

Snapshot



Miró Rivera Architects' public restroom appears as a work of sculpture set along Austin's lakeside trail.

By Stephen Sharpe

Who really wants to visit a public restroom? Most flinch at the thought and squinch at the necessity. In Austin, Texas, however, along the city's much-loved and much-used Lady Bird Lake Hike and Bike Trail, people are drawn to the park's latest enhancement – a sculptural assemblage of upright, weathering steel panels that encircles essential comfort facilities.

More than merely a prosaic convenience, the restroom elicits curiosity even from those who don't have to go.

Miró Rivera Architects designed the project for the Trail Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting and improving the 10-mile path that loops a narrow stretch of Lady Bird Lake at the southern edge of downtown. Hundreds of runners, walkers, and bicyclists enjoy the trail daily. "How can you get as low-maintenance as possible?" asks Juan Miró, AIA, recalling the client's primary concern. He and partner Miguel Rivera, AIA, responded by specifying a single material – $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick steel panels – that will stand up to abuse and clean up with a water hose. Electricity is not required; natural light shines in at the perimeter of the roof, a steel disk held by brackets welded to the wall panels. Additional daylight and fresh air enter through slender gaps between the overlapping vertical panels. The architects' attention to detailing affords a welcome privacy, with no possibility of prying eyes or hands from the outside.

Pushing beyond the basic program of a 70-square-foot, enclosed and ADA-compliant restroom, Miró Rivera also wanted to create a piece of sculpture in the park. The 49 steel panels are anchored below grade in a rhythmic sequence of varying heights, coiling around the privy and providing its structural support. Entry is through an 840-pound plate of weathering steel that swings open and shut with surprising ease.

The local firm donated architectural services for the project, which, due to its unusual design, required many meetings with municipal officials over a two-year period. Built for just under \$130,000 (in hard construction costs), the restroom was completed in March 2008. ■

An artful answer for the call to nature

