

We have no city, except perhaps New Orleans, that can vie in point of the picturesque interest that attaches to odd and antiquated foreignness with San Antonio.

Frederick Law Olmsted

# Going South

DREXEL TURNER

## The New San Antonio Main Library



Photograph by Summa-Rush

Market Street entrance, "Hertzberg" building, San Antonio Public Library, 1930. Cervantes (left) and Shakespeare flank entrance arch.



James Riely Gordon, Carnegie Library, 1903.



Herbert S. Green, "Hertzberg" building, 1930.



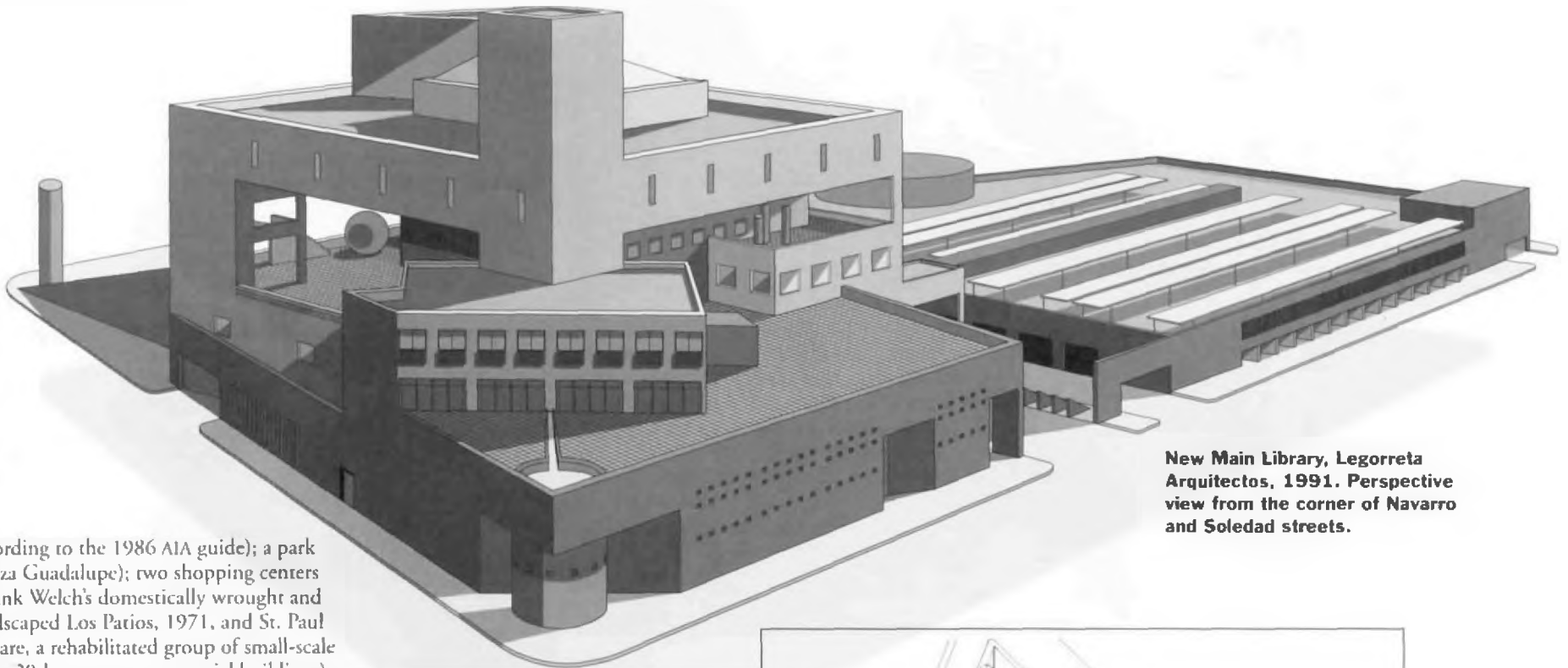
Ben Wyatt and Phillip Carrington, Main Library, 1968.

