

# SHADES OF GREEN

Pent-up pandemic demand drives surprising economic growth and environmental innovation in the shade market.

by Jeff Moravec



While 2020 started as a disaster, pandemic-related business picked up substantially as the year went on. Fabric manufacturers such as Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC were among companies providing shade products, like the Sunbrella® fabric for these shade structures in Miami, Fla., as restaurants moved to outdoor dining. Photo: Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC.

Shade and more shade was the order of the day during the warm months of 2020, says Tim Kellogg, president of Capital City Awning in Columbus, Ohio. Housebound homeowners spent money on improving outdoor spaces. Photo: Capital City Awning.



For many businesses, just keeping the doors open was a challenge in 2020. But for many shade fabricators and manufacturers, as the year progressed, the shade market heated up, and business became surprisingly good. Pandemic-related projects—including those related to the increase in outdoor gathering spaces and the need to enhance them with shade products—drove work for many shade companies.

“Now more than ever we realize the necessity of outdoor spaces with amenities—not just for shade, but for shelter, power and lighting as well,” says Colin Touhey, founder and CEO of Pvilion, a solar-powered fabric products company based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

At the same time, says Kirk Fitzsimmons, VP sales, outdoor products, for Glen Raven Custom Fabrics LLC in Glen Raven, N.C., it was more than the pandemic that was driving the increase in business. “It’s also important to note recent innovations in retractable awnings as a result of increased demand for shade structures that deliver on beauty, function and customization for commercial and residential applications,” he says.

### Working at home drives demand

With workplaces shut down and travel limited, people focused more on their homes and outdoor spaces during 2020. “That includes investing in their homes,” says Fitzsimmons. “This creates new demand and extends the outdoor season beyond what we have typically seen in previous years.”

“I think with people stuck at home, and the economy still pretty good, families had extra money from not going on vacation, not going out to eat, not driving the car much,” explains Tim Kellogg, president of Capital City Awning in Columbus, Ohio. “What a lot of people did was home improvement.”

The home improvement wasn’t just for the summer months, either, says Kellogg. “People needing to stay home figured out they didn’t want to just

## PANDEMIC ECONOMY DRIVES GREEN INNOVATION

For some companies, the pandemic has underscored the importance of environmentally friendly projects.

Take, for example, the solar-powered canopy structures fabricated for the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) by Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Pvilion, a solar-powered fabric products company. The work was underway when the pandemic hit, and CEO Colin Touhey says that while there was some concern that the city might want to pause, leaders understood that the pandemic actually increased the need for the project.

“It provides NYBG visitors a place where they can seek shade, enjoy a beverage and recharge their mobile devices,” he says. “The eight solar canopies, designed, engineered and installed by Pvilion, provide ample space to relax while staying safely socially distanced.”

Pvilion’s fabric incorporates photovoltaic cells, which generate electricity upon exposure to the sun. As part of New York City’s emission reduction efforts, seven of the canopies contribute energy directly to the city’s power grid, says Touhey, while one structure powers a bank of batteries used by NYBG and by Botanical Garden visitors to charge their mobile phones and other cellular devices.

Pvilion’s recent projects include structures for corporate parks, educational campuses, hospitals and hospitality facilities where people gather for work and



A solar-powered canopy at the New York Botanical Garden was designed and installed by Pvilion, Brooklyn, N.Y. Photo: Pvilion.

relaxation while being protected from the elements. The company’s solar fabric generates power that can be used for lighting, air conditioning, heating, charging large battery equipment and to power mobile devices such as laptop computers and cell phones.

“With the recent need to move so much activity outside,” says Touhey, “we think this technology has become a much-needed, quick and reliable solution for shelter and energy.”

### GREEN CLEARS THE AIR

Another green project that pushed forward in 2020 is a shade fabric technology touted as the first to purify and clean the air. It was introduced by Sauleda, a fabric company based in Barcelona, Spain, in conjunction with PURETi, a cleaning products company in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The product, called Green®, is sprayed with a mineral preparation based on titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>), which, according to the company, removes dirt and toxic particles in suspension through the use of sunlight; a process known as photocatalysis. The company says this eliminates common pollutants in the atmosphere such as sulfur oxides (SO<sub>x</sub>), volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>), through an oxidation process activated by sunlight.

