



Slippery When Wet

BY DAVID MCDONALD



How to create a multi-stage, multi-level and lifelike piece of sign advertising.

About the author: David and Robin McDonald own and operate Avila Sign & Design, a custom sign shop in Grover Beach, Calif. They may be found on the Internet at www.avilasigndesign.com.

WE WERE APPROACHED to design a multi-dimensional sign and functioning waterfall by Joe, who owned and operated Wet Pets, a tropical fish, aquarium, lily pad, koi and pond supply house. These were originally two businesses at separate locations that would merge into the same location at the new building Joe was having constructed.

Joe wanted us to develop new logos and have them displayed on the sign. He thought it would be a neat idea to have the sign sitting on top of a waterfall. I agreed. The design process was started, we received final approval on the renderings that were submitted, and all concrete work was subcontracted out to a local concrete contractor.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

First off, a good pattern is a must when doing a dimensional sign with this

many layers. From this pattern I can cut all necessary shapes needed.

For this sign we used Sign Foam II® high-density urethane (HDU) because of the sign's exposure to the elements, including the water and chlorine that would be present at all times.

A sandblast resist was placed onto the main piece of 2"-thick HDU and the pattern applied. All shapes that would become appliques were placed onto the resist and traced with a ballpoint pen — this line would be cut rather than the lines left from the pattern, giving me a perfect fit.

Using the band saw the main copy was cut from 1/2"-thick Sintra®.

DEEPER & DEEPER

The sign was sandblasted in a multi-stage process. This is achieved by removing only part of the cut resist, throwing sand at it, removing the rest of the cut resist, and sandblasting the entire surface — not just the previously-removed area.

This multi-stage process of removing the material will give you different depths

The finished sign, plumbed and ready to go — with a multi-stage sandblast, three-dimensional appliques, and glistening paint and gilding techniques.



Starting with an accurate pattern saves time and eliminates a lot of guesswork.



Saving your scrap material for appliques puts money in your pocket.



All pieces are cut first before hand cutting the resist stencil. Then, using a ballpoint pen, I trace around the cut-out shapes, ignoring the original pounce lines when hand-cutting the resist. This makes for a perfect fit! (Note the already-traced aquarium.)



Using the band saw, the main copy is cut from 1/2" Sintra.



Note the shadows on the first stage of sandblasting. After removing the areas for the second level, the entire sign will be blasted another 1/4".

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A wire brush chucked in a cordless drill created the stone. This is also great for wood grain.



My worm-drive die grinder separates the organic elements in the background.



Carving the address adds another element of dimension and texture (see the July issue for more information about this technique).



Cyanoacrylate glue is fast and permanent, and works great when you need it done right now!

and can be done with as many as three or four levels. The more levels you do the more edge erosion you will incur which will result in some distortion.

I have found on a three-stage blast that a good rule of thumb is 3/8" deep on the first pass, 3/16" to 1/4" on the second pass, and just an etch on the surface on the third pass will give real nice results with clean edges.

It pays to do some thinking in advance when sandblasting in multiple stages. The idea is to achieve good contrast between levels so the process won't go unnoticed.

TROPICAL FORM

After sandblasting we need to shape and form the pieces involved. To achieve

a weathered look on the rocks that line the bottom of the sign, I used a die grinder, then went over the stones with a wire brush, which was chucked into a cordless drill.

The die grinder was then used to shape and separate the tropical plants and foliage so as to be recognizable. At this point I thought it would be a good idea to break up the weight of the address by carving the numbers to soften them some (see the article on shaping HDU, *Sign Business*, July 1998, page 46) and add more texture.

The fish were also shaped using the die grinder, along with some sanding, especially on the tropical specimen. Any appliques that can be adhered and not inhibit the painting process is done at

this stage. This way all priming can be done at the same time as one piece, filling the cracks and saving time.

Due to the cellular structure of Sign Foam II, I like to glue raw foam to raw foam, which gives me a worry-free bond. Epoxy and cyanoacrylate are the two types of glue I use most often. Epoxy is used for large areas and edge lamination, and cyanoacrylate is used for smaller appliques.

Cyanoacrylate glue is also useful when you are in a hurry; it is immediate and permanent when used with Sign Foam II. Just make sure you stick it in the right place the first time!

On this sign the only pieces necessary to be applied before priming were the stones.

