

# Riding the Edge

of the Decision Making Process

# Custom Molder

By Andy Rusnak

The life that came to be  
came through the hands

## and Incoming ACMA President Bill Kreysler

*How does a custom molder make decisions anyway? The personality and decision-making process for these intrepid entrepreneurs has to run hard to the analytic and creative sides or they won't survive. With most of his customers offering purchase orders of no more than eight parts, with any one project in his shop holding the potential to sink the business if it goes south, having to restart his business with every new job, California custom molder and incoming ACMA President Bill Kreysler walks a very fine line in this industry, but he wouldn't have it any other way.*

*If there be nothing new, but that which is  
Hath been before, how are our brains beguil'd?  
— Shakespeare*

The weatherman had called for rain, but it was a postcard San Francisco morning, this larky city by the bay. The sun tiptoes into the sky and slowly spreads its magical realism—the scraggly homeless man who pushed a grocery cart last night on Ofarrell and said “bless you” to everyone who walked by, now, from a distance, holds up the Golden Gate in the edgy light.

As I drive across the Bay Bridge on my way to interview incoming ACMA President Bill

Kreysler, CCT, I glance back on the city and wonder how there can be any paradox here, even if it jumps back as bad metaphor or deadpan fabulation. But then everything seems a paradox here, a city decisive in its design and plan—nestled tight as it is in the California myth between hills, cliffs, oceans, and bays—leaves infinite room for decision nouveau. Like when Bill Kreysler used polymer concrete to restore to historic, hand-carved, sandstone





Several of Kreysler's one-off projects. "I start my business over again at the end of every job," he says.

condition the arches of the vintage James Flood Building on Market Street. He also used FRP to bring back to life some of the building's balusters, parapets, and cornices. If you ever walk by and can run your hands over this work, it feels as natural as the corky skin of a 2000-year old giant redwood.

Headed out I-80 toward Napa and William Kreysler & Associates, I'm sure the plant will receive top billing for most scenic shop in the composites industry, a fitting locale for a custom molder who specializes in sculpture, architectural elements, and overall FRP creative enterprise. A short walk from the shop, I'll see later, Bill's wife Jackie has a sculpture studio with a Normandy style rooftop garden and walls of full-sized wildlife and marsh scenes constructed of sand-filled gel coat backed by FRP.

This story is supposed to be a simple case study on plant relocation, do's and don'ts, the decisions involved, but I get inextricably wound in the metaphysical and psychological aspects of the whole decision making process for entrepreneurial custom molders, and how environment nurtures character. Is a business decision in Northern California (surfer mantra aside) made the same way, for instance, as a business decision in New York City or Atlanta? How much thought? How much gut? How Universal?

And I can't help but be intrigued with the sharp contrast between how the custom molder balances aesthetic notions, fleeting and ephemeral as they are, with the long-term analytical grind of business. Inherent to the oxymoronic idea of artist/businessperson or businessperson/artist has always been that these two parts of the brain don't get along well together. There's no symbiosis, they behave toward each other like un-evolved, omnivorous parasites. They feast off each other, and when one side gets too fat, devouring the other, it ends up starving itself to death. That's why artists have business managers or agents. It's a rare and healthy breed indeed that can balance the underground, dark river of imponderable fancy—what we call the creative impulse—with the mountain stream of consciousness and economic dissection.

"You start your business over again at the end of every job," Kreysler maintains. "I have no customers who give me purchase orders for more than eight products, very rarely. Custom fab has its advantages and disadvantages. There's no big capital investment, but it's hard, it's risky, every job is scary. I probably have at any moment at least one job with the potential of costing me the company if it goes wrong. But then that's part of the fun. It's what makes life worth living and makes work challenging and exciting. And fiberglass is one of the last great entrepreneurial endeavors because you can start a business on a shoestring."

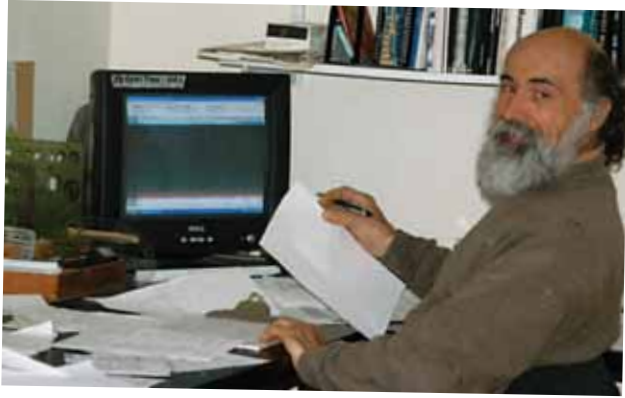
After three years of studying physics at San Diego State in the late '60s, Bill Kreysler satisfied a literature elective with a class on Shakespeare and saw his scientific grip on the world slowly slip away with each line of Hamlet. The decision to change his major to English could have been viewed as a reckless fall from promising financial security and a venture into the abyss of caprice and feeling that has come to stereotype those reactionary times. Artistic, whimsical, rebellious decisions (non-decisions?), the 60's, like voodoo—laid back, driving fast through the canyons, racing radical sloops around Point Loma—not hedonism, just fun, fun as spiritual delight. "We do many things that are unconventional," he'd tell me later about his business. "I mean if you're not out there trying, why climb a mountain you know?"

For Kreysler that decision to study language and the many places it can take you ("The limits of my language are the limits of my world," said Wittgenstein), that holding up the mirror, served right to the California past time of self-actualization. He knew he had the ability to comprehend the mind-bending theories of the physical world.

"But I wasn't really in love with physics," he comments. He's not really sure, when we sit down in his office to talk, where to start, as creativity requires the end and the beginning often switch places. "It was something my dad wanted me to do, and my uncle who had a non-ferrous foundry in San Diego, RMS Marine Foundry, wanted me to do because that's what



William Kreysler & Associates makes all the X'ian warrior steeds for P.F. Chang's restaurant chain.