The site, located on the transitional north edge of downtown near an elevated section of Interstate Highway 35, is that of a vacated Sears store (which will be demolished) and its parking garage (which will be retained). The three-level garage, which spreads over most of the south half of the irregularly pentagonal 4.7-acre parcel, offers an amenity that the library's present, more centrally located River Walk building on Market Street does not. But the new site admits little in the way of appreciable views inward, except from the parking lot of the Southwest Crafts Center, the former Ursuline Convent, which constitutes the area's primary architectural asset. In addition, it is hemmed in on other sides by Baptist Hospital and parking garage and by a small but assertive bank building of precast concrete construction. Even the area's sole park, a small, wedge-shaped remnant of Romana Plaza, most of which was ceded to construct the hospital, bears only a tangential relation to the prowlike northwest corner of the site.

The program offered for the guidance of four competing teams of architects specified an initial construction phase, to be completed in 1993, of 175,000 square feet, almost 20 percent larger than McKim, Mead & White's Boston Public Library. A second phase, projected for 1998, would increase the building's area to 350,000 square feet. In what it called "form goals" — although they were no less concerned with feeling — the program advocated an almost unlibrarylike lack of reserve. The building was to "be welcoming, not intimidating"; look "like a public library, not an academic library"; and provide "a space that makes visitors say 'WOW!' and want to show it off to others, . . . an environment that is friendly, comfortable and inviting." Under the heading of "functional goals," the program aspired to a building that would "serve for 50-75 years," inasmuch as it would be the fourth main library to be built in San Antonio since 1900. The present building, a non-descript, all-but-windowless expedient of 1968 by Ben Wyatt and Phillip Carrington, will have sufficed just 25 years by the time the new building is completed. Its predecessor, Herbert S. Green's repository of 1930, still extant but underused (and of which more will be said later), served only 38 years after replacing, *in situ*, James Riely Gordon's somewhat labored tempietto of 1903, built with Carnegie funds.

Although the architects were directed "to give primary consideration to interior aesthetics and function," they were nevertheless furnished a list of a dozen exemplary local buildings compiled by the library planning workshop to assist in the conception of "a structure unique to San Antonio." This curiously eclectic assortment of styles and types included two public buildings (James Riely Gordon's Romanesque Revival Bexar County Courthouse of 1896 and the Ayres, Jackson, and Willis Spanish Colonial Revival City Auditorium of 1926); five office towers from the late 1920s (three Gothic, one castellated, and one "vaguely Spanish Renaissance."

No Texas city provides an architectural context as rich and historic as that of San Antonio, nor seems as predisposed in principle to build on such a basis. This may account for the 1986 American Institute of Architects' *Guide to San Antonio Architecture's* report, despite scant built evidence, of "an amazing renaissance beginning in the late 1970s wherein the city's Baroque and vernacular traditions have been fused in an intense, exuberant new school of local architecture, one that sums up in uninhibited ways the qualities peculiar to its place." This spring's competition for a new library building "unique to San Antonio" similarly reflects the difficulty of reconciling romantic inclinations with building art, no matter how deep or cherished a city's roots. For the winning design by Ricardo Legorreta (in association with Johnson-Dempsey & Associates, Inc., and Davis Sprinkle Architect) prevailed mainly on the basis of a tougher love, by fusing the austere, sensual tendencies of Luis Barragán, Legorreta's mentor, with a formally demonstrative if functionally ambiguous international modernism more readily forgiving of the site's considerable deficiencies.



**New Main Library, Legorreta Arquitectos, 1991. Perspective view from the corner of Navarro and Soledad streets.**

according to the 1986 AIA guide); a park (Plaza Guadalupe); two shopping centers (Frank Welch's domestically wrought and landscaped Los Patios, 1971, and St. Paul Square, a rehabilitated group of small-scale early-20th-century commercial buildings); and two adaptive reuse complexes (the Ursuline Academy and Convent, 1851 and after, now the Southwest Craft Center, and the former U.S. Army Arsenal, 1859 and 1916, now the H.E.B. Grocery Company headquarters). Absent were the city's Spanish missions (including the Alamo, which in its definitive iconographic state represents the joint efforts of Franciscan architects and U.S. Army engineers); Robert H. H. Hugman's River Walk of 1938-41, San Antonio's most widely appreciated urban feature; Ralph H. Cameron and Paul Philippe Cret's U.S. Post Office and Courthouse of 1937, a majestic yet tactful addition to Alamo Plaza that serves as the Beaux-Arts equivalent of Gordon's Bexar County Courthouse, rendered in a regionally inflected classicism; and several spirited buildings employing Meso-American motifs (the Aztec Theater, 1927, and the Mayan deco Casino Club, 1926, both by the Kelwood Company.