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We give our HDU projects three good coats of oil-based primer.

100-PERCENT ACRYLIC

After priming, Robin applies the foundation coats of color. We like to apply color that's close to the target color and not worry about mixing it exactly right. The reason for this is that we know it will take three coats of color to cover normally.

By just putting something on there that's close in contrast and value can lead us visually in the direction that we want to go (or not to go).

We are using 100-percent acrylic latex paint for our finish — it is very durable and color fast and this keeps me from being called out to re-paint a sign when it starts to fade (I hate re-painting signs).

After the base coats were applied I came in with the finish work, adding highlights and shading to the tropical landscape. To further age the stones, I mixed two colors that looked oxidized.



Using a wall fitch with light pressure I stroked the outermost portions of the stones. I was really getting into this step and was excited about the appearance that was being created.

The borders of the aquariums were treated with aluminum leaf and painted with transparent ink, as were the keys on top of the aquariums.

FISH ON

The two fish were designed to be the center of attention — the hook, if you will (pun intended) — and I wanted them to be very stunning!

When doing some research on these little guys, looking at pictures and so forth, I realized that there was a certain shimmer and iridescence that was not going to be achievable with paint (at least not by me).

I thought that if I was to create that type of reflective quality that little fishes

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Our first coats of paint are only close to the target color. We have found that this saves us time in the long run. It allows us to stand back and get a visual of what the target color should be in the end.





Highlighting and separating the organic stuff.



With quick strokes, I paint oxidized colors on the outermost surfaces. Note how the stones and panel behind the address have changed compared to the base coat.



Surface gilding with aluminum leaf, which will be painted with transparent colors. I should have been a hand model!

adorn, maybe incorporating a foil or metal leaf would be the ticket — it was and it is!

What I chose to do was size the fish with a product called Wundasize, which dries very quickly (15 minutes), and leaves a very aggressive tack suitable for metal foils like aluminum leaf.

Aluminum leaf was applied and rubbed down with a foam brush, followed by velvet. They looked pretty intense at this point! Transparent screen printing ink was mixed and thinned down to airbrush consistency. The ink was airbrushed, laying down the dark color first, then going over this with the lighter hues. Then some opaque color was splashed on here and there, and before I knew it the fish were wet and slippery. Yep!

To create that type of reflective quality that little fishes adorn, maybe incorporating a foil or metal leaf would be the ticket.

APPLIQUE ME

The keys were glued to the aquariums with cyanoacrylate glue. A wet coat of epoxy was applied to the aquariums only. I have found that putting the epoxy on both sides of smaller appliques is a waste of glue and not necessary (this is not the case with edge gluing).

The aquariums were placed onto their designated area and no clamps are used — gravity is all that is needed here (sometimes a little weight is necessary to hold the piece in place).

The 1/2" Sintra letters were then secured with silicone. Silicone is a good choice when working with very smooth surfaces. Notice how the black panel to which the letters are applied has been pre-painted; this is necessary for a good bond (silicone is not a good choice on raw Sign Foam II).

Sign complete — turn on the water-fall!

Tools and supplies for doing transparent color glazes over aluminum leaf can be obtained through Esoteric Sign Supply, 1646 Wilmington Blvd., Wilmington CA 90744.