*“Serge Labesque is my main man.” says Kreysler. “Truly our residential genius, mathematical whiz and best craftsman. He’s been with us from the early boat building days.”*

he’d studied. I loved building things, using my hands and I started working in the foundry when I was 13. We used aluminum and bronze, and made marine hardware. So I was going to get my degree in physics and I was going to come back and eventually run the foundry.”

Reading Shakespeare changed everything, Kreysler said. The guys in the physics classes just weren’t having as much fun as the guys in the English classes. And given that Einstein said imagination is far more valuable than knowledge, the calculable and incalculable sides of stories for Bill Kreysler were more in tune with the times and how to “become this life,” because stories are about people, physics is about matter and energy, and the truth about the Truth is the same whether it’s made up of electrons or emotions. It wasn’t that English was easier. Literature required the same strength of analytical and abstract interpretation. It was simply more fun.

And when Kreysler looked around, the disjointed ’60s a backdrop to unfulfilled and agitated lives, he saw that for many, work had become the antithesis of fun. So he planted a seed and began to realize that work and fun, fun and work, the hard work of making a living fun and the fun of hard work, needed to be gradually synthesized into destiny. He wanted to become an English teacher.

“That’s what I thought I should do,” Kreysler says. “I thought that would be fun because I’d have all summer to go sailing.”

But literature—about life but separate from it, the outside looking in, the inside looking out—is different for those who want to live it. Kreysler’s



*Cupid’s span, Rincon Park, San Francisco.*



*Artist and sculptor, Jacque Kreysler, Bill’s wife, has exhibited her work around the country and has her studio on the site of William Kreysler Associates*

whim and intuition took him down a different path. He became a boat builder. He also became the protagonist in a story he was writing, a story about his hands, his head and his hands, his head filled with physics and literary arts, and his hands that brought back the same whether wrapped around a novel or sliding down the genre of the bright gel coated finish of a boat hull; hands that see, hands that write stories exponentially, in 3-D, with modern materials as the medium.

It seems you just could not grow up near the beach in California in the middle of the last century and not want to have fun making things. The freedom to make is part of the California story. The garage surfboard and hot rod icons are indelibly linked in our collective psyche. And as life was forever younger in California, to make was a calling to manhood without giving up boyhood. To create and make alleviated the boredom of long summers shooting pigeons with BB guns and hanging at the beach waiting to get back to shop class.

**E**xit Highway 37, west to Sonoma Blvd., four miles on Green Island Road. What does the landscape bring to the decision making process for entrepreneurs who practice the volatile art of custom molding? There are long stretches of hilly backcountry roads through vineyards. They make some of the world’s finest wine here. There also are active fault lines aplenty. Natural disasters come in the form of earthquakes and wild fires.

I drive through a small industrial park. I look for 501 and can’t find it, drive back and forth several times between the addresses I can see before pulling into a lot that looks more than the others like a composites shop. It proves to be a good guess, or, maybe it was intuition. I can usually follow my nose, but the only smell is of the intermittent sun hitting the dry earth. There’s a spot right in front reserved for “employee of the year.” I park next to it and look around.

Myopically, it’s just another industrial park. Scattered warehouses and plants, 18-wheelers chewing through gears, Southern Pacific railroad tracks on a lazy meander out back. Surrounding, however, are the fertile hills of Napa County. Although placid and rolling, like a Steinbeck novel, they speak to some eccentric American God, common only to the eureka myth, something about risk and beauty and replication and non-linear time, but it’s hard to piece it all together. Perhaps it’s never supposed to be—forever to remain the kind of mystery one gravitates to.

It’s quiet, behind the glass door and inside the office area of William Kreysler & Associates. There’s room to think, spread wings. The receptionist pages Bill. There’s some confusion as to where he is, what he’s doing. I grab a chair and flip through the portfolio of work the company has put together. Bill walks in five minutes later, his hands covered in dust. He’s carrying a part that needs to go out for anodizing. He lays it on the recep-

tionist's desk. Kreysler is tall, with gray wispy hair, receding, and a thick mustache. He projects the sailor motif, legs graceful but a little like they anticipate a sudden list. His perception quotient can plumb unexplored depths and spark ideas, which sometimes might make him nervous, unsure, one who has probably been accused on occasion (even by himself) of thinking too much. All of it though is a necessary prerequisite for creativity and "climbing the mountain."

When Kreysler was seven, his father decided to convert the backyard of their Ocean Beach home on Adair St. in San Diego into a boat shop. From a kit he built a 19-ft wooden Lightning, a racing sailboat that held three people. After the family moved to Point Loma, he acquired plans for another 22-ft., gaff-rigged, day sailor from *Popular Mechanics* Magazine and once again the backyard became the place in Kreysler's memory where wonder and imagination first fused with hands—unsure, timid hands. There's an element of mystery in watching things being built that, for Bill Kreysler, started when he was a kid in his backyard and he's never sought refuge from it.

"When you're seven years old and your dad is going to build a boat, it's the most important thing that can happen in your life," Kreysler revels, the boyish features of his perpetually inquisitive blue eyes not at odds with the gray mustache. We are seated around a table in his office. An antique wooden box houses a mercury barometer on the otherwise sparse walls.

He shadowed his father, handed him tools, helped block up the hull, a self-declared apprentice. He followed his hands through Dana Junior High and Point Loma High, taking every shop class offered: metal, wood, electronics, print, auto.

"My dad's career followed communications and electronics at the Naval Electronics Laboratory," adds Kreysler. "He was always working on and fixing radios. Making things and making things work was a way of life. That's why when I was 13 I was dropped off at my Uncle's foundry down in Imperial Beach. My mom thought, 'I was working when I was 13,' so it was time for me to get a job. The first summer I learned how to operate a radial arm drill press and drilled I don't know how many thousands of holes in inch-and-a-half steel plate. The next summer I learned how to run the milling machine and I milled the leading and trailing edges on some sailboat centerboards. And then my uncle taught me how to operate the lathe and I made some instrument parts for oxygen equipment and horse bridles. And he taught me how to braze and weld. And then it was time for me to learn how to make molds for the foundry. The foundry was a lot more dangerous than the machine shop."

