

Basket of Light

STORY BY
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Delicate yet monumental, high-tech yet entwined with vegetation, Ed Carpenter's steel and glass Vessel offers a perfect melding of art, science and nature.

Ed Carpenter, a Portland-based artist specializing in architectural installations, has long worked with structures designed to reflect visual and temporal changes, especially as made manifest by light. *Vessel*, a steel and glass structure standing over four stories high at the heart of Seattle's Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, offers a perfect reflection, as it were, of art and science. The center, named after baseball great Fred Hutchinson, who died of cancer at the age of 45, is an independent nonprofit research institution devoted to the treatment and prevention of cancer and other life-threatening diseases.

Installed in July 2008, *Vessel* both projects and reflects light, and, like a cup, retains and releases its contents. At 60 feet high and a diameter of 39 feet, it resembles a large-scale basket, whose latticework of steel and strips of dichroic and beveled glass subtly references the collaborative nature of the center. Though the sole designer, Carpenter relied on over 30 suppliers and contractors and the expertise of fabrication and welding specialists to complete the project. He is also dependent upon viewers: as audiences shift position, the glass used in *Vessel* appears to change color, so that the experience is optical as well as kinetic.

In early 2006, the center's art committee invited 100 artists to apply for the commission, eventually whittling the list to six finalists. The committee hoped to elicit work that would, among other things, reflect the identity of the institution and its connection to the world, while also maintaining a universal appeal. "Ed rose to the occasion," notes Cath Brunner, director of Public Art 4Culture and a consultant during the selection process, "He really understood the context of the space."

Vessel is situated at the center's core: a space that functions as a shuttle drop-off, vehicle drive and pedestrian walkway. It is also visible to casual observers from a number of vantage points, including Lake



Union and Fairview Avenue, a major thoroughfare. It is at the heart of an institution itself at the heart of a major city, and *Vessel* is very much alive. Honeysuckle vines planted alongside trident maples in the circular concrete retaining wall at *Vessel*'s base will eventually climb a third of the way up, enclosing the structure within a fragrant, leafy environment. Carpenter had imagined recreating an enclave in a forest, reminiscent of those he experienced when living in Oregon's Coast Range Mountains on the Wilson River.

The site is both transitional and centralized. With the inclusion of *Vessel*, it also serves as a retreat. Two triangular portals aligned with adjoining buildings lead to the interior, where benches allow visitors and employees to tranquilly take in a 360-degree view of their surroundings.

With its myriad bands of colored glass married to steel, *Vessel* appears simultaneously delicate and strong. And while fluidity was a key component in the creation of *Vessel*, it nevertheless came as a surprise when mere months after it was installed, a severe windstorm started to topple it. Stainless steel parts used as structural joints had been erroneously rated for loads greater than they could bear, and *Vessel* began to fall to pieces. Carpenter replaced stainless steel bands with welded and screwed connections. The center, he claims, stood by him during the entire

reconstruction. And *Vessel*, he adds, is now stronger and better than before. "It's every artist's worst nightmare," says Brunner, "But the people who work at Hutchinson Center, the majority of whom are researchers, have an extremely strong mission of problem solving and making progress as a team. They deal with the unknown all the time."

Vessel's creation, destruction and subsequent resurrection is an apt metaphor for many types of recovery, including those related to the research undertaken by scientists at the center. Carpenter wanted his work to embody the optimism that he saw in the staff and in the aspirations of the center. His work conveys an unsurpassed dedication and passion for setting things right, be they corporeal or structural.

Scott Rusch, vice president of facilities and operations for the center, has observed *Vessel* on site for two consecutive seasons: summer and fall. "We're still learning how it works on our campus," he says. As the days grow shorter, those leaving at dusk will see *Vessel* illuminated—a beacon in the night. Honeysuckle, a deciduous shrub, is barren of leaves in winter, but as spring approaches it will burst into bloom, a reminder of the cyclical nature of life. ♣

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Opposite: *Vessel* at dusk. Above: Sketch for the commission and details of latticework of steel and strips of dichroic and beveled glass. *Vessel*'s circular opening provides

a framed view of the sky. Viewers will catch sight of iridescent reflections that stretch or shrink depending on the season, weather and time of day.