



# THE EVOLUTION



TOP: The original McNay House with Brown Wing addition.  
ABOVE: New main entrance to Stieren Center.

SAN ANTONIO'S NEW  
STIEREN CENTER FOR EXHIBITIONS  
UNVEILED

BY RAFAEL LONGORIA

# OF THE MCNAY

**N**o other city in Texas has embraced its own architects like San Antonio: the Alamo City has consistently reserved its prime commissions for local architects. In the process it has nurtured such distinguished firms as Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres (architects of the beloved 1929 Smith-Young Tower); Ford, Powell & Carson (responsible for setting the tone of the Trinity University Campus in 1949 and the HemisFair in 1968); and Lake/Flato, winners of the 2004 AIA National Firm Award. With this history in mind, it is particularly surprising that the city's venerable

McNay Art Museum turned to Paris-based architect Jean-Paul Viguier for its latest addition of exhibition space, the Stieren Center.

The McNay Art Museum is far from the tourist attractions of the River Walk. It occupies a hilltop site surrounded by cozy suburbs. Originally designed as a residence for Marion Koogler McNay by Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres in 1928, the charming Spanish Revival building wraps around one end of an Alhambra-inspired garden. It is the sort of place where you can find brides and quinceañeras posing for portraits on any given day.

After Mrs. McNay's death in 1950, the house

became an art museum—with its first exhibition in 1954 dedicated to Pablo Picasso. The Brown Wing of 1970, the first in a series of additions by Ford, Powell & Carson, inserted a delicately detailed wood and glass structure to the side of the original octagonal entry tower. This pivotal sculpture pavilion, reminiscent of O'Neil Ford's nearby Intercontinental Motors showroom of 1960, is emblematic of San Antonio's celebrated modern regionalist tradition. The subsequent layers of the complex read like an essay on the evolution of Spanish-inspired architectural references—ranging from good, to bad, to ugly. The discrete Lang Galleries of 1973 and Frost Galleries



