Sapphire



Sold

Keggins commissioned Thomas Westra to create a sculpture for the Sapphire, a luxury apartment development on Canberra's Kingston Foreshore once described as "Canberra's Opera House on the lake". The brief was open: to make something exceptionally beautiful that captured the spirit of the apartments. Westra wanted the sculpture to convey elegance and give prospective residents a sense of excitement and joy.

After exploring a number of early concepts and discussing them with Keggins, Westra found the idea that guided the final design in a single frame from the apartments' marketing video. Bands of colour swept around the words "Reflections of Rare Beauty". Drawing on that movement and the shapes of tiny, unpolished sapphire fragments, he made a one-tenth-scale model. Once Keggins approved it, he began forming the sculpture in steel.

Sapphire was Westra's first experiment with colour in sculpture. He airbrushed the steel with automotive polyurethane in shades drawn from sapphires. Completed in 2017, the work was first installed on a stainless steel base outside the sales office, where prospective residents could see it while the apartments were being built.

30 mm solid round steel bar, stainless steel base and airbrushed automotive polyurethane

200 cm high × 130 cm wide × 130 cm deep

Sapphire up close



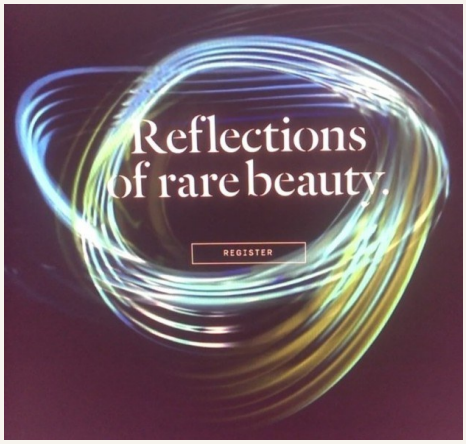
Sapphire on its stainless steel base outside the Kingston Foreshore sales office.

How it was made

The Formulator

With each major work, Westra looks for a chance to develop a new technique. Forming a long steel bar by hand means heating it in the forge, carrying it to a jig and bending it while it is hot. If the steel cools partway through, it has to come off the jig and go back into the forge, sometimes several times. Sapphire called for sweeping curves in 30 mm solid round steel bar, so Westra built a machine that could start bending the bar as soon as it left the forge.

He adapted a car hoist and an industrial decoiling machine into a rotary bar former he called the Formulator. A microcontroller let him operate the motors by remote control. Cold bar fed into a tunnel forge. As the heated steel emerged, Westra used the remote to wrap it around a large forming jig.



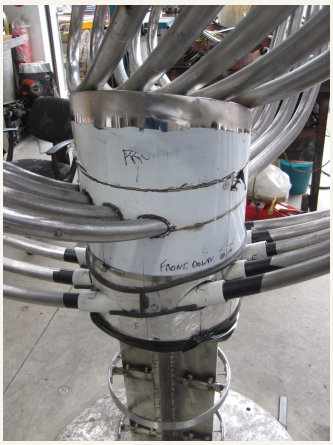
A still from the Sapphire Apartments marketing video. The bands of colour around “Reflections of Rare Beauty” guided the final design for the sculpture.



The scale model approved before full-size fabrication began.

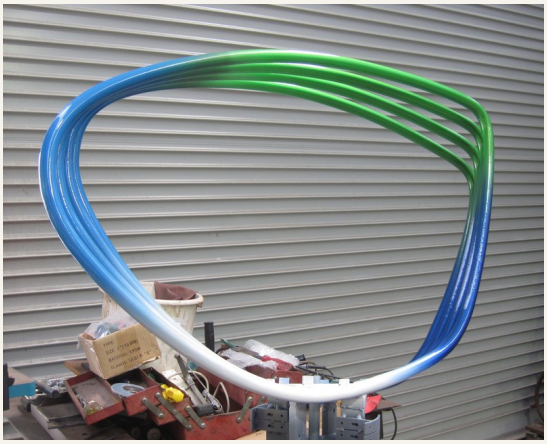


Sapphire fully assembled in raw steel before the colour was applied.



Marking openings in the stainless sheet where the bars meet the column at different angles.

How it was made



The central rings after colour was applied.



The coloured inner rings in the studio.



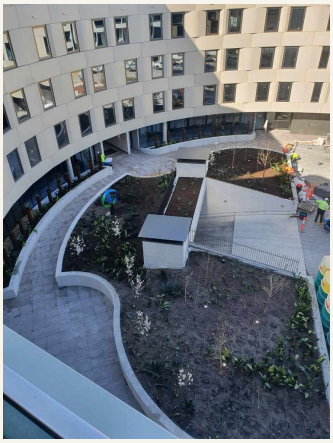
The shapes of tiny, uncut sapphire pebbles inspired the sweeping curves of the steel rings.



Fitting the stainless steel column panels in the studio.



Sapphire being positioned on site at Kingston Foreshore.



The sculpture in the apartment courtyard, seen from above.