

Design with a purpose

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Before the January 2005 completion of the retaining wall at the Texas School for the Deaf on South Congress Avenue, the elevated sidewalk in front of the building wasn't easily accessible by handicapped pedestrians. Thanks to a partnership between the City of Austin and the State of Texas, however, the community now enjoys a street-level, tree-lined, 15-foot-wide sidewalk, as well as more parking and a bus stop.

The improvements have brought a new sense of pride to the TSD campus.

"The wall has given the school a new presence in the community, more posi-

tive public relations and awareness," says Claire Bugen, TSD superintendent. "It has created stronger bonds with the local South Congress merchants, working together to strengthen the community of SoCo."

The retaining wall was part of a larger TSD construction project, which began in the early 1990s. This phase of the project was given higher priority when the existing retaining wall collapsed in August 2001 and raised safety concerns.

The state approached the City of Austin with a design concept for the wall and asked the city, which had expressed interest in the South Congress StreetScape Improvement Project, to become involved.

Pollyanne Melton, urban designer with the Austin Neighborhood Planning and Zoning Department, says the project was a victory for the state and city.

"The city did not have enough money to do this itself, nor did the state, but the state had momentum going with project management, construction and design teams," Melton says. "They were asking the city only for funding, and we put \$500,000 toward a \$1.3 million construction project and solved a bunch of problems at the same time."

When the city agreed to partner with the state on the project, leaders asked that street-level parking, more trees and a wider walkway be added to the design plan. The Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority eventually became involved, contributing \$20,000 that added to the project a covered bus stop in front of the school.

The split-face stone wall has a serpentine design. Jan Cartwright, a now-retired architect who worked for Barnes Gromatzky Kosarek Architects Inc. during the schematic phase of the project, says the team used limestone because it reflects the area behind the wall.

"The design added a sense of flow, interest and strength to the length of the wall, which makes the wall as unique as South Congress," Bugen says.

Carl Gromatzky, principal at Austin-based Barnes Gromatzky Kosarek, says the shape of the design left concave areas for the more than 20 right-angled planters along the bottom of the wall. Vines will cover the wall eventually to deter graffiti artists.

The biggest challenge faced in constructing the wall was excavating the bedrock in the area. The team had to make space for cuts as wide as 15 vertical feet while preserving existing live oak trees, and the limestone was a barrier to positioning trees along the wall.

After installing the wall, the team discovered drainage problems that prevented tree-root water from draining adequately. The problem was solved by drilling cores through the limestone.

Melton says another challenge involved meeting each entity's legal and technical

requirements. She says it took negotiation and finding common ground, but when the state's and city's legal departments communicated directly, everyone realized they wanted to see the project accomplished.

"We killed a lot of birds with one stone in getting this project done," Melton says. "This should serve as a demonstration project for other joint development projects along South Congress Avenue in the future."

Architectural
Design



Winner

'It has created stronger bonds with the local South Congress merchants.'

Claire Bugen
TSD superintendent

IN DETAIL

ADDRESS: 1102 South Congress Avenue, 78704

PROJECT START DATE: November 2004

PROJECT COMPLETION DATE: January 2005

COST OF PROJECT: \$1.26 million

SIZE OF PROJECT: 900 linear feet

CONSTRUCTION MANAGERS: Flynn Construction Inc., State of Texas Building and Procurement Commission

DEVELOPER: State of Texas Building and Procurement Commission

ARCHITECT: Barnes Gromatzky Kosarek Architects Inc.

CIVIL ENGINEER: Raymond Chan & Associates Inc.

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Frank Lam and Associates Inc.

MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL AND PLUMBING ENGINEERS: HMG & Associates Inc.

FINANCIER: State of Texas