



INSPIRATION

APPLICATION

MATERIALS

CONNECTIONS

CONTACT US

ABOUT US



LIGHTING THE WAY

MARY BOONE WELLINGTON

Inspiration has often come down to the world from the high, still, desert places. Anyone driving out of Flagstaff, Arizona on Route 66 - inspirational in its own right - will have stumbled across Mary Boone Wellington's "Solar Calendar" made from *LightBlocks*. At dusk the gentle glow from the 12 columns entrance those passing by - but the true effect of this public sculpture that marks the passage of time has been felt over a field far wider.

She's always been successful, but *LightBlocks* elevated the sculptor and Philadelphia College of Art graduate into the public consciousness and, indeed, into the business world. The Discovery Channel wanted her work for its stores and the creation of MB Wellington Studio saw IBM, Hilton, Sony, AOL and BMW all follow suit.

A curious nature and a desire to innovate led Mary to experiment with the plastic materials that were eventually worked into *LightBlocks*. "I'm a sculptor. And I wanted a material with color, translucence and light. Glass is difficult. It's heavy, it cuts, and you have to have special equipment to deal with it. Plastics, on the other hand, are an easily accessible, user-friendly, hands-on kind of material."

Mary's latest venture crosses back into the world of fine art, using her skills to realize architect Alisa Andrasek's Bifid installation at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art. Requiring a lightweight but durable ceiling structure, Mary recommended Eastman's *TiGlaze* copolyester: "We needed something that was extremely flexible and durable so that it wouldn't tear or break as we put it together and hung it."

The important thing, stresses Mary, is the vision: "You can always wiggle around the other parameters once you've got the vision." After the vision comes choosing the right material – not trying to force fit the material you're familiar with."

The problem for many designers, untutored in the properties of plastics, is an inclination to view them as a generic lump. Today as a popular speaker at seminars and still fascinated by the possibilities of plastic, Mary readily dispenses her wisdom to designers and architects. "There are so many possibilities," she says. And Mary is helping architects and designers narrow the possibilities and pick the right plastic.

 www.lightbox.com



LIGHT BLOCKS®

DESIGN INSIGHTS

Q – When you start a project, how open are you to different material possibilities?

Mary – We like to encourage the architects we work with to tell us their vision. We start from the vision -- just as with any work of art. It's a different way to



Ultron Showroom
Merchandise Mart, Chicago, Illinois
MB Wellington Studio

work. They are used to hearing "you can't do that" in response to specific questions, and then must modify their plans to suit the limitations. We decided early on that our motto should be: 'Yes.' So we like to look at the heart's desire, the most expansive vision, and then we'll talk about the possibilities. It's helpful to do that in partnership. If you try to go it alone, you not only miss the opportunities of other people knowing something that you didn't know, it's easy to fall into despair and give up and compromise before you need to. I tell people, "We don't know how to correct the gravity thing. But we might be able to make it look like there isn't any gravity." We look at the design first and then we bat around what is the appropriate material.

Q – So design is driving the material?

Mary—Absolutely. And the design includes the budget. Copolyester is affordable. It has more consistent color than polycarbonate. Generally, we'd be comparing it as a substitute for polycarbonate. We do prefer acrylic. We like the surface best. We like how it behaves. We think it has got a lot of great all-around qualities. But it certainly isn't well suited for every project. And that's one of the wisdom points I want to get across to people: you've got to pick the right polymer.

Q – What led you to do the deep dive into plastics?

Mary – I'm a sculptor. And I wanted a material with color, translucence and light. Plastics are a very user-friendly, hands-on kind of material. Glass is difficult. It's heavy, it cuts, and you have to have special equipment to deal with it. So plastics are an easily accessible, easy to work with material. I've always used different kinds of plastics in my work. As I evolved my career into doing public art, I realized that I had a vision – a vision to change the world. I want to create objects so that when you look at them, you're changed – in a good way. Sadly, I found that the juries choosing the public art pieces have other criteria above that. One really big one is: What happens when it's vandalized? You can create the most moving, important work for our age and it will never get built if someone perceives it as possible to vandalize. OK, that's a practical thing I figured we can bypass that by creating a material that is easily restored so that damage becomes irrelevant. That's why I was driven to work in the field of plastics. I created a surface treatment that is restorable so that if it scratches, it's not doomed. You can fix it with a *Scotch-Brite* pad. I also created a method to keep fingerprints off of it. My surfaces allow you to take spray paint off with *Goof Off* and other chemicals. So there are all kinds of things I needed to create in order to get my vision out there.

