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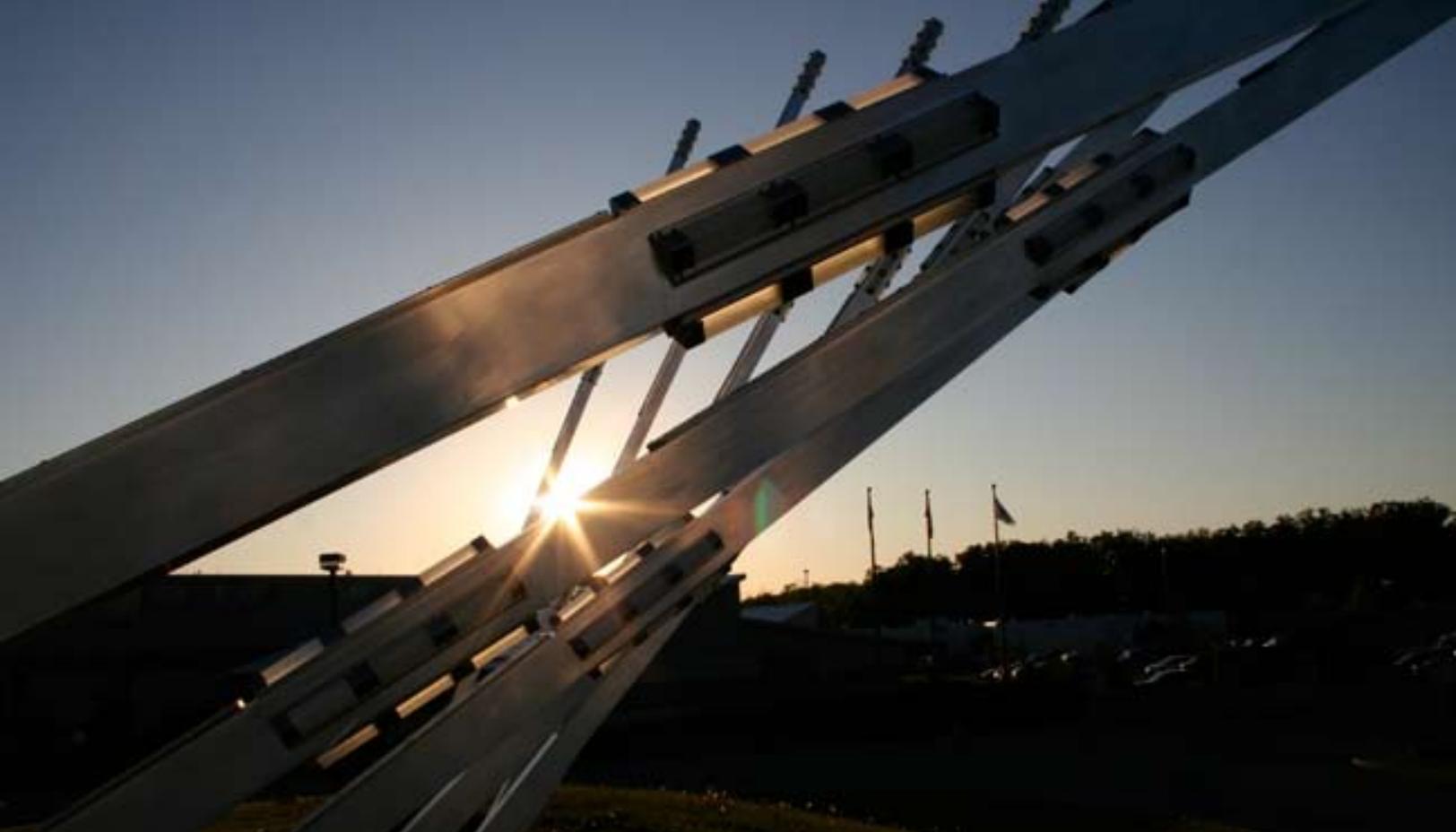
A chat with the creators of Ontario's Solar Collector.

By Stefanos Chen

WHILE DANISH ARCHITECT OLAFUR ELIASSON'S recently revealed Waterfalls project debuted to mixed reviews, a public art installation just north of the Hudson promises to make good on his community-fostering vision. Perhaps more NASA than Guggenheim, the modestly titled Solar Collector of Cambridge, Ontario, touts a simple

mission: In a collaboration between the community and the sun, Solar Collector gathers human expression and solar energy during the day, then brings them together each night in a performance of flowing light.

Upon visiting the Solar Collector website, the nexus of this virtual-cum-natural endeavor,



guests are invited to program light sequences using an intuitive control panel. The light patterns are then broadcast via 12 gracefully arched metal shafts starting at dusk. The entirely solar-powered performances carry on through the night, ceasing only at the first sign of daybreak. **The New Agenda** recently had the opportunity to speak with the bright and talented creators of this unique project — Susan, Matt, and Rob Gorbet. (Susan is married to Matt, who is Rob’s brother.) Speaking as one voice, the trio disclosed the Solar Collector’s secret past life as an armored tank in World War II. They also shared with us the mysteries of Stonehenge, the future of public art, and the key to sustainable design.

The New Agenda: To begin with, how did this project come about?

The Gorbets: It was commissioned by the Region of Waterloo. It’s public art that was created in front of the new regional facilities for Emergency Medical Services, which is one of

the first Gold LEED-rated buildings in Ontario. As a certified “green building,” they requested the construction of an outdoor, large-scale, and solar-powered sculpture. So they chose four artists to submit proposals in front of a public jury, and our piece was chosen unanimously.

