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Five silent sentries of Abyss Green granite, representing the five branches of military service, keep vigil at the Walnut Creek Veterans Memorial Plaza. Each pillar is inscribed with the name and emblem of one of the service branches. (Photo courtesy City of Walnut Creek, Calif.)

Client:

City of Walnut Creek, Calif.

Designer:

Cliff Garten, Cliff Garten Studio, Venice, Calif.

Contractor:

Jensen Corporation Landscape Contractors, Cupertino, Calif.

Stone Supplier/Fabricator:

Granicor Inc., St. Augustin, Que.

WALNUT CREEK, Calif. – Say one thing for the people of this Bay Area city: When they proposed combining new landscaping at city hall with a public art requirement and the community’s desire for a memorial to local veterans, it showed optimism.

The confidence turned out to be well-founded with the Walnut Creek Veterans Memorial Plaza, a stunning landscape project that relies heavily on several formal granite elements to achieve its vision.

Because the project fills so many different roles, however, it took time. Construction took the better part of a year before its Memorial Day 2004 dedication ... and that was the easy part.

Gary Pokorny, arts, recreation and community services director for the city of Walnut Creek, says a lengthy process to select the designer, Cliff Garten of Cliff Garten Studios in Venice, Calif. – coupled with Garten’s willingness to work with locals, especially veterans – helped make the project a success.

Pokorny explains that a number of different situations fell into place to make the plaza the best solution to several needs, including a pair of events involving the Walnut Creek municipal building.

First was the death of a 150-year-old valley oak that had provided an anchor for the building’s landscaping. At about the same time, the city was finally in a position to appropriate money for a major expansion of city hall that



approximately doubled its existing space.

“There was some money included in the site planning for the city-hall expansion to do some landscaping of the corner,” Pokorny says. “There’s also a public-art requirement for the building, which was expressed as one percent of the cost of the expansion.”

While the city’s own plans were going forward, a group advocating a memorial to veterans of all wars and actions and all branches of military service finally persuaded the city to budget some money to move that project along.

Pokorny says there had been some assumption that such a memorial would be constructed in Walnut Creek’s main downtown open space, Civic Park.

“Certainly, there was a desire to keep it downtown; and, in conversations with the veterans, we identified three or four sites,” he says. “However, what came out was that many of them really preferred it to be next to city hall. The advisory group said they liked this corner. It’s a very prominent location with two major streets going by.”

It was at that point that city officials realized they could take the money appropriated for the veterans memorial, combine it with funds for the public-art allocation and a portion of the city hall landscape budget, and make what Pokorny calls, “a major statement.”

Because of the public-art allocation, city officials decided to utilize the same formal process used in the selection of other public art. Carrie Lederer, curator of exhibitions



After careful fabrication, each pillar was carefully installed on its onsite support box. Alignment was critical, both for the support of the columns and to provide a steady flow to the water feature located at the top of each column. (Photos courtesy Jensen Corporation Landscape Contractors).

and programs for the city-owned Bedford Gallery, explains that it centers on a public selection committee, made up (for this project) of people from municipal government, as well as local arts and veterans’ organizations.

It also included an open competition.

“The process calls for soliciting proposals, so we advertised the project nationally,” says Pokorny. “We invited artists to submit a statement of qualification and interest in doing such a project. We got something in the order of 50

responses from people who had done public-art projects.”

After a preliminary review cut that number approximately in half, the selection committee looked at portfolios of remaining applicants, and then pared the list down to five artists/designers. Each finalist was asked to each submit a site-specific proposal and a model of the plan.

“We had specified that we wanted a team encompassing an artist and a landscape architect because of the land-

scaping of city hall and the art,” says Pokorny. “And, we wanted a project to incorporate a theme of honoring our veterans in its conception.”

Among the five finalists was Garten, both a landscape designer and an artist. He says he likes to go into urban situations and look at the potential of a particular place.

