

SOAK UP THE SUN

When Gorbet Design first responded to a call for public art for the regional operations centre in Waterloo, Ontario, the criterion of incorporating solar panels not only piqued the Toronto firm's interest but became the nexus of its concept. "We thought, if it's going to be solar powered, then let's make the inherent solar energy forms intrinsic to the piece," says Susan Gorbet, who co-founded the firm with her partner, Matt Gorbet.

After researching everything solar for their proposal, the team (including Rob Gorbet, Matt's brother and a frequent collaborator) found inspiration in sine waves, patterns prominent in nature, including ocean waves, sound waves and – important in this case – light waves. In their winning Solar Collector proposal, 12 aluminum shafts follow the sine wave's curves. But just as in nature, the form serves more than an aesthetic function: each shaft is positioned to correspond precisely to a different phase of the sun's movement throughout the year. Three solar panels on each pole collect energy during the day. At night, some 2,600 LEDs housed within the shafts consume this electricity in a light performance programmed via the web (www.solarcollector.ca). Intricate patterns stream across and up and down each shaft for an infinite range of visual impressions.

The site – a roadside hillock set within an industrial landscape on the outskirts of Cambridge, Ontario – is about as far as one can imagine from "public," in the conventional sense. But Gorbet embraced the challenge, proving that public art has a place beyond the busy urban core. The access points align with the two ways people are most likely to approach the work: driving by in their cars, or on the Internet. From passing vehicles during the day, Solar Collector's undulating form creates the illusion of an unfolding wave. And the evening's roadside light show will no doubt entice passersby to pull over and enjoy the performance. Online, visitors can become active participants in programming the next presentation by submitting their patterns, devised by adjusting a series of shifting controls, such as speed, wave, flare and scatter. "We think of it like composing music," says Matt. "When you compose, you're putting a bit of yourself into the piece."

SHANNON ANDERSON

Solar Collector stages a nightly LED light show in Cambridge, Ontario. The public art piece, by Toronto's Gorbet Design, runs on solar power absorbed by the photovoltaics on its 12 shafts, their positions mimicking phases of the sun's movement throughout the year.

