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Taking pains, creating a work of art

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 08/04/2009 –9:13 am.

Art tends to be a painstaking process. When it looks free and easy, you can be pretty sure it wasn't that way for the artist.

Or artists --- in the case of the Zaha Hadid-designed pavilion that opens Tuesday in the Chase Promenade at Millennium Park.

Sure, the London-based Hadid was the creative sensibility behind the elegant structure with its smoothly flowing, smoothly curving lines. But it took a couple dozen Chicago-area workers to make her vision a reality.



Hadid was one of two world-class architects commissioned to create innovatively designed temporary pavilions as part of the centennial celebration of the Plan of Chicago. The idea was to inspire today's citizens to look to the future with the same sort of boldness and creativity that was exhibited in the Plan and that transformed the region.

The other pavilion, conceived by Ben van Berkel of Amsterdam, opened June 19, but Hadid's design turned out to be so complex that it required an additional

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month and a half to be completed. Both are scheduled to be taken down after Oct. 31.

"The plan is simple. The scale is complex," Scott Kellerman told me about a week ago.

Kellerman was the site supervisor of the crew from the Elgin-based firm of Fabric Images that spent a month building the pavilion. Fabric Images was hired in early July to replace the initial contractor, TenFab Design of Evanston.

Buttressing the frame

TenFab had fabricated the 7,000 intricately curved and delicately positioned pieces of the structure's aluminum frame at its Lincolnwood warehouse and then dismantled it and moved it to the site just south of the van Berkel pavilion.

However, Kellerman said, an engineer later determined that another 600 to 700 additional aluminum pieces had to be added to buttress the frame so it could handle strong winds and other stresses. That was the first job for Fabric Images.

"Every single truss had to be redone," he said.



On the morning I was out at the site, the final trusses were being welded into place by some workers while others were working on the installation of some of the 24 exterior fabric panels.

It was a tedious, if fairly straight-forward, task.

Like tailors

Two workers, standing on tall ladders, stretched a section of fabric about three feet wide and 100 feet long along the framing of a panel and clamped it into place. Then, like tailors measuring a dress on the body of a model, they marked where it needed to be tucked in, sewn and otherwise modified.

The heavy fabric --- a sort of marine canvas often used for canopies, awnings and tents --- was then brought down and passed over to other crew members who went to work with scissors and sewing machines.



Kellerman said some of the panels were being tailored on site while others were being fashioned at the company's Elgin location. In all, a crew ranging from 13 to 18 worked at Millennium Park, supplemented by five or six other workers in Elgin.

In preparing the panels, the tailors put in a zipper along each side as well as, closer to the edge, a row of grommets. A grommet is a metal eyelet about the size of a quarter, often used in tent construction. The grommets were there so the panel could be tied to the frame. The zippers were there so the panel could be zipped to the panels on either side.

Each panel had to be precisely fitted to give the exterior its sleek look.

Like a drum

"It must be taut," Kellerman said. Then he plunked a panel with his finger, producing a deep tone as if it were a drum.

The eighteen interior panels were being made of a softer linen-like fabric called Celtic cloth. In addition, the workers were using a third stretchy, Spandex-like fabric called Alaska for the entryways.

In all, more than 100,000 square feet of fabric was being used to create the pavilion.

Because the job was already more than a month behind schedule, the Fabric Images crew worked overtime --- from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week -- - throughout July.

Yet, it's not their hard work that visitors will notice.

"All you see is the fabric," said Kellerman. And Hadid's vision.

Which is how it's supposed to be.

