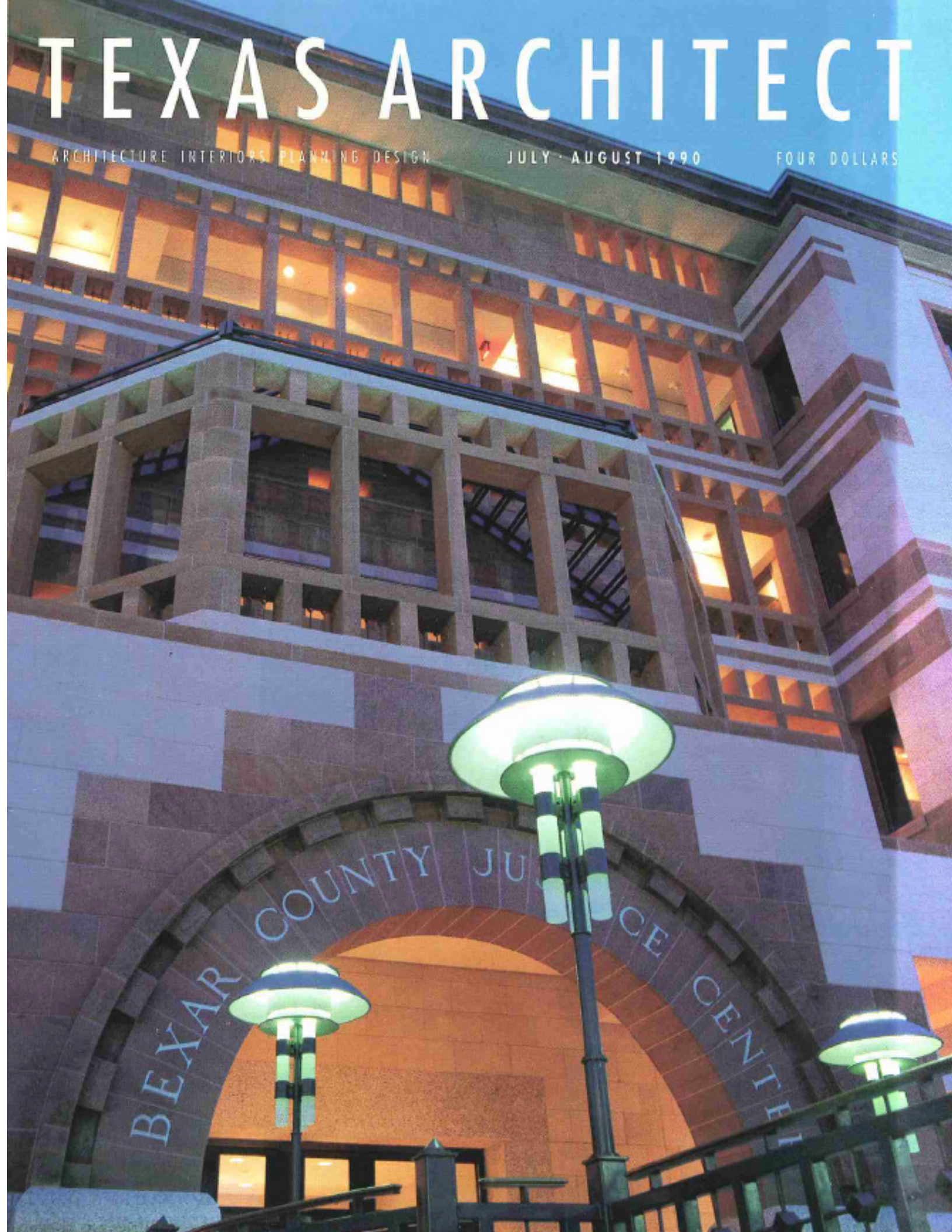


# TEXAS ARCHITECT

ARCHITECTURE INTERIORS PLANNING DESIGN

JULY - AUGUST 1990

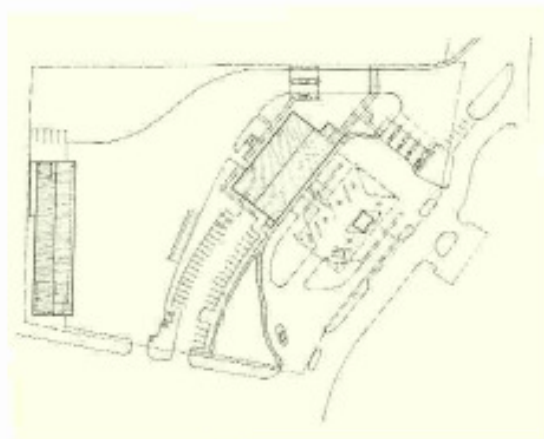
FOUR DOLLARS





# A BULLET-PROOF WELCOME

By Natalie Appel



The traffic plan at the B&M Bridge Station emphasizes efficient flow (from upper right), yet secure inspection areas for exceptional cases.

