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Portal to the Emerald City

A lush and inviting new installation welcomes visitors at Washington's Sea-Tac Airport.

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Airports provide travelers with their first and last impressions of a city—typically announced on low, blocky signs flanked by shrubs. Arriving or departing from the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac), however, is now a more engaging experience. A new installation, titled “Emerald City,” lives up to its name in creating a portal to the Pacific Northwest.

The design illustrates Port of Seattle CEO Tay Yoshitani’s vision “to become the cleanest, greenest, most energy-efficient port in the nation.” Designed by local artists Haddad|Drugan and situated along either side of the roadway leading to the airport, “Emerald City” is both landscape and art. It consists of a clock tower outfitted with solar panels, whimsical vine-covered towers, and mesh topiary cages set amid colorful rolling berms. At night, these elements transform into an otherworldly terrain illuminated by cool-hued LEDs.

The focal point is the clock tower, rising from the median and highly visible from passing cars and the new Sound Transit light-rail system. Clad in protruding and receding stainless steel fins, the tower not only announces the time and temperature on its LED display, but it also emits a glow from within that corresponds to weather conditions: blue when it’s below freezing, green in moderate temperatures, and yellow, then red, as temperatures go above 70 F. Six modules of green crystalline photovoltaic panels are installed along the tower’s south face. They generate 1.8 kilowatts at peak production, which is fed back into the grid. Haddad|Drugan collaborated with AltPower in New York City and Peters Studios, a glass-art workshop in Portland, Ore., to design the system and procure the unusual green solar cells, which sparkle like emeralds in the sun.

On the west embankment, three stainless steel towers rise to varying heights. They will soon be covered with evergreen vines including clematis, jasmine, and passionflower, and are illuminated by green LEDs at night. Lower mesh topiary cages house broadleaf evergreen shrubs including Japanese holly, purple false holly, and Mexican orange blossom, which will grow to fill out the rectilinear forms. In line with the airport’s wildlife-management program, the designers selected species that don’t produce bird-attracting berries.

Haddad|Drugan visually anchored the sculptural metal elements into the landscape by building linear gabion walls filled with granite or locally quarried basalt that retain undulating berms. This striped effect, which calls to mind ocean waves, is emphasized by carpets of flowering ground cover. Above these gabion walls, lines of Mt. Fuji cherry trees that blossom white are illuminated at night with blue LEDs.

“Emerald City” conjures the lushness of the Pacific Northwest and the wonder associated with travel while emphasizing the region’s collective energy consciousness. As artist Laura Haddad explains, it is an “ecotopia—a fantastic abstraction of an idealized place.”