After graduating San Diego State in 1970, Bill Kreysler took his literature degree, summer experience, and the Promethean spirit of the times and traveled north to build sailboats, Lasers to be sure. Everything had become boats, boats, boats—avocation became vocation, work became fun, and physics became the literature of life.

Just in time for a plant tour of William Kreysler & Associates, Bill and I are joined by ACMA's Composites Growth Initiative Director, John Busel. We make our way through the lobby and into a small office area where

project history photos are mounted on the walls: James Flood Building; Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco; Stanford University Chapel; San Francisco Ferry Building.

Bill introduces us to Marie, a project manager "among many other things," who started as a one-day temp 15 years ago, and is now "the glue that holds much of this together." Then, with the hum of the shop in the background, his voice finds energy and his hands get busy as he points, outlines, constructs the stories behind the Star Wars and Monterey Aquarium projects, also featured in photos on the wall.



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After quantum mechanics, Shakespeare, and a flirtation with the notion of teaching English, Bill Kreysler came back to his hands. He's never left them since. Throughout his time at San Diego State, he imagined his long fingers wrapped around a stick of chalk while he lectured from the front of a classroom. He kept them busy too by typing papers and, in his spare time, trimming sails while he crewed on racing sloops with friend Don Trask, a master sailor and boat builder. Desperate to round out a racing crew, Trask met and hired Kreysler as a last minute fill-in in Cleveland right before winning the North American Championship. He had a shop up the bay from San Francisco in San Rafael, a town in Marin County some 530 miles north of San Diego. Performance Sailcraft manufactured Lasers and, under license from Tillitson-Pearson, J-24s. When Kreysler graduated, Trask offered him a job.

"I didn't have anything else to do and I thought building sailboats would be great fun because sailing is what I did for fun and what

could be better than to do what you do for fun for a living," Kreysler says with the twinkle of experience in his eyes as he looks back. "So I moved up to San Rafael, spent 10 years there building fiberglass sailboats. We also built some star class boats, about 13,000 Lasers and a couple hundred J-24s. We had about 80 people in the shop. But after the first couple of years, the novelty of working in the boat business had worn off and it got to the point where I was working 7 days a week because the weekend sailing turned into jobs."

Kreysler owned a small five percent of the company that was eventually sold to Performance Sailcraft Corp. the Montreal-based firm with the same name that owned the rights to Lasers and originally licensed Trask to build them. The Canadian firm wanted to go public and needed from Trask the license to sell in the Western U.S. It was decision time for the young Kreysler. What to do now that, after so many years, he lost his job? Could he find capricious refuge in the wind? Fun? Switch majors again midstream, even in his early 30s? "Be it lawful, I take up what's cast away," said the King of France in *King Lear*.

With a small boatload of confidence from creditors and his five percent share from the sale jingling around in his pocket, he reinvested his earnings by buying all of Performance Sailcraft's old power tools from the wood shop. There was something about not wanting to lose the tactile connection with that old familiarity of life in the backyard and summers in the foundry. And when dad finished the first boat, he built another. But by now, after fabricating more than 11,000 Lasers, 200 J-24s, and a few Star class boats, Kreysler decided to go his own way and start a business. And even though he still loved to sail, he was burnt on pushing boats down the assembly line. The fun factor for making a living in the marine industry was put out of commission.

"Our company motto became 'anything but boats,' and still is to this day," Kreysler says. "I had a little bit left over that I used to make the first and last month's rent on a space in San Rafael, one of the places that we'd [Performance Sailcraft] been in actually, and I rented 3,000 sq-ft of shop space. I had all these old tools and some chopper guns and decided I was going to try and make things out of fiberglass other than boats. I ran the company off credit cards for the first couple years."

Before Performance Sailcraft closed its doors, Kreysler talked Trask into taking on a reluctant side job—fabricating signs for the GAP stores, the old, original, lower case g-a-p. From this



Greg Wright (left) and Richard Hatch, part of Kreysler's crew.

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humble start, Kreysler learned that fiberglass had a market reach beyond the marine industry in custom fabrication. After he set up shop, he flipped through the yellow pages and started jotting down the addresses of San Francisco sign companies. Then he loaded a few of the GAP letters he'd fabricated into the back of his old, black, model 1772 GMC pickup, an old delivery truck with hundreds of thousands of registered Northern California miles, and started to make the rounds.

Headed across the Golden Gate into San Francisco with new-found fun and a fresh definition of himself, from small share part-owner of Performance Sailcraft to full-fledged composites entrepreneur, Kreysler had taken another step toward learning to fuel creative enterprise with gut feel. With trust in intuition, he would continue to add conviction to risk in the years ahead. For even though the gas gauge bounced on E that day and he wondered if he would make it home, risk now was a calculated venture, not a whimsical trade-off. Well-tempered from literature and experience, he studied the ruin, fear, fortuity, and equilibrium about him. "...[L]et your own discretion be your tutor," Hamlet cautions. "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that o'er step not the modesty of nature."

The fun part was that he drove to three sign companies that day and got three orders. One company, Pischoff inquired about a five-and-a-half-foot diameter sphere. Kreysler borrowed a mold from a sculptor friend and delivered the sphere. Another outfit, Thomas Swan Signs, thought they had completed a big job with San Francisco's Moscone Convention Center until they came up a few signs short. Payment withheld, they contacted the contractor they'd used for the job who promptly informed them there was a 16 week backlog. In walks Bill Kreysler, perfect timing. Maybe intuition links to synchronicity somehow, but he filled the order. He made two signs in five days and Swan got its \$100,000 retention.

