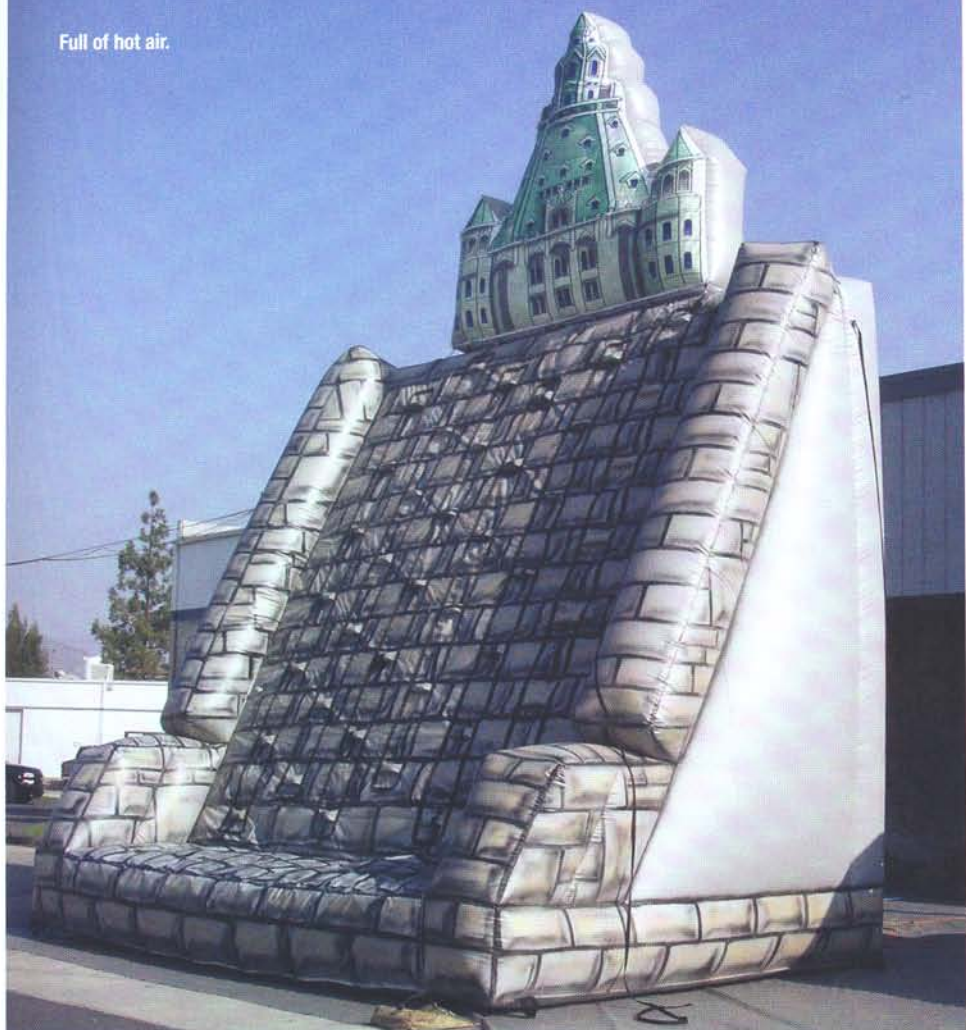


Full of hot air.



BLOWING UP

Inflatable structures add a unique twist to branded events and environments

Catching the eyes of attendees at large outdoor events has always been a challenge for those designing experiences that play out amid piles of visual clutter.

Given all the distractions and exhibitors vying for attention at outdoor events, many designers are going bigger in an effort to get some better eyeballs. Many are turning to large-scale inflatable structures in an event footprint—from super-sized inflatable product replicas or logos, to interactive climbing structures for kids and architectural pieces. The net: inflatables are gaining steam in the event world, and for good reason.

Suppliers are working with designers to create bigger, brighter inflatables that are changing the face of outdoor events. There are some keys to keep in mind about inflatables when considering the structures for a project—things like what sizes and shapes are possible, how they handle the elements, graphic options, and durability. ED went straight to the experts—inflatable designers, builders, and specialists—to come up with a

no-nonsense list of four big things to know about the world of inflatable architecture.

Size and physics. Inflatable technology can produce custom items ranging from as small as a beach ball to structures that stand several stories high, so there's a lot of room for creativity.

"Most inflatables top out at 30 feet tall or so—it's the standard ceiling, but we can go as big as needed. With good ground stakes and rope, the sky's the limit," says Inflatables 2000 art director Steve Gray.

With the help of 3D CAD software, detailed replicas of products, logos, and characters can be developed and tweaked until they are just right. And the structures can be used as architectural elements as well as stand-alone elements.

Inflatable designers at Landmark Creations recently worked with client Productions Plus on an inflatable wave with a speedboat on the crest that sat atop a tent for the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation's Take Me Fishing campaign.



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"This one was a bit challenging because the boat had to appear to float on top of the wave. You don't have any framework or support structure, it's just air holding it up, so you really have to keep in mind the weight of all the material you're using," says Jim Olson, head designer at Landmark Creations.

Elements. As with everything else in the world of outdoor event design architecture, protecting inflatable structures from the elements and making sure they are installed correctly is critical.

"Wind is a big factor. If they're big enough, they act like a sail in the wind. If you get a strong enough wind going through, it could tear it to pieces," Olson says. Common sense will keep inflatables safe, however. Properly staking the structures to the ground will keep them in place, and taking them down (or not blowing them up at all) when conditions are especially windy is good practice.

Long-term, however, rain and moisture are big enemies of inflatables.

"The biggest problem that we get is clients who allow them to get wet, they get moldy. If you keep it as clean as possible, that's ideal.



Inflatable exhibits (see boat, top) are making waves.

Water is probably the biggest enemy of inflatables. If they do get wet, dry them out before you pack them up," Olson says.

Graphics. Any images, logos or other artwork files that will adorn an inflatable should be as high-resolution as possible, to avoid blurred or pixelated images on the final product.

"We usually end up painting or digitally printing the graphics onto the structure, so it has to be something that we can work with. Bit-

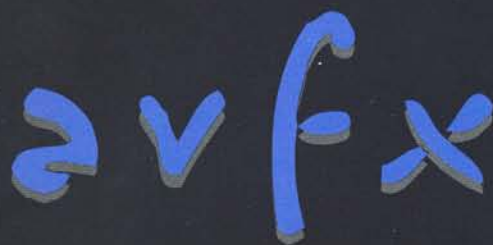
mapped images are too small when you blow them up to 20 feet," Olson says.

Durability. Different gauges of vinyl material are available for different applications, and heavy-duty materials are a must if the inflatable structure is used as an interactive play area, or if it will be up for extended periods.

Gray recently worked with Disney to produce an interactive inflatable for the premier event for new Disney princess movie "Enchanted," and he had to get tough with materials.

"We produced two custom inflatables to go along with the theme of the movie. We produced a Camelot-style rock climbing wall with printed bricks on the side of it," Gray says. At the top of the climbing mountain, designers included a large inflated, printed replica of the Woolworth building in Manhattan, to tie into the film's Camelot/New York theme.

"When we custom-make inflatable games, like slides, obstacle courses, and sports themed challenges, we make them to high-use standards with high-gauge vinyl and everything is super heavy duty and reinforced. We understand that at these events there is a high volume of traffic going through daily," Gray says. ■



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