



University Federal Credit Union - Brodie Lane Branch

The exterior of the Brodie Branch location was designed to give the UFCU maximum visual impact. The concept was to make the building act as a billboard for their products and services both day and night.

Structurally Sound

[BY : AMY LEMEN]



ARCHITECT MICHAEL ANTENORA

says architecture is 95 percent about people and 5 percent about the building. As a noted commercial and residential designer, he says his primary job is to meet people's needs. "Meeting client needs has been our goal for the last six years," he says. "We're not just creating buildings, and the community is also our client."

Yet Antenora and his staff have put their stamp on everything from commercial structures to custom homes, restaurants and retail in Austin, including many projects for University Federal Credit Union. In fact, UFCU is a good example of the relationship-building that Antenora says is key to his business. The credit union has been a client for nearly five years; Antenora started with a small branch downtown, which then evolved into re-branding the entire UFCU system. "Michael is very interested in how he can help achieve our strategic interests and goals through architecture and his designs," says Vince McConnell, senior manager of direct delivery services for UFCU. "We had several meetings where we just talked about how people worked – he was interested in learning how the business worked before designing anything."

The result of that intense focus has created an entirely new aesthetic for the credit union – from open, airy spaces, light woods and colors to technology innovations that allow for more efficiency, while still maintaining the human touch in customer transactions. It's a combination McConnell appreciates. "When you think of a bank, you think dark wood, marble and plush carpet, and we're far away from that," says McConnell. "He has really had an impact on the way we do business and has facilitated us serving our membership. It's been one success after another."

OHIO TO AUSTIN

That road to success started in Akron, Ohio, where Antenora was born and raised. He earned bachelors degrees in fine art and architecture from Kent State University and a master of architecture from the University of Texas at Austin. Antenora loved the city so much that he chose to stay, opening Antenora Architects in 1997.

The firm's central focus is on architecture, but also has a hand in many other artistic endeavors, including interior architecture; graphic design; architectural illustration for clients and other architectural firms – even furniture design. It turns out Antenora is also a skilled woodworker and cabinetmaker. "Most firms are either technical-business oriented or design-oriented," says Antenora. "We wanted to be imaginative in our design, but also very responsive to our client's needs while combining aesthetics, economics and function."

REUSE AND RECYCLE

One way Antenora meets those goals is by taking on adaptive re-use projects, for which the firm has become well known. By definition, one might think of *adaptive re-use* as a creative way of using old buildings in new ways – almost like creating architecture with found objects. “It really takes recycling to a new level. You are directly re-using the building and materials instead of processing them into another form” says Antenora. “There’s no transport costs because the building’s right there and no re-manufacturing costs – it’s a very green way to build.”

That philosophy resulted in one of Antenora’s favorite projects – the award-winning restoration of Penn Field, a World War I-era army airbase in central Austin. “It’s hard to pick one favorite project, but with the size of the project and palette of materials we used, there was a lot of creativity there,” he says. “It was a nice blend of history, adaptive re-use and design.”

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

Antenora is pleased with the way things have gone in Austin, but always has an eye on the future – and new ways to grow the business. Strategies include building on the firm’s strengths of problem solving, creativity, economics and branching out into new directions. One of those directions involves designing more high-end residential projects. “Residential really strikes a balance for us and adds depth to our work,” he says. “It gives us an opportunity to add to our experience and keeps us fresh.”

Antenora even put his money where his mouth is, entirely remodeling his own home with a highly creative design that connects the home with several courtyards – all while preserving its original footprint. “You really have to think about how you use your home, how you live and take the entire site into consideration,” he says. “I used my house as a lab and now have that unique perspective and can understand the position our clients are in when they want to redesign a home.”

A NICE PLACE TO WORK

Antenora also prides himself on creating a nice place to work for his staff, and they seem to agree. “The opportunity to learn is a big thing,” says Bruce Morrison, senior associate with Antenora Architects. “It’s such a small office – you don’t get that in a bigger office.” “Michael’s really talented at running projects,” says James Amos, architectural intern. “We can learn a lot from him.”



top : Penn Field : adaptive re-use project converting a World War I Army training base into a modern day structure.

middle : interior shot of Zax Pints & Plates

right : interior shot of teller stations in the UFCU South MoPac location



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And learn they do. Antenora says clients are “surprised” at the amount of work the firm turns out with a staff of four, especially in the timeframe that they do them. “It’s very vibrant here – things move quickly and there’s a lot of opportunity to learn,” he says. “We’re focused and efficient, and that helps us make good decisions and make them quickly.”

Apparently getting engaged is one of them. It seems that every male that has worked for Antenora has become engaged or gotten married while there. It’s a fun trend Antenora appreciates. “It makes me feel good,” he says. “The guys have lives outside the office. Architecture’s not everything – just one part of a lifestyle.”

THE BOTTOM LINE: SOLVING PROBLEMS

At the end of the day, Antenora wants clients to think of his firm as “very good problem solvers,” since that’s what they do, whether it’s repurposing an old building, designing a dream house, handcrafting

furniture or coming up with a creative solution for a commercial building. “You’re really designing a solution – putting an idea into a built form that’s sculptural, functional and habitable,” he says. “We try to achieve the best balance that we can for our clients – that’s what makes good designers. The balance of and attention to detail is really the hallmark of our work.”

Antenora tells a story about architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollo, known simply as Vitruvius, who subscribed to the idea of *Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas*. So does Antenora. “He said the necessary virtues of good architecture are Strength, Utility – or function – and Beauty,” he says. “This is the balance that we try to achieve in all of our work.”

As for Antenora’s clients, McConnell of UFCU says partnership is also important, and that’s how they view Antenora – as a partner. “With Michael, you get the whole package,” he says. “And that has been borne out time and time again with us.”