



A Campus For **CAMP MOODY**

*Designing to build community
and open opportunities*

By Milton Hime

AT YMCA CAMP MOODY, a new overnight and day camp located near Austin, Texas, inclusive accessibility is at the heart of the design. All activities and amenities are linked by a fully accessible trail system and will include a lodge for gatherings, a dining hall, treehouse cabins, a ropes course/repelling/zip line/water tower, and art pavilions. Completed in 2020, the aquatic center is the first building in this multi-phased project. The project provides the first day and overnight camp facilities for the Austin YMCA, which had been the largest component of the non-profit in the country without such a campus.





RELATIONSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP

Building strong relationships with agencies and clients underpins the success of a project like Camp Moody, as does an understanding of and careful listening to the unique needs of the community. This is a skillset ingrained in the DNA of Studio8 and is essential to our ethos. The established narrative that fiscal stewardship and design are not compatible is a fallacy. Everyone deserves—and can have—well-designed places that raise people’s spirits and improve lives.

Studio8 had a strong, long-term relationship with the YMCA, particularly with the CEO of the YMCA of Austin, James Finck (he retired in 2021). Serving more than 65,000 members at eight facilities in three counties that are seeing explosive growth, the building projects fill an essential community need. Two successful YMCA projects became precursors to the work at Camp Moody: Armed Services YMCA in Harker Heights, Texas, and the city of Austin - YMCA North Austin Community Recreation Center.



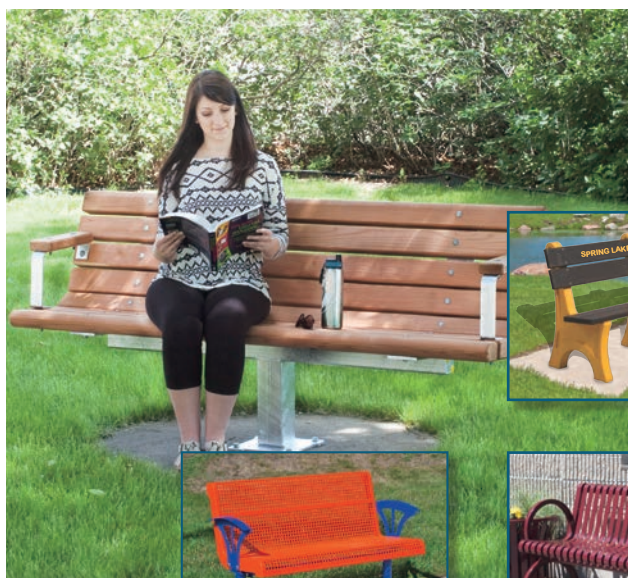


The Armed Services YMCA, the largest recreation center in the area, was built in partnership with the city of Harker Heights, adjacent to Killeen, which is home to Fort Hood. The project's partnership with Seton Hospital and Killeen ISD provided a bigger pool and rehabilitative physical and occupational care, an essential service in this community of veterans and active-duty military.

Similarly, the North Austin Center fills an essential community need. Residents of this diverse neighborhood had fought for years for a much-needed civic center. In response, the YMCA facility integrates with a city park to share amenities, including parking, in order to devote more land for services.

For the Camp Moody project, the YMCA partnered with Hays County Independent School District to provide a natatorium to be used by students as well as the community. While a swimming pool is a major asset in this growing exurb of Austin, the school district lacked the resources and knowledge to manage a pool (critical for communities of color, that typically lack the opportunity to learn to swim at an early age), a service

the YMCA easily fulfilled. Studio8 presented an initial rendering that was used to solicit funding, and stayed with the project throughout that phase. As the project developed, camping trips and evenings around campfires with donors and administrators helped fuel the design vision, and brought many voices to the conversation. Most donors are themselves enthusiastic users of the camp, which made the process even more interactive and personal. Summer camp is often thought of as a rite of passage, but it is a privilege that is out of reach for many kids. The commitment to ensure inclusivity on all fronts and to create a place where everyone enjoys that privilege was deeply embedded in donors' minds from beginning to end.



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OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSION AND EQUITY

Located on the southern outskirts of Austin, Camp Moody's presence means that kids can be easily dropped off (or transported from the city) and quickly find themselves in beautiful, pristine wilderness. This has made the traditional experience of summer accessible to a population for whom the travel to and expense of overnight camps was a barrier. The Austin YMCA had years of experience in meeting both social and economic needs in communities in the city and finding creative ways to make good on its promises to the neighborhoods. At Camp Moody, that knowledge, combined with an enthusiastic donor base and welcoming local community, has created a very special place.

The idea to make the camp fully accessible to everyone and to actually integrate that accessibility was a driving force from the early stages, thanks to the involvement of a young activist who had already instigated full accommodations to his own high school. Families and children with disabilities had a say in how the camp was designed. All decisions were made with this goal in mind as we selected surfaces, finishes, and equipment, and designed circulation patterns, restrooms—and most importantly—overnight facilities. Here, every camper can participate fully in every activity.



With limestone bluffs and rolling hills, spring-fed watering holes, and abundant live oak, elm, and Mexican buckeye trees, the 85-acre property, with its unique character and diversity, greatly influenced the planning for the camp. The planning assessed the character zones of the property and determined specific activities that would be best suited to each zone. Each activity area gives visitors a variety of camp experiences, all linked by a trail system with multiple loops returning to the lodge, the heart of the camp. Once all buildings are completed, the camp will be able to host a variety of events in addition to sleepaway camps, including retreats, meetings, and special events.

We continually strive to demonstrate how architecture and placemaking are essential platforms for addressing community needs, leveling systemic inequities, combating climate change, and innovating design and construction in addition to fulfilling a fundamental need for shelter, beauty, and inspiration. At a time when professional services are more monetized and marginalized, architects are positioned to meet these real-world challenges. These include understanding shifting realities of where needs exist and helping organizations anticipate these changes. Becoming engaged at every level of practice also appeals to younger professionals who approach design through a broader community lens, which bodes well for the future. YMCA Camp Moody shows that a well-designed place that raises people's spirits and improves lives is achievable and accessible for everyone. **CB**

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