan

“Surprise and delight — that’s what we’re aiming for. It’s at the core of everything we do.”

Susan L. K. Gorbet is describing the essence of Gorbet Design Inc., the Toronto-based company she co-founded with Matt Gorbet in 2001. The Gorbets are one of those couples with so much collective talent that it’s awe-inspiring. Not only are they both instructors in the Faculty of Design at OCAD, they also teach intensive courses as part of the TELUS Interactive Art and Entertainment Program at the Canadian Film Centre’s Media Lab. And they run a successful design company.

From obelisks that glow to aluminum shafts pulsating with light, together Susan and Matt Gorbet make visually dynamic interactive sculptures. Their creative process bridges the fields of art and design: they use design methodology to create sculptural work that’s known for its clean lines and organic forms. In conversation they move between

the two fields, referring to themselves as artists on the one hand, designers on the other.

Neither planned to be an artist. Susan began her career studying computer science and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. From the outset, her focus was on the relationship between people and design. With her finger on the pulse of media innovations in the early days of 3-D design for the Web and interactive television, she moved to Silicon Valley to work as a computer programmer and interaction designer. Notes Susan, “I’ve always worked in areas that are inventing the rules rather than applying them.”

Meanwhile, Matt’s interest since the beginning of his career has been in combining art and technology. “When I came out of high school, there wasn’t a place to combine those interests,” he says, “so I decided to apply to four different art schools and to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], rolling the dice to see what would happen.”

As luck, or fate, would have it, Matt was accepted at MIT, and he went on to do his master’s at the university’s Media Lab, where he researched human/computer interaction. Upon graduation, he worked at PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) with a highly creative team.

The couple first met in San Francisco in 1995, when they were working on a project at Silicon Graphics, Inc. Two years later, they ran into each other at a conference in Atlanta and started dating. Both highly creative, Matt and Susan thrive on their work and their relationship to such a degree that they have seamlessly combined their personal and professional partnerships. They also tend to finish each other’s sentences.

“We found we were always talking about the projects we were working on...” says Susan, to which Matt adds, “...so we decided that in order to spend more time together, we wanted to work together.”

In 2001, the couple moved from San Francisco to Toronto and started Gorbet Design. Because they see design as a conversation with the

viewer, the Gorbets create each piece with multiple layers. As viewers discover a sculpture, they respond to the immediate visual impact. Then they enjoy the delight of coming across something unexpected, followed by the discovery that they can interact with it.

“We don’t have a visual aesthetic that’s our calling card,” Matt says. Susan continues, “Instead, our aesthetic is about interaction.”

Together, they see people as both their audience and their medium. That’s where Susan’s psychology degree comes into play. “As an artist, you’re relying on people to act in a certain way,” she explains. “Much like oil painters need to understand the properties of oil paint, interactive designers need to understand the properties of their medium, which is people.”

People are central to *Threshold Memory* and *Heartbeat*, which were designed for Toronto’s Drake Hotel and launched at its official opening on Valentine’s Day in 2004. *Threshold Memory*, which consists of eight vertically stacked neon numbers, keeps a running count of people

moving between the lobby and lounge. Every time someone passes, a sensor registers the person’s presence and the number increases by one. At the current rate, the counting will continue for 300 years. As of October 22, 2008, the total registered was 1 665 098. *Heartbeat*, a series of six custom ambient sound sensors installed in the walls and ceilings, measures the sound levels in different areas of the hotel. The gauges displaying these sound levels are located in the geographic centre of the Drake. People can watch the needle of the gauge that reads *You Are Here* move as it registers their sonic presence.

Another piece that invites viewer interaction is the 20-foot-high obelisk at the Royal Ontario Museum. It was designed for the reopening of the ROM in 2008, as a means of recognizing donors to the Renaissance ROM campaign, which saw the addition of the Daniel Libeskind-designed Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. Donors’ names are permanently engraved into the obelisk, which is made from Corian, a reconstituted stone that is

also translucent. Touching a name illuminates it, with the light coming from inside the stone, and as your hand moves over the obelisk, it creates a path of light.

“The obelisk acts as a bridge between the old building and the new, a bridge between the past and the present, which influenced the form and the materials we chose,” explains Matt.

The classic obelisk form, the materials and the names carved in stone speak to the old building. The contemporary lines, straight edges and smooth surfaces, as well as the angle at the top of the stone, all echo the angles and lines of the new building. So does its placement: at the building’s architectural border between old and new.

Solar Collector, which launched on the 2008 summer solstice, also bridges two environments: the industrial area where it’s located and the natural world. Designed with Rob Gorbet, Matt’s brother, for the Waterloo Regional Operations Centre in Cambridge, Ontario, the piece consists of 12 large-scale aluminum shafts fitted with solar panels.

The shafts visually represent the movement of the sun through the sky, with the tallest shaft perpendicular to the sun at winter solstice and the flattest shaft perpendicular to the sun at summer solstice.

The idea is that people can interact with the natural world via the Internet by going online to set the speed and direction of light patterns in the panels. A custom electronic “brain” located in each shaft is responsible for the timing of an individual lamp, with the lamp’s schedule dependent on a database of patterns created on the actual site. (To view the patterns in real time, log onto www.solarcollector.ca.)

For more information on Gorbet Design, visit www.gorbetdesign.ca.

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Leanna McLennan is a Maritime-born writer and academic. Her work has been published in *The Antigonish Review*, *Broken Pencil*, *Fiddlehead*, *Taddle Creek* and *Third Floor Lounge: An Anthology from the Banff Centre for the Arts Writing Studio*, 2004.

OPPOSITE, LEFT
GORBET DESIGN
HEARTBEAT, DRAKE HOTEL, TORONTO, 2004

OPPOSITE, RIGHT
GORBET DESIGN
SOLAR COLLECTOR, CAMBRIDGE, 2008

ABOVE, LEFT
GORBET DESIGN
THRESHOLD MEMORY
DRAKE HOTEL
TORONTO, 2004

ABOVE
GORBET DESIGN
DONOR OBELISK
AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM
TORONTO, 2008

ABOVE & TOP
GORBET DESIGN
DONOR OBELISK
AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM
TORONTO, 2008