Mark Maček - Five Significant Projects

200 West Madison
St. Edward’s Chapel
24 Central Park South
Super Bowl Podiums
UT Life Sciences Seminar Table
Architect Dan Cheatham named this wall relief sculpture Hypnotic Field, designed as part of his overall renovation of the high-rise lobby at 200 West Madison which included lighting, landscaping, and art. An existing steel sculpture by Louise Nevelson from the owner’s collection already occupied the lobby. By the time Dan brought me in as a collaborator and fabricator, his design was in advance development.

The first technical issue was the choice of material. Requirement included that each beam be 2” thick, 14’ wide, and 32’ - 0” long. And there were to be 31 beams. Dan and the client prioritized sustainable, locally-sourced wood. I recommended against using solid lumber beams which tend to shrink and swell with changes in the seasons which could potentially cup or twist over time. An engineered material would be more stable. Dan located Douglas fir reclaimed from industrial pickle barrels in Minnesota, and the supplier laminated it into glulam beams of seven layers. It was the perfect material for the job. I researched finishes until we reached the semi-transparent white appearance Dan sought.

Although the patterns of the relief carving resemble CNC routed shapes, the beams were far too large to fit into a CNC shop. The beams needed to be cut both by hand and by power tools, and then sanded and varnished. The shapes of the silhouettes were modified according to my directions to minimize any vulnerable short grain which could damage easily during installation or in daily wear.

The last technical challenge was how to attach the fabricated relief sculpture to the wall. The beams weighed 200 pounds apiece. Lifting the entire sculpture of three tons was not practical. Each beam would therefore need to be lifted individually. I recommended the method of French cleats for attachment. Five beveled blocks were screwed to the back edge of each beam corresponding to five beveled rails secured to the wall framing. Dan’s engineer signed off on it. A professional art installer used rigging and a small crane to lift each beam and drop it into place while Dan and I supervised. It was thrilling to watch the 35-foot tall sculpture settle into place.
2' - 3" 5' - 6" 5' - 6" 5' - 6" 5' - 6" 5' - 6" 2' - 5"

[Images of a wooden sculpture with dimensions and notes on screw placement and assembly details]
Father Peter advised me on the symbolic importance of the furniture in Catholic liturgy. For example, the altar must convey permanence. The altar top, the mensa, must be made of stone. The tabernacle serves as the house of the body of Christ. The presider's chair should be dignified but not overly comfortable.

Formally, each piece needed to convey a large scale, somewhat more monumental than ordinary furniture, in order to maintain a presence in such a large room. The altar, lectern, and baptismal font were made of thick panels of wood intersecting in plan, with geometric voids removed from the centers. The tabernacle was considered as a tiny fortress. The daily use of the tabernacle centers on opening its door which is hinged wood-to-wood directly to the cabinet. When the key is turned, a magnet pushes the door open with a smooth action.

Several fellow-Austin artisans also designed components in the Chapel. Kathleen Ash made the glass baptismal font bowl. Rebecca Cantos-Busch carved the wooden corpus of Christ. Hawkeye Glenn made the brass and steel candle stands. All of the architects and artisans were invited to be present at the chapel’s formal consecration ceremony, giving a satisfying closure to the project.
Holzman Moss Bottino are renowned for the subtlety of their building renovations, responding respectfully or bravely, as appropriate to the situation. This mid-century mid-rise on Central Park South did not have exceptional bones to begin with. The architects opened up the lobby space as much as possible and focused on thick-relief textures to enhance the interior environment.

The reception desk was drawn as a wave of solid wood, 3 feet high and up to 19 feet long, notched around the neighboring wall. The surface of the wave was dappled with a texture Néstor referred to as “beavertooth.” Building the walnut stack-laminated wave was not as much the challenge as was making the relief texture on the curved wood surface, while maintaining a luxury quality for the piece as a whole. I made dozens of samples to perfect the relief technique and the finishing. The scope of the project included its installation, which required planning for pre-existing imperfect walls. Several friends of mine in New York joined in to help me carry the desk into place.
Opening Night is an event that takes place the week before Super Bowl Sunday where journalists interview the players and coaches from both teams in a spectacular setting designed by Populous. Their designer envisioned a warm wooden backdrop built into a moveable podium unit with necessities such as lights and other gear attached. The NFL needed fourteen of these podiums. After Opening Night they would be moved to the Super Bowl venue for post-game interviews.

From the designer’s concept sketches, I developed a buildable structure that could be fabricated on a budget and within their schedule. Part of the NFL’s goal was that the wood selection should be flattering to a variety of skin tones, and my team helped with that research, making varnished wood backdrops and finding models nearby to photograph with them. (Those photos are now property of the NFL.) In the end, walnut was the species of choice.

The podiums were made of four separate components - floor, lectern, backdrop, and guard rail - that could be disassembled, packed, and re-staged by property moving companies for future Opening Nights. The instructions and hardware were almost self-explanatory. The components required a strategy for shipping and storing, so my crew built custom crates and padding devices. We installed the inaugural run of podiums at Minute Maid Park in Houston, Texas.
Paul Woodruff, the dean of Undergraduate Studies, instituted a program of cross-disciplinary seminar courses that would be held in six new classrooms within the Life Sciences Library. The table design was crucial to the seminar discussion format. Dean Woodruff had commissioned a similar table from me in 2004 for a Plan II seminar room. In fact, Plan II had two such rooms, and Dean Woodruff had built the first seminar table himself from plywood to test the design. Each table sat eighteen people comfortably around an elliptical top 14'-0" long and 8'-0" wide. In use, all the participants could see one another well and be heard effectively.

The Life Science Library classrooms, located within the historic Main Building, required several refinements to the initial table design. The tables needed to relate to the 1937 Beaux Arts architecture of the Main Building. The new classrooms borrowed millwork details directly from the original building plans. The original furniture was still in use, massive walnut reading tables with Byzantine geometric decorations. I designed the new seminar tables in that spirit with thick walnut lumber, adding ash and spalted maple for contrast. The structure of the table base acts like a plinth, allowing maximum foot room for users. The plinth hides computers and cable, which feed a touch panel controller used by the instructor. To differentiate the six tables, each table featured a unique inlay pattern based on the properties of ellipses. One of the best parts of the project for me was spending time with Paul Woodruff and hearing his thoughts about art and education.