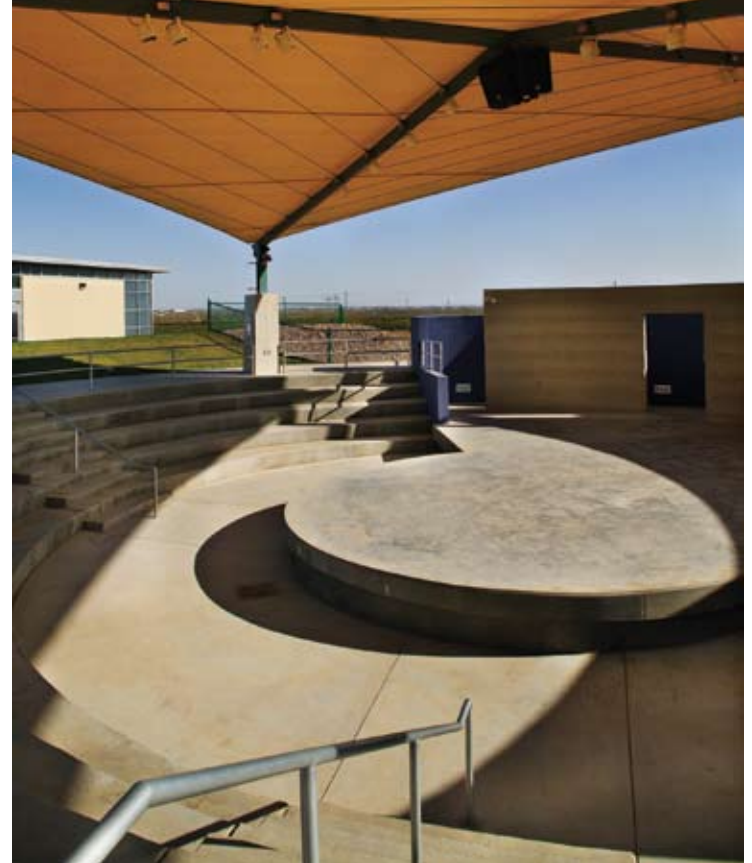


Enlivened by varied forms and colors,

a new education complex in El Paso

plants seeds of wonder in kids' minds

by ED SOLTERO, AIA



A PLACE OF DISCOVERY





PROJECT John E. Uxer Head Start Complex, El Paso
CLIENT Region 19 Head Start
ARCHITECT Alvidrez Associates
CONTRACTOR Vistacon, Inc., Blair-Hall Co. (Dinosaur Time Zone)
CONSULTANTS Gutierrez/Borrowski & Associates (landscape);
 Roe Engineering (civil); Henry K. Ng & Associates (structural);
 Fluid Systems (mechanical); Gonzalo Aguilar (electrical); RBM
 Engineering (MEP-Dinosaur Time Zone)
PHOTOGRAPHER Fred Golden

SELDOM DOES ARCHITECTURE for children reflect a sensitive approach to scale, color, context, and the overall interactive experience. In the case of children's museums and educational facilities, the contents and/or exhibits typically compensate for sterile environments. The John E. Uxer Head Start Complex in El Paso by Alvidrez Associates has successfully melded all of the requisite elements into a project which is not only responsive to the needs of children, but addresses regional contextual issues as well, albeit via a different approach—that of an interaction with light. Located in the northeast section of the city, the facility faces the nearby craggy faces of the Franklin Mountains to the west and is illuminated by the less intense light of the rising sun.

Programmatic components include classrooms, administrative areas, a small library, an “Intelli-zeum” (a science museum), indoor and outdoor gathering spaces, and an outdoor amphitheater. The 30,660-square-foot facility is organized along two major axes: the east/west axis houses the classrooms and administrative areas, while the north/south axis includes the building's *raison d'être*, namely, the science museum and its interactive exhibits. Visiting children and passing motorists alike are tantalized by a split-second glimpse of the bright cobalt blue and yellow hues

of the museum wing, which unfortunately sits behind and seems somewhat incongruous with the subdued entry facade running east to west. A palette of stucco and concrete masonry creates the syncopated composition of the museum wing's exterior elevations.

