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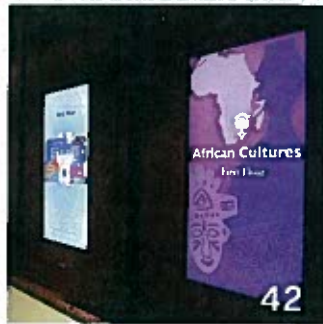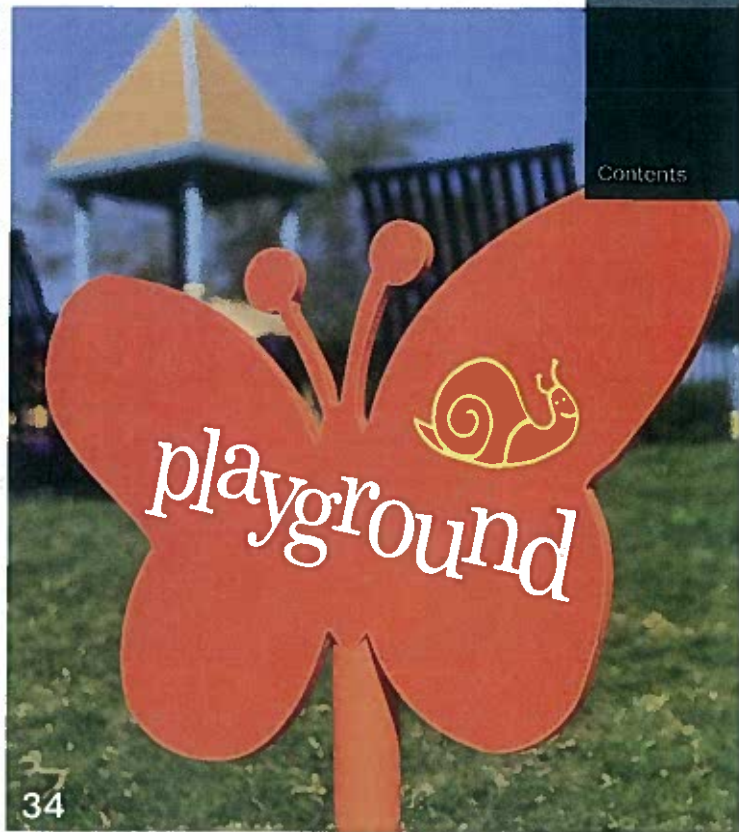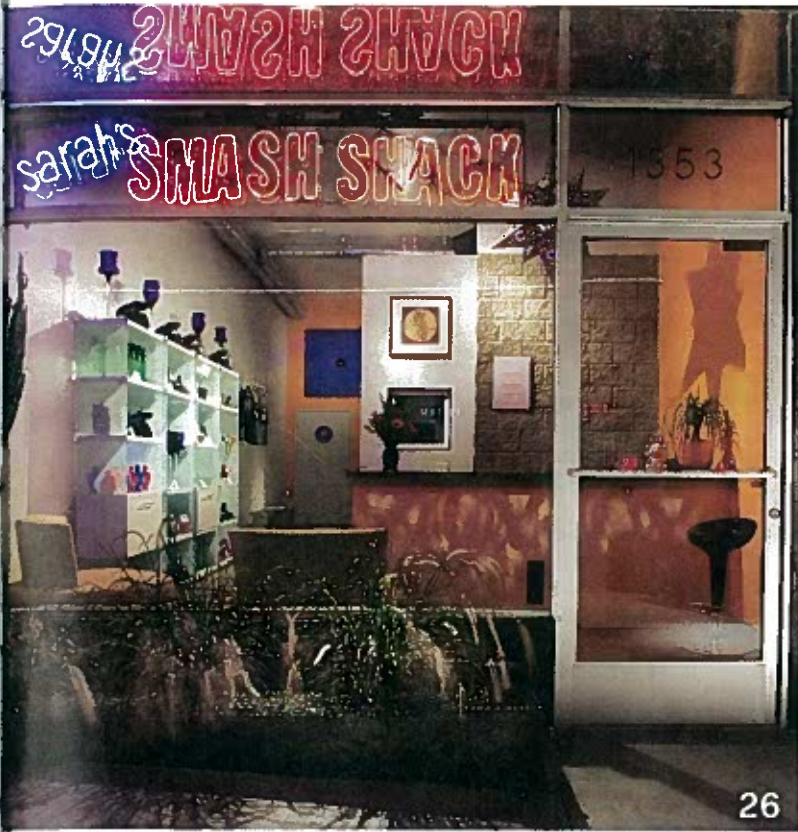
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On the cover: San Diego's Latino culture is heroically displayed in the storied murals at Chicano Park, located underneath the Coronado Bay Bridge in Barrio Logan. Photo: Harmon Nelson

Colorful environmental graphics make an urban San Diego park sing.

