



CASE STUDY: HENNEPIN LIBRARY
Library to the World





CERAMICSTEEL BECOMES THE CANVAS FOR A PIECE OF PUBLIC ART THAT ANCHORS A NEW LIBRARY IN SUBURBAN MINNEAPOLIS, UNITED STATES.

When a pair of civic artists looked for a durable material for a mural that would be the heart of a brand-new library in the United States' Midwest, the answer was CeramicSteel. The artists, Shane Allbritton and Norman Lee of RE:site in Houston, Texas, wanted to illustrate an encyclopedia's wealth of images in 331 accordion-like panels, and knew from previous projects that the material's UV-resistant surface and specialized printing process would keep their work vivid and long-lasting. The library in Brooklyn Park, outside of metropolitan Minneapolis, is the latest new build that the Hennepin County Library

system undertook in its updating, and is more than double the size of the 40-year-old building it replaced—at 39,000 gross square feet. The exterior of the building is made with timeless materials: slate, zinc metal panels, and cedar wood siding. The one-story building has large clerestory windows to maximize the light inside throughout the long Minnesota winters, which made it imperative that the interior materials be timeless as well. "We needed a material that was really durable in harsh sunlight," Lee says, as that streaming light would hit the mural every day for hours.

“I think that how you experience public art is qualitatively, fundamentally different than how you experience art in a gallery. There’s an aspect of self-discovery that’s powerful. It’s something that you happen along. You experience it when you don’t have the expectation of experiencing art—we’re interested in that encounter.”

—Norman Lee, artist and co-founder of RE:site



Inside the building, there are three zones intended to act as living rooms for the community—places where patrons can do such activities as check out a book, take a class, conduct online research, or meet with people. Also designed to be a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning hub, the building features more than just stacks and carrels—it has a wind tunnel, a microscope, and a table for kids to build with magnet tiles, among other things. The variety of offerings draw people

from across the region, including students from the community college across the street. Soon, too, the library will be a stop on a future light rail extension. This library was meant to last, and the community is invited to linger.

Hennepin County Library—Brooklyn Park wanted the art to anchor and center the project, visually and metaphorically, in one big piece as opposed to multiple small works. From the beginning, the library staff worked with the architects, national firm HGA, to accommodate a large piece of art into the building’s blueprints. The designated space would be half of the main, right-angled soffit wall that faces the glassed-in entrance of the library, and would be visible from the street and to all those passing by. The art needed to be welcoming—and lively. The call for artists, as stated by the library’s community advisory group and the library task force, envisioned the library “as a gathering place and a place of access to the world’s information, culture, and books.”

RE:site was chosen to create a monumental piece of art, an interactive, panoramic mural that would both mirror the population walking in and out of the library and invite them to interact with the learning in the pages of the library's books. Each of the 331 unique, digitally imaged CeramicSteel panels installed on the interior fascia of the library unfolds like an accordion to the eye as you walk through the library in front of the artwork. As RE:site stated in its pitch to the library, the firm wanted to achieve a breathtakingly ambitious goal, to use "art and technology as a medium to tell the story of world culture, in juxtaposition to local geography, through the lens of math and science." Walk through the space in one direction, and the images seen are global—fingerprints, world art, ancient fossils, spiraling galaxies. Turn around at the end, then walk back the other way, and the topics are local—indigenous plants, Hmong embroidery, biomedical imaging, Mississippi River eddy currents. The experience is much like walking past shelves of colorful book spines, their pages inside full of knowledge.

"We were struck by this folding or unfolding motif as something that not only looks like stacks of books like in a library, but also mimics how books open," says Lee. "But our inspiration also came from the mission statement of the library, which was to tell the story of local culture and a broader geography through math and science." As Ali Turner, Hennepin County System Services Division Manager, explains, "We pride ourselves on being a place of discovery."



A library in the Midwest of the United States gets a dynamic 3D mural that looks inward to local inspiration and outward as a portal to the rest of the universe. The library mural, dubbed "Sectio Aurea" by the artist, RE:site, unfolds layer upon layer in a lenticular effect. From the outside, passersby see the mural through the clerestory windows. A bike rack outside, shaped like a Viking ship, is an invitation to come inside for an adventure of discovery and exploration. "People come in in groups, so we designed the spaces for all ages to be together," says Ali Turner, Hennepin County System Services Division Manager. "It's not for dropping your kids off and going."

The mural has an additional layer of complexity, incorporating the golden ratio. Since the design of a book's page has been based upon the golden ratio since Gutenberg, Lee and co-founder Shane Allbritton used the golden spiral (based upon the ratio) as a lens to see each subject through. "These proportions are found in nature, from something like a galaxy spiral to how a hurricane forms to the spiral of a shell," Lee says. As the panels unfold to a walking viewer in a linear fashion, so do

"I'm proud of this library because I see how people's eyes light up. It means so much to them to have something awesome in their community."

—Ali Turner, Hennepin County System Services Division Manager

the images unfold in spirals across the mural. The library's call for artists stated that "all mediums will be considered, including paint, tile, glass, lightweight relief materials," but RE:site had worked with Polyvision CeramicSteel on two previous outdoor projects and knew that its properties were such that it would render their designs flawlessly. Special enameling

technology fires full-color images directly into the UV-resistant surface, merging the ephemeral quality of art with the permanence of the material. "Although this was an interior project, and you're not dealing with harsh conditions like weather, there's still sunlight that's going to be streaming through the large curtainwall windows," Lee says. "We wanted something that wouldn't fade." Turner, also the Hennepin County Library division manager, says that the art was intended to be a permanent installation, "meant to last the life of the building." RE:site told Turner and the library stakeholders that CeramicSteel, manufactured by Polyvision, would be the perfect fit. "They spoke to the durability and the cleanability," Turner says. "Since it's a public building, we have to take practical things, like how often it needs to be cleaned, into consideration."

RE:site worked with two Steelcase companies. Polyvision, the leading global manufacturer of CeramicSteel, manufactured the material and printed the graphics onto it using an advanced digital printer. Designtex, the leader in design and manufacturing of applied materials for the built environment, which designs textiles and wallcoverings,

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CeramicSteel panels were used in the 160-foot-long mural.



helped RE:site finalize the imagery and adjust colors for Polyvision's ceramic-ink digital printer in Belgium. The hundreds of panels, crafted in desired sizes and angles, were meticulously waterjet cut and labeled by Polyvision so that the installer would know exactly where each one should go. The team also included Metalab, based in Houston, which specializes in art project management. Metalab created the system that the art hangs on and handled installation.

The resulting mural is a metaphor for discovery and learning five times over, each panel a subject to discover, just as a book opens to rich learning. The best part, though, is that the community is wowed and engaged. "We're interested in creating something that the community takes ownership of," says Lee. "Yes, it's created by artists, but the neighborhood takes ownership of it, and it becomes part of what makes that neighborhood," he explains. "It's their library."

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