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'Water Forest' stands tall again



DREW PERINE/The News Tribune

City of Tacoma employee Richard Johnson radios a fellow worker Thursday as they adjust water levels of the public art installation "Water Forest." It took almost seven years and \$174,000 to fix, but the sculpture has risen again on the plaza outside the Museum of Glass. The original work, made by acclaimed Rhode Island artist Howard Ben Tre, cost the city \$208,000. It was damaged soon after its 2002 installation and was removed for repairs.

PUBLIC ART: After seven years, City of Tacoma confident it's made the right fixes to sculpture outside Museum of Glass

BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI
The News Tribune

All it took was an errant kid bumping into a "Water Forest" tube, and the sculpture was down for nearly seven years. With the publicly owned work just reinstalled last week, the City of Tacoma says its long-awaited modifications have hopefully made the sculpture's 20 tall tubes vandal- and accident-proof.

Chief on the list of improvements has been the substitution of clear cast acrylic for

the original glass that made up half of each tube. (The other half is bronze with a green patina.) Finding the ideal material to substitute for the glass, which shattered soon after the 2002 installation, took the city four years.

Another important factor, says city arts administrator Amy McBride, is the insertion of four 5/16-inch stainless steel rods into each tube to strengthen the join.

"It's been hard to find an adhesive to connect bronze and acrylic, two really dif-

ferent materials that expand and contract at different rates," she said. "But it was important to find something we could really count on not to delaminate or be pushed over. To have someone hurt from a falling tube, that would be unthinkable."

The solution was a gasket-type middle joint, flexible enough to allow expansion, and the insertion of the rods for extra strength. The rods were originally rejected for aesthetic reasons, but McBride points out that they "add another vertical element" to the sculpture and fit in unobtrusively.

Other safety elements include screens at the top and base of each tube, to prevent

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debris being thrown in, and a tweaking of the computer program that flows water up and out of each tube: The length of time each tube will remain dry on the outside will shorten to minimize opportunity for graffiti vandalism, which would weaken the acrylic.

For the moment, says McBride, the water will flow continuously until the reprogramming is complete.

"It may take a couple of weeks to fine-tune," said Larry Koontz, a City of Tacoma employee who worked on the reinstallation.

The water, which pools underneath the sculpture, will be UV-treated, just in case any kid decides to taste the cool water flowing down the outside of the tubes.

Finally, each tube is now bolted to the plaza supports, not welded as originally, to allow for easier repair work.

The fiber-optic element of "Water Forest" will remain, lighting each tube at night with green light, as will the circular sitting bench in the center of the tubes.

The total repair bill for "Water Forest," which cost the city \$208,000 initially, came to \$174,000.

"Having it up is such an accomplishment," said McBride. "I love it. Having that space filled again is nice - the sound, going inside."

The installation comes at a good time of year, says Koontz: "It's much cooler in here on a hot day."

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A dramatic view of the Museum of Glass is captured on a summer evening soon after the 2002 installation of "Water Forest." The bronze and glass towers were controlled to reflect the ebb and flow of the tides surrounding Tacoma. The glass portions of the sculpture are now clear cast acrylic after extensive repairs.