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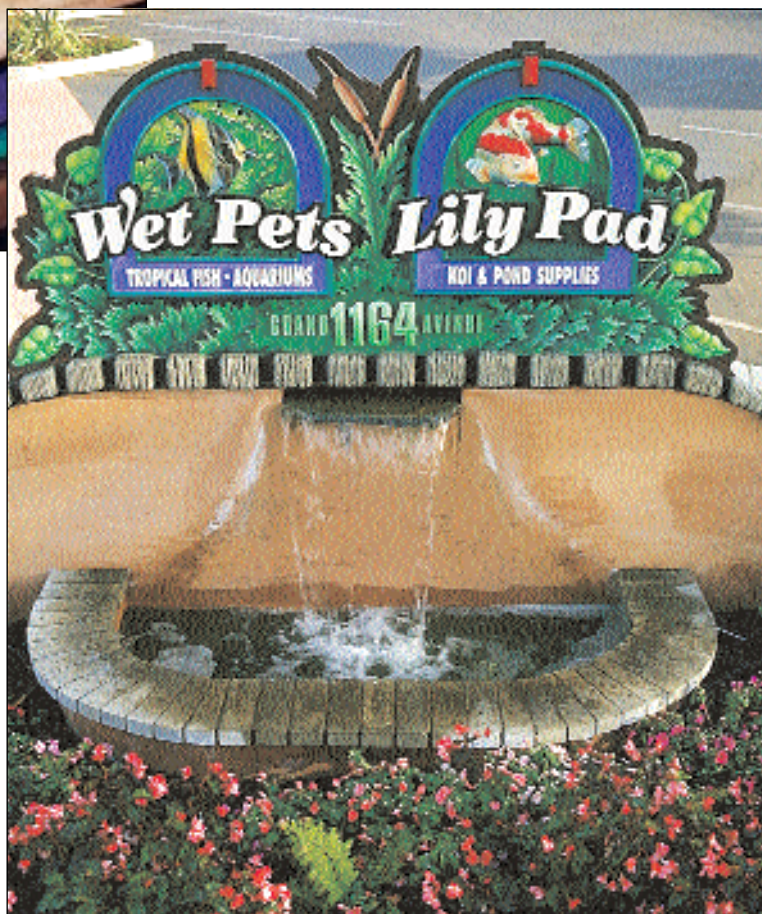
Here I apply opaque details with a brush.



Letters cut from 1/2" Sintra are bonded to pre-painted HDU. Don't attempt to use silicone on the raw material; it is not recommended.



A two-part epoxy is used to apply larger appliques without the use of clamps. The aquarium was a little stubborn and needed some weight, hence the sand bag.



The finished sign.

Fine Furnishings

BY DAVID MCDONALD



Setting a business apart from its neighbors and competitors with a storefront re-design.

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I WANT TO GET one thing straight right off the bat! I am a graphic designer and sign painter — at least those are the hats I prefer to wear.

But it seems lately that we have been doing a lot of design work that would fall into the category of architectural design. Or, maybe it could be called environmental outdoor advertising with an emphasis on exterior design.

No matter what you want to call it, the end result is being involved with more than just the design and creation of the signs and graphics that will be presented to the general public to view and admire. This type of design can be very rewarding

and not as difficult as one might think.

The challenge is to take the exterior of the building and treat it as if it were a blank format, and it's your job to fill it with elements that will better convey what is happening on the inside.

As designers, we have a whole world of materials available, such as: wood, glass, stone, concrete, paint, ironwork, tile, and lighting, just to name a few.

The project can be as simple as choosing an exterior color scheme for the storefront or as elaborate as a complete face-lift using contrasting materials in weight, mass, texture and color.

The idea is to suggest and to design. Some people are really looking for help with this type of design and are willing to pay for it!

I do the design work and do not get involved with the contracting end of the project. We often suggest certain con-

