

Retail Design

Going to great heights with expanded metal

By Mary Estes

When it comes to mountains and rock climbing, The North Face knows its peaks and valleys. So, it's no surprise that Gensler's San Francisco retail design team, when asked to create a store design for this outdoor apparel retailer, envisioned colossal rocks and steep slopes. After all, the store is named for the coldest side of a mountain.

Now the store façade, which features a simulated mountain range fabricated of expanded metal grating, has become a prototype applied to many of The North Face locations.

The prominent design element personifies the brand of this popular merchant by incorporating a dramatic series of geometric triangular shapes reminiscent of terrain expected in the land of glaciers and requisite outdoor wear.

Each store location that incorporates the metal element, including those in Corte Madera, Calif., Indianapolis, and Murray, Utah, has unique site conditions that required different dimensions and shapes

of the metal feature, but with the same expanded metal grating.

"The design concept began with fixtures we used in the interior, and evolved into the sculptural metal on the exterior," says Alison Carr of Gensler, lead designer for this prototype design that started with The North Face's Indianapolis store at Fashion Mall at Keystone, followed by The North Face at The Village at Corte Madera, north of San Francisco.

MOUNTAIN INSPIRED

Through the use of Tampa, Fla.-based McNICHOLS' heavy-duty, 1/4-inch strand expanded metal, both stores are immediately recognizable by Gensler's mountain-inspired sculpture-like feature.

"All designs are slightly different, but based on same idea of jagged rocks and mountain terrain," says Carr, pinpointing the Corte Madera store as an example. The large support column and angled front at this store—completed in October 2011—required a slightly different approach to the metal element from the Indianapolis store.

Fabricated and installed by Chris French Metal

Inc., the metal "sculpture" at Corte Madera constructed in Oakland, Calif. The 17- by 8-foot structure weighing 2,500 pounds, required a custom-built cart and remote-controlled lift to install. It was bolted at five points to metal studs within the exterior wall assembly.

While installation of the 250-square-foot structure was demanding, the fabrication presented another challenge. The McNICHOLS Expanded Steel Grating weighs 4.27 pound per square foot and has 58 percent open area.

"Because expanded metal does not lie flat, it sprang back in the water jet cutting process," says French. His team back-rolled it for the cutting, and took precautions with the sharp edges created during the fabrication.

The most challenging task was to translate a 2-D form into a 3-D form. Using a CAD drawing, the first step was to build the metal frame, a process that required interpreting compound dimensions. The frame was made of hot-rolled flat bar with compound angles that were continuously welded and sanded smooth for a seamless finish.

GEOMETRIC WONDER

The geometric shapes vary in size from small triangles that are 4 by 4 7/12 by 5 1/2 feet to largest triangles that are 5 1/2 by 11 1/4 by 13 3/4 feet.

Because the frame system was viewed as a flat piece and required continuous welding, determining the length of a specific line when placed in an elevation was complicated. "We had certain elevations to meet, and we had to connect all the dots," French says.

While the random geometric planes and the associated cutting and fitting of expanded metal created the need for ultra-custom fabrication, the design approach achieved the symbolism Carr and the Gensler team envisioned.

Selecting McNICHOLS expanded metal over a sheet metal also produced the appearance they were looking for, says Carr. With less weight and a translucent quality, the open metal casts patterns on the building. "The shadows create dynamic visual changes throughout the day."

The light bronze of the expanded metal, shop-painted to complement the metal of the interior fixtures, duplicates the metal material used on the store's community bulletin board that is painted the iconic red characteristic of The North Face logo.

Designing to shopping mall's criteria often places restrictions on creativity, but in the case of The North Face, the mountain symbolism was not lost in translation. 

Mary Estes is a Tampa, Fla.-based freelance writer and a marketing communications consultant for multiple industries, including manufacturing, building and design and technology. For more information on McNICHOLS Co., Tampa, visit www.mcnichols.com.



Laszlo Regos Photography