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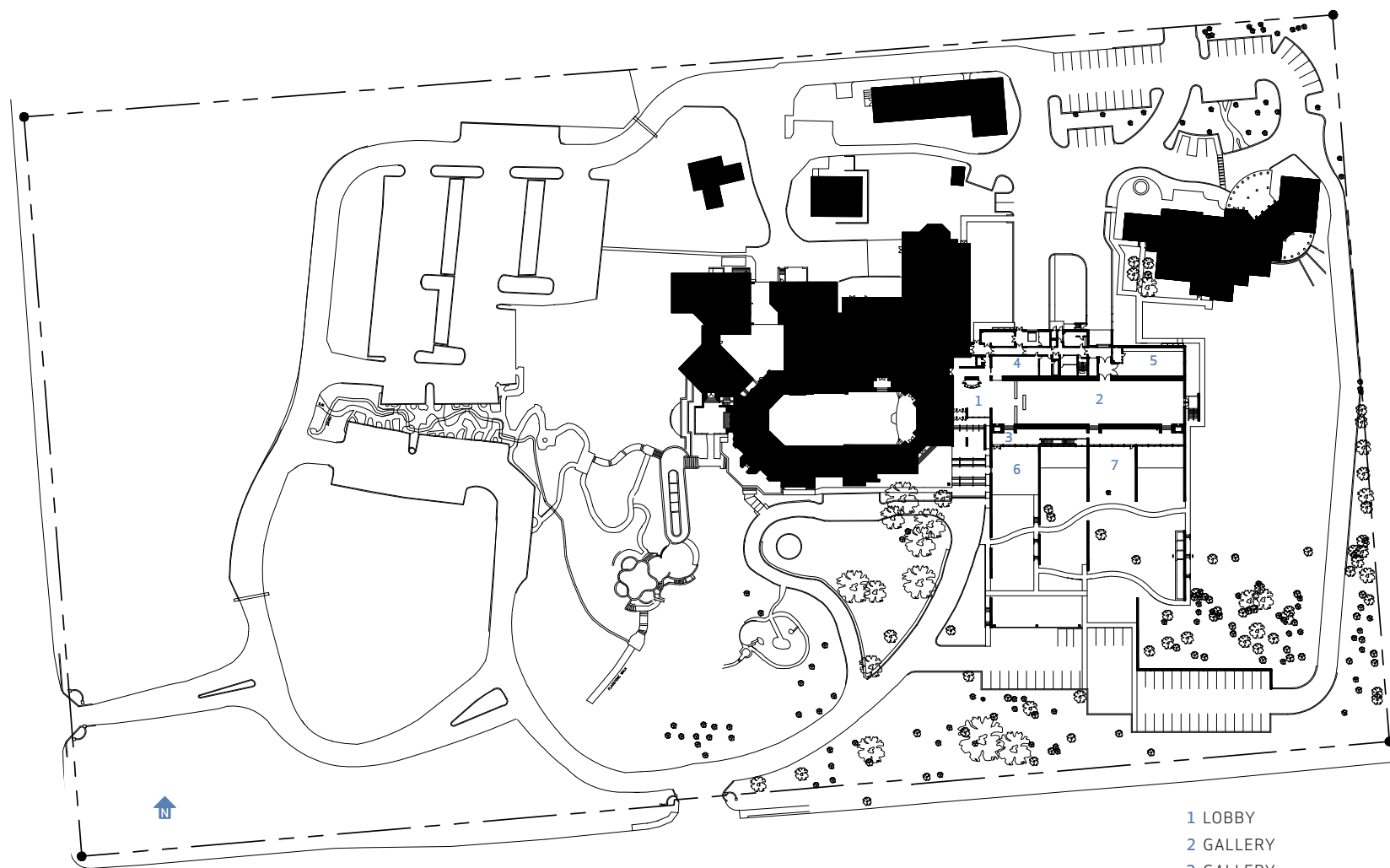
of 1975 completely enclosed the once open courtyard, taking cues from the 45-degree geometry found in the original house. But the need for a new approach became evident after an auditorium addition, with a campanile that seems more suitable for a strip shopping center, was built in the early '90s by a different firm.

Bill Lacy, former head of the National Endowment for the Arts and coordinator of the Pritzker Prize (as well as the husband of Jane Stieren Lacy), played a pivotal role in the assembly of a list of suitable architects for the planned exhibitions center, and the eventual selection of Viguiier (with Ford, Powell &

Carson returning as the associate architects). Other architects considered included Machado and Silvetti of Boston, James Stewart Polshek of New York City, and Carlos Jiménez of Houston.

first encountered Viguiier's work at the 1992 World's Fair in Seville. His French Pavilion was one of the highlights among a remarkable collection of architecture. Its quilted fabric exterior was a brilliantly surreal solution to insulating a temporary structure, while the knife-edged umbrella covering the building and adjacent outdoor gathering space responded to the

