When it comes to building one of the UK’s most prestigious projects of recent times and you’re an architect looking for the best way to impress clients with your skills and high-quality finishes, what do you do?

In the case of the £400 million Trinity Leeds shopping centre, the designers turned to the country’s leading producer of architectural glass reinforced concrete (GRC) to make their designs come alive. The result is there for all to see and months afterwards the shopping centre, and the cladding in particular, are attracting rave reviews. This was highlighted most recently in a travel review in *The Times* which complimented the Trinity Centre’s ‘impressive, stylish interior’.

The architects undertook an exhaustive selection process, settling upon GB Architectural Cladding Products Ltd as being able to provide the quality panels on time and at the right price for the project. More importantly, the firm has now cemented its position as the UK’s leading manufacturer of architectural GRC, taking the product to new levels of use.
The firm’s managing director Andy Garside says: “We are probably the longest established UK company producing architectural GRC and the best known because our product is of such superb quality.”

Most of the firm’s sales come from satisfied customers repeatedly returning back to them.

Essentially, Glass Reinforced Concrete looks and feels like natural stone but is lighter and more versatile - giving architects and contractors a wider range of options to finish their building. GB Architectural has worked hard to achieve its pole position in manufacturing GRC with a number of impressive projects under their belt including Bradford University and London’s Dalston Square. They have successfully carried out dozens of impressive projects around the country with London-based clients particularly keen to use their expertise.

Search for architectural cladding begins

The Trinity Leeds success story began back in 2009 when the scheme’s architects Chapman Taylor began to research the various product options available for finishing the interior of the shopping mall. The firm was particularly interested in the aesthetics, durability and cost for the interior surfaces of the mall. Andy explains: “Basically, the architects wanted something that would look as good in 40+ years time as the day it was installed. “GRC doesn’t easily deteriorate like many other materials and will look good for years without any maintenance.”

In the selection process, all of the available options were explored by the architects and time and again they returned to the potential of GRC for the Trinity project. Indeed, a director Chapman Taylor Robin Pinfield confirms: “We are very pleased with the finished product.” Andy says: “From our initial meetings we developed bespoke product samples and we then met with the builders Laing O’Rourke who, in turn, also extensively researched GRC providers in the UK and across Europe before eventually settling on us.”

Andy says the project team was particularly interested in the quality control of the GRC panels. He added: “It was an incredibly proud day for me when we were awarded the contract, not only because of the time and investment we had spent in trying to get it but it was the acknowledgement that we were trusted to deliver an impressive product to a strict schedule of time and cost.” In addition, the specification called for the product to be beneficial to the environment and the panels had to come in a variety of shapes and sizes, go round curves and be fixed to steel fixings as well as having fire retardant properties and be able to have subtle colour variations.
GRC is best for panel cladding

GRC satisfied all of the criteria the architects were looking for which meant that in early 2011 GB Architectural was appointed as designer and manufacturer. Sufficient designs were approved for production to start in late 2011 and the experience of GBA’s 35-strong production team was put to the test. They had to design and manufacture bespoke panels to a strict architect’s specification which was probably the most testing phase of the entire project.

Andy says: “The project was a challenge because of the sheer number and complexity of the units involved, all of which had to be individually designed and created. “They then had to co-ordinate the fixings with the primary steelwork which was already in place. This fact constrained standard fixing details and so we had to design and manufacture panels for what was a uniquely technically demanding project.” He added: “To be fair, Laing O’Rourke knew this was going to be a challenge and were rightly concerned. “However, our Technical Director Kevin Heaton along with our co-designers Smart Crosby International helped us to create a cost-effective product that’s not only practical but also has a high level of tolerance.”

The impressive scale of the project saw 4,000m2 of GRC being delivered and installed, until GB Architectural’s involvement came to an end in October 2012.

The Yorkshire-based firm prides itself on the fact that it not only delivered everything to specification but also on time and to budget.

Andy says: “There’s no doubt that this takes GRC into a new area because this project is as prestigious as it gets and marks a milestone for GRC products.”

Glass reinforced concrete boosts Trinity Leeds

When the Trinity Leeds centre opened in May 2013 – it constituted the only major shopping mall in western Europe to open this year – it was to a huge fanfare of publicity, journalists and professional builders alike being amazed at the high standard they found. Most of the reports commented on how impressive the domed glass roof helped to create space and that the interior design and build – including the GRC panels – has helped to create an identity for the shopping mall.

The main contractors Laing O’Rourke are undoubtedly proud of Trinity Leeds and this is what they say about the use of GRC panels in their magazine, Infoworks: Trinity Leeds was also the first large-scale deployment of glass rein-
forced concrete (GRC) – which Vetter’s Matthew Wilkinson says enables an entirely different way of thinking about stone. “GRC can be finished to look like sandstone, but it’s moulded, not quarried. That lets you create complex curves and other irregular shapes you couldn’t achieve in stone.” Because GRC is lighter than stone, it can be produced in thinner sections and hung from steel frames. It’s also less expensive than stone – which all adds value for Land Securities. Matthew says: “This was a complex job – the sort an outside contractor, coming to it cold, might easily misjudge.”

The Trinity Leeds project is also a feather in GB Architectural’s cap and it’s something which is already attracting attention from current and potential new clients. Andy explains: “We have already picked up work on the back of this project and I believe we are now firmly established as the best selection choice for architectural GRC cladding - clients are reassured with our experience and expertise. We have a track record of delivering high quality GRC products cost-effectively.”

Acknowledgements
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