Also missing was Herbert Green's previously noted San Antonio Public Library of 1930 on Market Street, a pleasantly instructive, locally exotic building of mostly external charm, part of which now houses the library's Hertzberg collection of circusana. The 1986 AIA guide identifies the "Hertzberg" as "San Antonio's finest example of Modern classicism as espoused by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue," though its virtues are more encompassing. These include its original step-back massing, now somewhat obscured by the addition in 1942 of gallery space to either side of its massive, overscaled entry, which leads up to a short, blocky tower of stacks that converts, on its rear, River Walk face, to an alignment of six mini-stories set within a pilastered cage. Sculptured figures of Cervantes and Shakespeare rise in high relief on either side of the main entrance, flanking a motto from Emerson: "Books are the homes of the American people." Epigraphs by William Ellery Channing ("In the best books, great men talk to us, give us their most precious thoughts and pour their souls into ours") and James A. Garfield ("Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained") appear over the entrances on the side elevations, where additional sculptural reliefs were also planned but not executed. The effect is legible, direct, and engaging if not "unique to San Antonio," apart from the pairing of the stone-faced front doormen.



**Ground floor plan.**

The only library close at hand that might pass as an authentically fictionalized San Antonio commodity is Ralph Adams Cram's Houston Public Library of 1926, whose readily identifiable Spanish Renaissance extraction is unfortunately compromised by its brown brick facing, employed as a cost-cutting alternative to limestone. Cret's Hispanically inclined classicism at the University of Texas (particularly the warmer West Mall buildings, the Texas Union and Goldsmith Hall, 1931-33) exhibits a parallel aptitude, appositely clad, and served as a partial model for the competition entry prepared by JonesKell Architects/Reitzer Cruz with William Curtis Architect - a long, extendable superpalazzo that ranged impressively along Navarro Street in a manner approximating the serial progression of Gordon's

Bexar County Courthouse. It fronted, like the courthouse, on its short side, with a polychromed cupola-rotunda looking onto Soledad Street. The scheme prepared by Rehler Vaughn Beary & Koone/Hammond Beeby & Babka was similarly disposed in mass but fronted on its long, Navarro Street side, capped by a shallow, colorfully patterned tile dome - a motif borrowed from the Municipal Auditorium. In elevation it posited a more severely abstracted, planar classicism and, like Cret's library and administration building at UT (1931-33), projected a rear tower, though diminished in relation to the main mass and placed off center. The Saldaña Associates/CRSS Architects Inc. entry was historically detached and formally less resolved, but hinted at the latent possibilities of the site's prowlike corner at Navarro and Soledad.

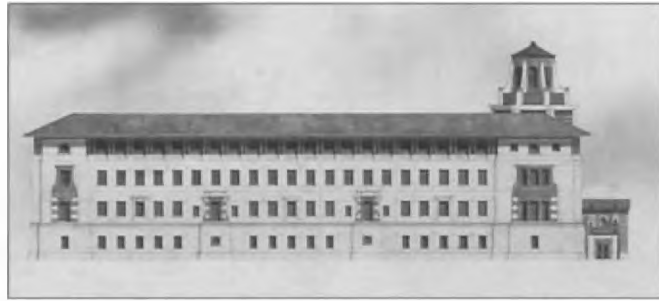
Legorreta's scheme was cited by the jury for its success in dealing with "the contemporary reality of the site" and was also characterized as "tough and rich and simple." In plan, its point of departure and