"I just kept going back to the same guys, rather than go out and contact every sign company, because they seemed to be able to keep me busy enough," Kreysler says. "And probably for the first five years of the company, I'd say 75 percent of what we did was fiberglass signage. Architectural signage, monument signs, directional signage for business parks, there was a big boom in business parks at the time. So, we did a lot of custom signs for sort of high-end sign companies who did real expensive sign projects."

For almost 10 tough years, Pischoff and Swan were Kreysler's two biggest customers. There may have been more trust than money invested in the relationship. In a scene that could have been lifted out of *East of Eden*, Alan Thomas of Thomas Swan Signs once advanced

Kreysler \$2,500 for an as yet uncompleted job so Kreysler could maintain his perfect record of never missing a payroll. The action to the word, the word to the action, Kreysler's discretion could now swirl in the sweet notion of success. A "trust in your gut" formula now seemed firmly in place, an awareness of one way decisions can be made, like an artist, where everything you have seen, smelled, touched, heard, and forgotten somehow gathers right below your solar plexus and pulls a chord connected to your cerebral cortex.

With the sign business on the grow, Kreysler's

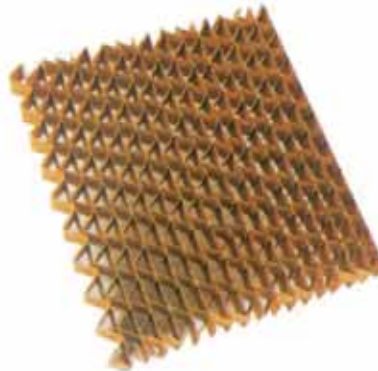
way too big of a shop at 3,000 square-feet now felt pinched.

With Kreysler in the lead, more and more injected with enthusiasm the closer we get to the buzz of power tools and the scurry of bodies about the production floor, Busel and I step through a glass door into a small windowed office adjacent to the shop and find Makai Smith, CNC department manager, busy on his computer manipulating a colorful array of digital media. Sub contracted by MSK Precast for an Army Corps of Engineers dam job over



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the Ohio River, Kreysler is tasked with constructing a 1/125-scale model of the dam via rapid prototyping. Smith is in the early stages of putting the project together, which will help engineers and general contractor Morrison Knudsen gain a visual sense of proportion and see way past what the mountain of engineering drawings can reveal to what the dam will actually look like. Some of the precast concrete pieces will weigh close to 4,000 tons each and be floated into place on barges.

As Kreysler launches into an animated explanation, I glance out into the shop and see what looks like a very large bear reared up on its hind legs. The 42-ft. tall FRP bear will eventually prowl his way to the front of the Colorado Convention Center in Denver. For now he's missing a few sections, but it reminds me of a float that belongs in a Thanksgiving Day parade. The Colorado bear was a total "digital job," no paper drawings, all finite element analysis conducted on the computer, from concept to fabrication. Kreysler also manufactured the "bronze" lion in front of the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas and all the X'ian warrior steeds that majestically grace the entrances of P.F. Chang's Chinese bistros.



*Ramon Verdugo cuts plies of fiberglass mat.*

Smith completes an explanation of the dam project and rapid prototyping. Kreysler opens the door to the shop and ushers us through. He starts, or, he never really stops—explaining, thinking, gaining intensity, confidence. We head toward one of three CNC milling machines, all with homegrown modifications, and his transformation (I should say transcendence) is complete. Hands, like canny birds of prey, float then glide through the sunlit air on their way to explore some explanation or other. Or they might just as easily hover over a novel concept. I think about what to many may seem a paradox—this tall combination of book- and shop-smarts, juiced in an element where perceptions are sharp and decisions are contemplative. It's an adrenaline akin to driving his '99 Carrera over the Golden Gate. Philosophical reflection and several hours at the art museum round out the repertoire.

Kreysler's having fun, and the couple dozen employees scattered about with laid-back but focused California expressions look like they're having fun too. It's easy to see how this space pushes as much studio as shop. The formula is deceptively simple; it flows so well, right out the door and into the rolling Napa landscape. But it took a lot of introspection and fortitude to get it right.

On large screen high definition television, the dramatic tension and all its electronic feeds comes close to taking over the senses. Alliance Rebel commandos made a pact with the Moon of Endor's indigenous Ewoks and ambush the Empire's Imperial Storm Troopers. Chewbacca and a restless patrol of Ewoks capture one of the Empire's heavily armored AT-ST walking tanks—a spindly-legged mechanical version of Tyrannosaurus

Rex (without the tale)—and proceed to kill the other tanks. Ewoks lay traps for some of the remaining AT-STs. It's *Return of the Jedi*, and composites are now part of cinematic history.

"So, I had a friend who was building sail boats in an old dairy farm in Petaluma and he was going out of business, as sort of standard procedure for ahhh ...," Kreysler continues, but checks the sarcasm with his anything but boats mantra. "I approached the dairy farmer who owned this farm about leasing his building which he refused to do, but he did say he would rent it to me for a month and if I behaved myself, and he didn't get mad at me for some reason, he would think about letting me stay there."

Twenty miles north of San Rafael, a short haul up a dirt road, out in a field, no hot water, worse, no indoor plumbing, the bathroom was in the milking barn, and this is fun? It was 1985. "If you really wanted to pay the price and you wanted some funny, weird company to do it for you, it was great," Kreysler said, likening his days in the barn to a boutique as opposed to a chain department store.

Kreysler worked alone in the beginning. Several of his old crew from Performance Sailcraft wanted to come work for him, or "with" him as he is quick to correct himself, but he could not yet afford to hire them. He relayed to all his ex employees that if he got busy enough, he'd give them a call.

Then came Star Wars' *Return of the Jedi* and he got busy enough. Hollywood knocked and Kreysler brought a lot of guys back.

