

Open-Air Market

by BRANTLEY HIGHTOWER



PROJECT The Shops at La Canterra, San Antonio
CLIENT La Canterra Real Estate Limited Partnership
ARCHITECT Alamo Architects
CONTRACTOR The Whiting-Turner Company
CONSULTANTS J.Robert Anderson, FASLA (landscape); Dan Pope (irrigation); Jaster-Quintanilla & Associates (structural); Goetting and Associates (MEP); Kaplan Partners Architectural Lighting (lighting); Pape-Dawson Engineering, Inc. (civil); The University of Arizona: Comfort Consultant-Environmental Research Lab, Martin Yoklic (environmental)
PHOTOGRAPHER Bob Wickley

(above) Seen as a prototype for future outdoor malls, the 1.3 million-square-foot open-air retail center was conceived to address concerns about responsible land use as well as in response to changes in shopping patterns. (opposite page) Water features were designed to minimize water loss through evaporation and appear as natural features when turned off in drought season.

IT might at first seem counterintuitive to consider a shopping mall as an example of place-making. Malls are almost by definition place-less elements of an ever-expanding generic suburban landscape. While The Shops at La Canterra project is on the one hand yet another regional mall at the edge of yet another expanding suburb, its innovative design challenges the standard way of thinking about malls and in doing so creates a shopping experience that is truly unique to its place in the Hill Country just north of San Antonio.

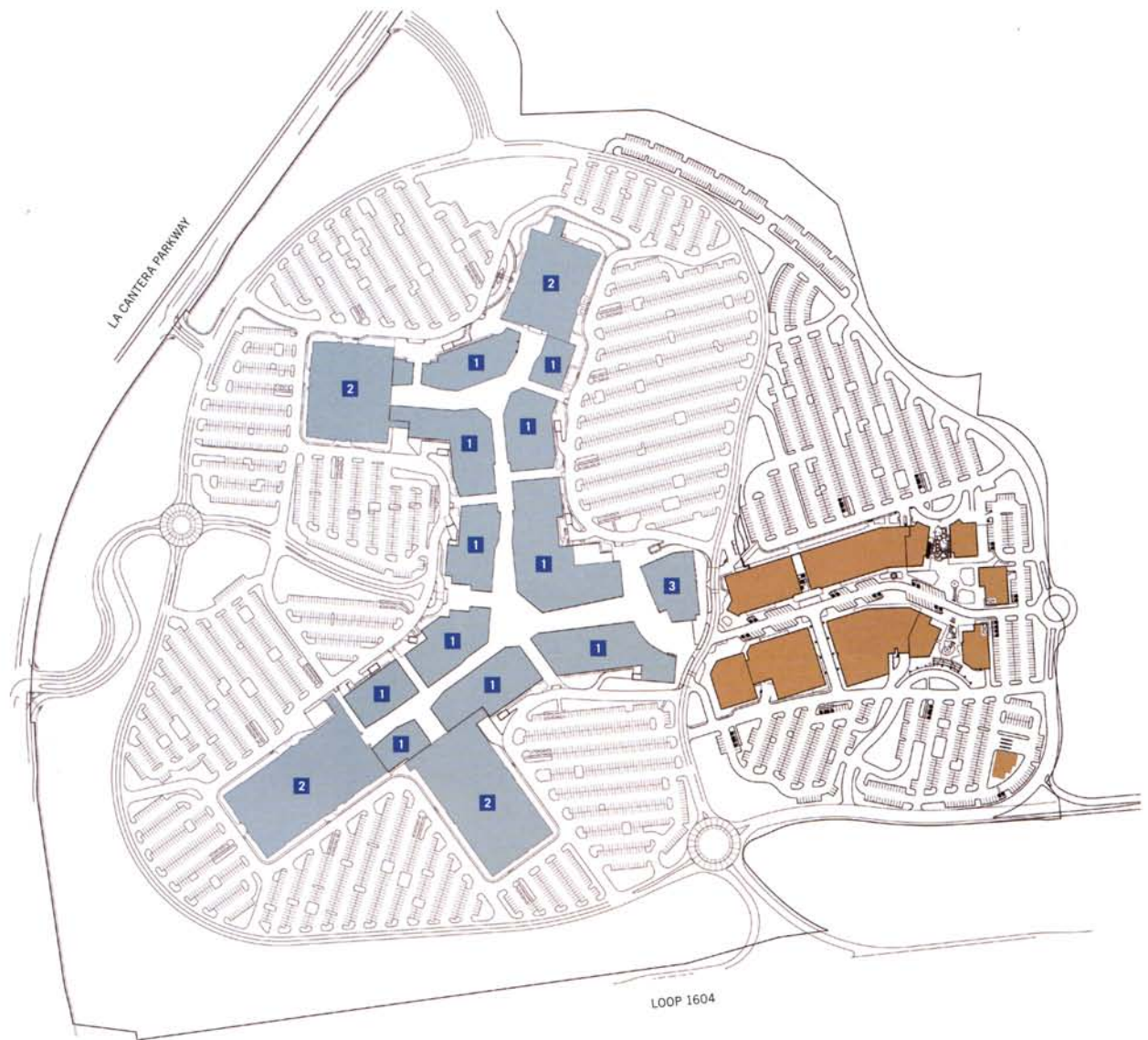
As is often the case with successful architectural projects, this one began with a client group that was interested in trying something new and an architectural team that was able and willing to fully explore and execute that potential. Market surveys had indicated to the client that shoppers were growing weary of the standard mall model with its regular geometries, minimal and often artificial interior landscaping, and the contrived re-creation of a park-like environment indoors. One possible response to this was to jettison the simulation of an outdoor park and instead build the mall concourses as an actual outdoor environment. While the stores would remain climate-controlled, the concourses that connect them to one another would be left open to the elements. With this general concept, the client approached Alamo Architects and tasked the firm with exploring the concept of an open-air mall.

