



Design Blends Old and New

Courtyards and walkways unite an urban community

By Jenan Jones Benson

PHOTO BY RANDALL MICHELSON.



An alfresco dining area accented with native, drought-tolerant plantings transformed a previously unattractive street.

It may be difficult to blend old and new, but it's not impossible. The Ratkovich Company (www.ratkovich.net) has put universal design principles to work to blend a 1-million-square-foot engineering and manufacturing campus, now an office park and a new retail center, into one of Southern California's most attractive and environmentally friendly mixed-use properties.

Yesterday and tomorrow

The Alhambra (www.thealhambra.net/), located 8 miles east of Los Angeles in Alhambra, Calif., was originally designed decades ago as the C.F. Braun Engineering headquarters. Its institutional look was easy to ignore, in fact, occupancy had dropped to about 35 percent in the late 1990s, but the complex got a new lease on life when real estate developer Ratkovich purchased it in 1999.

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Wayne Ratkovich, the developer's president, envisioned a vibrant mixed-use campus that embraced sustainable practices. The center's location near a freeway brought lots of traffic its way. The Ratkovich Company implemented a multiphase plan to enliven the office park and expand it to encompass a retail center rich with green space. Years of well-planned landscaping improvements, along with new construction, have meshed The Alhambra into an attractive work-play-shop center, with future plans for residential units.

Incorporating retail

In 2004, Ratkovich teamed with EPT Design (www.eptdesign.com), based in Irvine and Pasadena, to create the new look and feel for the center.



Placing these palms required street closure, cranes and more than two days of meticulous labor.

“From the first meeting, Ratkovich’s vision was clear: to make it a ‘destination landscape,’ a place outsiders would think so special that they would make a special trip to visit,” says Nord Eriksson, director of design at EPT’s Pasadena office.

At the same time, the group sought to preserve the character of the original structure, while incorporating elements reminiscent of the center’s namesake, the Alhambra palace in Spain.

The renovation began with the addition of a 120,000-square-foot retail center on a vacant portion of the 45-acre property, with an eye to maximizing exposure along a busy thoroughfare. The mix of shops and eateries is blended with a plaza courtyard with seating for 165, complete with authentic tile made in Morocco that reflects the design and pattern used in the original Alhambra. That tile, along with brick, forms a long, linear fountain, the area’s focal point, which is proving successful in fading traffic sounds.



An overhead walkway links the office and retail portions of The Alhambra in Alhambra, Calif.

The retail component was completed in about one year, making the pace of the project challenging. Multiple trades working simultaneously, coupled with bad weather, made for frantic working conditions. Placing finishing touches, such as five 25-foot Canary Island Palms, required two days of street closure; cranes weighing 50 tons were used for placing the trees. Scott Horsley, EPT’s studio director who oversaw the installation, says planting was a laborious undertaking, requiring many adjustments to get the palms perfectly positioned. Even so, some of the planted trees were ultimately rejected and replaced for aesthetic reasons. Throughout the campus, replacement and new plantings were selected with sustainability in mind. High-maintenance varieties were replaced with middle-grade, drought-tolerant species and those reflecting the Spanish theme.

To unify the retail and office parks, a bridge tying the landscape and architectural elements together links the sections. By Christmas 2004, office workers could lunch, shop and bank just steps away and recharge themselves amid a parklike atmosphere in the new “Shops at The Alhambra.”

In 2006, EPT’s work on the shopping center received a merit award for the best retail project through the Pacific Coast Builders Conference Gold Nugget Award program.

Refurbishing the office park

Phase two, bringing a welcoming landscape to the office park, unfolded during 2005 and 2006. A formerly drab front entrance was redesigned to blend with the retail look. EPT’s work transformed the atmosphere from bleak to inviting with native plantings complementing the red brick color scheme and softening the architecture. Parking lots shrunk from about 25 acres to 17, and walkways composed of concrete and brick accents linked green spaces, parking areas and the office complex. Due to the age of the original structure, matching brick was unavailable, but the landscape team incorporated different finishes and colors to tie the old and new together. One of the early buildings features a concrete etching in a terrazzo style that designers were able to match and incorporate into walkways. Developing a more human-centered campus was one factor that increased occupancy to 94 percent by late 2006.

Enhancing the retail center

After sprucing up the office campus, EPT further tied the center’s functional areas together by incorporating a new outdoor space, complete with seating, pathways and fountains, between the two.

As a fitness center and parking structure were added to the retail area, landscape elements were placed to enhance the center’s look and sustainability. California requires on-site water percolation, so swales were used to manage drainage from the fitness center. From the swale, stormwater runoff drains back into the soil and ultimately returns to city aquifers. EPT got double-duty out of the swales as landscape features by adding rocks.

PHOTO BY RANDALL MICHELSON.



Courtyards with dining areas, walkways, lighting and abundant green space enhanced the formerly drab office park and gave a natural transition into the adjacent retail center.



This bleak, unused lawn in the office park was transformed into a Mediterranean courtyard.

A four-level, open parking deck was softened with red iron brick and coral eucalyptus trees. The fast-growing plant, common in Southern California, was an economical choice that matched The Alhambra's brick in color, as well as the narrow space between the parking structure and the sidewalk.

Courtyards in the business park

The latest project, completed this year, added courtyards to the office sections. EPT replaced an unused lawn between the buildings with a permeable surface area featuring native plantings, seating and dining areas. The Mediterranean-style plaza is outfitted with low, linear concrete walls.

Designers sought to make the courtyards throughout the office center "a new discovery around every corner," according to Eriksson. The main courtyard is a dry, textural garden that weaves around one building, while another has a Jurassic Park feel with tropical plantings and a fountain.

Project installation

Budgetary issues led the Ratkovich Company to revive The Alhambra in phases over several years. Ongoing construction, an early 20th century office complex, multiple contractors and the inability to deploy new systems and infrastructure universally across the campus made for installation challenges.

"When working on a piece of a property, but the whole isn't being built, it's hard to grade correctly for proper grade and drainage; it never works out right," Eriksson says. Coping with existing utility lines further complicated drainage issues.

In addition, as one area was modified, it affected other sections. For example, some portions of the property were without water for a while, leading to maintenance challenges.

Excavation tends to bring surprises, and this project followed that trend. Two structures, a portion of which had been used for Braun's research and

development, were demolished to make way for the new fitness center. The removal of a basement meant compensating for the resulting hole.



Existing landscaping was replaced with native, drought-tolerant plantings and walkways.

Even in the case of irrigation, the designers and installers put their skills to the test of integrating old and new and making it all work together smoothly. Rain Bird equipment was selected for the retail center. Due to the wear and tear associated with traffic, standard overhead sprayers and controllers were installed, with the capacity to tie the new installation in with the older equipment. In the future, equipment throughout the property will be united through a master control system to maximize water efficiency.

Efficiency and functionality were key in lighting choices, as well. Multiple lights were placed high in the palms using a collar system to discourage vandalism, and Pollard lighting and up lighting were used to highlight specimen trees. In high-traffic areas, such as the fitness center and dining corridor, a festive look was created with layers of overhead lighting with exposed wires and bulbs.

“Originally, [The Alhambra] was beautiful, but boring,” he says. “From a design standpoint, [it’s fulfilling when] something that’s classic and beautiful takes on new life, becoming more campus like and [prompting] people to have outdoor conferences.”

The overall rebirth of The Alhambra is about 70 percent complete. Eriksson says it has been exciting to watch the project develop and grow.

Based in Greensboro, N.C., the author writes articles about horticulture, landscaping, agriculture and travel. She has been a contributor to Moose River Media publications for three years.