



SUM STORYTELLING SERIES: MILWAUKEE

Design Fugitives

The real estate company developing 833 East Michigan searched internationally for the right artist to design a piece for their lobby.

They weren't having much luck. Then they looked about a mile southwest.

Design Fugitives, a Milwaukee design firm, has executed some mind-bendingly beautiful installations for local clients. The crystalline structure of copper tubes they created for the entryway to 833 East Michigan was one of their most challenging, and most satisfying, projects to date.

"I think that was one of the moments where we saw that we can be pretty competitive and be unique locally," said Tuan Tran, co-founder of Design Fugitives.

In 2009 Tran and six other architecture grads got together and decided they didn't want to work in big architecture

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firms where they'd devote their days to others' ideas.

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Some of the co-founders have since parted, but the ambition remains the same. Design Fugitives have found a niche by embracing advanced design software programs not commonly used in the Milwaukee area, according to Tran.

Equipment also plays a big role since the firm does most of its manufacturing on-site. Tran built the company's first CNC machine about a decade ago; today they're preparing their shopfloor for two KUKA industrial robots adopted from a Michigan manufacturing plant.

While that tech-savviness is a defining factor that helps them stay competitive locally, it also complicates the search for qualified employees. According to the Urban Manufacturing Alliance's [*State of Urban Manufacturing: Milwaukee City Snapshot*](#) report, they're not alone.

Forty-two percent of the 79 manufacturers surveyed for that research said finding qualified employees was a barrier to growth. When zoomed in

on those manufacturers with one to nine employees—the category Design Fugitives would fall under—the number rises to 47 percent.

According to Tran, local colleges are just starting to offer classes that utilize some of the design software programs they've been using for nearly a decade. There's some hope that that could fix the talent crunch.

But despite the hunt for good personnel, Tran says the company has been "somewhat successful" overall. Right now they're looking for a bigger piece of real estate in Milwaukee, and recently amplified their international presence with an order from a company in Kuwait for a



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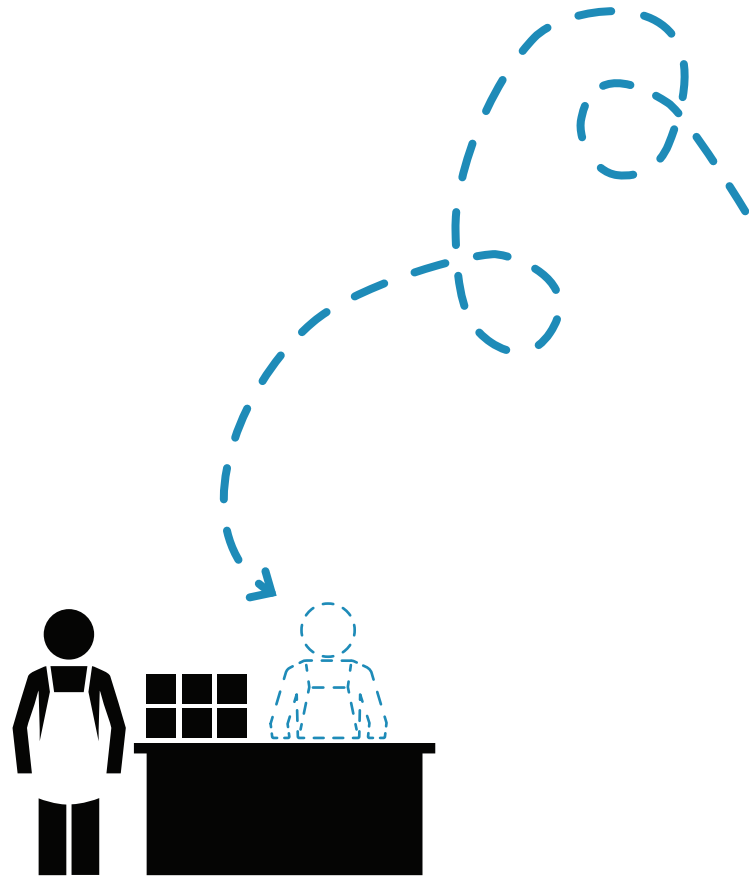


hanging structure of shimmering, dichroic leaves.

It stemmed from a design they fabricated earlier in the decade—a physical representation of the way they’ve thrived by deviating from what’s standard in their field.

“The piece we installed in Kuwait is like the fourth generation of something we did locally in 2012,” said Tran. “It’s an example of how we continually refine a system that we came up with.”

See Design Fugitive’s stunning models over at [their website](#).





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