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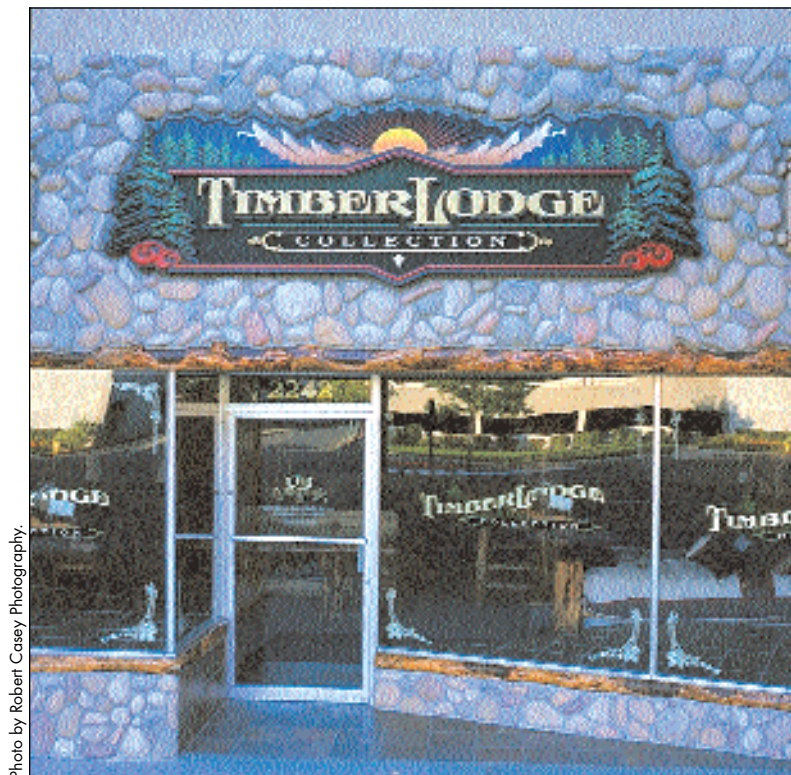
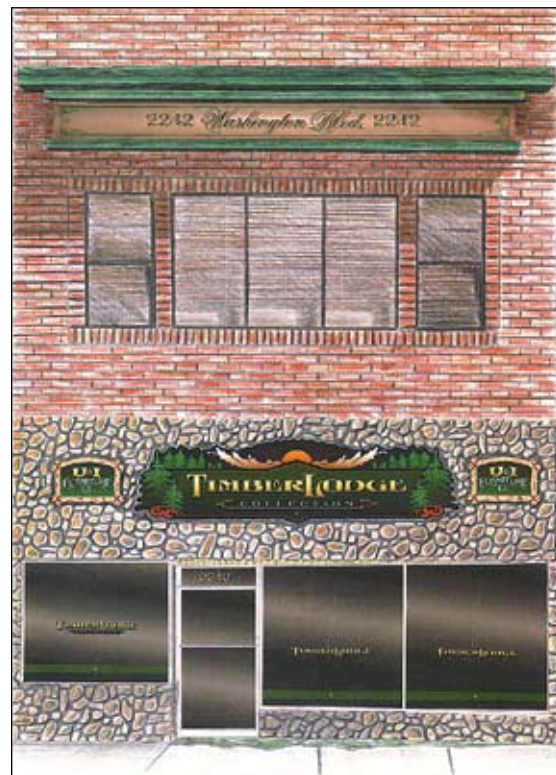
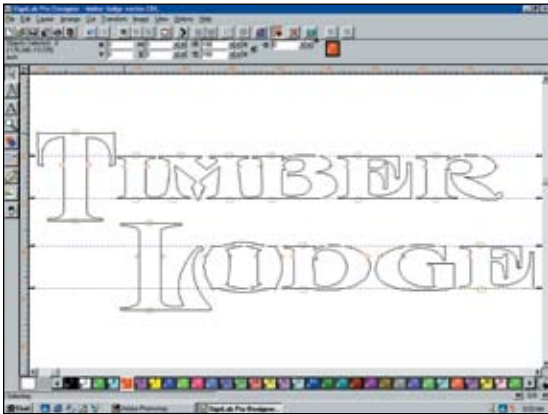


Photo by Robert Casey Photography.



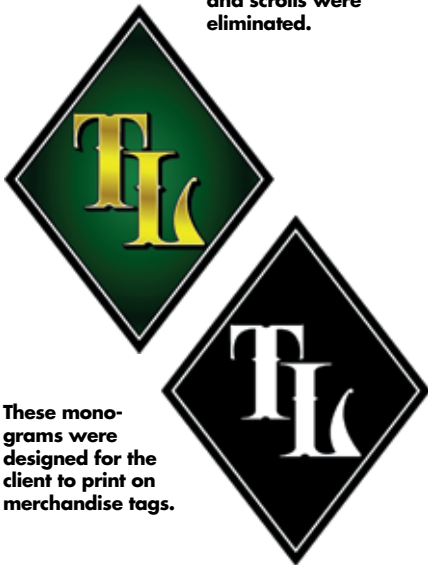
Working from measurements we took while on-site, this colored pencil rendering (right) was put together with our ideas for the storefront. Those ideas came to fruition after weeks of hard work, and a client who understands the importance of a sharp appearance.



I scanned a rough thumbnail sketch, then using the editing tools in Signlab 5.0 I created the lettering for Timber Lodge.



This idea didn't settle right, so the arrow and scrolls were eliminated.



These monograms were designed for the client to print on merchandise tags.



The computer was used to establish color, proportion and size to fabricate the main sign.



Photo by Robert Casey Photography.

tractors that we have worked with in the past, but the ultimate decisions are made by the storefront owner.

