



Custom Design and Artistic Collaboration Creates a One-of-a-Kind Retaining Wall

by Julie Taylor

Enthusiasm, creativity and years of experience were key to the recent success of a highly unique, nature-inspired retaining wall finish in Rancho Bernardo, CA created by Boulderscape.

The Boulderscape team was hired by Flatiron West, Inc. (Formally known as FCI). Flatiron won the bid from SANDAG (San Diego Association of Governments) as the General Contractor to initially move a failing retaining wall that was causing a large parking lot to crack and separate. The wall had to be moved back 400 feet in order to complete phase one of an extensive project to enhance a total of three separate bus stations along the I-15 corridor in North San Diego County. A tie back system was used to secure the wall that included the use of rebar, layers of shotcrete, and more rebar before the structural layer was sprayed on by Boulderscape. A final layer of shotcrete was then applied for the design phase.

“Every time we require a special artistic wall finish with our shotcrete-faced wall projects, our first choice is always Boulderscape,” says Tom McMillan, a project manager at Flatiron. “It’s an awesome experience to work with Boulderscape. Mark Allen is such a pleasure to work with and if he says it, he does it, and that means a lot to us.”

At the same time, SANDAG wanted to ensure that the final result included public art, so any retaining walls and other structural elements would reflect an artistic theme that would be carried through all three

mass transit stations. Artist Paul Hobson was part of the design team made up of KTU+A, a planning and landscape architectural firm in San Diego, and Architect Manuel Oncina.

"We met several times to come up with a theme that would make sense for this project that would enhance the bus rider's experience," says Hobson. "Because the I-15 corridor is bordered by a lot of eucalyptus trees, we imagined the leaves following and blowing as buses whizzed by. For the retaining wall, I was visualizing a scene from Walt Disney's classic movie, "The Wind in the Willows". I thought the blowing leaves idea would reflect the natural surroundings of the stations and evoke a sense of motion," he says.

Hobson explained that the initial design for the retaining wall was for the leaves to have been in relief as well as recessed into the wall. Unfortunately, there is no technique that could realize the initial design, so they opted for recessed leaves only.

Boulderscape suggested using a soon-to-be patented system to create the individual leaf designs. Hobson loaded the dimensions of the wall into his computer and started creating 75 unique leaf designs. Each leaf "form" was numbered and stacked.

Boulderscape spent about 10 days on the project. "This creative process had never been done before and yet it all went very smoothly," says Hobson. "Boulderscape was great from the very first day. The entire team's expertise really made a difference. I was there every day working with Boulderscape and it was extremely exciting to see it all come together. There was a point where I was afraid this never-been-tried-before technique might not work, but after the first day, you could see the process and how everything was going as planned and I knew it was going to be a success," says Hobson.

Once the leaves were in place, the final step was the staining of the concrete. Hobson explains what happened next. "We thought we'd go with one technique for staining, but we were worried it would be too opaque. We wanted to create a mottling and translucent effect to enhance the blowing leaves feel to the wall so different translucent stains were used to help create the look we wanted. Shadows and light play on the wall throughout the day. In the mornings, the sun turns the eastern facing wall a gorgeous golden bronze color."

Hobson adds, "Boulderscape was able to transform what could have been a very standard engineered retaining wall into something beautiful that looks like it has always belonged there. The wall offers a bit of whimsy and adds interest and delight. By using Boulderscape, we saved money and still obtained the result we desired. Other options to create a unique pattern like this would have been exorbitantly expensive, such as pre-cast sections that hang on the wall or using special liners and single use forms to create limited patterns as the concrete was poured. There's no question we made the right choice by working with Boulderscape."

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Team Members:

Client: SANDAG, I-15 Corridor Bus Stops, North San Diego County, CA

General Contractor: Flatiron West, Inc. (Formally FCI) www.flatironcorp.com

Design Team: KTU+A www.ktua.com

Architect: Manuel Oncina – www.uncinaarc.com, San Diego, CA

Artist: Paul Hobson, paulhobson@cox.net, San Diego, CA

Architectural Concrete Finish: Boulderscape – tel: 949.661.5087 / www.boulderscape.com

Boulderscape - Blowing Leaves Project

Rancho Bernardo, CA

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