

Art AND ARCHITECTURE

Maureen Kelly draws on her tenacity and talent to create one-of-a-kind fabric sculptures.

“I NEVER THOUGHT I COULDN’T WORK IN A SPACE 200 FEET TALL,” SAYS MAUREEN KELLY, owner of The Design Loft (TDL) in St. Louis, Mo. “I always thought there would be a way to construct these pieces—I didn’t always know how, but I knew we could get it figured out.” Kelly, whose educational background is in ceramics with an emphasis on sculpture, started the company that integrates fabric into art for architectural spaces after working in sales at a local flag and banner company. “I just looked at the basic banner and thought, where can you take it to?” she says.

As it turns out, Kelly took the concept of banners to places that include sometimes whimsical, always artistic, vast sculptures where stainless steel and fabric seem to float and interact as they define interior spaces.

Foundations

At the company’s inception in 1990, Kelly focused more on creating banners for malls, backdrops for dinners, and exhibit work. She hired sewers she found through the International Institute of St. Louis, an organization that provides services for refugees and immigrants. About six months in, Kelly’s brother (Rick Kelly) came to visit and offered an astute observation. “He looked around



You can't blow an uncertain trumpet. ~Rev. Theodore Hesburgh

VITAL STATISTICS

Maureen Kelly

The Design Loft Inc.
St. Louis, Mo.

Since 1990

Studio of site-specific fabric and metal sculpture for extreme and unusual spaces

IFAI member since 2005

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and saw what we were trying to do and said, 'Yeah, but how are you going to make any money?'" she says. He advised Kelly to add a "bread-and-butter" piece to the product line, which led to Rick investing in the company as a partner and heading up The Flag Loft, an arm of TDL. "It worked out great because now we have a company that when times aren't so good in one area, the other area can pick up the slack," Kelly says. "Together we've built the business."

Building networks

Building the business to provide the types of artistic structures for architectural spaces it now offers can be attributed to Kelly's tenacity and determination as much as it is to her talent and vision. She created a network of architects and designers who might be interested in her work, using the pre-Internet resources available to her at the time. "I would take hundreds of dimes with me down to the AIA [American Institute of Architects] office where I would tediously copy pages of their members," Kelly says. "Then I'd go back to the office and call them. It was brutal." Without having enough information about the architects to know if they worked commercially or residentially, Kelly and another member of her staff made many thousands of calls to end up with a data base of just under 4,000 architects and interior designers.

Now, of course, she keeps the list refined and updated through the Internet, and sends out readout sheets on the major projects the company is involved with. "Every time a readout sheet goes out, it always sparks interest and people call," Kelly says. "We also have a booth at the AIA show every few years, which also results in connections."

One of those connections turned out to be John Portman, a celebrated and accomplished architect whose work Kelly had long admired. "He was a rock star to me—my Mick Jagger," Kelly says. "He is an architect who incorporates fabric sculpture into interior spaces. He understands how fabrics can work with a building." Portman stopped by Kelly's booth at the AIA show in Chicago in 2005, and in 2006 his office called to ask if she'd like to collaborate on a project with him. Working closely with Portman and his team, TDL installed "The Lily Project" (a series of four lilies of sheer stainless steel cloth and a stainless frame) at the Renaissance Schaumburg Hotel & Convention Center. "Through him we learned about other stainless steel wire cloth fabrics," Kelly says. "We were already working with some fine stainless steel at the time, but he wanted a stainless steel that would be extremely sheer and transparent."

Though Kelly was thrilled to work with Portman, and occasionally collaborates with architects and designers, about 90 percent of the work her company does is from her designs.

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by Geoff Colvin



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INDUSTRY PREDICTION

I don't put a lot of credibility in predictions. You can't control outside forces; you just have to do the best you can, move forward and employ out-of-the-box thinking.

BUSINESS STRENGTH

I'm very good at keeping organized, understanding the end point, and coordinating everything that goes on between that first sketch and the completed piece.

“As an artist, the value of the piece as a sculpture is always on my mind,” she says. “I need something that people, when working in a space for years and years, will be able to come in every day and see something new and different.” One element Kelly uses to achieve that kind of dynamic presentation is by combining textures in her sculptures. She draws on her background with her clay sculptures to create a relationship between line and shape that translates into interior space. Currently, Kelly and the TDL team is working on a project for the South Dakota Children’s Museum in Brookings, S.D., which is scheduled to be installed in spring 2010.

Integral involvement

In order to make her concepts a reality, Kelly works personally through every stage of the process, including overseeing installations. To safely install the expansive pieces, Kelly works with a team made up of TDL employees and employees from Lawrence Fabric Structures, a local company that manufactures products, including fabric tension structures. “I work with Bobby Balay [from Lawrence Fabric Structures], who is an artist on a lift,” Kelly says. “He can work on any type of lift, maneuvering through a maze of tightly placed cables.” Kelly also works with Lawrence on the initial set-up discussions and with the company’s welders to fabricate the frame systems for her work.

The time a project is being installed is the time the structure takes on the final nuances of its personality. The way the piece fits together within the space can be affected by moving it a few inches one way or another, and there’s really no way to predict the effect those subtle shifts have on the sculpture until the installation is underway. That’s why Kelly insists on directing every installation. “When I’m on site, I adjust and change and reposition the piece so it’s never really complete until that moment,” she says.

Taking a project from a drawing, to CAD and welding, to powder coating, to fitting fabrics and/or metals to it, to installation, brings Kelly an extreme sense of artistic accomplishment. “It is just so overwhelming to see something that was just an idea at some point become reality,” she says. “These are pieces that people are going to look at for years, and there’s no way I could bring those ideas to fruition without the incredible support of TDL’s team and our outside support system.” ®

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BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY

You have to love what you do, always believe in yourself and focus on where you want to be.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Get an advisory board. We have an outside-of-the-industry advisory board made up of people from manufacturing, finance and marketing—they’ve made us see things differently.



2009 International Achievement Award winner
Award of Excellence, Commercial Interiors
Photo: Bart Harris/Chicago.

WIND OF THE SEA

Although the majority of work The Design Loft does is generated by Maureen Kelly’s designs, she occasionally installs designs by people such as John Portman from John Portman & Associates Inc. in Atlanta, Ga.

The Design Loft installed “Viento De Mar” (Wind of the Sea), designed by Portman, in the Hilton San Diego Bayfront Hotel in 2009. The installation required three phases: Kelly and her team first laid out the massive floor pattern in vinyl, then installed the channel system, and finally, they went in with the stainless steel fabric. “It was a difficult project,” Kelly says. “There were massive amounts of material. And working with sheer stainless steel fabric is like working with liquid water—it moves everywhere.”

As its name suggests, the piece hangs in a fluid freefall of reflective motion, enhancing the hotel lobby.