“I like a site where I see a real potential to create a



The plaza itself is paved in a combination of the stones used for other components of the project – Prairie Green, Abyss Green and Peribonka – all done in a thermal finish. (Photo courtesy City of Walnut Creek, Calif.)

place which will ask people to gather and feel the energy of that place,” he says. “My work (in) building public places is the intersection of sculpture and landscape.

“They also had an intention to honor the veterans, which I think is always an interesting proposition,” he adds. “It’s not a war memorial, and they were not interested in figurative sculpture or a list of names. They said they wanted it as a place where people could go to contemplate those

who are lost, as well as the meaning of military service in a democracy. They were thinking nationally, not just locally.”

Garten says he was also challenged by the presence of the two city streets, and the fact that the end result needed to be an open-yet-sheltered place appropriate for public events and quiet contemplation.

The five plans and models were put out for public



display and comment over the 2001 Veterans Day weekend, Pokorny says.

“We invited public comments and several hundred people said they liked this element of one or something else about another,” he says. “Then, the selection committee convened and asked the artists to make presentations about their proposals and what they had in mind. At the end, Cliff Garten’s was both the one most clearly favored by the public and by the selection committee.”

Due to the nature of the project, Pokorny says city officials didn’t feel it could be done as a typical low-bid situation. Instead, they contracted with Garten, gave him a budget, approved the concept, and told him to bring in the people necessary to deliver a high-quality project.

To do that, Garten turned to Cupertino, Calif.-based Jensen Corporation Landscape Contractors. Jensen superintendent Bill Turano says the company typically does one or two high-end landscape jobs similar to the Walnut Creek project each year.

Garten says he wasn’t willing to work with just anyone on such a job, and while he hadn’t worked previously with the company, it did exhibit traits he looks for in choosing contractors for this level of work. He adds that the city was thrilled to be working with a company of Jensen’s caliber.

For stone, Garten worked with St. Augustin, Que.-based **Granicor Inc.** He says that because of budget considerations, he was able to get better value by buying from Canada, and the company was also able to provide

just the right colors of granite for the project.

Working with Granicor’s western U.S. sales manager, Mitchell Vitrano, Garten ultimately settled on a combination of three different granites that incorporate four different finishes.

“He gave me some color ideas for what he was thinking about, and we helped him decide which ones to use,” says Vitrano.

The project ended up utilizing a combination of Prairie Green, Abyss Green and Peribonka, and Garten says the shades of green work well with the rest of the project.

“I knew gray was too muted and white would not work,” Garten says. “Black is honorific and somber, but the green is like a mediator with the landscape. The stones tend to read gray-green, as granite tends to, and the variety of different surface treatments we used pulled several different colors from each different stone.”

Vitrano agrees that the stones get wide play within the project.

“All three were used in the paving, and that was all in a thermal finish,” says Vitrano. “The remembrance benches at the ends of the paths and the dedicatory bench were all done in Peribonka with honed seats and thermal sides. The pillars are Abyss Green in a thermal finish with the waterfall portions done in one of our newer finishes, Gemstone 8.”

Both the paving and the pillars offered their own types of challenges to fabricate, Vitrano explains.

“There were some standard field pavers – 2' X 6',” he says. “But, the paths of remembrance included some paving bands that are trapezoidal shapes that are almost 5' X 5', and there wasn't a lot of repeating going on in the job.”

To produce the large number of shop tickets necessary for production, Granicor turned to S.M. Haw Associates Inc., a Twinsburg, Ohio-based drafting and engineering services firm. Haw worked directly from Garten's CAD files to create drawings with tolerances of less than 1/32nd of an inch.

From Granicor's perspective, the other big problem came in creating the five elliptical columns used to represent the five branches of the armed services. Vitrano says he prefers to call them a challenge for the company's Alma, Que., plant.

“Each column was made in three pieces and it took six days per piece to make,” he says. “Because of their ellipti-



Creating the elliptical pillars was handled by Granicor at its Alma, Que., plant. Each was made in three pieces. Because of the shape, each was cut and ground individually. In assembling the pieces, the company also had to meet California's stringent seismic regulations. (Photo courtesy Jensen Corporation Landscape Contractors).

cal nature they couldn't be turned on a lathe. We had to cut and grind each individual piece, which was 3'4" tall. Everything had to be pinned together with stainless steel dowels 1 1/2" in diameter. And, all three pieces of each pillar had to be epoxied using a fast-set epoxy because of seismic concerns.”