While models of this approach exist in regions that enjoy milder climates, doing so in Central Texas with its extreme temperatures was identified as the primary challenge. In order to make the idea work, Alamo Architects needed to develop a series of strategies for addressing thermal concerns for a complex of large buildings with varying orientations. One of their first moves was to bring on an environmental consultant who helped them perform a detailed climate analysis. The consultant also assisted in developing, modeling, and testing of multiple strategies to ensure that the mall complex



SITE PLAN
1 SINGLE-LEVEL RETAIL
2 DEPARTMENT STORES
3 FOOD COURT

NEW CONSTRUCTION
FUTURE EXPANSION



offered a variety of “comfort experiences”—meaning that each concourse would have a combination of areas with sun, shade, and dappled light. In addition to controlling sunlight, building masses and canopies were designed to capture optimal cooling breezes. Where this proved inefficient, vortex and ceiling fans were installed to increase air circulation.

Beyond the design responses that relate The Shops at La Canterra to its specific place environmentally, many of the materials and stylistic moves made by Alamo Architects reflect or reinterpret architectural elements already found in and around San Antonio. From the colorful cement tiles found on stair risers to the pierced copper light finials, examples of Mexican craftsmanship exist throughout the development. Hand-carved stone fountain elements and tables made by the Cortez family—a dynasty of San Antonio craftsmen who have been building whimsical bus stops, bridges and park structures for generations—are sprinkled throughout the mall as well.

While the variety of form and material can be overwhelming at times, potential criticism is countered by the fact that these are not merely aesthetic flourishes but necessary parts of the larger climate mitigation system.

The shops themselves are arranged in plan in a casual relationship to one another that further distinguishes them from the more formal galleries found in other malls. This is in many ways the result of an early decision that was made regarding the existing landscape. While much of the site was cleared to make room for the mall, nearly 30 old-growth trees were earmarked for conservation and moved into the common areas of the mall itself. The organic design that resulted possesses the added effect of creating a series of informal rooms onto which multiple shops face. These rooms are individually landscaped to reflect the ecological diversity of Central Texas while at the same time developing separate identities for different parts of the mall.



(left) Material selections for the food court ground the project to its region. (above) The rambling layout – with courtyards, paseos, and gardens connecting the stores – emulates the open-air markets of old San Antonio. Alamo Architects is designing the development's second phase.

Similarly, the surface parking that surrounds the mall is subdivided into smaller units by fingers of landscape that radiate from the mall. Many existing trees were left in place, and that strategy further acts to break up the considerable mass of these lots while preserving at least a trace of the original landscape condition. This original condition is preserved in its entirety in the greenbelt of undeveloped land that serves as a natural buffer between the mall and the two highways from which it is accessed. Rather than immediately entering a sea of parking after exiting a ribbon of highway, visitors to The Shops at La Cantera first pass through a perimeter of trees and native landscaping. Thus, before even seeing the mall, one is aware that they are visiting a very different kind of place.

The Shops at La Cantera is most impressive when seen in contrast to standard shopping mall design. While the project still follows a familiar model to achieve a standard set of financial goals, the manner in which that model is interpreted and how those goals are sought have been altered enough to create a truly unique place to shop. (A second phase, currently being designed by Alamo Architects, is scheduled to open next year.)

Toward the end of his career, Alvar Aalto was noted to have said "You can't change the world; you can only set it an example." Likewise, no architect could be expected to change the pattern of suburban development or the need of suburbanites to have a place to go to buy new shoes, jeans, and iPods. But by taking a familiar program type, then questioning the assumptions that had previously determined its typical form, and ultimately providing practical and workable architectural solutions for today, Alamo Architects has succeeded in providing San Antonio with a good example of a mall that is closely grounded to its place. ■

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RESOURCES LAMINATES: Wilsonart, Advanced Technology Inc., Pionite Decorative Surfaces; DECORATIVE GLAZING: Skyline Design; PAINTS: ICI; CERAMIC TILE: Casa Dolce Casa, Daltile; RESILIENT TILE FLOORING: Armstrong Commercial Flooring, Johnsonite; CARPET: InterfaceFLOR