

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA | Yazdani Studio of Cannon Design

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A sizable expansion to a student union serves as a vibrant centerpiece for the University of California, San Diego, campus.

By Jenna M. McKnight

LOCATED IN LA JOLLA, the University of California, San Diego, campus mimics the suburban sprawl so prevalent in the American West. Spread across 1,200 acres, the grounds consist of scores of bulky buildings set among eucalyptus groves, vast lawns, and a labyrinth of roads. Guided by a 1989 master plan by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, school leaders have been working to create a centralized “downtown” district, and the new Price Center East aids considerably in this effort. Created by Yazdani Studio of Cannon Design, this vigorous addition to a 20-year-old student union fortifies the campus core while also providing vital amenities to the growing UCSD community.

One of 10 schools in the University of California system, UCSD is a leading research institution founded in 1960. Its young age and pioneering spirit are reflected in its bold and disparate architecture, with works by Moshe Safdie, Arthur Erickson, and Antoine Predock, among others. Its most idiosyncratic edifice, Geisel Library, a 1970 sci-fi extravaganza by William L. Pereira, is as recognizable as the school mascot (a Triton) and is even featured in the UCSD logo.

For the \$66 million (total cost) student-center expansion, the school issued an RFP in 2003 and short-listed five firms. Mehrdad Yazdani beat out formidable competitors, including Eric Owen Moss and Rafael Viñoly. Based in Los Angeles, Yazdani describes his 20-employee studio as a “hybrid practice,” with all the benefits of being part of Cannon Design fused with an

atelier’s high level of experimentation.

While not beholden to any particular style, Yazdani wasn’t entirely free from precedent while dreaming up the new building: It had to merge with the existing Price Center West, designed by Kaplan McLaughlin Diaz. Recognized for its novel layout when it opened in 1990, the center comprises stone-clad volumes that wrap an outdoor food court – a breezy setting popular with students and befitting a campus a few miles from the beach. But when it was built, UCSD’s student population numbered 17,000. With enrollment now approaching 30,000, an enlarged central hub had become crucial.

At first, the university wanted to employ the same courtyard-style layout in expansion. But after a series of workshops and thorough analysis, Yazdani decided it wasn’t the right approach. “If it’s going to be an urban

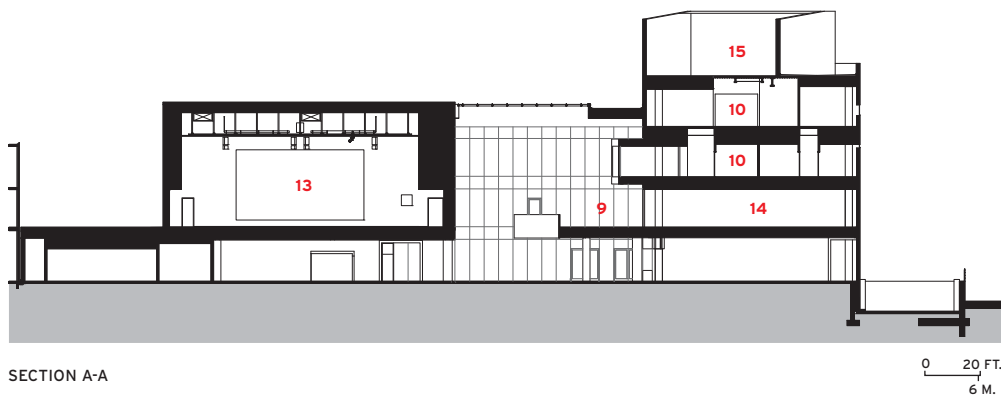
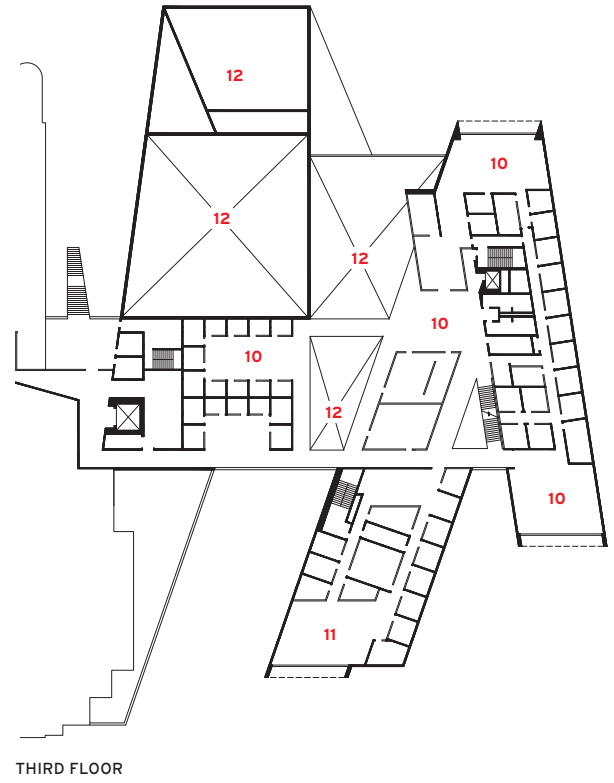
OPPOSITE: A grand stairway on the south doubles as seating and looks over a “town square.” Appearing to float above the street, boxy volumes with concrete walls and storefront glazing are supported by steel beams and columns.