"We made the two legged walking tanks used by the bad guys in the battle of Endor," he said. "Chewbacca took one over in the movie. We also made the bunker in the same scene. We designed, engineered and fabricated the sails for Jabba the Hut's barge and cast the urethane foam pieces that made up the reactor room of the death star where Luke and Hans dropped their bombs at the end to blow up the death star."

More self-actualization, the door wide open, Kreysler started to make a pretty good go of it. But he did not hide behind protective walls of pride just because he scored some very visible, if monetarily modest, success. Star Wars taught Kreysler a Yoda lesson on how he wanted to see himself in the cosmos as businessman and human being, taught him to "o'er step not the modesty of nature" and to resurrect the fun quotient at all costs.

"When it [Star Wars] was over I didn't want to lay anybody off because we'd done that in the boat business," he recalls. "I hated it, hire guys in the summer, lay 'em off in the winter. It's a nightmare. I told myself if I ever had my own business I wasn't going to do that. I kept waiting to get a new job in. Finally I ran out of money and had no choice. I had to lay everybody but about three of us off. I learned my lesson. I decided to grow in a way where I could sustain so I don't have to fire people every time I slow down. That philosophy has worked. I'm kind of conservative by nature, not politically, but financially, and I wanted to enjoy coming to work in the morning. I could do that by making sure the people I worked with were happy. I'd been a policeman too many years in the boat building business. And you know, it just isn't fun. Life's too short. Over the last 22 years, we've slowed down enough so that I've had to ask people to work fewer hours, but usually we get a new job in. I've tried to be cautious. I only have 30 people working for me and that's about right."

One day, while working on this article, I received a call from Kreysler who wanted to know, when it was published, if I could include photos of the guys in the shop. "They would get a kick out of it," he said. This kind of humility in composites entrepreneurs I've often seen before. Unlike in laissez-faire corporate structure and politics where worker bees are commodities or "the cost of doing business," to nurture interdependent relationships with hardworking, skilled craftspeople who aren't far removed from where the boss loves to be anyway—head and hands in the hunt to make it better—goes beyond good economics. More so, seemingly, for custom molders who must first accept precariousness and inconsistency as a way of life and then manage it like an art form.



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What might a custom molder's stream of consciousness sound like?

*... Well, that job ... finally ... done, out the door. We underbid looks like two percent, still made a decent profit ... Now what? That architect so confident in us, such a big job, covered ourselves well, spent more than a year developing, passed up those other offers to bid, thought we had this one in the bag, 30 percent rule though, no more than 30 percent of revenue dependent on one customer, got to juggle it all. Should've heard from him by now, crew is antsy. Let's see, what else is out there ...*

The custom molder walks over to his office to take a phone call from the architect who informs him that his proposal was accepted, only there's a "slight" problem. The project has been delayed a year. "Will that hurt you?" he asks. "Will you have to lay off some of your crew in the meantime? Will the skilled fabricators come back? Can you find something to keep you busy for 11 months, 6 days and ... let's see ... 5 hours until we can start?"

Somewhat taken aback, the couple stopped the car on the dirt road that led to the old

white dairy barn. How sturdy was the question, how professional. Several of the barn's splintered planks had been jury-rigged back in place after termites had eaten through them.

The drive out from San Francisco in the rented Volvo had been pleasant enough, a more measured, organic pace than the quick tempered New York City they'd left a handful of hours ago. But the view out the window, of meager means set against the idyllic languor of Northern California, forced them to great pause. Aside from the rustic blend—what a 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape painter might find intriguing—there may be cultural obstacles to accessing the California myth as well, since a 90-ft Brachiosaurus appeared to be stretched out on its side near the barn.

"Is this what we came all this way for?" they both must've said to each other.

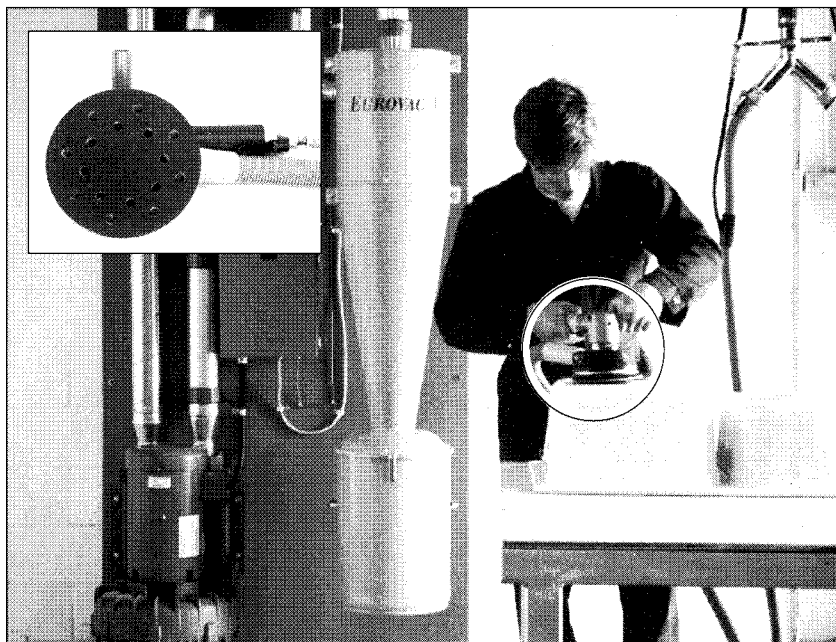
Claes Oldenberg and Coosje van Bruggen, world-renown landscape sculptors, wondered what to do and whether they should simply turn around and head back to San Francisco. Perhaps the terms sketchy and fly-by-night entered their conversation. Several weeks ago they had spoken by phone to a young man named Bill Kreysler whose place of business they now stared at and who, after sensing an opening, suggested they think about constructing a 40-ft high inverted necktie out of fiberglass instead of aluminum.

