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He lights way on public art

Artist, developer join forces on an innovative project for the capital

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Michael Hayden looks to the sky and sees art. Soon, you will too.

Sacramento's new U.S. Bank Tower at 621 Capitol Mall is the multimedia artist's latest canvas. The top and the atrium of the steel-and-glass 25-story office tower will soon feature a massive, two-part art display inspired by the city's nearby rivers.

The latest technology using light-emitting diodes will be employed on the building, easily visible from Interstate 5 or Highway 50, to bathe its crown with a water-inspired video. If all goes as the artist has planned, you should be able to look up from a downtown street some night in June and see what appears to be a flowing river streaming across the top of the \$130 million building.

The tower's atrium will continue the theme with a series of mirrored LED panels, all hard-wired into the building and controlled by specially designed software.

Art and architecture officials believe the work in and on top of U.S. Bank Tower will set the standard for public art in Sacramento for years to come. The displays put Sacramento firmly in the middle of a trend that combines art, architecture and technology on an immense scale. From Chicago's renowned Crown Fountain, featuring LED-projected images of local residents talking, to the 10-story video wall on Tokyo's Chanel Ginza Tower, developers and designers are turning enormous structures into complicated works of animated art.

But the sheer size is daunting. Despite Hayden's considerable résumé as a high-tech artist, he freely admits that his Sacramento project has an element of uncertainty. Small-scale models and renderings can only approximate what the final product will look like.

To meet the challenge, the building's Sacramento developer, David Taylor, gathered two dozen consultants, engineers, architects and electricians. The team includes Dallas-based Lighting Science Group Corp., whose Rancho Cordova unit built the ball that dropped for the 2008 New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square.

Lighting Science's experience mitigates the risk, but Ellen Warner, who oversees the building's design and construction for David Taylor Interests, admits she has been nervous about what will happen when the project goes online in late May or early June.

"On more than one occasion, I've pulled the team together and asked, 'Are you sure it's going to work?' " she said.

And if it doesn't?

"You don't think about that," Warner said. "It would be too horrible."

Public policy and private business interests prompt developers to include public artwork in their projects. The city of Sacramento in 1979 began requiring builders to set aside 2 percent of their construction budgets for public art. Sacramento County passed a similar ordinance in 1983, although the guidelines leave room for negotiation.

City and county projects in the last 30 years have added 600 public art pieces, according to the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. Developers spend between \$3 million and \$6 million each year on public art, said Shelly Willis, the commission's Art in Public Places administrator. The commission reviews and approves details of all public art projects, including the artist and design.

But beyond the government requirements, many builders see public art as an amenity that helps sell the building to potential tenants.

Taylor Interests executive Warner wouldn't say exactly how much Taylor has put into U.S. Bank Tower's art but confirmed it runs into "the hundreds of thousands of dollars."

The company considered nearly a dozen artists before settling on Hayden, a Santa Rosa resident. Hayden ranks among a handful of artists worldwide who use light and large spaces as others use paint and canvas. With more than 100 major works in his 40-year career, Hayden, 65, has pieces in Chicago's O'Hare Airport, the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, Toronto's Yorkdale subway station and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

His two-part concept for U.S. Bank Tower ties the building to the nearby American and Sacramento rivers.

The first, "Lumetric River," will cover the building's south-facing louvered top with an LED video projection of rushing river water that will be visible at night from miles away.

To produce the video, Hayden shot hours of river footage and then manipulated the images to give them an abstract quality when cast on the building's five-story, 150-foot-wide crest. Technicians at Lighting Science's Rancho Cordova branch designed the lighting.

"The idea," Hayden said, "is to create a metaphoric river flowing across the top of the building."

The running water theme speeds up with "Rapids," an array of about 200 mirrors and lighted panels hanging down five floors and spanning 84 feet in the tower's seven-story atrium.

Each 2-foot by 2-foot panel resembles a smooth white piece of gum on one side – Hayden calls them "Chiclets" – that contains an LED video projector developed by Lighting Science. The other side is a holographic two-way acrylic mirror.

Hayden will hang the panels from an aluminum structure running across the atrium's expanse, and the south-facing mirrored side of each panel will cast rainbows by reflecting sunlight pouring through the building's clear-glass exterior.

The LED sides of the piece will carry more water video, giving the viewers the sense they are looking at frothing river rapids tumbling down from the seven-story ceiling.

Willis, the public art administrator, said the U.S. Bank Tower will raise the public art standard for other local projects, including the airport's expansion and the downtown railyard.

"They're the pioneers here," Willis said. "If this works, it helps everyone – developers, design professionals, artists, engineers. It can be used as a model for future projects. It makes it easier to encourage artists and builders to take some risks."

Despite the best intentions, sometimes complicated public art projects don't quite deliver.

In 2001, Internet giant Yahoo installed a \$100,000 piece on its Sunnyvale campus that mimicked nearby wetlands with a combination of low-growing grass and white wires topped with reflective squares.

The project went awry when the grass grew much higher than expected. Two years ago, the city of Sunnyvale told Yahoo to tend to its overgrown lawn. Yahoo's grounds crew cut the grass down but damaged the white wires. Yahoo eventually replanted the area with lawn grass but left the bent wires in place.

"They turned my art into a bad miniature golf course," artist Sharon Loudon complained to the Wall Street Journal last year.

The logistical challenges of Hayden's piece have been so great that "there have been many days when I have slumped in my chair and privately wished we had commissioned a wall painting," Warner said. "Fortunately, those moments did pass."

Aligning Hayden's vision with the building's architecture, electrical and data systems is an overwhelming undertaking, she said.

How will the pieces be installed? How will they be maintained for decades to come? At one point, the city fire marshal pointed out that the atrium panels would interfere with the building's fire sprinkler system. Hayden changed the panels' angle.

The tower's first tenant, U.S. Bank, opens its office April 25. A team led by Lighting Science will install the piece in late May or early June.

Hayden, meanwhile, is starting to move on. He's working on a bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. He says he needs clients who think as big as his projects.

"I need people who have as much nerve as I do," he said.

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