

Snøhetta 

The El Paso Children's Museum

El Paso, Texas



Evening view of the El Paso Children's Museum, showing star lights and 3 story window into Anything's Possible Climber.

October 5, 2020

Snøhetta unveils lofty design for the El Paso Children’s Museum

El Paso, Texas — After winning the competition for the new El Paso Children’s Museum, Snøhetta has designed a light filled, lofty and playful museum in the heart of the city. Snøhetta has partnered with El Paso architects Exigo, and is working with Gyroscope who is designing the exhibitions for the museum. The unveiling of the design marks the latest milestone for the city’s first purpose-built children’s museum, programmed to bring value to all youth in the region and also to complement the nearby children’s museum in the city of Juarez. The architecture reveals itself as a cloud, floating above the desert connecting all people in this important place, young and old alike.

El Paso is located at a juncture of both geographic and historic crossroads. Together with the Mexican city of Juarez, the two cities comprise a borderplex with over 2.7 million people for whom crossing the U.S.-Mexico border is a daily occurrence. The new El Paso Children’s Museum fills a critical need for an educational cultural space geared towards the region’s intergenerational families. Designed to support all from the youngest to the most senior members of the region’s families, the museum holds accessibility and bilingualism as core values, with interpretive text provided in both English and Spanish. In the spirit of celebrating the free movement of ideas and culture irrespective of geopolitical borders, the EPCM includes an exhibit which interacts with the nearby Museo La Rodadora, a children’s museum and interactive space in Juarez, Mexico.

The new 70,000 SF museum is positioned within the heart of El Paso’s Downtown Arts district, close to the vibrant San Jacinto plaza and less than one kilometer from El Paso del Norte, a major border-crossing station. To the north, the site is bounded by the Union Pacific Railroad, one of two major transcontinental freight lines in the western United States. The building’s unique geometries immediately set it apart in the city’s skyline: the rectilinear base is wrapped in glass, providing interior views to entice passersby to stop inside the public lobby, and is topped by a rippling succession of barrel vaults which soar to a cloud-like crown.

El Paso has nearly 300 sunny days on average per year, and accordingly, the design provides ample outdoor public amenities such as streetscapes and gathering areas and gardens, which are influenced by the geology and botanical landscape of the Chihuahuan desert. At the eastern end of the building, a terraced discovery garden creates a series of outdoor rooms, each with a distinct atmosphere to enjoy. Local plants and natural boulders highlight the colors and textures of the surrounding desert. Families can enjoy a respite from the sun and heat with a shady grove of trees and a cooling mist playground that acts as a low-flow water and recreation feature.

The first floor is a warm, light-filled open space, and includes free exhibitions as well as a café and the entrance to the learning landscape. From the lobby, the vertical experience of the museum clarifies, as the 60-foot atrium delivers views to a spectacular climbing structure which spans the second to the fourth floor, with pathways that can accommodate multiple forms of access and varying mobility needs. Windows and lookout points provide opportunities for introspection, with views to the Franklin Mountains to the northeast, and the Sierra de Juarez Mountains to the southwest. While the museum offers many opportunities for hands on play,

including exhibitions and vertical climber, all designed by Gyroscope, the character of the design provides a sense of calm and peacefulness, as a welcome complement to the energy of the surrounding exhibits.

The new El Paso Children’s Museum aims to become a civic classroom and energy point for the region’s families, designed to maximize open-ended and imaginative play and exploration. Snøhetta’s design considers how the museum itself can become a learning tool. With spaces and exhibitions that inspire the imagination of both children and adults alike, the museum celebrates the unique culture and geography of El Paso while providing barrier-free access to educational opportunities.

Design Team

Design Architect & Landscape Architect: Snøhetta
Architect of Record: Exigo Architecture
Exhibit Design: Gyroscope
Landscape Architect of Record: Greenway Studio
SMPEFP, IT: Arup
Art Canopy Design: Futureforms

About Snøhetta

Snøhetta began as a collaborative architectural and landscape workshop, and has remained true to its trans-disciplinary way of thinking since its inception. For 30 years, Snøhetta has designed some of the world’s most notable public and cultural projects. Snøhetta kick-started its career in 1989 with the competition-winning entry for the new library of Alexandria, Egypt. This was later followed by the commission for the Norwegian National Opera in Oslo, the National September 11 Memorial Museum Pavilion at the World Trade Center in New York City, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Expansion in California.

Snøhetta is currently working on a number of civic and cultural projects internationally including the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in North Dakota; the Willamette Falls Riverwalk in Oregon City; the Le Monde Headquarters in Paris; the Cornell University Executive Education Center and Hotel in New York; the El Paso Children’s Museum in Texas; and two public libraries in New York City, one in Far Rockaway, Queens and one in the Bronx. Recently completed works include Calgary’s new Central Library in Canada; the design of the Times Square pedestrian plazas in New York; and the Lascaux IV Caves Museum in Montignac, France; and Harvard HouseZero, a collaborative research and construction project with Harvard University’s Center for Green Buildings and Cities that strives to be the world’s most ambitious net-zero retrofit.

Among its many recognitions, Snøhetta received the World Architecture Award for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet, and the Aga Kahn Prize for Architecture for Alexandria Library. Since its completion, the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet has also garnered the Mies van der Rohe European Union Prize for Architecture and the EDRA (Environmental Design Research Association) Great Places Award, as well as the European Prize for Urban Public Space, The International Architecture Award and The Global Award for Sustainable Architecture. In 2020, Snøhetta was awarded the AIA New York’s Medal of Honor, the organization’s highest honor for distinguished work and high professional standing.



View of the El Paso Childrens Museum looking Northwest toward the main entry.



Cross section of the El Paso Childrens Museum showing interior exhibits, terraces and landscape.



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