The sculptors, who by then had their pieces placed all over the United States and parts of Europe, from the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines to the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam, had never used composites before, and were curious to see for themselves the potential of this versatile material and how it could apply to their work. Commissioned by officials in Germany, the inverted collar and tie sculpture was destined for Mainzer Landstrasse, Frankfurt am Main.

"Once they came into the shop, their whole perception changed," says Kreysler. "It was the beginning of a relationship where we built some 15 sculptures over the years. Serge Labesque, who has been with me from the beginning, developed a strong relationship with them. He's a craftsman of the highest order and they really appreciated that."

Sometime in mid-July, 2003, I received a postcard from "Kreysler & Associates, Architectural Composites" with a photo of an Oldenburg and van Bruggen creation on the front called "Cupid's Span." The postcards are a clever marketing strategy, non-obtrusive, lasting images, perfect bookmarks or bulletin board décor. If you ever go for a stroll around palm tree-lined Rincon Park in San Francisco, about a half-mile up the Embarcadero from Pacific Bell Park, home of Giants baseball, check out the 60-ft high, steel and FRP bow and arrow embedded in the ground. Under the San Francisco/

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Oakland Bay Bridge, itself a 4.5-mile long marvel of ancient suspension technology opened in 1936, in an almost surreal juxtaposition that brings anomaly to life, the Oldenburg/van Bruggen arrow fabricated by Bill Kreysler is pointed into the earth at the old ships and sailor dreams said to be buried there.

Memory is critical to the custom fabricator. There are stretches of time in the lives of some businesspeople when, recalled later, receive high marks for stability, growth, and discovery. Challenges were met with zeal, mysteries removed from disparate variables, dynamic systems created, orders filled, business flourished.

Time added, halcyon days, although not without struggle, become sugarcoated, remembered with the genuine fondness of, say, falling in love on a summer vacation at the beach. Words like “click,” “hum,” and “golden” are overused. And less one thinks this type memory suffers from delusion or the false sentimentality of nostalgia, it doesn't. In order for the entrepreneur to cage the diabolic little demon that often-times throws chaos at memory when new discoveries blind rational thought, the future success of the business rides on accurately and patiently trusting the comprehensive history of one's experience.

And then, there's this: When things become too static, an underlying need for change, real or imagined, slowly emerges from whatever depths and we Americans are off once again chasing or being chased. It's the entrepreneur's cycle, the antsy, restless inventor and idea broker who has to create an edge, step back from it, then find another. It's the drive to define oneself as one who redefines oneself—the great American progress ethic and personal tragedy all wrapped tightly under one skin.

Sometimes the cycle leads to self-destruction. How many of these stories are there in the American lexicon? *Ingenious self-starter invents culture-altering product, organizes company, can't sustain it? Different skill set required.*

Successful custom molders, however, who navigate this emotional high wire, have been able to balance their restive souls with the right formula—restart the business and find a new edge with every new project.

Bill Kreysler's time in the dairy barn in Petaluma is recalled with the sweet fondness of growth and experience. It's where he paid most of his dues. He spent 15 years there, built his clientele, reputation, and integrity as a business owner. As orders for fiberglass signage helped launch and secure the start of Kreysler's “out in the barn,” deliver by pick-up truck enterprise, he got to know the construction business, studied shop drawings and contract negotiations. At the same time, contractors were receiving plans for

projects with FRP requirements, small, non-structural decorative items like planters.

“So, I began to develop relationships with contractors and started adding to my signage business,” Kreysler says. “And then along came decorative replicas of historic buildings. There was a government-sponsored effort to preserve historic buildings. If someone's building could be declared a historic building, they would receive a tax credit. So they stood in line for their tax deal and what they didn't think about was that what they were signing up for was a promise to maintain the building in its historic complexity.”

Many of these buildings supported original decorative terracotta elements that had become unstable, a safety concern to pedestrians and traffic below. To replace the elements with original materials proved cost prohibitive. Alternative materials that could preserve aesthetic appeal and provide an original replica finish were sought, and found, in composites. With a strong and growing penchant for architecture and architectural history—words to forms, the unhindered artistic sensibility that underlies much of what is designed and built in (“*Custom Molder...*” continues on p. 50)



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*“Custom Molder...” from p. 27*

California, a new era of preserving brick and mortar with synthetic materials—Kreysler took on many historical preservation projects.

That is it exactly when one shortsighted generation decides it's time for a grand old building to die, to be reborn with a modern look only to discover that, through some act of fortuity, the building didn't die after all and in the eyes of history a subsequent generation's gratitude seems to far outweigh the disappointment suffered 50 years ago from a lack of “progress?”

In a 1905 photo, a year after it was built, the Flood Building on Market Street in downtown San Francisco almost looks like the bow of a giant ship, one everyone is getting ready to board for a long voyage. It is one of America's stately buildings, a venerable structure that—if new has gotten so old that old is now new—captures what was important at the beginning and end of the century.

The Flood Building, however, built by James Leary Flood, son of James Clair Flood a former New York saloonkeeper turned “Bonanza King,” suffered a mid-century crisis. In 1950 the prime real estate it occupied was more valuable to Woolworth than the building, so an offer was made that third generation James Flood, now the proprietor, could not refuse. The building would be demolished and replaced with a three-story, modern facility that Woolworth would lease for 50 years and then return to the Floods.

The Flood Building, packed with steel, stood tall through the famous 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Now, just 45 years old, a wrecking ball bull's eye was drawn on its façade. Fortunately, for history, San Franciscans, current owner James (Jim) Clair Flood II, and, eventually, Bill Kreysler, the Korean War provoked the U.S. government to invoke its privilege of eminent domain and Uncle Sam moved into the Market Street address to manage the war.

The Woolworth deal was obviously off, but the government agreed to give back the bottom part of the building and Woolworth signed a 40-year lease with the Flood family. Enter granulux, what Jim Flood described in a 2003 *San Francisco Chronicle* article as “a horrible material that architects in the early '50s thought was the chic new stuff.” Four of the buildings original arches were sacrificed to granulux during the Woolworth renovation.