Q – In effect, you took a threat, vandalism, and turned it into an opportunity.

Mary – And a valuable commercial thing. My tables at the Metropolitan Museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City) are in an extremely high traffic-area. And they are not scratched. *LightBlocks* has been specified in areas where glass and other plastics simply would not hold up.



Project: Wynn Hotel Poolside Tables, Las Vegas, Nevada
Designer: Wynn Design and Development

Q – How do you make plastic scratch resistant?

Mary – The way to describe my surfacing technique is that it's engraved. We make lots of cuts and undercuts. If you look at it under a microscope, it looks like skin. It's a very rich surface, which looks quite even. It looks very much like a cast-in or a sandblast surface. But the difference is that those surfaces are very even and regular and my surface is extremely irregular. All those irregularities mesh to create a nice smooth-looking surface. The result is that you can scratch it and it doesn't show—it absorbs the abuse with grace.

Q – Was that the intent?

Mary – Yes, it was. I wanted to do two things -- I wanted to take the shine off of the plastic because it was getting in the way of the piece. And the second thing I needed to do was make it really hold up. I said, "I think I'm on to something here. I can make something that the vandals can't hurt."

Q – *LightBlocks* resulted from your search for a lightweight, translucent substitute for glass. You started with acrylic and polycarbonate and, more recently, began using Eastman's TiGlaze copolyester. What's the basis for this?

Mary – As I say in my seminars, it's better to be lucky than smart. You don't have to cover all the bases if you're lucky. When I first began to use plastics for public works, there were two local suppliers I had worked with over the years. I called them up and said, "I want to do this thing and I need this many pieces of plastic." They probably asked, "Do you want acrylic?" And I must've said: "Well, yeah, sure." So they sent it over. Luckily, it was a good polymer to use for weathering. I had a mixture of cast and extruded material and I was a little mystified as to why some of it cut better than others. I didn't really know. Through trial and error, I found out what I needed to know about the distinctions between types of polymers and methods of manufacturing. Then my clients began to ask for materials with various fire ratings. So I started learning about that. I needed pieces that were more flexible so I discovered polycarbonate. I didn't realize then that copolyester was also flexible. When I discovered that wonderful combination of strength and flexibility, I began to use the copolyester more and more. The more I learned about the parameters of plastics, the more possibilities there were for my

clients.

Q – You developed *LightBlocks* in 1998 as part of a 75-by-45-foot solar calendar made up of 12 colored towers that glowed at dusk along Route 66 in Flagstaff, Arizona. Route 66 is a unique space with a storied past. To what degree did that space influence the development of *LightBlocks*?

Mary – I had already developed the material on a small scale. The site there (in Flagstaff) is very mystical. The mountain across from the site is called Mount Eldon. It's a sacred mountain. I created the shape of the piece to reflect the view of the mountain as seen from the sculpture site. The different columns are made in different heights to reflect the profile of the mountain. And I wanted to create a piece that talked about that timeless power – that connection to patterns beyond our scope, while positioning the viewer in a place of power and knowledge in relationship to the natural world.

Q – When did you realize that *LightBlocks* was more than just a public art project?

Mary – After I did the Solar Calendar, I was working with Ron Pompei, an architect who was doing a project for the Discovery Channel. He was their concept architect when they decided to go into retail, creating their flagship vision. The first store was in Washington D.C. He did an extremely rich museum-like environment. Every section of the store was detailed with some sort of creative expression relating the Discovery Channel outlook on science and nature and reflecting that outlook through art. He had a vision to do this massive wall – a three-story wall, and he wanted to make it out of glass. I said, "You can't make it out of glass. It's too much, too heavy, too costly. Let's look at doing it out of plastic." So I brought all the kinds of plastic things I'd been working with – most of them acrylic, some polycarbonate. I wasn't really up on the distinctions at that point. We looked at all these things and thought about how to use it. As it turned out, the wall was way out of the budget even in plastic and we had to scrap it. But along the way, he said, "I'd like to do something in this area...maybe we can use your material." I did two installations for the Discovery Channel. And that's how the commercial thing came about. Other architects saw this installation and began asking for *LightBlocks* to use in their projects.



Solar Calendar, Flagstaff, Arizona

[PAGE 1](#) | [PAGE 2](#)