



ANCESTRAL ARCHIVE

By responding to the local Hispanic community's heritage,
a new reading room connects to more than just a library.

by ED SOLTERO, AIA





PROJECT Marcos B. Armijo Library Addition, El Paso
CLIENT City of El Paso, El Paso Public Library
ARCHITECT Alvidrez Architecture
PROJECT TEAM David Alvidrez, AIA; Cesar Molina; Ryan Molloy; Enrique Spencer; Stephanie Conrad; Rene Aguilar
CONTRACTOR Dantex Construction Company
CONSULTANTS Ponce Engineering (structural); Alpha Engineering (MEP); Fluid Systems (mechanical and plumbing); Gonzalo Aguilar Engineering (electrical)
PHOTOGRAPHER Fred Golden

EL SEGUNDO BARRIO (the Second Ward) in south-central El Paso is well known by the many poor immigrants who enter the United States from Mexico via this sector of the border. The neighborhood is typically the first place *los emigrantes* arrive, and they often settle here. In fact, in the early twentieth century the Second Ward was a haven for Mexicans who fled the oppressive dictatorial regime of Porfirio Diaz. Then, unscrupulous housing developers took advantage of the ravaged refugees camping out in makeshift tents along the Rio Grande and shoved them into crowded, squalid tenements before they had a chance to ponder their options. A large number of these tenements remain, although the miserable conditions have been improved through community development grants.

Everyday life in these *vivienda* housing units inspired the design of the Marcos B. Armijo Library Addition, a 4,200-square-foot infill project between a gymnasium and a branch library, that opened early this year. Cesar Molina, project designer and manager for Alvidrez Architecture, made several visits to el Segundo Barrio where he observed daily life there and came to better understand the character and scale of the buildings, particularly how the public courtyards play a central role in the community. Molina says he challenged himself "to reinterpret the intrinsic beauty found in the simple structures."

An additional challenge for Molina was to incorporate two existing murals painted by well-known local artist Carlos Callejos on walls bordering the project site. One of the works, "Children's Minds Unlock The Secrets of the Universe," is a monumental depiction of outer space exploration in which icons of ancient Aztec civilization mingle with modern-day astronauts. The imagery symbolically links a rich history with a future of infinite potential.

The journey into the library addition actually begins outside the library, within the simple



forecourt created by the 20-foot setback. The forecourt is crowned by a *sombrilla*, a shade structure common in the Southwest, reinterpreted in the form of a modern overhanging flat roof. Oversized concrete blocks set within this “internal oasis,” to use the designer’s words, subtly attract children as a playscape while an image of a floating Aztec priest – a section of the mural isolated in the forecourt – beckons them inside.

Entrance is through the existing library. Once inside the new 22-foot-tall volume, the subtle manipulation of space is endless. Sculptural cabinetry clad in a light oak veneer overcomes its utilitarian purpose by highly articulated openings set at varying positions. These not only serve as shelving for books, but as spaces for children to frolic in. The floor-to-ceiling murals are the wall finishes and a carpet of neutral color covers the floor. The decision to leave the existing masonry exposed in the interior recreates the material character of the communal courtyards within the neighborhood’s housing complexes.

Changing light conditions, visible through carefully placed openings, are a refreshing alternative to windowless interiors common to many public libraries. Some windows are set high to mitigate outside noise and thereby enhance the contemplative ambience of the space. Clerestory windows and a skylight running the length of the main mural tempers the intense natural light falling on the artwork.

A tall, slender colonnade supports the floating ceiling plane clad in painted gypsum board and somewhat reminiscent of ancient hypostyles. The use of three structural supporting columns mimics the rhythm of those depicted in the mural at the rear of the space. The extreme height of the volume metaphorically hints at the boundless and featureless daytime skies of West Texas.

Both the residents and the library staff have embraced this wonderful new public room. Local visitors to the space are simultaneously reminded through both the murals and the simple architecture that the Second Ward – and specifically the tenements – remain the ancestral archival depositories of their collective memories, but more importantly are inspirational catalysts for future generations. ■

Ed Soltero, AIA, is a contributing editor of *Texas Architect*.

RESOURCES MASONRY UNITS: Featherlite; METAL DECKING: Vulcraft; RAILINGS AND HANDRAILS: Julius Blum; ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORK: Nevarez Millwork; BATT AND BLANKET INSULATION: Johns Manville; METAL DOORS AND FRAMES: Steelcraft; ENTRANCES AND STOREFRONTS: Kawneer; UNIT SKYLIGHTS: Viewpointe Skylights; GLAZED CURTAINWALL: Kawneer