A 50-year young Jim Flood took over in April of 1990 and immediately started thinking restoration. A piece of original Colusa sandstone fell from an upper floor his first day on the job and Woolworth's lease would expire in two years. Old had started to become new. Blood that coursed through Flood's veins was his grandfather's. Dust that dried his grandfather's lungs in the early 1900s came from Colusa sandstone taken in large blocks from the mines northeast of San Francisco for the new building going up on Market Street.

Would it have something to do with the horses that dragged these colossal blocks to the Sacramento River? The barges that carried them to the Ferry Building in San Francisco where they were once again dragged up Market Street to the Flood Building construction site? Would this journey have anything to do with Jim Flood's profound sense of historical authenticity and respect for a bygone concrete and mortar culture? The old photographs and documents he likes to allude to, what propelled him to make a trip out to those same mines to try and replace the four arches of Colusa sandstone lost to the early 50's granulux renovation, a restoration project that would most certainly not see any direct financial returns? Arches that were 50-foot high, 30-foot wide?

“I was a little naive at the time, but I wanted to put the ground floor back to

what it was,” Flood told me one day over the phone. “That quarry hadn't been mined for a lot of years, and the budget ... well, that avenue dried up on me.”

Flood appealed to the general contractor on the job who happened to know Kreysler who happened to win the forthcoming bid to build the four arches out of polymer concrete.

“It was a very unique job, one of a kind,” Flood recalls. “It had never been done before. The molds were big and detailed. Bill was a small operation. We were afraid he might fall behind. I went there once a week to see his progress.”

Perhaps it is ironic that Flood's determination to respect the original design and materials of the building—the largest steel frame building west of the Mississippi in 1902-04 when it was being raised—and the culture it represented put him in touch with a man who also appreciated that bygone era but used modern materials and technology to help bring it back.

“Bill and Serge were very attentive and creative,” Flood adds, his voice rising on

each detail like symphonic notes in a crescendo. “They had a few false starts but the end product looks just like the Colusa sandstone. No one can tell the difference. We have a store in there now, Urban Outfitters, and they like an exposed interior. The bases of the arches are right at the store. I love to show how these were made. The outside looks like stone, the inside steel and FRP.”

Kreysler went on to fabricate balconies and balustrades for the landmark Flood Building. One of the icons of San Francisco political circles, Flood later recommended Kreysler build hearts for the Hearts in San Francisco project to raise money to support the San Francisco General Hospital Foundation. My post card

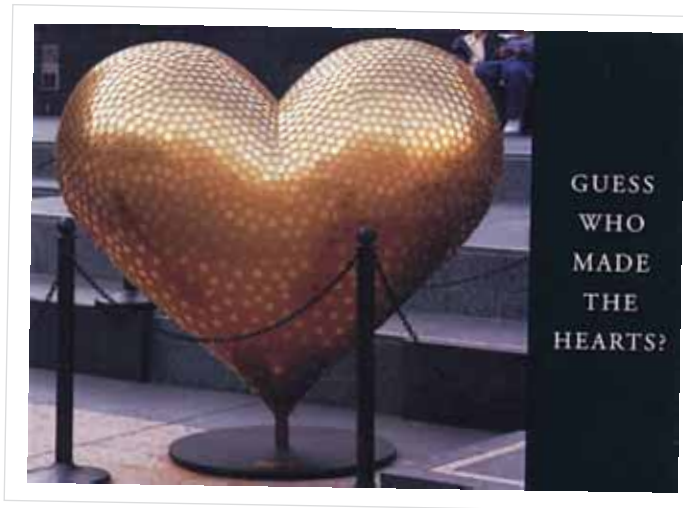
arrived—“Guess Who Made the Hearts?”—in July of 2004.

“The concrete part of the business was interesting, but it didn't catch on,” said a somewhat disappointed Kreysler. “We do it a little bit now and then, glass reinforced concrete. In fact we're doing a job right now for the Monterey Aquarium using GFRC. The vast majority, however, 90 percent of what we do is open molded, hand lay up FRP although we're trying to switch over to vacuum infusion. Actually we have some ideas ... looks like we're going to be able to do that pretty successfully and that's going to be nice.”

Died and gone to heaven is what Kreysler remembers feeling when he and Serge received their first \$3,000 order. Then, with historic replica projects, the orders jumped into the range of hundreds of thousands of dollars followed by a well-earned reputation for taking on “unusually special things with contractors.” Takes one to know one, for sure, and architects who knew Kreysler's work were now able to free up their creative impulses and wonder about new applications.

“Just the mere fact that we can build something here and deliver it to the job site all completed can give a huge impact on the construction schedule,” says Kreysler. “We don't need to have people on the job site, therefore we don't need scaffolding which oftentimes gets in the way. By bringing something in a truck that can be picked up and set on top of the building in a day, instead of building it with carpenters on scaffolding can save the contractor thousands and thousands of dollars and maybe weeks of time. This makes the cost of our product, which might in fact be twice the cost of doing it the traditional way, actually cheaper. So we began to learn about these little tricks and learned how our product was useful and we gradually focused on that.”

Time. Memory. The entrepreneur's cycle. By now, fairly well established, Kreysler had been thinking about it for a while, his next “edge,” finding his own building. He even, on occasion, actively pursued it. The idea of becoming even more settled, more established, jockeyed with the wild and destructive reflex of



*The Hearts in San Francisco project raised funds for the General Hospital Foundation.*

creativity and risk. Risk must now accept the burden of being calculated; creativity must accept parameters. There comes a responsibility with getting older and wanting to grow *and* maintain a business.

One day, Kreysler's real estate agent called.