Location is such a critical factor in public sculpture. What about the Waterloo Regional Operations Center drew you to this project?

It’s a very industrial area — there’s a Toyota plant down the street, there’s a lot of pedestrian traffic, and cars and trucks and train tracks a block away, so it’s a very interesting place to put a piece of art. We felt that public art should be very accessible to the public, and so that became one of our mantras, one of our guiding principles. It was also really important to us that if this was going to be solar-powered, that the solar panels be intrinsic to the piece, rather than having some of the sculpture to one side and some little trees and cells [off in the distance].

On your website, the Solar Collector has

aptly been dubbed a “modern Stonehenge,” a paradox that draws as much from its ergonomic design as it does from the ancient marvel’s mystique. How would you describe the interplay between these forces?

Well, we hope that the thinking that inspired the builders of Stonehenge is similar to the things that inspired us. When we started looking at the forms of solar energy, we discovered that they’re really quite beautiful. The way the sun moves in the sky, the way its path changes over the seasons...there’s something about these natural forms that really appeal to us as human beings. We wanted to make these forces visible. To celebrate this movement was one of our central inspirations.

The most remarkable thing about this project is that all of the light patterns programmed into the Solar Collector are provided by online users. Could you tell us how the response has been?

It’s been quite extraordinary. People from all around the world have been experiencing the website and creating their own patterns. We’ve received feedback from Italy, Russia, France, China....Someone called us from Johannesburg; it’s really global.

Any standout comments?

One thing that we’ve really enjoyed is that people have been naming their patterns. There’s one dude that named his pattern “life,” because it pulses like a human heart. It was very carefully designed, and he went on to talk about why the pattern was important to him. People have also been talking about how this piece helps connect them to the local community, and to nature, and to themselves... it’s been really gratifying.

Any difference between the local community’s response and the broader online population?

Well, the local people get to drive by and see it, which is sort of fun [laughs]. But we’re going to have a webcam up and running very soon to bridge that spatial gap.

Will the Solar Collector ever move stateside?

Well, we would love to. One of the really interesting things about this sculpture is that, because of its relational position to the sun, another installation in another location would look very different. At the equator, for instance, all the posts would be flat. So, as you can imagine, it would be very interesting to contemplate a work like this having multiple physical locations.

There is something utilitarian yet decidedly aesthetic in your design. Can you speak a little about that?

In order to create something sustainable, be it a new technology, new industrial design, something that’s good for the planet, it’s not really enough just to be better on a technical or practical level. It really has to be better in terms of people’s desire for it, people’s attraction to it. What I mean to say is that it’s not good enough to make a car superefficient, because if the car’s ugly, no one’s going to buy it. You have to touch people on a human level. We’ve aspired to make a piece that’s attractive, that people are drawn to — but at the same time, a piece that’s conducive to spreading the word on sustainable energy. And I think that’s a really important message for designers today, to find that balance between function and aesthetic.

On your website, you mention some of the practical specifications that support your commitment to sustainable design. Would you care to share some?

Interesting story, the glass prisms we used for the LED lights are actually reclaimed World War II tank prisms. They were initially used as components in tank periscopes. It really felt great to reuse these objects that were once made for military purposes, especially in this environmentally friendly context.

That's a really amazing example of using truly reclaimed objects. How did you come across such an exceptional find?

We had stumbled across this great surplus glass dealer. And that's another thing — as great as it felt using recycled and reclaimed materials, the decision to use these materials was also very cost effective.

So it's actually cheaper to build green than it is to use new materials?

Absolutely. Practical and beautiful. For instance, one of the nice things about using recycled aluminum for the shafts is that they're light enough to actually move with the wind. It sort of evokes the feeling of reeds waving in the breeze. It's just another interaction with nature that we very much enjoy.

While we're on the topic of sustainable design, what are your long-term plans for this project?

One of the things we haven't talked too much about yet is the manner in which we store all the patterns we collect through the website. Over time, as the new input of patterns dies down, the collector will begin cycling through all of the patterns that have been archived. We've been asking users to submit their postal code so that people closer to the sculpture will have a greater proportional impact on the series of global patterns. So even in the event that our sponsors no longer wish to maintain the website in five or 10

years, the patterns the global community have created will live on. As for the structure itself, we practice what's called "graceful degradation." We opted not to use any sort of chemical finish on the aluminum shafts, so that over time, the piece will age naturally. Aluminum doesn't rust, but it has this way of weathering into a nice shade of grey.

So are there any other projects on the horizon for the Gorbet clan ?

We've launched a whole series of projects. One piece that's about to go into its final phase is an interactive obelisk we've created for the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. They wanted a unique way to recognize museum donors for what they call the Renaissance ROM campaign.

Given the limitless potential of online communication, how do you see the realm of public art changing in the years to come?

We're moving into an environment and a whole universe of art where people are both the audience and the medium. When you create interactive artwork, you're creating with people as well as for them. It's a very different design process to acknowledge that people aren't just looking at your work — they're actually going to be a part of it. If you have an artwork that requires interaction, the piece doesn't really exist as such unless someone is using or experiencing it. So all of a sudden it presents all kinds of questions like "Where is the artwork located?" and "What's the scope of the actual art piece — is it a thing, an event, or an experience?" We think artists are just starting to explore this universe of possibilities. tna

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