We recently traveled to Ogden, Utah, to do a new storefront for a client. Following is the design process we went through.

COLD CALL

We received a call from Brian, the owner of U & I furniture in Ogden, and he said that he was interested in having us design a new look for the front of his building. He went on to tell us about the wonderful line of furniture they were selling from that particular outlet.

The Timber Lodge Collection is where nature meets art, an artistic upper-scale style of furniture and furnishings that you would find in the trophy homes of some pretty heavy hitters. Robin asked Brian if he could send some pictures of

the building and a brochure so that we could get some idea of what we would be designing around. We also needed to estimate the job in order to receive a deposit.

After receiving the pictures we realized that we could have a lot of fun with this project and make a big difference in the look of the Timber Lodge's storefront. We put some figures together and within a short time received a deposit that put the job into our schedule.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

We felt it was necessary to fly to Ogden and look the site over in person. This way we could take measurements and share our ideas one-on-one. During this time we could get a better understanding of the client's needs and view the building as the general public would.

When we arrived in Ogden that first evening we drove to the building right away. We were surprised, to say the least, at what we were looking at!

The storefront was located on a busy six-lane boulevard and was showing its age. There was a sheet metal facade hung in panels, circa 1940, loosely hugging the exterior of the building, with lots of large pane glass windows peppered with bullet holes.

The second-story level was the original brickwork with more modern-style

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This is how the storefront looked before the remodel (left). The new look we created should speak more clearly to the fine furnishings sold inside.



Photo by Robert Casey Photography



Here, I'm using a die grinder to sculpt the trees that will later be attached to the main sign.



As you can see from this shot there were many layers on this sign. Using West System epoxy I attach the lettering.

windows; it was apparent that we would have our work cut out for us.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

To walk through the showroom of the Timber Lodge Collection is like candy for the eyes. Their creations are very appealing (especially if you like the great outdoors) and demand a certain respect. It was clear to me that a lot of attention to detail was given to the interior of the business and that we could make a difference on the outside.

Here are the suggestions we made: The metal facade would need to come down, and all of the windows on the

ground level would need to be replaced.

We also suggested that we employ stone on the lower portion of the exterior walls that would run along the interior walls just inside the windows, creating a sort of *cave* appearance.

Slate tile was chosen for the entryway floor just inside from the sidewalk. This tile would also be incorporated on the raised floors inside the windows.

The windows could be trimmed with some of the timbers they were using for their line of furniture. We suggested lettering the address on the building high on the second level.

Dimensional signs would be designed

for placement inside the stone work on the face of the building and we also suggested gold leaf work on the storefront windows.

The guys at Timber Lodge are serious businessmen and graciously accepted our suggestions, so we returned home to start the designing process.

DUCKS IN A ROW

I started with a rough sketch of the storefront, working from the pictures and measurements we had taken while on-site. This sketch would serve as a map to solve format issues that would need answering.

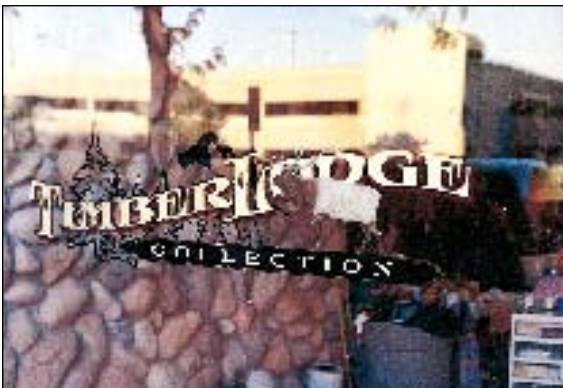
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The close-up reveals gold leaf surface-gilded over beach sand for a nice matte appearance.



With the 23-karat bright lines already laid down, the centers of the letters were filled with a 16-karat matte center.



The pictorial of the elk was painted in reverse, then the outline and shadow, followed by the black line work. The word "collection" is spun aluminum.



For a little more sparkle a sunburst design was cut out on acetate and used to burnish the gold. Abalone shell was also used in the centers of the "T" and "L".



Gluing the leather straps to the framework of the U&I signs. My son John thinks one should go in the middle. The finished signs work well with the faux stone work surrounding them.

Onsite photo by Robert Casey Photography.