Small, diversely oriented openings were carefully orchestrated in direct response to the desert setting and at a scale sensitive to children. The playful pattern of light cast from these windows is very much in tune with the mission of discovery presented by the educational complex. Directly above the openings, the architect mimicked the windows with *faux* openings colored a deep yellow in deference to the sun. The sun's role was further acknowledged through the use of opaque and louvered canopies as a means of modulating the building surfaces with both solid and striped shadows, echoing the canyons and recesses of the nearby mountains. Rather than responding to context with a specific use of materials—in this case stone or the use of massive walls—the architect responded to the abundant West Texas sunlight. The juxtaposition of varied forms and colors creates a festive ambiance enlivened by the dynamic interplay of light.

The architect applied the same thoughtfulness and sensitivity to exterior gathering spaces. The amphitheater, the main outdoor congregating space, is sheltered from the hot rays of the sun by an angular, tensile fabric canopy that seems prepared for takeoff into the nearby mountains. Behind the concrete stage, one of the walls enclosing a handicap-accessible ramp is painted a deep yellow reminiscent of a Dan Flavin installation. This vivid composition is set against the backdrop of a highly articulated and playful section of the museum wing known as the “Dinosaur Time Zone.”

(this page) The administrative wing presents a subdued facade. (opposite page) In contrast, the angular form of the amphitheater canopy and the adjacent museum's highly articulated facade create a playful ambiance perfect for children.



Sunlight in West Texas

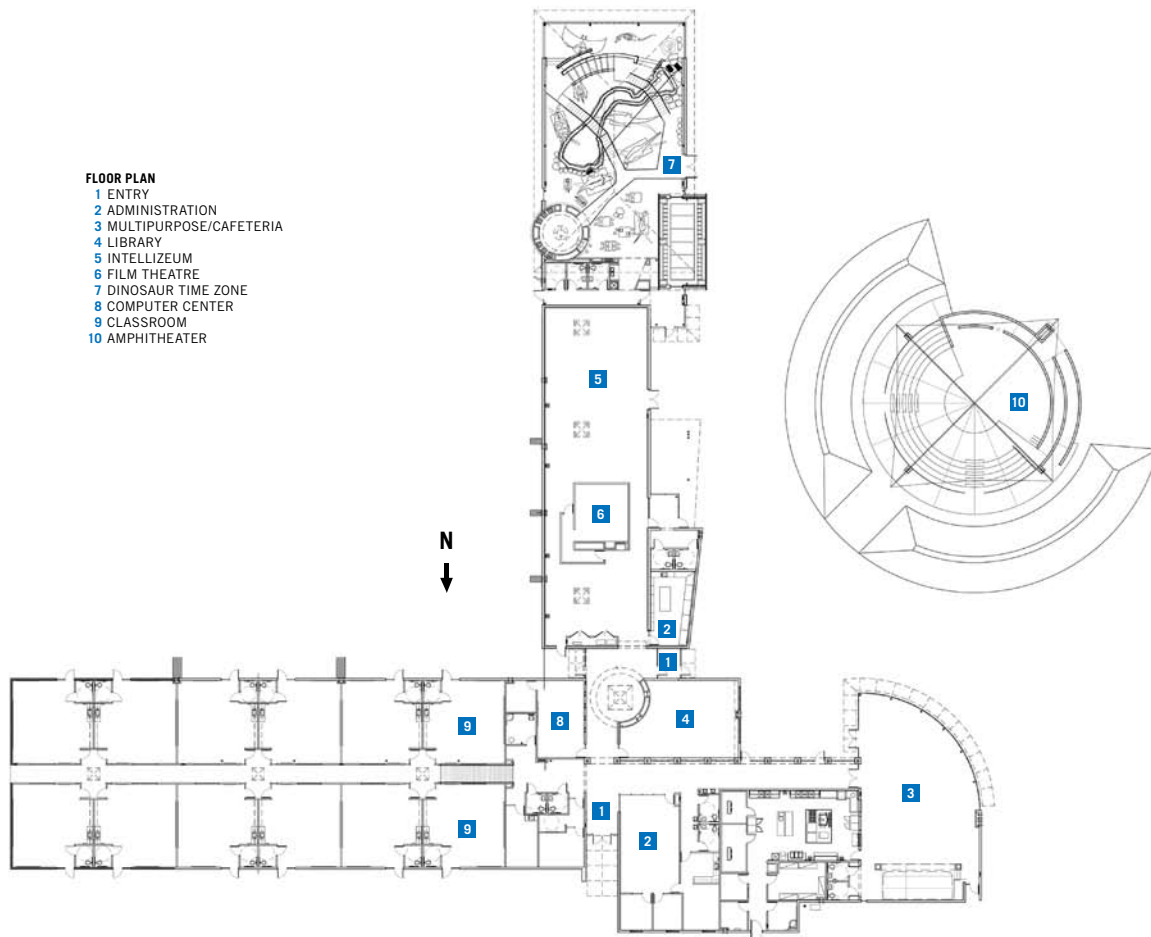
Perhaps one of the most coveted of Texas' assets is the diverse quality and intensity of sunlight found in its different regions. El Paso, situated at the state's farthest western tip, benefits most of all from the abundant sunshine. The unequalled characteristics of the area's natural light—a combination of its high altitude (3,500 feet at the banks of the Rio Grande) and the atmospheric conditions of its Chihuahuan Desert locale—demand that the best of its architecture respond sensitively with surface applications. Effective use of color is essential to maximize the effect of such brilliant sunlight. In fact, to quote Frank Welch, FAIA, who has 40-plus years of experience with the singular properties of sunshine in the western half of the state: “In West Texas, you have to color architecture brightly for it to sit properly in the landscape.”