In fact, because of those seismic concerns, Granicor officials decided it would be better to assemble the pieces in the company's plant and then ship the completed pillars to the site. An independent engineering firm had to be brought in to observe the epoxy work.

“By assembling the three pieces into a single column piece, we were able to guarantee that all facets of the elliptical columns would line up,” says Vitrano. “Besides the alignment of the holes for the dowels, there was a large hole running through the center of each column to supply the water feature at the front of each column. By assem-

bling the columns at the plant, we were able to control all the little intricacies involves with these unique granite elements.”

Granicor also inscribed the various pieces of stone as specified by Garten. The pillars have not only the names of each branch of service, but its emblem, which was litho-chromed in silver. Garten explains that he requested the special litho-chrome color because the more-traditional white was too bright.

And, Granicor sandblasted a selection of appropriate quotations into the stones.

While many of the quotations are from famous Americans, the wording on the dedicatory bench, which reads, “Dedicated to the veterans of the Armed Forces of America, their families, and all who gave of their lives that we may live free,” was selected following a public workshop that Garten conducted with the Walnut Creek-area veterans.



Designer Cliff Garten supervises the planning of trees at the site. Everyone agrees that as the site's trees mature, the plaza will only look better. (Photo courtesy City of Walnut Creek, Calif.)

Vitrano says Granicor began shipping the various stone components to the site in December 2003, and completed the shipments about eight weeks before the dedication ceremony.

“As with any complex project, these things take time and information,” he says. “However, I think we had enough time to fabricate everything and I believe they had more than enough time to install it, thanks to proper planning up front.”

Jensen’s Turano compares assembling the various parts of the project, including the stone, to working on a large jigsaw puzzle. Because much of the stonework was being done during the winter months, the contractor erected tents on the site to protect the work from the rain and cold.

“We didn’t have to put in too much overtime because everything went really well,” he says. “We had a good team between Cliff, the city, the pool subcontractor (Rock & Waterscape Systems, Inc., of Irvine, Calif.) and Granicor.”

Turano says he was particularly impressed with the



stone components. Even though they were cut and assembled thousands of miles away, there were few problems.

“There was no tolerance for being off, especially with the pillars, and Granicor did a fantastic job,” Turano says. “Everything came out perfectly with every piece we used.”

The only real problem with the stone features was with the weir caps used on the pools. The stone needed to sit in the stainless-steel fittings, and Turano says some shaping of the stone was done at the site.

Granicor’s Vitrano also brought a personal touch to the finishing of the project during a visit to the job before the dedication. He saw that the flow of the water from the pillars created an overspray in the wind, and did some hand-trimming to help the water flow a little more smoothly down the columns.

Even with that extra help, Jensen’s Turano says the



The corner of two busy city streets wouldn’t immediately come to mind as a site for a place of reflection, but the designer’s use of foliage and natural stone draws people into the plaza and provides quiet areas, as well as large meeting spaces. (Photo courtesy City of Walnut Creek, Calif.)

contractor was working right up until the last day before the plaza’s 2004 dedication.

Since then, those involved say the project has only gotten better as its trees and grass have started to mature.

“We’re very proud,” says Turano, adding that he liked to visit the plaza with his wife.

“I thought it was marvelous,” says Vitrano.

Walnut Creek officials agree that the Veterans Memorial Plaza has done a good job fulfilling its

multiple missions. The Bedford Gallery’s Lederer says it certainly works as both art and as a memorial.

“As public art, it’s a very accessible piece,” she says. “The way it’s created offers a very public aspect, but it also has sheltered areas among the trees where you can sit and have some solitude. It’s both public and private. As a memorial, it’s very profound. It was a profound experience for all of us involved creating a gift from the community to all we’re honoring.” ■