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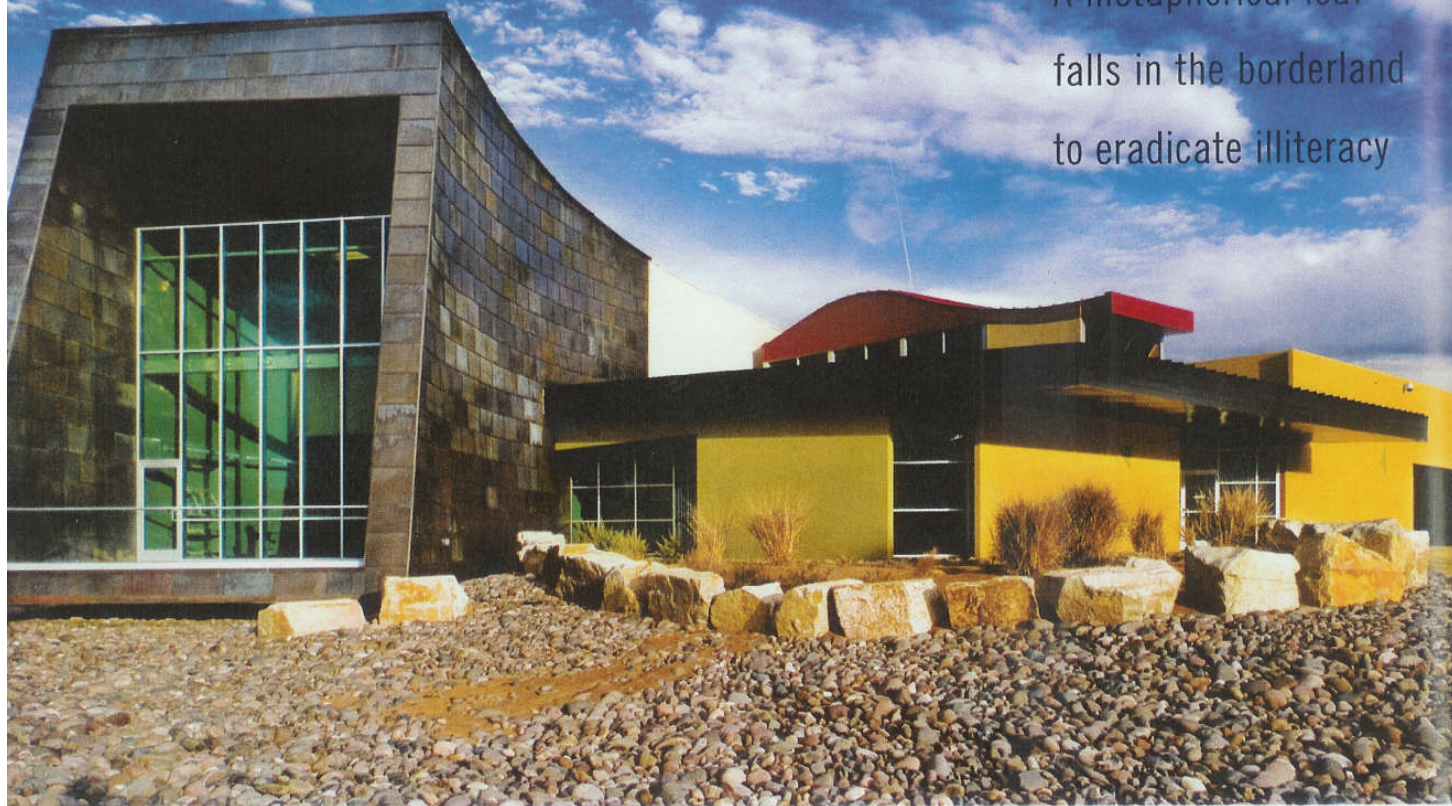




# Inspired by Nature

by ED SOLTERO, AIA

A metaphorical leaf  
falls in the borderland  
to eradicate illiteracy



**PROJECT** Esperanza Acosta Moreno Regional Branch Library, El Paso

**CLIENT** City of El Paso Public Libraries

**ARCHITECT** IDEA

**DESIGN TEAM** Guillermo Barajas, AIA; Nicole Ferrini; Roger Martinez; Erica Alisa Barajas

**CONTRACTOR** Dantex Construction

**CONSULTANTS** Henry K. Ng (structural); Brock & Bustillos (civil); Gutierrez Landscape Associates (landscape); EMC Consulting Engineers (MEP); A2 Collaborative (interior); Rio Grande BPSI (furniture); American Library Center (library)

**PHOTOGRAPHER** Fred Golden

THE character of the public library has evolved from that of a mere repository for books to one of a space whose functions address the many aspects of daily community life. When the El Paso Public Library System commissioned IDEA Architects for the new Esperanza Acosta Moreno Regional Library, expectations were set high and in that direction. As one of the first branch libraries built with funds from the 2000 "Quality of Life" bond election, the program's administration was placed under citizens' review. All new library projects were charged with goals of not only eradicating illiteracy in border communities, but to serve as catalysts for building robust neighborhoods.