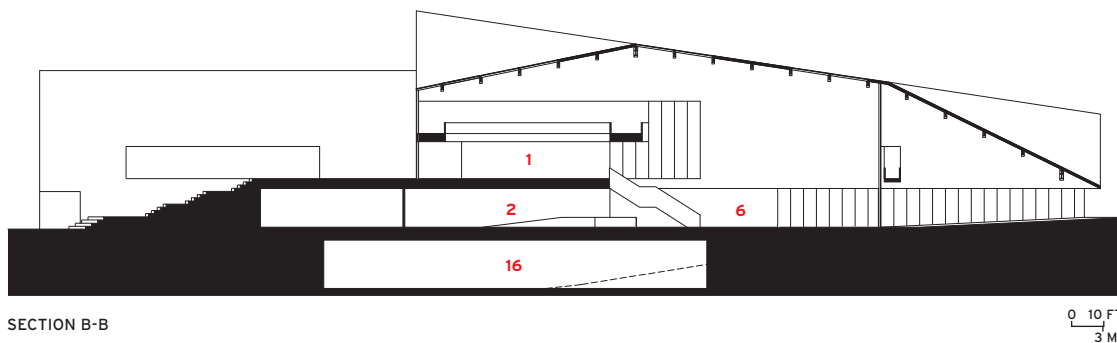
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DRAWINGS



SECTION A-A



SECTION B-B

- 1 Plaza/entry
- 2 Food service
- 3 24-hour lounge
- 4 Retail
- 5 Grocery store
- 6 Seating/food court
- 7 Study capsules
- 8 Campus shuttle stop
- 9 Lounge
- 10 Student services
- 11 The Loft nightclub
- 12 Open to below
- 13 Ballroom/dance studio
- 14 Cross-cultural center
- 15 Mechanical
- 16 Loading dock



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building," he told the university, "we're going to need to increase density, activate street edges, and have a relationship to the exterior pedestrian spine of campus." With the existing center focused inward, the "extroverted" addition would push outward and make its presence known.

Completed in August 2008, the 172,000-square-foot facility certainly is assertive. Constructed on a 5.9-acre site with a 6-foot slope, the building's hulking form is broken into parts to avoid the monolithic massing often found on university campuses. Those parts – rectilinear and geometric volumes of varying scales that either thrust forward or retreat – are positioned in response to circulation patterns. On the north, they converge

with several walkways and a circular drive that serves as a campus shuttle stop. On the south, they front grassy swaths and a paved area now referred to as the "town square." Both sides feature ample glazing, strengthening the center's connection to the streetscape and giving students the chance to see and be seen.

