

Beauty and Brawn

More than Just a Pretty Face, Decorative Glass Products Can Offer Performance, Too

by Brigid O'Leary



Brigid O'Leary is a contributing writer for *Decorative Glass* magazine.

In today's world, it pays to be able to multi-task. You've got to be able to juggle email, snail mail, conference calls, business travel and still have

time for a personal life. We multi-task because we're expected to—and we're expected to because the technology is available to do so. From the iPhone that can do virtually everything to the incredible shrinking laptops, we're surrounded by technologically advanced gadgets, gizmos and thingamajigs that do more than one thing. And don't forget the glass.

Snazzy Safety

Decorative glass has always been a multi-tasking agent of sorts. Stained glass windows in houses of worship were designed to either tell a story or, well, beautify a space—often while keeping the congregation inside sheltered from the weather. Today, decorative glass still does that, but it can also protect people in some traditional and some not-so-traditional ways.

Take for instance San Francisco-based SAFTI *FIRST*. The company, known for its fire-rated glass and frames, also offers fire-rated decorative glass. Likewise, decorative glass products can be laminated or tempered to meet safety-glazing requirements. Companies such as Meltdown Glass in Chandler, Ariz., UroGlass in Kansas City, Mo., and Pulp Studios in Los Angeles, all offer tempered and laminated decorative glass. All the different value-added aspects that are available for glass are important, espe-

cially when you consider all the ways decorative glass is being used these days. No longer reserved just for churches, decorative glass has moved into the mainstream and can be found in both commercial and residential applications.

Meeting a Need

For the crew at UroGlass, a manufacturer of kiln-cast products, tempering bent panels was an important upgrade. Company president Stew Langer explains that while a curve adds more structural integrity to a flat panel, bending glass for a particular project, such as a shower enclosure or to wrap around a receptionist area desk, will sometimes also require tempering so it's code-compliant.

"When we started out, the first process we added was tempering so we could compete with products that must fall into the safety glazing category. Then we added poured resin lamination for safety glazing. It allowed us to be code-compliant with products we couldn't send out to temper," Langer says, adding that the company sends its glass to Precision Glass Bending in Arkansas for bending/curving or tempering.

The safety component is an important one for any designer, architect or builder—and by extension, glass manufacturer—but so are the aesthetics of the building. Pete Hayes, national sales

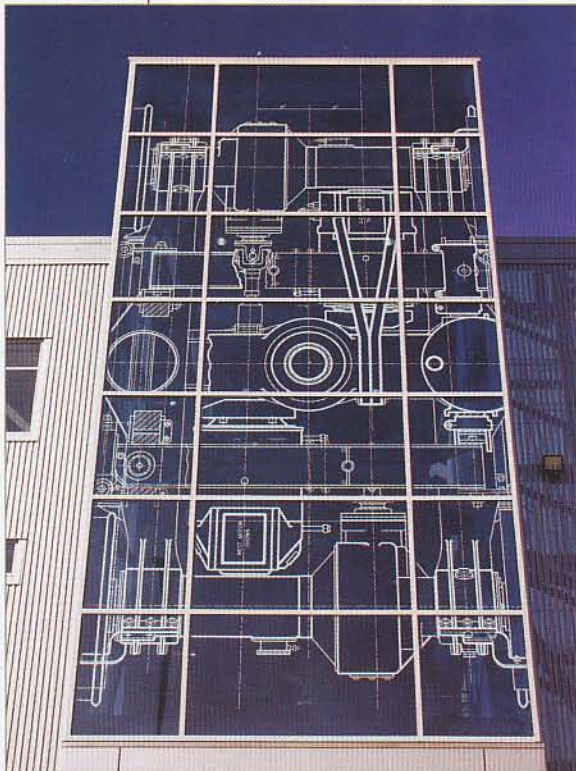


Photo courtesy of Pulp Studios.

New technologies now make it possible to print images directly onto interlayer materials that are used to create laminated glass.

**“It’s the
cherry on the top
that makes the
project interesting.”**

—Bernard Lax, Pulp Studios

manager with Meltdown Glass, says he has noticed a growing trend in some areas of the country to use decorative glass in applications that require fire-rated glazing.

That growing trend has fostered a relationship between Meltdown Glass and SAFTI *FIRST*, and the companies say getting involved in a project early is a critical step.

“On several occasions, we’ve worked with architects in the early stages of the design phase in providing our input and guidance as experts in fire-rated glass and framing. There are many instances where we’ve been asked to match existing, non-rated glazing systems, especially if there is a specific look that the architect is going for,” explains Diana San Diego, SAFTI *FIRST*’s marketing and communications manager. “We accomplish this by understanding the aesthetic needs of the project and working with the design team in coming up with a glazing system that meets the aesthetic, performance and fire and safety code requirements of their project,” she adds.

