

Firm creates station to house forensics, law enforcement



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The Austin Police Department's East Substation and Robert Martinez Sr. Forensics Science Center parking lot is located opposite residential streets in East Austin.



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The APD's substation and forensic science center was designed to match the neighborhood.



Shiny aquamarine panels and windows gleam next to brown-and-gold sandstone walls. A radial canopy of glass and galvanized metal clearly identifies the front door.

It may sound like a postmodern Texas mansion in Westlake Hills, but it's a notable public building — the Austin Police Department's East Substation and Robert Martinez Sr. Forensics Science Center. The building at 812 Springdale Road in East Austin is one of a few of its kind in the United States. It houses a police station and forensic science labs. The building is unique because Austin is one of just a few cities to create a specialized center for local police forensics.

Made possible by a voter-approved bond package in 1998 and opened in 2004, the new building replaced an old APD station. That structure was surrounded by barbed wire. Today, an attractive stone exterior and expertly designed interior provide an inviting workplace for nearly 300 APD employees.

TAG International LLP, an Austin-based architecture and design company, worked with the Austin Police Department to design and supervise construction of the new building. One of the project's challenges involved ensuring the building suited the surrounding neighborhood, taking into consideration concerns about appearance, light and noise. As a result, there are no institutional- gray cinder block walls. Outside, parking lot lights are low and directed to avoid illuminating

nearby homes. Noisy equipment is contained within concrete walls. Patrol cars come and go from the parking lot located opposite residential streets.

Ronald Pope, a partner at Austin-based TAG International LLP and the project's architect and lead designer, says the building's appearance and materials resonate with the warmth and natural setting of Austin.

"The glass at the entrance suggests transparency and accessibility to the public," he says.

Inside the building, the two operations share a lobby accented by cherry-veneer paneling and terrazzo floors. Just beyond the lobby lies 50,000 square feet to house seven forensics units: crime scene and fingerprint analysis, DNA and crime labs, evidence control, ballistics and a multimedia lab.

The APD center is one of only 83 local crime labs nationwide certified by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors, a national nonprofit organization that sets standards for forensic science practice. Creating a space to accommodate forensic science and law enforcement required in-depth understanding by TAG.

"The biggest challenge in designing this building was putting together all of these disparate departments, with widely varied programmatic and technical requirements, into a cohesive whole," Pope says.

"Within the forensics division, for example, we had to deal with both the highly sensitive DNA lab and the ballistics firing range, and these areas have very different needs.

"Then we also had to combine all of that with a police substation that has its own unique requirements. That was challenging enough on a technical level, but we also wanted to put it all into an architectural framework that was efficient, flexible and also visually interesting and 'humane' for both visitors and staff."

It's a busy building. On any given day, an armorer is on. Fingerprint specialists compare information against state and federal databases to identify a suspect.

A team of chemists tests unknown, usually dangerous substances seized from illegal laboratories. In another tightly controlled lab, specialists carefully copy and analyze DNA taken from hair or blood found at crime scenes. With all of this activity, the architect's challenge is more than a

matter of dividing available space. Safety, security, workflow and evidence control and management are critical undertakings for this special building.

One of the building's hardest-working rooms is rarely seen by most occupants. The mechanical room is where building systems such as heating, ventilation and air conditioning converge. Air quality is a top concern in a building housing potentially unsafe activities in close proximity, such as a chemistry lab down the hall from a firing range. Good design and planning has its rewards. Before moving into the building, forensics employees were spread out in different buildings downtown and at the old Robert Mueller Municipal Airport site. Having multiple labs under the same roof greatly improved morale and efficiency for the forensics teams.

"Building unity between the sections was also difficult, as there was very little personal contact with personnel of the other sections because of their physical locations," says William Gibbens, manager of forensic science services for APD. "The new building offered the division a great place to work, it increased morale, and became a showplace for others building forensic laboratories."

In addition to appearance and functionality, TAG met two other requirements: the building was finished on time and under budget, for little more than \$15 million.



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TAG International LLC designed the Austin Police Department's updated station.