

MODERNIZED MASTERPIECE



Hexagons, shown here above lunching students, are a consistent design element of the upgraded facility.

Vibrant colors and ample natural light add plenty of life to the transformed Sanchez Elementary.



Photo Credit (left): Leonid Fumansky



The revamped school is designed to serve about 500 students.

Austin-Based Elementary Gets Remarkable Revamp

By SCN Staff

WHEN it comes to astonishing upgrades that bring new life to a facility, it's hard to top the recent Texas undertaking that has energized students and staff at Austin's George I. Sánchez Elementary School.

One block east of Interstate Highway 35 and a few blocks north of Lady Bird Lake in downtown Austin, the school has undergone a remarkable renovation, vitally renewing it without overlooking the community's historic roots and values.

Pursuant to a voter-approved 2017 bond proposal, Austin Independent School District (AISD) invested approximately \$25 million in the future of the east Austin school. First built in 1976 and named after Dr. George I. Sánchez, a pioneer in bilingual education, the 80,000-square-foot modernized school is designed to serve just over 500 elementary students.

Working with a diverse community within a rapidly growing city, McKinney York Architects—including Project Principal Michelle Rossomando, AIA, RID; Project Architect Navvab Taylor, AIA, RID, LEED AP BD+C; and Project Manager Patricia Hunt, AIA, RID, LEED AP—spearheaded meetings with community stakeholders to enable all parties to contribute to the vision for the future of Sánchez Elementary.

McKinney York led dual-language community meetings, envisioning exercises, listening sessions, and surveys with groups of stakeholders including teachers, parents, and community members, throughout the ongoing process—encouraging vital input that was invaluable to the project's success.

“Community engagement made the entire project so much better,” reflected first President Rossomando. “The end result would not have had the richness or authenticity without the community's guidance and input.”

AISD Director of Bond Planning and Project Controls, Drew Johnson, added

Design Insights

Michelle Rossomando, AIA, RID, Principal, McKinney York Architects, recently shared some thoughts with SCN on her firm's amazing Austin undertaking.

How did the Sanchez Elementary project stand out most from other school projects you've worked on in recent years?

This was a great opportunity to work with Austin ISD on the implementation of their new 'Ed Specifications'—a set of guidelines to create 21st century learning environments to offer state-of-the-art technology and community spaces in modernized facilities. Much of our work focuses on spaces for high-quality education and these new principles reflect many of the same trends we are seeing at colleges and universities—flexible and collaborative learning spaces, communal gathering spaces, and spaces that support technology and audiovisual use.

Does the new facility encapsulate any vital current educational trends?

The new facility reflects current trends in education that learning happens in a variety of settings and needs to be flexible to accommodate individuals and small groups as well as the entire class. Classrooms are clustered into 'learning neighborhoods', which share an open collaborative space as well as several small group rooms. This encourages mobility and invites interaction between students, enhancing the learning experience.

What do you think are some of the most interesting spaces within the new school?

We turned an underutilized internal courtyard into a Learning Stair, now a vibrant gathering space at the heart of the school. This space extends the seating capacity of the Dining Commons for community-wide events, while also providing a direct connection to the upper-grade-level learning neighborhoods and Library. On a recent visit, the school was using the Learning Stair for a literary event, with books placed all over the seating area. As oral presentation is important to the dual-language school, we created small impromptu performance areas where students could practice speaking in front of their class, including one with a raised "stage". Finally, we created a new double-height space in a central location to honor the school's existing murals, which had to be relocated as part of the renovation. Here, teachers gather their students in a new collaboration space beneath the mural and utilize the artwork on a range of subjects, including geography, history, and art.

What kind of feedback have you received on the project so far?

On the first day of school this fall, we were thrilled to see Austin ISD Superintendent Stephanie Elizalde at Sánchez Elementary interviewed on the local news welcoming all the students and families back to campus. The site design changed drop-off and pick-up circulation by creating two separate entries—buses on the city side facing west and cars on the neighborhood side facing east. The vastly improved traffic flow and provided more space for queuing of vehicles at both locations. The principal recently shared that the kids are excited and love coming to the new school; she also stated that the renovation is so transformational, it's amazing to think that it's still the same building.