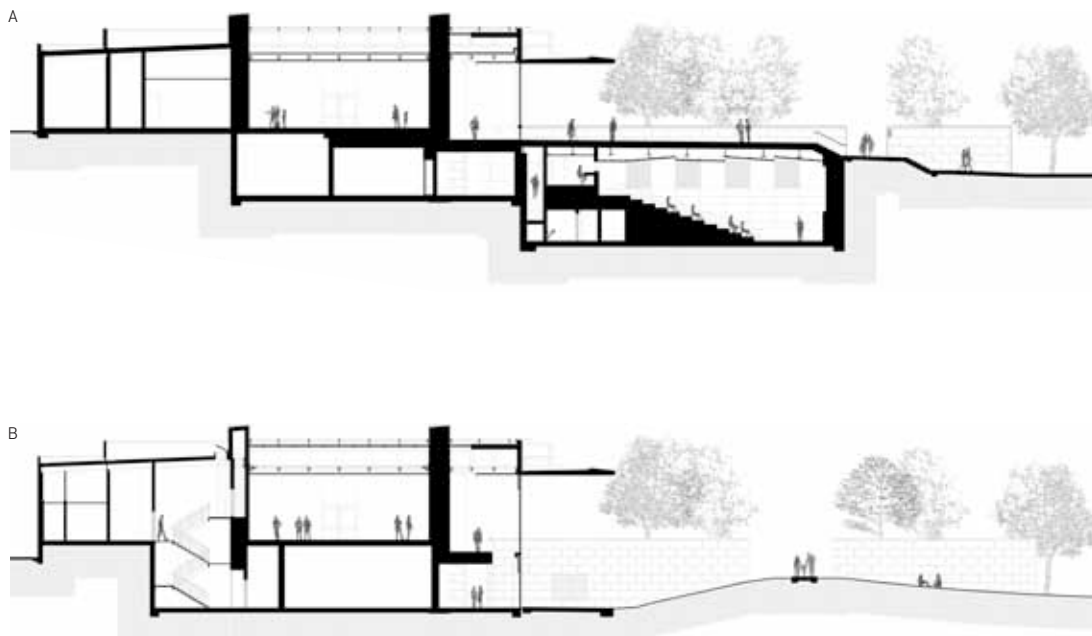
ABOVE: Quinceañera portrait at McNay House colonade.  
BELOW: McNay site plan showing Stieren Center.



- 1 LOBBY
- 2 GALLERY
- 3 GALLERY
- 4 MUSEUM STORE
- 5 ART RECEIVING
- 6 TERRACE
- 7 SCULPTURE GARDEN



LEFT: View from lower galleries to outdoor sculpture garden.  
RIGHT: Sculpture gallery along southern wall.



A: Section through main entry and auditorium.  
B: Section through galleries and sculpture garden.

**Client**  
McNay Art Museum

**Architects**  
Jean-Paul Viguier s.a. d'architecture;  
Ford, Powell & Carson, Inc.

**Contractor**  
Whiting-Turner Contracting Co.

**Engineers**  
Pape-Dawson Engineers (civil);  
Robert Silman Associates (structural);  
Altieri Sebor Wieber (MEP)

PHOTOS: SERGE AMBROSE; DRAWINGS COURTESY FORD, POWELL & CARSON

hot climate with conceptual rigor and elegance.

The Stieren Center's inaugural festivities in June 2008 included an exhibition titled "Cool Models/ Maquettes Froides" that featured a collection of jewel-like architectural models of buildings designed by Viguier. The highly abstracted gold, jet, and crystal models were presented, disassembled, in luxurious cases designed for the architect to carry the projects to client presentations around the world. As the array of models clearly illustrated, Viguier's buildings are often composed of discrete rectilinear

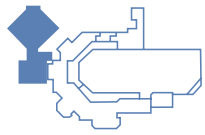
elements that provide conceptual order while bending to the peculiarities of each urban condition.

The Stieren Center attaches somewhat awkwardly to the complicated agglomeration of additions east of the original courtyard, which prolong the main axis of the house. An art school designed by Charles Moore once occupied this part of the site. The new building is organized along a series of parallel walls that extend to the exterior and delineate a sequence of sculpture gardens—a strategy reminiscent of the one used by Renzo Piano at the Nasher Sculpture

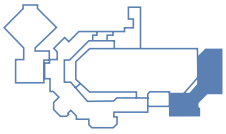
Center in Dallas. The Viguier addition has shifted the museum's center of gravity by creating a new main entry that is programmatically and spatially more appropriate to a contemporary art museum. The new building has top-lit, flexible galleries suitable for the big traveling exhibitions that have become the bread and butter of the art world, as well as providing much needed ancillary spaces in a partially revealed basement level.

Like Piano before him in Houston and Dallas, Viguier developed a sophisticated roof system that

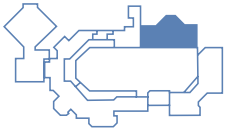
# 1970-2008



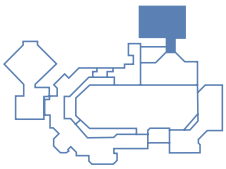
**1970** Brown Wing opens including the Brown Sculpture Pavilion and the Brown Gallery. The latter is the museum's first facility for public programs.



