



In Architectural About-Face at Fort Bliss, Army Plans ‘Sense of Place’ in the Desert

E L P A S O In earlier times, the planning philosophy of the U.S. military could be summarized as “three hots and a cot.” That simplistic attitude left much to be desired in the way Army bases and other military installations were laid out and adapted as needs changed. However, at the sprawling outpost of Fort Bliss at the extreme western tip of Texas, the Army is currently building a small town with architecture that responds to the desert conditions.

The Fort Bliss Army Base spreads across approximately 1.1 million acres, or 1,760 square miles, of arid land within Texas and New Mexico. Its population in 2003 was estimated to be 127,133, with most living near El Paso. That population is expected to expand by about 70,000 new residents within a few years. That unprecedented growth is foreseen as a result of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) recommendations approved by the federal government in 2005 to consolidate activities and facilities across the U.S. With a number of military institutions targeted for closure, BRAC has proved fortunate for El Paso and other communities whose economies are in large part affected by Fort Bliss—the construction budget at this one base is \$4.4 billion, a figure that is substantially greater than that for the entire U.S. Air Force.

The seemingly magical overnight appearance of entire working and living communities at this desert base was not happenstance. Masterplanning modern-day military installations

is a highly sophisticated process. Army garrison commanders are often compared to mayors of small cities. They are assisted by a Real Property Planning Board which is akin to a “city planning council.” These are comprised of members of the command, operational, engineering, and planning and tenant interests of the installation who advise the various mission commanders on planning decisions.

A myriad of interested parties participate in the Army’s master planning process. The overall goal is to prepare a Real Property Master Plan (RPMP). Despite the anemic institutional look, devoid of any architectural character, that is often associated with military installations, the Department of Defense is now making great strides at improving such through the aforementioned planning process. The RPMP aims foremost to provide the master-planning aspects of force protection and anti-terrorism while actively embracing environmental stewardship through LEED sustainable design and development concepts and principles. The Department of Defense also supports the federal government program called “Greening of Government,” in essence a 20-year sustainable planning horizon. Furthermore, Army planning officials also look to contextual compatibility when arranging the new facilities. These concerted planning activities also are coordinated with local community development. In fact, local planning officials, civilians, and business owners are encouraged to participate in the development actions being contemplated.

The Fort Bliss Lifestyle Center, initially conceived by the Army as a “big box,” has been reconsidered by Good Fulton & Farrell as a pedestrian-oriented commercial oasis in the desert.

In response to the rapid relocation of such a large population to Fort Bliss, the Army Corps of Engineers, which is administering the design and construction of this huge undertaking, has developed a delivery mechanism called Military Construction Transformation. MILCON Transformation attempts to address many real-world challenges, chief among them is the efficient erection of a large amount of necessary facilities within a compressed timeframe. The new delivery mechanism will involve procedures that will impact how the Army can access the best design and construction practices for Fort Bliss in terms of performance-based criteria without compromising its mission or the specific implications of community, order, and sense of place that position the installation squarely within the Army’s overarching military tradition.

This new delivery process has allowed a “small town” to quickly rise in the desert. The buildings are constructed in a variety of techniques, including modular prefabricated assemblies that are delivered to the site approximately 90 percent complete. Facades are generally clad in a desert-colored stucco with an applied stone or split-block plinth that recalls the historical vernacular of the region.

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for “integrity.” Interior woodwork came to life with a fresh seal, and original exterior fascia boards blended with the new after a fresh coat of paint.

Asked recently about the responsibility inherent in such a project, Weir said, “It is a privilege to have the opportunity to bring this home back to life. I am still in awe of its subtle sophistication, and am honored to be able to share it with friends and visitors from around the world.” Robin and her designer, Reese Beddingfield, were a daily presence at the house from the initial investigation stage through the restoration’s completion.

As the scope of the project was defined, Weir and Beddingfield made the pilgrimage to Taliesin West. The staff at Wright’s Arizona retreat, as well as an independent preservation consultant, confirmed the direction of the project and recommended methods and materials for common Usonian issues. Weir recalls the pride and commitment shown by all of the craftsmen who worked on the house, understanding the significance of the project.

With permission, a brick mason brought his daughter out to the house to write a report for school. Electricians and plumbers worked tirelessly to find ways for modern conveniences to be installed without disrupting the clean and uncompromising aesthetic.

