

Why one Anchorage design firm wants to retool the ice scraper and arctic entryway

DEVIN KELLY ALASKA DISPATCH NEWS



LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News Ice scrapers designed by the McCool Carlson Green architectural firm are displayed in their showroom earlier this month. The inspiration for the design came from the ulu, a curved blade used by Alaska Natives to cut fish and meat



LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News Architect Garrett Burtner shows off a coat rack at the McCool Carlson Green showroom in early November. The architectural firm has been dabbling in functional objects — like ice scrapers, coat racks and benches — that are designed to fit into an arctic entryway and make the space more functional and inspirational.

A prominent Anchorage architecture and design firm wants to inject beauty into the more mundane features of northern life, like windshield scrapers and arctic entries.

The firm, McCool Carlson Green, has designed some of the city's most recognizable public buildings, including the main terminal of Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, the Nesbett Courthouse and the Alaska Airlines Center.

A few years ago, the firm began to think beyond buildings. Garrett Burtner, the director of technology and innovation, was interested in a smaller scale. Burtner, who grew up in Alaska, wanted to design products that are used every day in the north.

Burtner and his teammates turned first to tools. Inspiration came from the ulu, the distinctive and functional knife with a curved blade used by Alaska

Natives to cut fish and meat.

The team settled on designing a tool that is both ubiquitous and easily manufactured: an ice scraper.

“Everyone has a big plastic club from Fred Meyer or wherever,” Burtner said. “So we started rethinking the ice scraper.”

The scraper, unveiled at the Anchorage Museum last year, was the first product to come out of “object_,” the name for the firm’s slowly growing line of accessories for modern life in the north. Architects around the world have designed furniture and other materials to complement homes and buildings. But Burtner said it’s less common among architects and designers in Alaska, given the state’s limited access to materials, long winters and geographic isolation.

The McCool Carlson Green team wanted to design objects with distinctly Alaskan or northern qualities that would be useful during long winters, said Nicholas Horn-Rollins, an intern architect and designer.

For the ice scraper, the designers used laser-cut acrylic plastic for the square blade and wood and acrylic for the oval-shaped handle. The scraper comes in a magnetized felt pouch that can hang from a car door on a chilly morning.

Next, Burtner, Horn-Rollins and other designers began thinking about the spaces where tools live. They focused on the arctic entryway, the small room between the front door and the outside that buffers the cold and keeps warmth in.

In the winter, the arctic entryway is like a front porch: a place to get out of the cold, hang gear and take off boots, Burtner said.

“A lot of it came down to storing your gear without making it look like a junk show,” Burtner said.

In a workshop in the firm’s headquarters at a former train depot on Ship Creek, Burtner walked over to an almond-colored wooden bench and sat down.

The bench includes a drawer that pulls out sideways for storage. Burtner’s seat cushion, held down by a magnet, showed a map of Anchorage on fabric with a

fractured pattern. His feet rested on a slanted metal piece where boots could be taken off.

The team also designed a metal and wood shelf called “_hang up.” Burtner held up the shelf to demonstrate, while Horn-Rollins set an ice scraper on it and tacked up small pieces of magnetized wood, called the “_pin up,” that can hold papers or photos.

Burtner pointed out the slant of the shelf and of parts of the bench. It was 17 degrees, the difference between true north and magnetic north in Anchorage.

Most of the “object_” pieces debuted in an installation at Anchorage Design Weekend in September. The ice scrapers have also been sold at the museum store.

For now, the pieces, mostly available online, aren’t making money like the firm’s main job of designing buildings for schools, military installations and airports. The bench, at \$1,100 for a one-drawer model, is out of reach for most people, Burtner said. The ice scraper, meanwhile, has a \$50 price tag.

He said the next step will be to make the product line less boutique and local and more affordable to a wider audience. At the same time, he said, it’s important to keep making the objects in Alaska with local materials.

Burtner hopes to add to a network of what he calls “Alaskan makers” that could help the state economy become more diverse.

“There is something about recognizing the material quality of a particular region and celebrating it,” Burtner said.

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