**Architects of border stations face an obvious dilemma: representing both the strength of U.S. immigration and anti-drug policy and the welcome of the world's melting pot.**

**W**HETHER ONE TRAVELS ON FOOT or by car or truck or bus, whether alone or carrying other people or goods, the one nearly inevitable commonality of a trip across the border is an encounter with at least one of the federal agencies that control this threshold into Texas. From Brownsville to El Paso, in bustling tourist towns like Laredo and haunting relics like Roma and Rio Grande City, most citizens from both sides of the Rio Grande make relatively routine crossings, stopping only briefly at U.S. Border Stations, which are typically designed to reflect the fairly simple procedures involved. Inside each Border Station, housing U.S. Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Border Patrol Station, headquarters of the U.S. Border Patrol, however, are extremely serious apprehension and detention facilities, assuring an extended, labyrinthine detour for those who are exceptions to the routine. Furthermore, the INS runs its own detention centers at separate sites for illegal aliens who face possible deportation.

In the past few years, the Reagan and Bush administrations have seen the passage of the Immigration Reform Act and an increasing escalation of the so-called "War on Drugs," both of which have increased demands on immigration and customs officials. Add to this the thriving *maquiladora*, or twin-plant, system of assembling U.S.-made components in Mexico, and the swelling traffic has made the existing border control facilities inadequate to handle current traffic and policy needs. The General Services Administration and the Department of Justice are addressing the situation with an ambitious construction program throughout the border region from Texas to California. In Texas alone, over \$63 million in federal funds has been allotted to build several totally new Border Stations and to update, expand, or replace 20 existing stations. According to Jim King, Chief of Project Management for the GSA's Design and Construction Division, most of the scheduled projects will go into construction by year's end. Others, such as an import-oriented station for the new \$10-million International Bridge scheduled to open in 1991 (linking Monterrey, Mexico, to the U.S. via Columbia, Nuevo Leon, and Dolores, Texas, 16 miles northwest of Laredo), are in the works.

Among these projects are two that have been designated as prototypical by their clients: B&M Bridge Station in Brownsville, and the Eagle Pass Border Patrol Station. While serving different user groups and functions, both building types have several things in common, including temporary detention facilities and a great deal of high-security construction. Interestingly enough, the primary issues of control (locking-in versus locking-out) and the interception of unwanted people and goods (guns going out and drugs coming in) are not overtly mentioned nearly as often as those of expediting traffic flow and projecting a positive image that fits in with the character of regional architecture. There is an obvious dilemma in a building that must represent both the strength of U.S. immigration and anti-drug policy and the welcome of the world's melting pot; perhaps these two examples can provide some insight into how this can be best solved today.