For Pulp Studios, offering different methods of achieving a goal is important. In addition to offering laminated and tempered decorative glass, the company also has a back-painted decorative glass that can meet safety requirements.

When asked about the types of decorative glass projects for which they



Decorative glass can also be tempered for use in safety glazing applications.

Photo courtesy of UroGlass.

have been tapped, both Trip Cathcart, president of CG&D Studios, a specialty glass company in Raleigh, N.C., and Bernie Madden, owner of design firm Madden-McFarland Interiors in Kansas City, Mo., immediately name bathroom windows, citing the blend of privacy and beauty a decorative glass window can add to a bathroom. But bathrooms are just the beginning, as they each rattle off very similar lists when asked about where they have used decorative glass that’s also safety glass: front doors (including sidelites), kitchen applications, restaurants and corporate lobbies.

Production Junction

Creating beautiful, eye-catching glass that is also functional for a particular project is a task in and of itself. And just making the products safer can complicate the job.

“Any time you have a piece of glass that is specialty—anything other than clear, monolithic glass—the processes that it goes through can add weeks depending on how it’s being used, how many processes it goes through, availability of supply,” says Bernard Lax, chief executive officer of Pulp Studios,

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Capt. Cook's Restaurant at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Fla., features this decorative fire-rated installation.

who adds that demand for a company's services is also a factor in the turn-around time of a project.

In that respect, manufacturing decorative glass with added value can create a whole different set of challenges for a company.

"The big problem with most specialty glass manufacturers is that you don't know from week to week what's coming in. You can get a request that will require three steps to make or you can get a request for something that will take eight steps," says Lax. "Depending on the piece and work load in the plant, you only have so much productivity you can dedicate to that. That's what affects delivery the most."

Add in quality control and it's easy to see just how much more particular people have to be when manufacturing decorative glass.

"When you are forming glass to go into a space, you're taking a piece of glass you're going to cut and put in an oven. While it's there, if it's a long piece of glass, it has the potential to grow. If your tolerances are tight, you have to take that into account," says Langer. "As a result, you have to inspect that product before it goes in to be processed for size and fit, then inspect it again when it comes out and again when drilling, notching or doing any other pre- or post-production work or preparation. In the case of tempering, [if] you send it out we have to look at it when it comes back because it has been in another set of hands. We check for product quality. That's a key component for any glass processing. You check for dings, dents, abrasions. If you have someone else do a polish you check to make sure their machinery doesn't leave track marks. Those

Photo courtesy of SAFETI FIRST.

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are considerations that have to be applied on both ends.”

Enduring Economy

Time constraints aside, those working with decorative glass are not any more or less concerned about the economic downturn than anyone else in the building industry. They say that though times are tight, their products may not necessarily be cut from the job.

“Specialty glass is generally not the huge volume element in a project, so despite the recessionary measures people are taking, they often keep those decorative elements in because that’s what makes it unique. It’s the cherry on the top that makes the project interesting,” says Lax.

Madden sees glass as the next step in popular design—if it’s sold correctly.

“Wall coverings are returning. We’ve fauxed the world. We’ve fauxed and stucco’d and now there’s a backlash. Paint on a wall is just paint on a wall. The formality is not there. So how do you make it pretty? You add texture. There’s only so much texture you can add before houses and rooms start to look the same,” he says. “Glass, to me, has many uses and it takes more of the skilled designers to use it because it requires more creativity and talent. To sell [decorative] glass, it helps to be a qualified designer.”

Cathcart’s design team has a range that allows it to take a client’s idea and make it a reality, even if the clients aren’t always sure what they want when they come in the door.

“That’s our forte, giving people something different, something unique,” he explains.

As Langer says, many architects, designers and builders look at the additional investment over the life of the building, and what the investment in value-added decorative glass represents. He says they often decide that what the glass represents is more important than the immediate cost.

“Even in a faltering economy,

the decorative glass source

- dichroic
- back painted
- acid etched
- cast
- custom laminated
- crystallized composite
- clear textured
- colored
- tinted float
- glass blocks

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they’re not cutting back on decorative glass. The points are the same—it helps because the kinds of products that we sell are purchased by people who have a need to employ the attributes of the product either from a practical perspective or from an aesthetic perspective. The perfect example ... have you seen a casino without neon lights? Even if the price of neon goes through the roof, no one is going to say ‘let’s use fluorescent,’” he says.

Decorative glass, value-added or not,

isn’t for every consumer. Manufacturers agree: it’s not for the faint of heart.

“When people ... want to get into the added value side of things, they need to know it’s not just about the product, it’s about the mindset. They have to be involved in the process from the beginning to end. If they aren’t the type of personality that thrives on this type of involvement and understands the project’s expectations, then it’s something they really shouldn’t get into,” says Lax. **dg**