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Artist Henry Raeburn worked with Alamo Architects to give the Maury Maverick Jr. Branch Library a strong identity on the street. The far Northwest Side library opened three weeks ago.

Style, function converge here

S.A.'s newest branch libraries are tributes to thoughtful design.

BY MIKE GREENBERG
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With rare exceptions, San Antonio civic architecture in the last few decades of the 20th century was pointedly, aggressively mediocre, to put it kindly.

Strength in design was not even a consideration in the selection of architecture firms. Good buildings happened purely by the luck of the draw. Art? That was the taggers' responsibility.

Times have changed. Consider the first three branch libraries to be completed under a 1999 bond issue. All three are delightful and inviting neighborhood landmarks, distinctive products of three firms with strong design traditions. All three incorporate work by widely respected local artists who are not known to be members of street gangs.

The Maury Maverick Jr. Branch Library, named for a prominent civil-rights lawyer and longtime Express-News columnist, opened off Bandera Road on the far Northwest Side three weeks ago. Alamo Architects designed the building, along with the adjacent Fire Station No. 49, and the artist was Henry Raeburn.

Last fall the Julia Yates Semmes Branch Library, named for a philanthropist who supported library collections for the visually

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Libraries are inviting, functional civic spaces

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impaired, opened at the corner of Judson Road and Nacogdoches Road, at the edge of Comanche Lookout Park on the far Northeast Side. The architecture firm was Rehler Vaughn & Koone and the artist was sculptor George Schroeder.

First out of the gate, in mid-2004, was the Henry Guerra Branch Library, named for a beloved broadcast news pioneer and historian, on Military Drive West on the Southwest Side. Sprinkle-Robey Architects designed the building and Henry Stein was the artist.

All three projects faced a common challenge: how to respond to a diffused suburban environment that had little in the way of architectural character. There being no "there" there, each design firm had to invent one, more or less from scratch. The three firms devised very different and variously successful strategies for addressing the street — always a difficult issue in such locations.

Alamo Architects started with an advantage: Given the task of designing the Maverick Library and a fire station on adjoining tracts at the same time, the firm had the opportunity to create a unified civic complex.

The two buildings use the same materials palette of stucco above a base of yellow brick with green glazed-brick "dots." Their rooflines are similar in style, with inverted pitches. The fire station's two-bay equipment wing and a portion of the library's main public space are similar masses facing the street, each with its attached pylon sign.

On the library, that mass addresses the street in a playful and colorful way with a three-dimensional mural by Raeburn.

Large metal letter forms in a variety of fonts, colors and orientations spell "LibRaRY" above the roof overhang. Irregular metal forms suggesting flowers and foliage weave among metal mesh screens subtly painted with a pattern based on floral-print wallpaper. A few more large letter forms are attached to the wall.

Thus, the library has a strong presence on the street, even though much of the building is hidden behind a stand of old live



PHOTOS BY MIKE GREENBERG/STAFF

RVK Architects designed a thin, flat roof above limestone walls for the Julia Yates Semmes Branch Library.

All three of these branch libraries are pleasant and functional environments.

oaks and the entrance is in the rear, facing the parking lot.

Inside, the main distinctions are the dramatic window walls, giving close-up views of those wonderful trees, and the dramatic ceiling of acoustical panels arrayed in complex waves that rise and fall among the exposed ductwork. The carpet tile design continues the wave idea, as do exterior light fixtures.

The design concept for the Semmes Library may be best appreciated as you approach the site driving north on Nacogdoches Road. There's a paradoxical but very strong resonance between the building's wafer-thin flat roof, supported on a metal space frame above limestone walls, and the Comanche Lookout hill rising behind it.

The entry is on the side, facing a parking lot that serves both the library and one of the park's trail heads. But the main orientation is toward the park: Window walls 18 feet high give the reading room and stacks a wide-screen, uninterrupted view of the wooded park, its namesake peak and a small wetland watered by runoff from the parking lot. The ample north light coming through those win-



Acoustical 'wave' panels energize the Maverick Library's interior.

dow walls also reduces the need for artificial lighting. Interior fluorescents adjust automatically to the natural light conditions.

The flat roof extends on a diagonal well beyond the building's three stepped-back bays to create sheltered outdoor spaces for seating groups. Project architect Heath Wenrich says the flat roof was conceived by partner RVK founding partner Ken Rehler, who died soon after the library opened.