**Above: New Main Library, Legorreta Arquitectos, 1991. Site plan.**



**Navarro Street elevation.**



**JonesKell Architects/Reitzer Cruz with William Curtis. Soledad Street elevation (left) and Navarro Street elevation.**



**Rehler Vaughn Beaty & Koone/Hammond Beeby & Babka. Soledad Street elevation (left) and Navarro Street elevation.**

arrival stems from the long axis of the parking garage; this point is reached by nonmotorists via a midblock passage connecting Soledad and Augusta streets. A two-story parallelogram-shaped podium extends out from the library's six-story central cubic mass to establish a corner-post-prow at the intersection of Navarro and Soledad. The central cube is cut away on all faces, forming giant loggia terraces at the third level that merge with the roof terrace of the lower parallelogram; the loggias fashioned within the cube are shaded by a canopylike top floor that frames the loggia in a manner suggesting the garden elevation of Le Corbusier's Villa Stein, greatly enlarged. The nine-story second-phase tower to be added on the Augusta Street side will form the third increment of a stairstep progression toward downtown. Cooling towers and roof penthouses are employed for skyline effects at two opposite corners of the cube, together with a cluster of four pyramidal skylights that illuminate a generous atrium rising through the core of the building. Sparingly fenestrated and colorized with a deep-hued palette, Legorreta's pulled-and-stretched picturesque geometry will be embellished by several modest water features and a piece of public art now being selected.

What seems remarkable, aside from the self-evident authority of Legorreta's design, is that San Antonio will at last be the recipient of the work of a leading Mexican architect of this century. That the agent of this reconnection has been the state's first competition of international scope for a public building is also significant. But in hindsight, it is also possible to wonder whether in this most preservation-minded and tradition-conscious Texas city the new library might have been accommodated to better advantage nearer the heart of the city, on the vacant River Walk site across from the Hertzberg. So positioned, it might have provided the impetus to relieve the Hertzberg of its awkward circusana, perhaps to house the library's Texana and local history collections and serve as friendly, experienced counsel to a new, much larger neighbor.



**Competition models looking southeast from the corner of Soledad and Navarro streets. Top to bottom: JonesKell et al., Rehler Vaughn et al., and Saldana Associates/CRSS Architects.**

Besides forsaking the special pleasure of a River Walk site and the mutually beneficial companionship of the Hertzberg, the new Main Library, while serviceable and requisitely showy, manifests little in the way of "foreignness." Only the special coloring of its stuccoed walls seems somewhat exotic, reclaiming the strategy of enrichment Olmsted noted locally in 1853, whereby "buildings are converted by trowel [and] paintbrush." As such, it promises a traditionally sanctioned chromatic respite from the tawiness that has settled over San Antonio's "jumble of races, costumes, languages and . . . religious ruins" in the intervening years. ■

## Trial by Jury

In July 1991 a jury appointed by the San Antonio City Council unanimously selected the architectural association of Johnson-Dempsey & Associates, Inc., Davis Sprinkle Architects (both of San Antonio) and Legorreta Arquitectos (Mexico City) to design the new San Antonio Main Library.

In reflecting on the competition, jury chairman Barton Phelps, an architect practicing in Los Angeles and teaching at UCLA who was himself involved in efforts to assure the preservation of Bertram Goodhue's Los Angeles Public Library of 1925, observed that "the problem with civic architecture today is a real estate problem. We get the left-over site, . . . the fractured zone out of the orderly core where the city shifts to less clear forms. Site selection is among the most critical issues associated with civic buildings. After that, architects are responding to conditions."

In addition to Phelps, the members of the jury included Linda Allmand, director of the Fort Worth Public Library; Anders C. Dahlgren, a consultant to the Wisconsin state government's division of library services; Peter G. Rowe, professor of architecture and urban design at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University; and Michael Underhill, director of the School of Architecture at Arizona State University.

Legorreta's design appealed to Underhill as being "fresh and adventurous in a modernist sense," in keeping with the city's vision of the library as a welcoming public facility. "This design," Underhill said, "is open like the stacks." In comparison, "the classical designs in the competition may have been impressive in a frontal way, but they didn't let you into the stack areas as well."

Noting that the classical designs seemed out of context in terms of the site, Phelps said that the jury was inclined to be "critical of schemes that pretended to maintain formal axial symmetry when there was a convoluted path from the garage to the front door on the street."

*Stuart Brodsky*