Company sources say the fabrics carry out this photocatalytic process continuously, purifying the air, reducing mold by 60 percent, eliminating odors and staying cleaner with half the maintenance of a normal fabric.



Sauleda, a Spanish fabric company, last year introduced a shade fabric technology called Green®, which it says requires half the maintenance of a normal fabric. The product is made in conjunction with PURETi, a cleaning products company in Cincinnati, Ohio. Photo: Sauleda.



withdraw into the interior recesses of their homes, especially as the days got shorter,” he explains. “They enjoy the outside space so much they want to try to continue to use it through the winter. Otherwise, there’s just too much cabin fever.”

In areas of the country that have seasonal weather issues, such as Florida, a lot of work didn’t get going until later in the year. “Now that the hurricane season is over, many residents will be looking at enhancing their outdoors spaces with shade products,” says Anita Marten, design coordinator at Miami Awning Co. in Miami, Fla. “We finally get to enjoy the weather. It’s just too hot and humid in the summer.”



In areas of the country with volatile summer weather, the increase in home shade projects didn’t occur until late in the year, says Anita Marten of Miami Awning Co., Miami, Fla. In Florida, she says, projects like those shown in this photo and the one above do not occur until after hurricane season. Photos: Miami Awning Co.

### New business needs drive commercial work

As the pandemic spread, commercial work increased as well. For example, restaurants were seeking canopies to increase their outdoor seating areas to comply with health experts' recommendations and to accommodate patrons preferring to eat in the open air, according to Marten.

But it wasn't just restaurants. "Clients in every market were looking for outdoor covered areas for work, recreation, relaxation and to be able to safely meet with others outside," says Marten.

Kellogg says he has found it interesting how the pandemic has affected various kinds of businesses.

"For example," he says, "veterinary offices have asked customers not to come inside, so their employees go outside to pick up pets for their appointments. We've been doing shelters for those employees as they wait outside."

### Public needs drive innovation

New shade solutions for public facilities were needed as well, says Cindy Thompson, founder of Transformit, a fabric architecture company based in Gorham, Maine.

Transformit was asked by the Portland, Maine, public school district to design an extensive system of outdoor structures that not only would designate class "rooms" but

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Shade wings from Transformit, Gorham, Maine, designed by owner Cindy Thompson with longtime and frequent partner Charles Duvall of Duvall Design, are growing in popularity for homes as well as public buildings. Photo: Transformit.

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would provide shade as well. Other structures such as covered art courtyards and a covered amphitheater were also needed.

With longtime and frequent partner Charles Duvall of Duvall Design, Transformit came up with a number of solutions, including five-point wings, four-sided diamonds stretched from roof to roof, and retractable roofs that can connect two roofs.

The issue, not surprisingly, was the price point. “Price point is really tough for these schools,” says Thompson. “Not having a ton of money is one of the real challenges of doing work with public schools. But we’re not going to do cheap stuff that is going to blow away. Our challenge was to make them something substantial at their price point. It was a killer to do, but we did it.”

Later in the summer, the school district asked for further four-point

shade wings that could come down and be stored away in summer and winter.

“To make this a reasonable task for school facilities staff, we fabricated and installed the wings with removal and re-installation in mind,” says Thompson. “The aluminum poles and lightweight wings are easy to remove and store while the four anchor stakes and the base pads for the two poles can all remain in-ground below grade year-round.”

In addition, as the weather grew colder and everyone moved inside, Transformit saw an increased interest in social screens—lightweight movable walls than can be used to divide large spaces and create smaller congregation areas for schools, museums, events and the hospitality industry.

“These walls are beautiful and don’t require tripping hazards to stand on their own,” says Thompson. “They are lightweight, can have wheels and even

an acoustic liner. They can break down in minutes and zip into a duffle bag for easy transport and storage.”

### Future forecast looks busy

As 2021 gets underway, fabricators are looking forward to continuing high levels of activity. Miami Awning’s Marten, for one, expects increased commercial work in the coming months, as those in the hotel and resort industry who are anxious to get back to normal monitor the progress of the coronavirus vaccines.

“They just want to be prepared, to be raring to go when it’s time,” says Marten. “And so do we.”

Jeff Moravec is freelance writer based in Brooklyn Park, Minn.



Transformit was asked by the Portland, Maine, public school district to design a system of outdoor structures that would not only designate class “rooms,” but would provide shade as well. Photo: Transformit.



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