

Making a mark

TONYIA SULLIVAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Several years ago, the leadership at Whole Foods Market Inc. came to realize that the shopping experience at the Austin-based natural and organic food store had become dated.

Jim Sud, executive vice president of growth and business development for Whole Foods, says the opportunity and space to build an 80,000-square-foot store in downtown Austin enabled Whole Foods Market to bring the latest stage in natural foods' evolution home to Austin.

The project included building a new landmark store and six-story, 200,000-square-foot headquarters across the street from the original Sixth Street and Lamar Boulevard location.

In addition to natural and organic groceries, the new store offers dine-in and takeout areas, cooking demonstrations and food sampling, and a whole-body department with body care, cosmetics, fitness products and supplements.

Above the store is a landscaped, 25,000-square-foot roof garden and plaza with shaded seats, entertainment space, a playscape and a stream. Three levels of underground parking hold 900 automobiles.

Deborah Fuller, senior designer at Dallas-based Lauckgroup Inc., says the end result of the national headquarters project reflects the ideas that were first generated at a brainstorming and visualization session that explored Whole Foods' corporate culture.

In the new building, each employee has access to daylight, and an under-floor heating and air conditioning system allows each employee individual temperature control.

Employee break rooms and coffee bars offer the building's best views. Colors used

are reflective of nature and natural fruits and vegetables, and exposed concrete floors and open ceilings create an urban, minimalist feel. The environmentally friendly materials used are sustainable, low-maintenance and durable.

"The client wanted the new facility to reflect their core beliefs and employee satisfaction," Fuller says. "Creating a space that was conducive to wellness was central to the design strategy."

John Straub, senior project manager at White Construction Co., which handled interior construction of the Whole Foods landmark store, says the space is impressive and unique.

"It stands out head and shoulders above anything else I have ever done," he says.

Bill Farnum, vice president of preconstruction services for White Construction, says that coordinating the intense mechanical, plumbing, electrical and refrigeration elements, along with other equipment in the store, such as stoves, ovens and coffee

brewers, was challenging. On top of the challenges was added a time crunch of five and a half months to complete construction.

In order to bring all the elements together, Farnum says White Construction began working with the architects and engineers from Austin-based Dynamic Systems Inc. and Schmidt Electric Co. LP early in the project.

Dynamic Systems and Schmidt Electric assisted with preconstruction and construction services and established a budget.

Creating unusual spaces with minimal materials was difficult under a conservative budget, Fuller says, but the final Whole Foods project reflects Austin's unique character.

Sud says Austin's character and the various departments of the store were what the corporation had in mind when planning the landmark building.

"I believe the project has fit into the Austin landscape and character by creating an incredible store, and what we had hoped and believed has come to pass in terms of also creating a community gathering place for people to enjoy great food, a great shopping environment, entertainment and, in

IN DETAIL

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS ADDRESS: 550 Bowie St., 78703

LANDMARK STORE ADDRESS: 525 N. Lamar Blvd., 78703

PROJECT START DATE: Late spring 2003

OFFICE COMPLETION DATE: January 2005

STORE COMPLETION DATE: March 2005

SIZE OF PROJECT: 200,000 square feet

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER: White Construction Co.

STORE ARCHITECT: CTA Inc.

STORE ENGINEER: CTA Inc.

HEADQUARTERS ARCHITECTS: Lauckgroup Inc.

HEADQUARTERS ENGINEERS: Blum Consulting Engineers Inc., Hill Electric Co.

general, just a fun place to come and hang out," Sud says.

Jack Tisdale, principal of Susman Tisdale Gayle Architects Inc. and chairman of the Best Real Estate Awards judging panel, says one of the reasons the panel found the Whole Foods building to be the best overall award winner was its significance as Austin's downtown develops into a vibrant place to live and work.