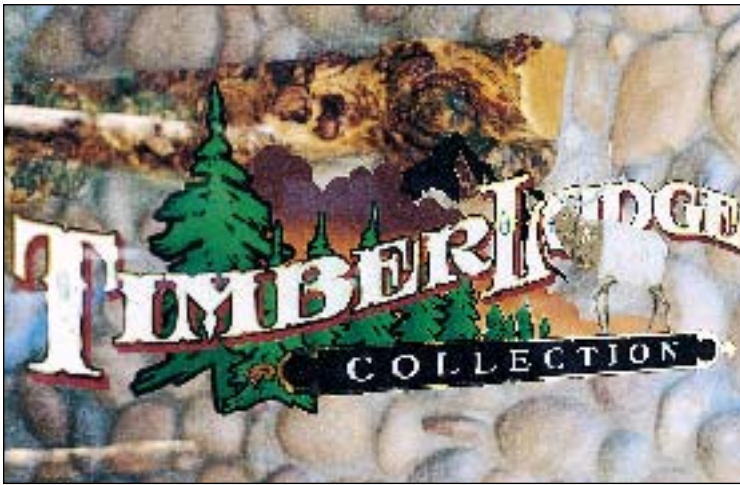


Timber Lodge Collection was the main copy, but the client requested that *U & I Furniture* be on the sign somewhere. I elected to do the main sign with a horizontal format, filling the area of the storefront. Separate smaller signs on each side identify U&I Furniture.

Of course the overall feel was to represent the outdoors; the look needed to be classy yet rustic. Use of material was a consideration due to the extreme weather conditions that the sign would be exposed to. The storefront was facing due west and would receive sun all afternoon.

I planned on using Sign Foam II® high-density urethane (HDU). I knew we could count on this product to behave nicely in these conditions. I would also

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Color is added with a brush and blended with a damp sponge.



The finished window signs should give Timber Lodge's clientele a taste of what's inside.



need to design the sign so that I could implement finishing techniques that would hold up.

DESIGN, RE-DESIGN

Referring to some early 1900s design books I created the lettering for Timber Lodge in my sign software. Once the lettering was established I worked up a thumbnail of the nature scene to rest on top of the sign.

My intention was to create some panels to hold it all together with maybe some filigree design work on the ends to cradle everything.

At this point I wasn't very pleased with the direction I was going in, and I thought that canning the design work on the ends of the sign and replacing this with some more *frat* could be better. This is where I stopped, and the trees seemed to pull it all together nicely.

The U&I signs on both ends would be

secondary, yet act as a double-hit, fulfilling the extreme length of the store's format and reinforcing ownership. The design for U&I went together well, because the client requested implementing some logs. This was a good place to put this idea to work.

After sending the designs to the client I received a thumbs-down on the design for the glass work. In talking with them it became very apparent that I had indeed missed the mark on this one!

Brian said that the window design was too straight and formal and that the style of furnishings they were offering was loose and relaxed, anything but tight and straight, so I agreed and started over.

The file was reopened, and using the *transform* option in SignLab I loosened up the lettering with a bezier curve. I added the mountain scene and imported an elk from Corel's clip-art library. These elements together gave a whole new look

for the sidewalk traffic but also went along nicely with the main sign.

Brian also told me that he was going to cover the brick work with a stucco finish, which made me realize just how conscientious he was about his remodel. This impressed me with a new respect for his seriousness and we concurred on the color selection.

Sign fabrication, pattern work for the gilding, cutting of vinyl and pre-planning for execution was done in the shop. A crate was made and the sign was shipped, scheduled to arrive the day after we drove in to town. Yep, that's right, we made the 15-hour drive to Ogden!

It made sense to plan the trip this way because of the gilding we were to do on-site and any other means of travel would not allow for the amount of baggage we would have. I did not want to be in the middle of the job and realize I had forgotten something.

We loaded our Aerostar van with just about everything in the shop and arrived as planned. The signs arrived without a hitch and were installed by their crew.

We had scheduled a week for the job and used every bit of that time to work on the window treatments; we were very pleased with our efforts, as were the guys at Timber Lodge.

Next time you arrive at a site to bid on a job and you can see that you can offer more than just a sign to complement what the client envisions, make your suggestions. You never know just what kind of help they might be looking for.

You might have to give some advice away at first but these dues paid will build a portfolio that will give nice returns in the end.

SB