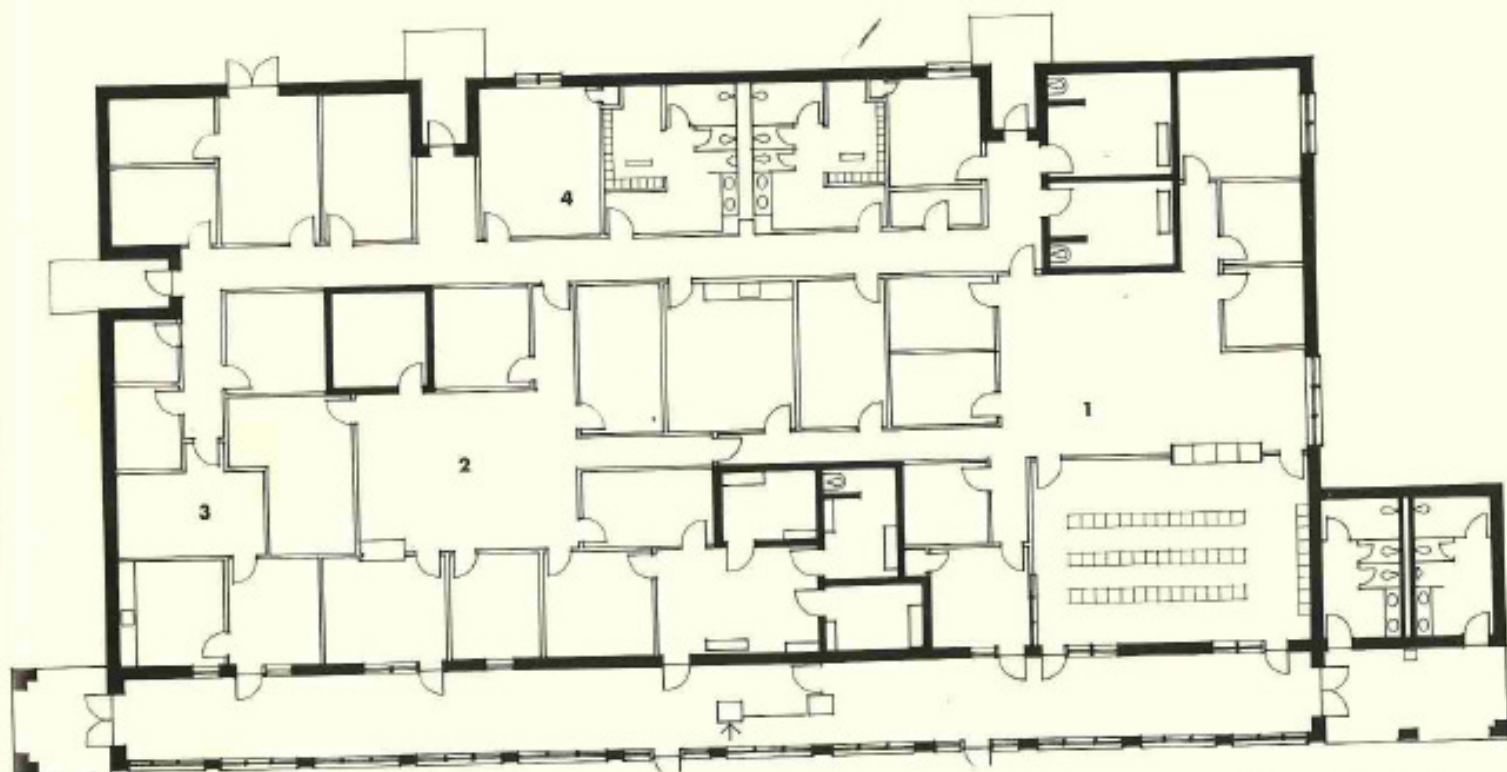
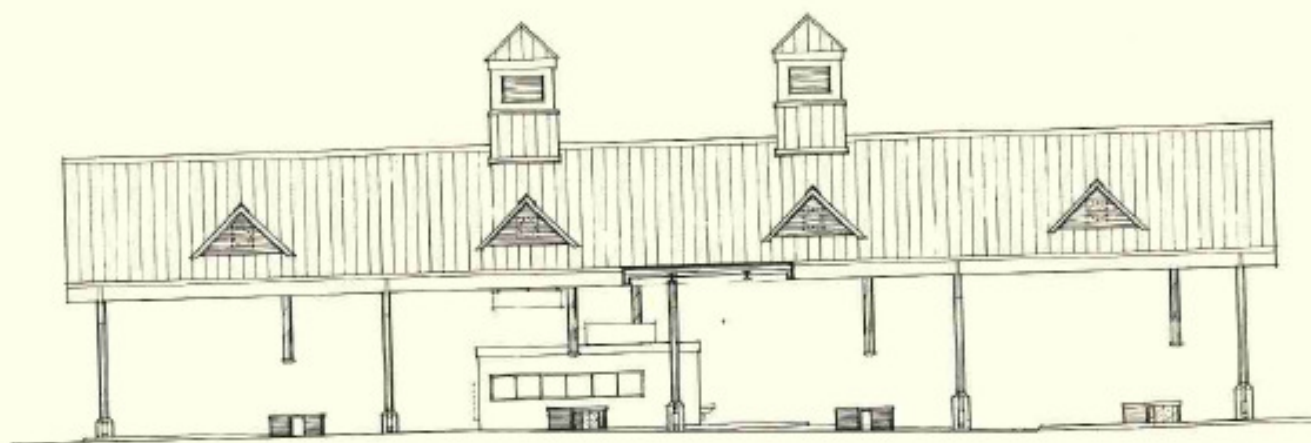
## **B&M Bridge Station, Brownsville**

THE B&M BRIDGE, the old-timers' favorite crossing in Brownsville, was originally built for the railroad but now accommodates two vehicular lanes. Located at the corner of Mexico Street and Sam Perl Boulevard, which leads into the old heart of Brownsville, the site is actually on land reclaimed from the Rio Grande flood plain for the now-defunct Amigoland complex. The new border station, by the joint-venture team of RioGroup Architects and Planners, Joneskell Architects, and Jasmine Engineering, has been bid and awarded to a contractor but not yet begun. It will include an administration building with matching primary and secondary inspection canopies, and an

Top: The B&M station's administration building is faced in limestone-trimmed buff brick typical of the area, evoking (on its U.S. facade) WPA-era civic architecture.