Students and staff alike have been energized by the school's terrific transformation.

"We utilized design elements such as color and pattern to instill the modernized school with the history and heritage of the community while at the same time being sustainable and staying within budget," Rossomando remarked.

The vibrant revitalization is earmarked by the infusion of colors, patterns, and geometry throughout the school. McKinney York incorporated natural colors layered against a neutral backdrop, and employed color blocking to define different program areas, accentuate points of entry, and articulate circulation paths. Rich iconography was used in room signage and wayfinding, as seen in the scrolled serpent floor pattern in the Dining area, which recalls a feature from the original building. The risers of the Learning Stair display virtue words in both English and Spanish, while room signage for communal gathering spaces employs three languages – Spanish, English, and Braille – in addition to colorful pictographs and the serpent motif.

Hexagons, another symbol carried forward from the original school, compose the ceiling of the Dining area and flow through the Learning

project data

Facility Name: AISD Sánchez Elementary Modernization

Type: Renovation

Construction Budget: \$21,834,678

Start Date: 01 / 2019

Completion Date: 09 / 2021

Area: 80,674 sf (building), 405,065 sf (project)

Owner/Operator: Austin Independent School District

Project Manager: Michelle Rossomando, AIA, RID, McKinney York Architects

Architect: McKinney York Architects

Landscape Architect: Garcia Design, Inc.

Interior Designer: McKinney York Architects

General Contractor: Flintco Construction

Structural Engineer: LEAPI Structures PLLC

MEP Engineer: TG&W Engineers, Inc.

Civil Engineer: Garza EMC LLC

Geotechnical Engineer: MLA Geotechnical

AEGB Consultant/Commissioning Authority: Studio D Consulting + Design/ ACR Engineering, Inc.

LEED Consultant: Studio 8

Communication Technology Consultant: DataCom Design Group

that "[McKinney York's] ability to slow down, engage the community and listen, learn, contemplate, wonder... - much of that groundwork is the cause for the success of the project."

With the school's main entrance angled toward the city, there was the sense that the original edifice had its back to the families it served. Reprogramming led to orienting the official public-facing uses toward the west side of the school, while the more intimate, community-focused spaces were accessible by the neighborhood to the east.

The architects realigned the main entry location and reconfigured the main circulation spine to connect four primary communal spaces (Dining, Fitness, Learning Stair, Library) and extended it outward to result in hospitable canopies at the East and West entries. The internal reorganization of the building also freed up the design team to blend previously disparate exterior play and activity areas, boosting access to the outdoor areas.

An underused internal courtyard was repurposed into a Learning Stair, which now serves as a popular gathering space at the center of the school. The newfound space also boosts the seating capacity of the Dining area for community wide events and furnishes a direct connection to the upper grade-level learning areas and Library.

Meandering through the main corridor between the east and west entries is an undulating wall inspired by a double-headed serpent. Wrapping around the community gathering spaces and reaching a zenith at the roof, the decorative element serves as an energizing beacon for the modernized Sánchez Elementary, like a snake that has shed its skin.

Another key approach to McKinney York's programming scheme was optimizing the existing "embedded value"—and keeping the Kitchen, Dining, and Fitness spaces in the same locations. This pragmatic approach took advantage of the existing building and also helped keep costs down.

A major goal of the transformation was to craft a modern educational hub that also embraced the community's heritage and values. McKinney York answered the challenge with an inclusive design that incorporated the region's bilingual Spanish-English culture, and both honored the past and anticipated the future.

Stair, culminating in the Library ceiling. There, hexagons in the millwork create intimate reading nooks, while other hexagonal niches display cultural artifacts and artwork from the school's historical tapestry. The consistent highlighting of these design elements fortifies a cohesive, school-wide identity. The design also incorporated original mosaic artworks and large-scale painted murals that were of vital importance to the school and community.

"McKinney York honored some of the cultural aspects, some of the historical components, but still pushed the project forward into modernization," acknowledged AISD's Johnson.

And now—invigorated by the venue's vibrant new look and fresh layout—the students at Sánchez Elementary are heading into the future without leaving the school's vital heritage behind.