Against a light spray of sea and salt we stood under the Golden Gate near Fort Point taking in the evening sun. Kreysler had pulled us over, Busel and me, on our way to the St. Francis Yacht Club and a meeting with some ACMA members to talk about the new Composites Growth Initiative.

The mystery here goes straight to the sublime, levitates time, as many pristinely beautiful scenes in the California repertoire do. It even impresses Kreysler who comments that there may only be a half-dozen days in the year that are as clear. He has been able, in a distinctly California way, to somehow tap into this resource for energy. Seduced tourists, on the other hand, fall into an awe-inspiring trance. It's not as simple as taking where one lives for granted either, the connection runs deeper than that, to where the affected are not paralyzed but juiced.

Kreysler gives a little history about Fort Point. I watch his hands move about. He's not overtly nervous, nor does he talk with his hands per se, but I sense the somewhat pent-up reserve of restless desire to be doing more than what he was at that particular moment doing. So he points out some components on the bridge that could've been rehabbed with composites instead of metal, if those in charge of making such decisions were more educated about the resourcefulness of composites. He always seems more comfortable when he is touching something that needs work. James Flood would later tell me that Kreysler is a "creative guy with good engineering skills, something you don't usually find in someone." Maybe both sides of Kreysler's brain, right creative and left analytical, have worked out an agreement to equally share the neurological highway to his fingers. Here we are, on the edge of the road, the edge of the bay, near the edge of the bridge on the edge of the country, and inside Kreysler's head, he's probably close to the edge of another new idea.

Busel and I bank what Golden Gate magic we can (winter is approaching back east) before starting for the yacht club. On the short drive around the Presidio, I think about what may have been Kreysler's biggest professional decision ever, the move to the new building in 2000. Off and on, he had pursued the notion. The barn was getting small, but real estate in Northern California? It's always expensive.

"Initially, we were only going to stay in the barn until I found something else," said Kreysler recalling his final years there. "But that took 15 years. The philosophy of the local [Petaluma] government was that if so much of the property was used for commercial purposes, they would leave you alone unless they were forced to do otherwise by complaints or something. It wasn't zoned for commercial use. But we had helicopters coming in and picking dinosaurs up, so it was just a matter of time before somebody was going to complain about something. Meanwhile, the residential property in the surrounding area was being developed, getting closer and closer and that was a ticking time bomb before the farmer was going to sell his lot to some developer. So, for years I'd been looking for a place but everything was always too expensive."

At some point for Kreysler, the need for a change that would enhance stability started a star war with the sweet memories of struggle and extemporaneous success in the barn. Over the last three or four years, he'd looked at seven or eight new locations that he thought might work, not to necessarily grow his business, but allow him to sustain it and secure some equity. This was one idea that seemed to be growing on him, one pursuit that still had to compete with "starting your business over again at the end of every job," which, for a custom molder, even though it's "fun," comes all too frequently and puts a hurtin' on cash flow. It also

was a lesson that had to grapple with reinvestment strategies, wanting to pay his employees a fair wage or buy them health care, a very important goal for Kreysler as a business owner.

"I had noticed for years that the people who seemed to be successful in owning and running little job shops were using the income they were getting to buy a building," he says. "That seemed a common thing. And the guys who just closed their doors had to do really well in their business. Well, I wasn't putting a huge amount of money in the bank. I could pay the bills, but I wanted to take care of my employees and there wasn't a whole lot left on the bottom line. So I realized that building equity in property would be a good thing."

Kreysler feels fortunate in that he did not *have* to move. But the pressure came from somewhere. After the real estate agent showed him a particularly attractive property on Green Island Road, he knew he would have to act fast. But he also knew he would have to borrow a lot of money, which "just by my nature is hard to do." To add to the pressure, Kreysler would now have to fly above the radar screen. At the dairy farm he didn't need permits, he "just did things." Now, he'd have to comply with every local, California State, and Federal requirement. (It didn't hurt that the building housed a former resin company.) To top it off, he'd have to move his business, pay a mortgage, and invest in maintaining the building all with income based on his current revenue stream. It wasn't just a matter of nailing up a few new loose boards some termites had eaten through.

Although an efficiency study on the new building showed productivity would increase, all said and done, despite or maybe because of the calculation that goes into evaluating risk, despite or maybe because of the myriad variables that are impossible to totally quantify, and despite or maybe because of the fact that custom molders seem to thrive off making decisions, Kreysler reached into his gut and pulled out the decision to move. He'd found out about the building on

Monday, by Friday had made an offer, and by the following week it had been accepted. He'd come a long way from having decided to move to Northern California to build sail boats. The stakes were higher, risks greater, calculations infinitely more refined. Kind of like a Shakespearean sonnet.

"Being upfront with officials worked well for me," he recalls. "Having a relationship with the bank was good. They wrote the seller a letter supporting my proposal. I picked up the phone and called Lowell Miles and asked him about the fire regulations. Being able to call people and having a good team together makes the difference. I went to the whole company and I said, 'We want to move, here's where, are you willing to do it?' We were only an hour away from the barn. I used my own employees for the move. I only lost two because of a long commute. Custom molding doesn't lend itself to rapid turnover of employees. I was proud of that. After about two months I realized everybody thought they worked for a moving company, I finally had to say 'stop putting up shelves, stop painting the floor, tomorrow we go back to being a fabrication shop.'"

The view from the yacht club ... the sun has descended in the west, the Golden Gate casts a noirish shadow and the city of San Francisco takes on yet another dimension. Dressed in khakis and a blazer, Kreysler, incoming ACMA president, is at ease hosting the meeting, talking to members about the benefits of ACMA and the new Composites Growth Initiative. Earlier, I saw him work the small crowd, hands in pockets ... picks up glass of wine, holds with both hands until one leaves for emphasis ... **CM**

Andrew Rusnak is editor of *Composites Manufacturing Magazine*: 703.525.0511; arusunak@acmanet.org.



Kreysler made Bronze panels at PRANA at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas.