

Art:Design:Culture

# Glass

The UrbanGlass  
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**DESIGN**

# Hang Time

Nikolas Weinstein Studios pushes the limits of glass engineering to create epic forms that appear weightless as they drape and torque like fabric.

BY ANDREW PAGE





**S**culptor. Designer. Architect. Nikolas Weinstein isn't completely comfortable with any one of those terms. Though all describe aspects of what he does, his singular focus is on creating unorthodox glass works at unprecedented scale in his San Francisco studio, where he has assembled a team of problem-solvers and hackers (he calls them "the people who want to take apart the alarm clock") to push themselves farther with each new project. When his hand-picked crew can't figure it out, Weinstein will turn to some of the top glass scientists and engineers (often current or retired Corning experts) for help solving the complexities of annealing thousands of glass rods of varying sizes, of creating intricate curving patterns, or making sure the end product is sufficiently shatter-resistant. The final results are complex fusions of literally tons of glass rods, or networks of rods joined by special connectors that allow football-field-long structures to flex and twist when being installed. His largest pieces redefine the spaces they occupy in hotels, restaurants, and building lobbies with light-catching glass objects that capture and diffuse the light as only glass can do, but somehow appear to float weightlessly above it all.

"I've always wanted pieces that were big enough that they would be considered as much an element in a building as the foundation or the façade," Weinstein says. Since his first major project, a 1997 Frank Gehry commission for 36 cloud-like chandelier forms suspended from the six-story-high ceiling of Pariser Platz in Berlin, he's continued to push glass to larger size and unusual forms, enjoying the thrill of overcoming gut-wrenching challenges. He says he doesn't like to think about limitations but the desired effect, which is how he approached the project that was his first big break.

"When I did the Gehry thing, to say I was green is an understatement," he says. "I learned by the seat of my pants."

Most up-and-coming designers or sculptors would have played it safe when given an opportunity to collaborate with a soon-to-be superstar architect. But Weinstein went all-in to create intricate assemblages of glass at a scale and weight that kept cracking during annealing in the massive kiln he had built to accommodate them. It wasn't until a Corning engineer suggested he contact retired Corning legend Hank Hagy, who had been on the team that created the ground-breaking Palomar mirror, that Weinstein was able to figure out how to add numerous thermocouples to his massive kiln to better regulate critical areas of heat for the demanding process, and deliver the final flawless result.

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Skylight installation, Bar Agricole, San Francisco, 2010. Fused and hot-formed borosilicate glass tubing "fabric." H 7 1/2, W 5, D 7 ft.**

PHOTO: BRUCE DAMONTE

THIS PAGE, TOP ROW: **The installation of Weinstein's first major commission in 1997, a set of 36 suspended glass "clouds" for a Frank Gehry-designed building on Pariser Platz. Hanging above a bank's cafeteria, the individual glass pieces measure approximately 9 feet long and weigh hundreds of pounds. Their construction required special kilns with a grid of supporting rods that dropped to slump the glass into organic shapes.**

PHOTO, RIGHT: ROLAND HALBE

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM ROW: **Weinstein and his team discovered a way to create flexible glass elements using a special wire armature for a 27-foot-diameter skylight oculus that was added to Singapore's historic Capella Hotel for a basement ballroom addition designed by Foster + Partners architects in 2009.**

RH PHOTO, RIGHT: MICHAEL WEBER





**For the 255-foot-long glass ribbon that winds through the lobby of the InterContinental Shanghai Puxi luxury hotel, Weinstein used borosilicate glass tubing with special connectors that allow the finished product to flex and bend. Installed in 2009, it was folded up and placed in a shipping container, and unfurled by a team of 10 after it arrived in China.**

RH PHOTO, RIGHT: MICHAEL WEBER

Weinstein happened into glass when he switched colleges and had some time on his hands. He found a job at a small stained glass shop in New York City, where, though he developed no special love for leaded glass, he became intrigued by the molten form of the material. He took a handful of lessons in glassblowing at the New York Experimental Glass Workshop (now UrbanGlass), and a couple of years later, when he had completed all the required courses to graduate with a degree in comparative literature from Brown University, he again sought out glass, this time with Michael Scheiner at RISD, where the assignment was to make conceptual work that referenced the organic.

“Everyone else was doing these hyper-conceptual pieces, like milk bottles filled with blood and urine, and I made something that looked like a pumpkin,” remembers Weinstein. The tactile immediacy of forming clay molds into which to blow glass appealed to him, as did the organic nature of the form, and after graduation, he started up a small design business where he made glass objects for high-end retail stores, though he resisted pressure to make identical pieces. Weinstein says the Gehry project came up after the architect had seen a 35-inch abstract blown glass piece he had done and asked him to propose a solution to the lobby of the building in Berlin. Even as Weinstein’s scale has exploded, he has continued to bring an organic perspective (think DNA-like twisting repeated patterns) to even his largest pieces, which seem from a distance to be a single unified mass.

“Working at large scale is like the slow flood movement—you can’t make a sculpture that size quickly,” says Weinstein. “You have to plan, the problems are more complicated, and you need five or ten people instead of one or two.”

As his portfolio of completed projects has grown to include a hotel in Shanghai, where he created a ribbon-like glass sculpture that torques and leaps through the air for hundreds of feet, and a cocktail bar in San Francisco, where he has created billowing glass curtains that descend from a large skylight, one can’t help wondering why he hasn’t switched to a lighter, more forgiving material such as acrylic.

Weinstein’s answer comes down to one word: light.

“Glass is fundamentally altered by light, and this gives you the sense that my objects are constantly changing and morphing,” says Weinstein. “On some level, glass is alive in a way other materials are not.” ■

*ANDREW PAGE is the editor of GLASS.*