



‘A modern Stonehenge’

Cambridge art installation, Solar Collector, captures beauty of sun’s energy

CAMBRIDGE — We’re approaching summer solstice, when the sun reaches its apogee in the northern sky. There will be an opportunity to mark the solstice by being part of the official launch of Waterloo Region’s latest public art installation on Saturday.

The rhythms and patterns of the Earth turning around the sun were an inspiration and starting point for Solar Collector, a sun-powered, web-connected, interactive sculpture by Matt Gorbet, Rob Gorbet, and Susan LK Gorbet.

Working together as a Gorbet Design, these artists represent a broad range of experience: Rob teaches electrical engineering at UW. Matt has degrees in architecture and media arts at MIT; Susan in psychology and computer science. Susan and Matt both teach at the Canadian Film Centre’s New Media Lab and at the Ontario College of Art & Design.

Solar Collector was commissioned by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo to grace the Waterloo Regional Operations Centre at 100 Maple Grove Drive in Cambridge.

The nature of the site, which includes the Emergency Medical Services Headquarters, also shaped the project.

Upon its completion in 2004, this facility became the first building in Ontario to be awarded gold level certification from the Canada Green Building Council as part of its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.



Shafts of sunlight (top photo) find their way to the Solar Collector ready to be interpreted into flowing illuminations at night. The official opening of the Collector is on Saturday.



Martin DeGroot
Arts and Culture

The end result is something that will serve as a landmark in a relatively nondescript area dominated by vehicular traffic. On a grassy knoll made of fill from excavation on the building site, 12 aluminum shafts of varying lengths have been installed at a

graceful sweep of progressively steeper angles. Each shaft has three sets of LED lights, three solar panels and a built-in computer.

Both the lengths and the angles of the shafts were determined by the sun. “The light patterns are based on sine waves — the mathematics behind sunlight and the seasons,” Rob Gorbet explains. “As we explored the geometry of solar energy, we were struck by how beautiful it was, and we wanted to make it visible.”

The tallest shaft is perpendicular to the sun at winter solstice, when the sun is at its

lowest point in our sky. The shaft that is shortest and angled closest to ground faces the sun at summer solstice.

During the day, the sculpture collects and stores energy. The sun’s contribution is matched with human input: People are invited to visit www.solarcollector.ca and submit patterns — compositions of sorts — for the lights to follow.

Every evening when the sun goes down, the sculpture begins performing, the illuminations flowing according to patterns submitted online. How long the show lasts depends on the season and the weather: When the shafts use up the energy stored, the lights fade to dark.

The launch on Saturday is going to be more elaborate than originally anticipated. A few months ago, the poet Rae Crossman volunteered to organize a sequence of performances to accompany the launch after hearing a talk about Solar Collector: “I was drawn to the piece because it is both contemporary and ancient,” Crossman explains . . . “it’s a modern Stonehenge. And, as a work of art, it calls out for a celebratory response: music, dancing, poetry.”

The distinguished Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer has given permission for his music to be used at the launch. Among the performers Crossman has lined up are French horn player JC Morrison, clarinetist Tilly Kooyman, soprano Marion Samuel-Stevens, the Carousel Dance Company and the all-percussion group Organic Groove.

So come down, bring a picnic, relax on the lawn under the apple trees, and enjoy the performances that will accompany the world premiere performance of Solar Collector.

Martin DeGroot is executive director of the Waterloo Regional Arts Council. He comments on arts and culture Tuesdays in the Record. You can reach him by e-mail at mdg@golden.net.