If there is a formal entrance, it's on the southwest, where wide stairs double as seating and look over the "piazza," calling to mind the grand steps of an old courthouse. Proceeding up and into the building, the nonlinear, hyperdense organization of the space becomes fully apparent. There's a lot to take in. On the east is a maze of offices, retail areas, meeting rooms, and a nightclub;

the western half contains more retail, ballrooms, a dance studio, and a renovated/expanded bookstore. Open areas are furnished with movable chairs and couches, where students meet, eat, study, even snooze. On the second level, the new building connects to the old via a bright yellow passageway.

At the heart of the facility is a four-story, 56-foot-tall atrium, designed as a counterpoint to Price Center West's courtyard. Despite a common assumption, San Diego isn't eternally warm and sunny, and "when the cold air rolls through in the fall and winter, everyone migrated into the narrow corridors," Yazdani says. And so he gave the students a spacious interior gathering area bathed in natural light. A stairway cuts through the center,

1. On the north, ample glazing offers views of a 24-hour lounge on the ground level, and farther back, a dance studio on the second floor.

2. The new building (gold) merges with the existing student union (white); to the northwest is Geisel Library, an eccentric behemoth.

3. Circulation patterns and the desire to create an urban-style landmark inspired the building's broken-down massing, with volumes of varying scales.

ARCHITECT: Yazdani Studio of Cannon Design – Mehrdad Yazdani, Assoc. AIA, design principal; Craig Hamilton, AIA, project principal; Ron Benson, project manager; Mark Piaia, AIA, project architect; Craig Booth, John Chan, senior designers

CLIENT: University of California, San Diego

CONSULTANTS: Englekirk and Sabol (structural engineer); IBE Consulting Engineers (mechanical); Coffman Engineers (electrical); Hirsh & Company (civil); Pamela Burton & Company (landscape); M.A. Mortensen Company (general contractor)

SIZE: 172,000 square feet (new); 66,000 square feet (renovated)

COST: \$53 million (construction)

SOURCES

STRUCTURAL SYSTEM:

McMahon Steel

CURTAIN WALL: Tower Glass

GLAZING: Viracon

ROOFING: NeoGard; Sarnafil

ACOUSTICAL CEILING:

Armstrong

METAL CEILING: Ceilings Plus

OFFICE FURNITURE:

Steelcase

leading up from an expansive court ringed by eateries, a grocery store, a post office, a computer lab, study pods, and a 24-hour lounge. An imposing Barbara Kruger mural, with news tickers and giant photographs of clocks, adds zing to this buzzing microcity.

The project involved several structural challenges. For instance, to maximize the ground level for public functions, the team placed a loading dock below-grade. The 12,500-square-foot space is mostly column-free to provide clearance for large trucks. Custom-made plate-steel girders transfer overhead loads to the sides of the structure.

Given that San Diego sits on several fault lines, seismic issues also were a concern. The building, composed of a structural steel frame with cast-in-place concrete walls, was designed to withstand a powerful quake – not easy, given its challenging geometrics, explains Ety Benichou, the project's structural engineer. The solution was to separate it into two discrete structural units, the east and west, connected using a seismic joint that varied in width from 6 inches at the lower portions of the building to 10 inches at the roof, according to Benichou. Throughout the facility, every hanging element was braced, even lamp fixtures. "As a California architect," Yazdani says, "you come to embrace the braces."

Fortunately, no seismic events have put these measures to the test. But in terms of use, the facility is performing quite well: About 12,000 people pass through each day, many stopping off to have a bite, check e-mail, or rendezvous with friends. "It's packed," boasts Paul Terzino, student center director. "We already had to buy more furniture." With Price Center East, Yazdani Studio has created an exuberant landmark that bolsters the urban core and takes center stage on this vast California campus. ■

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1,2. Five skylights totaling 2,255 square feet bring natural light into the 56-foot-high atrium. A giant mural by Barbara Kruger invigorates the space.

3. Various rooms, such as a ground-level computer lab, feature a dropped ceiling with thin metal bars. In the background, enclosed study pods have floor-to-ceiling windows.

4. A bright yellow tunnel connects the old building to the new.

5. A view of an information desk on the third floor shows the facility's relaxed, modern vibe. Vivid colors and enlarged text aid in wayfinding throughout the interior.