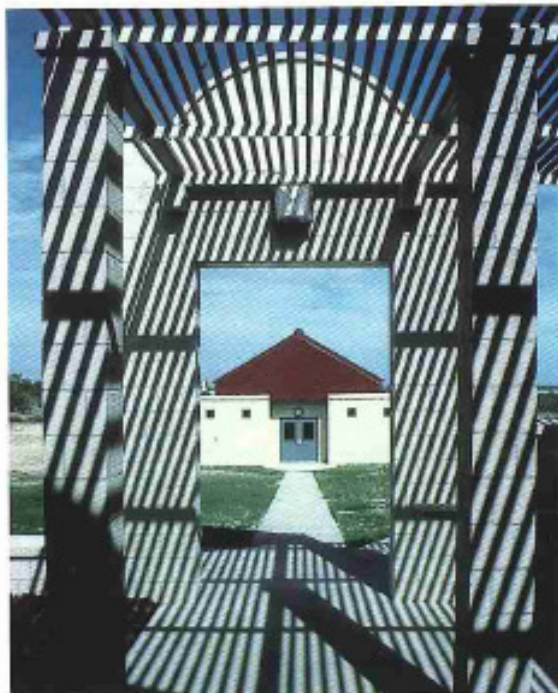
Middle: The automobile inspection canopy is specially equipped to protect inspectors from exhaust fumes that could accumulate despite an 18-foot vertical clearance. Four-by-eight-foot booths are capable of stopping magnum-caliber gunfire.

Bottom: The administration building has distinct work areas arranged along the pedestrian flow past (1) INS, (2) U.S. Customs, and (3) USDA, with shared spaces (4) to the rear.

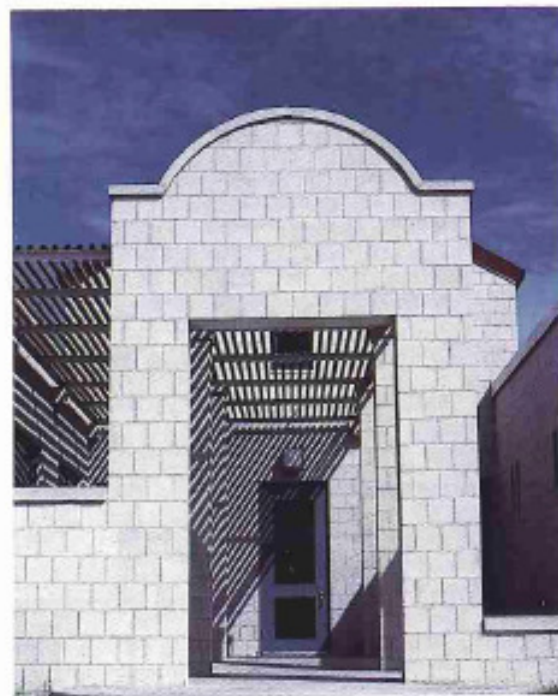




Facing page: The Border Patrol Station in Eagle Pass is organized along an east-west axis perpendicular to the highway, allowing it to stretch along the slope in a formal arrangement reminiscent of U.S. Army forts of the 19th century.



Above and right: The station's red metal roofs, white concrete block, and shaded entries recall stucco-and-tile haciendas of the border region.



import building with truck inspection docks, all in the limestone-trimmed buff brick typical of the border area. Taking their cues from the best civic architecture of the South Texas region, RioGroup, the design architect heading the joint venture for this station, gave the main facades the feeling of good WPA-era work. The administration and inspection facilities, with their pitched metal roofs, along with the efficiently designed import docks, are slated by GSA officials as prototypes for other new stations such as that proposed for Columbia Bridge. Additional sites, including Los Indios, near Blanco, and Zaragoza, near El Paso, have been proposed in negotiations between Texas' Governor Clements and Mexico's President Salinas.

Program imperatives, including traffic separation, security, and control for Customs, INS, and USDA alike, are the keys to the site planning and interior organization of the B&M Station. Due to the general east-to-west direction of the border, the B&M Station, like most stations, is oriented north-south to take advantage of cross breezes. The largest building is a 14,000-square-foot automobile inspection canopy, open at the sides to allow ventilation of exhaust fumes and large enough to protect inspectors and vehicles from the elements. The canopy includes hydraulic lifts and agents' observation booths. The canopy is long enough to allow 12 to 18 autos and a bus or two to be detained and examined at any one time.