Hence, the Uxer Head Start project's lively caravan of colored forms probably would not appear as powerful in Beaumont or Tyler or anywhere else in the state as it does at the extreme edge of West Texas. It is certainly refreshing to view an architect's alternate response to context by establishing a dialogue with exterior light rather than simply through the use of materials. As shown above, the choice of a deep yellow along the amphitheater's handicap-accessible ramp accentuates the unique qualities of sunshine over El Paso.



FLOOR PLAN

- 1 ENTRY
- 2 ADMINISTRATION
- 3 MULTIPURPOSE/CAFETERIA
- 4 LIBRARY
- 5 INTELLIZEUM
- 6 FILM THEATRE
- 7 DINOSAUR TIME ZONE
- 8 COMPUTER CENTER
- 9 CLASSROOM
- 10 AMPHITHEATER





Many of the facility's interiors are designed to arouse children's curiosity and draw them into the interactive experience.



Undoubtedly, such theatrics were meant to elicit a great amount of curiosity among young visitors about the contents inside.

Blanca Enriquez, director of the Head Start complex, envisioned a state-of-the-art learning environment for economically disadvantaged children, replete with learning stations and interactive exhibits. Her abiding desire to nurture youthful minds moved her to request that the architect collaborate on exhibits about space exploration, broadcast news, medicine, polar habitats, and jungle wildlife. Enriquez collaborated with the architect and exhibit designers Exhibit Concepts of Vandalia, Ohio, to accomplish this task by creating imaginary environments that feature various means of discovery perfectly suited for kids—scaled dinosaurs complete with sound, an interactive lab with microscopes, a waterfall and pond with live fish, an archeological dig with dinosaur bones, human anatomical diagrams, and—the hands-down favorite—a volcano with flashing lights to simulate an eruption. The simple palette of interior materials includes painted gypsum

board walls, exposed painted steel structure, and both colored and stained concrete floors. An array of brightly colored interior walls, tactile materials, and small-scale furnishings thoughtfully address the children's height and sensory perceptions. Despite the intensity of the interior composition, it nevertheless does not overwhelm the museum's exterior but instead evokes the same sense of amazement.

Although the project could have benefited greatly from the articulation of the simple exterior materials and additional manipulation of scale in some areas, further enhancing the playful gymnastics of sunlight, in the end it is true to its mission—to plant the seeds of wonder in fertile, young minds. **T**

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

RESOURCES STONE: Texas Quarries; METAL ROOFING: VIC West Steel; WOOD WINDOWS: Marvin Windows; METAL CEILING: WF Norman; WOOD FLOORING: San Pedro; ALUMINIUM CORNICE: Campbellsville Industries; RETAINING WALL: Classic Paving

While responding well
to the children's needs,
the complex addresses
its regional context via
the interaction of light.