

# Rocky start for business

Raincity builds for penguins and anyone who wants to frolic among fake rocks

Nobody dares ask the giant centipedes and whip spiders how happy they are pussyfooting across fake rocks at the Vancouver Aquarium.

Nobody probes the aquarium's 150 fruit bats about how much of a buzz they get dangling from an artificial cave. The African penguins aren't a lot more verbal - and if they were, their fish-infused breath might wither the toughest interviewer.

But the penguins' delight is obvious as they preen, waddle and plunge through the concrete habitat built by Vancouver-based Raincity Rock & Waterscapes.

Raincity is glad to settle for inarticulate joy from the aquarium residents it has helped to house. That's because the company has little trouble reaping praise from human customers frolicking in its grottos, waterfalls, pools and waterslides.

Raincity, which rolled into the artificial-rock business in 2007, may be the only company in Canada that counts bugs, bats, builders and BMW dealers as clients.

One of Raincity's challenges is opening people's minds to how realistic concrete installations can look, says co-owner Ryan Spong, who handles business affairs.

In the past, some artificial-rock works were less than exquisite, he says.

"Part of the stigma with artificial rockwork is that when it looks bad, it looks really bad," says Spong, 36.

"Landscape designers, builders or architects stuck with something that looks like a Flintstones fun park don't want to do it again."

About 10 per cent of Raincity's work is fixing flaws in rock work done by rivals, Spong says. But repairing others' goofs is not why Raincity went into business.

The six-person company is built around the talents of Mark MacIsaac, 38, the concrete carver-sculptor who has been Spong's friend since their East Vancouver boyhood.

"I haven't seen Mark's kind of detailed carving anywhere - B.C., California, Vegas," Spong says.

"When more people discover what kind of work he's capable of, he'll be flown around the world to sculpt."

What is MacIsaac capable of? Commercial and residential projects of enormous functional and artistic range.

At previous employer Arcon Rock and Waterscapes, he collaborated with mentor Peter Heiss on elements of the Vancouver airport's Pacific Passage exhibit.

The exhibit's looming rock arch greets travellers arriving from the U.S. to B.C.

Later, as Arcon's artistic director, MacIsaac made a splash by designing and building Nickelback star Chad Kroeger's infinity edge pool.

His first project at Raincity was a grotto spa for Brian Jessel, owner of Vancouver's Brian Jessel BMW.

"I use it every day I'm in Vancouver. It's very practical because it's half cave, half spa, so weather isn't really a factor," Jessel says.

"Raincity did an excellent job," MacIsaac says he shapes, colours and textures his six-inch-thick rock formations to ensure they're in harmony with the surroundings.

For an oceanfront grotto at a Tofino residence, he matched his artifice to the property's black volcanic rocks so well that visitors assume it's a natural hot spring.

When he built a pool and grotto for a wealthy client's B.C. island MacIsaac echoed the rock-strewn landscape.

"You can't tell where the real rocks end and mine start," he says.

Good sculptors know when fate tells them to ease their grip on a beloved design, MacIsaac says.

"Accidents may happen along the way that look even better than the original design," he says. "If some concrete falls away, it may create a natural-looking overhang."

Raincity's installations can also become a soothing voice within a property's sonic

JESSEL

Overlooking English Bay, this spa built by Raincity provides privacy in a crowded and exposed neighbourhood. It's partly covered by a grotto-style cave that lets the owner relax in his spa throughout the year, however nasty the weather.

MARINE CENTRE



Raincity developed and built a tidal pool aquarium for the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre in Sidney, which opened in the summer of 2009. The pool houses many species of sea life native to the waters surrounding Vancouver Island.

landscape. The white noise from a waterfall with adjustable flow can create an oasis of tranquility as it masks the sound of nearby traffic, Spong says.

"If you're beside a highway, you can crank it up at 3 p.m. and turn it down to a zen trickle at night," he says.

Raincity's waterscapes are out of reach of those of us whose financial capacity extends only to the lip of a plastic wading pool. Projects range in cost from \$10,000 to just over \$500,000, Spong says.

The company's revenues, expected to reach about \$2 million this year, are evenly split between commercial and residential work, he says.

The aquarium's Penguin Point, which opened in May, was inspired by the endangered birds' natural habitat of Boulder Beach in Cape Town, South Africa. It's Raincity's most ambitious project so far, with the company coordinating consultants, engineers and handling construction from demolition to finish.

Smaller jobs can bring their own technical challenges, says Spong.

"Somebody in West Vancouver will say, 'I live on a cliff and it's totally useless to me. Can you make a natural rock patio that cantilevers out from this rock face?'"

Spong supplies much of the entrepreneurial energy for the growing company.

After earning an MBA from University of Toronto, Spong spent two years with Barclays PLC in New York, helping to raise and place billions of dollars worth of corporate debt.

He returned to Vancouver to marry and set up a boutique finance shop. But he longed to be an entrepreneur, not just a financier.

Over beers at a Main Street pub, he and MacIsaac decided to go into business together. MacIsaac's brother, Malcolm, came on board as operations manager.

"My theory is to find people who are good at what they do and support them," Spong says. "We're young guys and we're hungry guys. We want to expand the business."

The company currently builds in the Lower Mainland, the Okanagan and Vancouver Island. Expansion could mean setting up seasonal shops in Toronto and Calgary, Spong says.

Hot-tub grottos, besides the protection they offer from the elements, afford a privacy that has given them a romantic glow in the public's mind.

Spong doesn't lean on this dimension for marketing his company's creations. Nor does he bother to dispute it.

Other species are not immune to the erotic ambience of Raincity's caverns.

The aquarium had to separate its male and female fruit bats because the exuberant mammals were breeding a bit too quickly.

Bats lack human speech. Hang them in a happy home and they'll learn the same language of love.

BUTT RESIDENCE

The instalment at the Butt residence in Anmore was inspired by the family's trip to a tropical resort. The pool has a natural concrete slide that rushes over a multi-swimjet powered tube ride which runs through a cave.

BLUE MOUNTAIN

A Raincity-designed water feature for Blue Mountain Park in Coquitlam includes a picturesque pond and waterfall. Couples having their wedding photos shot in the park often use the water feature as a backdrop.

Posted by The Province July, 08 2012