Besides its regional appropriateness and strong sense of order, there is also a great deal of technical expertise exhibited in this complex. One telling sign is that the inspection canopy and import dock equipment command the greatest portion of the budget. Security for agents inspecting automobile traffic—a prime concern at all the stations, according to RioGroup partner Robert Steinbomer—is provided by four-by-eight-foot booths capable of stopping magnum-caliber gunfire. Tall air-intake stacks and dormers for exhaust regulate air temperature and control pollution for the open-air work stations outside the booths, and air conditioning systems will deliver 2,000 cubic feet per minute of cool comfort in and around each one. Bird-proof canopy soffits and dock levelers to adjust for non-standard Mexican trucks of every size and configuration are just a few more of the specialties that the new border stations must provide.

The next largest structure is the main administration building housing the INS, U.S. Customs, and the USDA. This building too is oriented north-south in the direction of pedestrian flow. Each agency has separate work areas, communications, and personnel. The INS and Customs each have short-term detention rooms, equipped with alarms so that agents can summon help when needed, detention-quality fixtures, and observation windows. The only shared areas in the complex are restrooms, conference rooms, and kitchens.

#### Border Patrol Station, Eagle Pass

THE EAGLE PASS STATION, by O'Neill & Perez architects of San Antonio (later phases of the project were completed by Andrew Perez Associates), finished in 1985, is a regional headquarters for Border Patrol agents located on a hillside with a good view of the Rio





Grande in the distance. Like RioGroup, Andrew Perez felt strongly about the contextual challenge of this place, and on many levels infused this project with observations from the architecture and planning of the area. Its hillside siting and materials—white concrete block, red metal roofing, and contrasting detailing of main facades and openings—bring to mind the stucco-and-tile haciendas of the past, a memory that is reinforced upon closer inspection.

The complex, including the station itself and a maintenance building, is organized along an east-west axis nearly perpendicular to Highway 277. This allows the building to stretch along the slope in a formal arrangement reminiscent of the U.S. Army forts and parade grounds that staked out the Mexican and Indian frontiers in the 19th century. The indigenous architecture of the region is also recalled in the *morisco* or courtyard plan of the public and agent entries.

Separation of different groups of people and program areas is a priority of this building type, just as it is in the border station. The agent entry and squad room are separated by a secure control room from the alien entry and processing room. This main functional area of the building is denoted by a gable roof, while the supporting holding areas, interview and isolation rooms, agent locker rooms, and offices are flat-roofed. Officer security and public image also have high priority here, as shown in the automatic gates of the alien entry and discharge area and the location of the agent entry at the focal point of three formal axes and circulation paths that survey the maintenance building, the helicopter pad, and the parking areas for government and impounded vehicles.

The successful synthesis of tough-building imperatives and appropriately transformed historical building patterns in the Eagle Pass Station has resulted in a San Antonio Chapter/AIA Design Award, as well as the station's adoption as a prototype by the Department of Justice. The architects attempted to go beyond the

program statement in creating an architecture that speaks to the greater community—one that is actually unified rather than divided by the life-sustaining Rio Grande. This may not tell the whole truth about the building's purpose as a control and detention facility for illegal aliens and smugglers, but it does serve as a modest yet dignified civic symbol.

Although the role of the Border Patrol Station is fairly straightforward, the Border Station resonates with the inherent ambiguity of its position. Like Janus, two-face god of the gate, this enigmatic figure must smile both ways, to belie any prejudice towards either side. On the other hand, unlike a simple threshold, the station must go beyond welcome to exhibit a policy that requires separation of desired people and goods from unwanted or illegal ones. Stations must clearly express the fact that contraband will be excluded.

During this time of shifting views towards immigration, amnesty, drug smuggling, economic cooperation, and protectionist policy, it will be worthwhile to watch for any corresponding changes in Janus's expression. The recent proposal to dig a huge barrier ditch along the California-Mexico border, and the discovery in May of a sophisticated drug-smugglers' tunnel system across the Arizona-Mexico line offer a striking contrast to official support for new bridges and *maquiladoras* now employing thousands on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border. Conflicting public sentiment over the border—the desire to gain from open access, at odds with the fear of losing control—will determine the future. **TA**

**Conflicting public sentiment over the border—the desire to gain from open access, at odds with the fear of losing control—show in two prototype projects.**

*Architect Natalye Appel of Houston is a member of the TSA Publications Committee. Her Caldwell Beach House, Galveston, was featured in the April 1990 issue of Architecture.*