As with most Usonian homes, several pieces of furniture are detailed in Wright’s drawings. Those pieces—a dining room table and benches, a curved sofa in the living room, and a pair of twin beds—are still in the home, enhanced by built-in millwork in the bedrooms, bathrooms, and study. All express the simple, yet profound geometry integral to Wright’s work.

Reese Beddingfield, charged with furnishing the Kinney Residence for his client and friend, took cues from Wright’s passion for Asian art and design. She met the particular challenge of restoring this rare jewel not into a museum, but a home—the balance between the character of the house, its artifacts, and her client’s personal style produced a unique and authentic aesthetic. Beddingfield’s selection of art and accouterments complement the scale of

the home and its furnishings, even without the grand piano dictated by Wright’s drawings.

Since the completion of the restoration, Weir has opened the house to numerous individuals and groups, including AIA Amarillo. Pilgrims from as far away as Barcelona have shown up at the gate hoping for a glimpse and have been treated to a tour from the home’s gracious owner.

With his Usonian concept—the term derived from an abbreviation for United States of North America—Wright aspired to create a whole new way of designing for middle-class Americans. He described his Usonian ideal this way: “We must have a big living room with as much vista and garden coming in as we can afford, with a fireplace in it, and open bookshelves, a dining table in the alcove, benches, and living-room tables built in; a quiet rug on the floor.” With the restoration of the Kinney Residence, the Amarillo community, along with all of Texas, has an architectural landmark to be proud of, and a project to inspire a new generation of designers.

MASON ROGERS, AIA

A burnt-orange metal roof is also typical. While these examples of modern construction are in no manner architectural gems, military planning personnel were nevertheless savvy enough to outsource the quality-of-life component of the sprawling garrison.

Another innovative process currently being employed at Fort Bliss is the Area Development Guide (ADG), a planning tool similar to Building Information Modeling that uses computer-generated simulated environments that serve as virtual snapshots that depict proposed buildings within a specific landscape. The team of Jacobs/Huitt Zollars was selected by the Army Corps of Engineers to provide ADGs, along with design planning and infrastructure development, for the new construction at Fort Bliss. Implementing the ADG process is a significant part of the Army’s strategy to achieve a high level of sustainable design. To that end the Army has issued the following mandate to the many A/E teams working at Fort Bliss: the architectural style of all future buildings shall reflect and reinforce the goal of an appropriate response to the environment and a commitment to sustainability for the installation; both the buildings and the site shall be designed and constructed in such ways as to incorporate

appropriate sustainable design strategies that will reduce the costs of energy and maintenance in the future through the intelligent selection of forms, materials, and details; responsible water control and use of sun protection and control are two of these sustainable strategies.

Another firm now involved in designing improvements at Fort Bliss is Good, Fulton & Farrell. The Dallas firm has been commissioned to develop the commercial nucleus for the Army base, the Fort Bliss Lifestyle Center. Now in its design phase, the complex will comprise approximately 498,400 square feet of leasable space and will include a Post Exchange, Army and Air Force Exchange Service offices, along with retail, restaurants, a cinema, and a fitness center.

Although the complex was initially conceived of as a “big box” retail center by the Department of Defense, the architects have skillfully masterplanned the programmatic requirements into a pedestrian-oriented commercial oasis. The color and material palettes mimic the regional architecture of the base without deliberately copying the physical aspects of the existing buildings on base.

Of particular interest is how the design team finessed the unwavering requirement for

implementation of force protection and anti-terrorism planning. The typical pedestrian/vehicular open space required between commercial storefronts is 80 feet, but at the Lifestyle Center this requirement was expanded to 126 feet. To accommodate the expanded requirement, the architects referenced a dry river bed for the open space by including a combination of desert flora, gravel berms, colored concrete, and pavers. The strong axial composition of the complex is punctuated by two water fountains, one at the northern plaza entrance and another in a larger plaza at the center. Shade canopies over the storefronts were also creatively devised, with versions ranging from completely opaque to some with a level of porosity to capture and manipulate the intense southwestern light.

The sensitive architectural approach now being undertaken at Fort Bliss, as exemplified by the Lifestyle Center, represents an extraordinary change for the U.S. military but undoubtedly will be welcomed by the thousands of families who soon will take residency there. In the coming years after this unprecedented expansion is completed, Fort Bliss will stand as a model for master-planning efforts around the world.

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