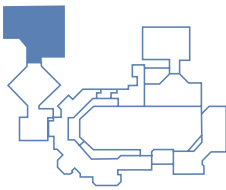
**1973** The Lang Galleries open, their construction funded by Mary and Sylvan Lang.



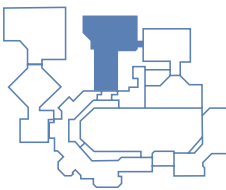
**1975** Jack and Adele Frost Galleries open, completing the necklace of galleries around the museum's central courtyard.



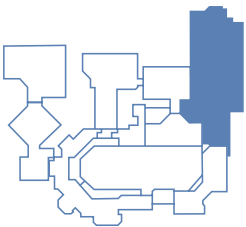
**1982** The Jerry Lawson Print Gallery, the first dedicated gallery for works on paper, is completed through the generosity of Mrs. Gus Glasscock. A Print Study Room adjoins the gallery.



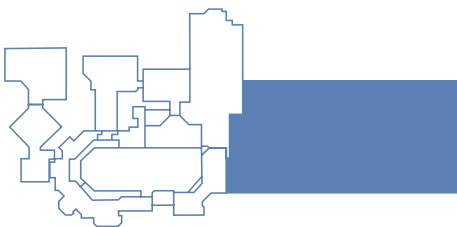
**1984** The Tobin Wing, the home of Robert L. B. Tobin's theatre arts collection and of the museum's art reference library, is completed through the generosity of Margaret Batts Tobin.



**1987** The Stieren Wing for art storage and receiving is completed, the gift of Jane and Arthur Stieren.



**1993** The Blanche and John Leeper Auditorium is completed.



**2008** Construction of the Jane and Arthur Stieren Center for Exhibitions.

THE SUBSEQUENT LAYERS OF THE COMPLEX READ LIKE AN ESSAY ON THE EVOLUTION OF SPANISH-INSPIRED ARCHITECTURAL REFERENCES—RANGING FROM GOOD, TO BAD, TO UGLY.

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modulates the abundant Texas sunlight. In Viguier's words from the exhibition catalogue: "My architectural proposal in regard to the existing building is deliberately modern, and my only demand is to adapt the project to the San Antonio light and climate.... [The] roof is made up of four layers aimed at treating natural light and adapting it to each type of exhibition. The first layer, made up of parallel blades, prevents the light from directly penetrating the museum. The second layer, made out of sandblasted glass panels set into a serrated shape, harmonizes the diffusion of light. The third layer, made up of motorized horizontal shades, regulates the light's intensity and can create total blackout if necessary. Finally, the fourth layer, made up of horizontal silk-screened glass plates, creates light 'vibrations.'" The resulting illumination is perfect for the multiple demands of traveling exhibitions, and the sculpture gallery along the sunny southern wall is the most delightful part of the new addition. I just wish the brush-stroke pattern recurring in multiple surfaces inside and outside the building was not so distracting.

When I first saw renderings of the Stieren Center design, its dark stone seemed to be out of place next to the creamy stucco of the existing complex, and its size, which doubles the existing footprint, seemed overwhelming. But I was pleasantly surprised when I visited the finished building to realize that the green granite and brown metal of the new building blends well with the vegetation of the surrounding gardens. The southern façade consists of a glass curtain wall shaded by a deep cantilevered roof, which helps dematerialize the building. When viewed as a complete composition from the south (the new public face of the museum), the Viguier addition is arguably more respectful of the original residence than the stucco additions, primarily in the way that it helps clarify what is new and what is historic. The Stieren Center added to my appreciation of the wisdom of the Brown Wing—the delicate first addition by Ford, Powell & Carson—and made me wish that the stucco additions (particularly the southern wall of the Frost Galleries) could be covered with ivy in order to recapture the original stucco profile of the Ayres & Ayres house. ☆



TOP: Main stair with brush-stroke pattern.  
ABOVE: Billboard outside the McNay.