The focal point of the terraces is Schroeder's steel sculpture of three tall, curving bands that respond loosely to the form of the hill beyond. Schroeder also fabricated light fixtures and sconces designed by RVK: The sconces on the entry columns are punched with holes that spell Semmes' name in Braille.

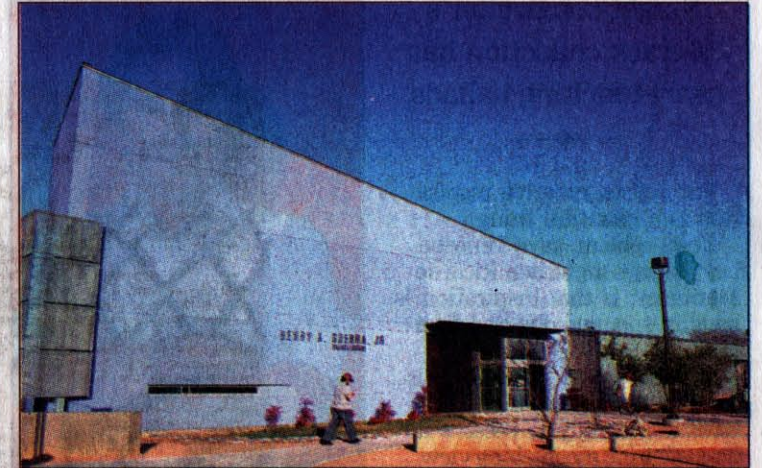


A limestone wall separates the Semmes Library's children's area.

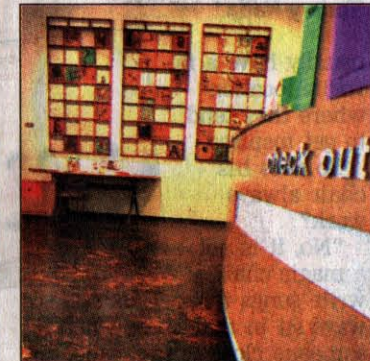
Near the entrance stand two cisterns that collect rainwater from the roof — a purely theoretical possibility in recent months, but in normal times the stored water is expected to be enough to irrigate a patch of landscaping along Judson Road.

Alas, the Semmes Library's deep setback from Nacogdoches Road and the placement of the loading dock and employee parking lot on the Judson Road frontage devalue the street as a locus of civic life.

By contrast, Sprinkle-Robey's design for the Guerra Library invigorates the street with a bold blue stucco wedge that responds to the rich colors of the



Sprinkle-Robey Architects used several stuccos to texturize the blue wedge of the Henry Guerra Branch Library on the Southwest Side.



Artist Henry Stein's found objects dress up the Guerra Library's entry.

nearby Resurrection of the Lord Catholic Church, designed by Speegle & Associates.

The blue volume holds the entry and a meeting room, whose corner window is shielded from the west sun by a perforated metal screen that nicely punctuates the street presence.

In plan, the building is an L, with administrative and public wings radiating from the entry.

Both wings are simple shed forms with standing-seam metal cladding on the low sides, facing the street on the west and the parking lot on the south. Weathered steel panels screen the loading dock and accent the entry.

The high sides, facing a small courtyard and the church's athletic field, are mostly glass, pulling natural light from the east and north into the staff break room and the main public space. Both wings have some operable windows, allowing cross-ventilation to reduce the need for air conditioning in mild weather.

A bright orange box penetrating the glazed wall in the children's area is an intimate space

for storytelling or other kids' programs.

Federal Community Development Block Grant money funded some upgrades in finishes: The staff wing and entry have soft rubber flooring with swirls of color custom-mixed to match the building. Circulation and reference desks are topped with natural stone. Adult reading and computer desks tables are handsome solid-wood pieces designed locally by Peter Glassford and fabricated in Mexico.

Stein's arrays of found objects decorate the entry walls near the circulation desk.

All three of these branch libraries are pleasant and functional environments, and they're all real architecture, celebrating form and the craft of building. They're all heavily used neighborhood assets.

Although these three libraries honor three late community leaders in their names, they also can be seen as a tribute to a leader who is still living:

In retrospect, it's clear that the city's shift from malign neglect to the enthusiastic embrace of architecture can be traced to the early 1990s, when Marie Swartz, then chairwoman of the Library Board, insisted that the Central Library should be designed by a first-rate architect.

The design competition for the Central Library, and the general approval that greeted Ricardo Legorreta's colorful essay when it opened in 1995, established a public demand for artful design in civic facilities. After that, the city couldn't turn back.

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