A flat, characterless desert site, on the city's far east side, was selected for the project. After walking the site with the new and progressive library director, Carol Brey-Casiano, it was decided then that an opportunity for a new architectural direction had presented itself for the library system. Although the project team, under the guidance of design principal Guillermo Barajas, looked long and hard at the featureless site for clues in generating a *parti* for the facility, the effort was eventually abandoned altogether.

As luck would have it, the answer literally fell on the architect's hands while visiting the East Coast in the fall. A leaf rendered in beautiful autumn colors resulted in the beginnings of an organic scheme for the project. It was assigned an imaginary life, one of a traveler collecting facts, images, experiences, wishes, and, ultimately, stories as it went about its journeys. Its impression was transposed onto the site and adjusted to fit the various programmatic needs.

The new 21,500-square-foot facility contains a multi-purpose room, children's and adults' reading areas, a space dedicated solely for teens, an art gallery, computer station zone, youth workroom, a "Friends of the Library" bookstore, and ancillary support spaces. True to its calling, the new library also supports a multitude of varied uses such as plays, community gatherings, puppet shows, and other public functions.





(opposite page) The library, built on a featureless desert landscape creates its own context through a design inspired by nature and a color palette of autumn hues. The site is within a 20-acre municipal park. (this page) Custom finishes carry the outdoors theme into the public areas.

The footprint of the new multi-functional community space has large re-entrant cutouts that spill natural light into all of the public areas and reinforce the idea of a leaf's outline. These also project the interior areas onto the outdoor reading spaces. A serpentine circulation path is broadcast from one end of the building to the other as a metaphor for the stem. It ends in the Quiet Area, a dramatic reading space that seems to soar out from the body of the building. The gently swerving form serves as a simple organizing spine for all of the interior spaces. The dynamic quality of the library spaces are made possible through this path and the absence of doors. It allows visitors to obtain a view of the majority of the public areas at a glance. (In a whimsical gesture, the library director and the architect coined a new term – "glanceability" – to describe the capacity to understand something through a single glimpse. The new word is prominently displayed on the building plaque.)

The interior palette of materials consists of brightly painted gypsum board walls attached to a neutral gray, exposed steel roof deck. Muted floral and geometric patterns adorn both the sheet vinyl floor finishes and carpets. Millwork is clad in plastic laminate with abstract patterns that mimic stacks of fallen leaves. The colors of autumn are ever-present. The imagery of a leaf's life-line is likewise represented through the use of fabric ducts, although these capillaries distribute conditioned air rather than water.

Intensifying the wonderful symphony of the senses are the soaring, colliding spaces and rays of daylight entering the rooms through abrasions on the roof line. The quality of light filtering into the spaces below is a mixture of diffused and bright, direct sunlight. The interior's colorful, nature-inspired composition is further complemented by three barkless tree trunks that support portions of the roof. The columns are sensitively anchored to the floor in a fashion to appear as if growing out from small beds of smooth river stones. Also, custom fabrics in a myriad of colors

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The building's internal circulation path snakes through the facility and clearly conveys the organization of the varied internal functions.

carry the outdoors theme to the prefabricated, modular computer workstations. In particular, fabric canopies in each workstation resemble huge leaves looming overhead.

Seen from the exterior, the varied forms and collection of masses spread out in a welcoming gesture to pedestrians and motorists alike. In fact, interest in the playful composition of elements began early during the construction process with weekend caravans of cars and trucks lined up to view the progress. The parade of curious onlookers seemed intent on deciphering the dramatic arrangement of forms developing before their eyes.

Dominating the composition is the serpentine structure, the metaphorical leaf stem, that clearly organizes the masses housing the varied internal functions. A portion of this symbolic stem, clad in copper panels finished with a natural patina, cantilevers ever so slightly above the ground much as a leaf does when it lands on the earth. Brightly painted precast concrete panels are juxtaposed against integrally colored concrete-block walls to form the body of the leaf, while simple metal-clad overhangs protect the sliced-off corners of the building against direct sunlight.

The architecture is greatly enhanced by the sparse yet elegantly detailed verdant landscaping. Large boulders, arranged in a semi-circle, sit atop the smooth river stones abundant on the southwestern end of the site. The combination of smooth river stones and turf remind one of the detritus left over after raking leaves.

The Esperanza Acosta Moreno Regional Library's iconoclastic design, its unique massing, and free-flowing interior spaces challenge the conventional staid libraries of the past and heralds the arrival of a new era for El Paso's public library system whose mission is the elimination of illiteracy from this border region. Yet, while the architecture of this new facility is successful in many ways, its greatest achievement is in bringing the community back in touch with the joy that comes from reading a book. ■

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