BY PAT MATSON KNAPP

Tweet
Street

I t's just a series of 10 x 30-ft. right-of-way strips perched over a major freeway, but Tweet Street is sweet to neighborhood residents, their pets, and the birds returning to the neighborhood after being displaced by downtown development decades ago.

Tweet Street was more than 15 years in the making, but it's a new bright spot in San Diego's Cortez Hill neighborhood. It was named in honor of the avian artwork perched atop colorful poles: birdhouses created as part of a public art competition aimed at attracting native birds back to the neighborhood.

"The idea behind the park was to involve the community by having a design competition for birdhouses," says MaeLin Levine, principal of hometown design firm Visual Asylum. "It's wonderful that we now have this great park in downtown San Diego and at the same time we're encouraging the native birds to come back."

Above: Visual Asylum created a family of bird characters that appear on digitally printed aluminum banner blades and on waterjet-cut sculptural elements atop banner poles.

Right: Tweet Street won a 2008 Orchid Award from the San Diego Architectural Foundation. It was lauded for the public policy efforts to build new parks in the urban environment.

Opposite: Since the park's public art is literally up in the trees, Visual Asylum designed banner poles to guide visitors' eyes upward.

Above: The birdhouse-inspired interpretive kiosk features three conical aluminum panels, with graphics embedded in high-pressure laminate. Two of the three panels spin, but the third is stationery and embedded with Braille text.

Below: Fabrication Arts created artist plaques waterjet-cut from 1/8-in. aluminum.

Coming to roost

The project started back in 1992 when San Diego's Centre City Development Corporation marked a series of Caltrans rights of way off Interstate 5 as the site for a park. "Our goal is to provide parks within a five to 10-minute walk of every neighborhood," says John Anderson, CCDC project manager. "In this case we took a piece of land that was essentially unusable and turned it into a beautiful park space for one of our core neighborhoods."

In 2000, CCDC hooked up with local activist and graphic design instructor Candice Lopéz, who had led the Urban Art Trail project in the city's East Village neighborhood. Lopéz turned to the local AIGA chapter and Levine, its then-president, to brainstorm theme ideas for the park. Lopéz and Levine orchestrated a competition inviting local artists, designers, and architects to submit their ideas for a series of "urban birdhouses."

The birdhouses were designed to the exact specifications of birds indigenous to the area, says Levine. "The holes were specific sizes, there were no perches that could attract predators, the houses had to be ventilated, and they had to be accessible for cleaning."

Ten birdhouses were ultimately chosen and the AIGA held several gallery exhibitions to show them off. But the park project was stalled from 2002 through 2006 while CCDC negotiated with Caltrans to lease the land back to the city for use as a park.

Taking flight

The project finally got off the perch again in late 2006, when CCDC asked Visual Asylum to design a signage package and visual identity for the park. Estrada Land Planning was selected as the park's landscape architects.

With the whimsical birdhouses as a starting point, Levine's first thought was that the park should be bright and colorful.

"We really believed there needed to be more color and whimsy in San Diego, and especially in downtown San Diego," says Levine. "Because we were primarily a military town for so long, everything was beige and white. We felt the park needed a feeling of life and energy that would better reflect the spirit of San Diego."

So Visual Asylum created a family of colorful bird "characters" that appear on aluminum banners, on sculptural elements atop banner poles, and on identity and interpretive signage. "You might not notice on the first visit that there are several different bird characters, but it's a level of detail we think people will enjoy as they visit repeatedly, and it also alludes to the diversity of San Diego," Levine explains.

The signage program consists of nine banner poles with aluminum banners, identity signs at the park's three entrances, artist identification plaques, and a circular, birdhouse-inspired interpretive kiosk. Visual Asylum also gets credit for the naming, visual identity, and various print collateral pieces for the park.
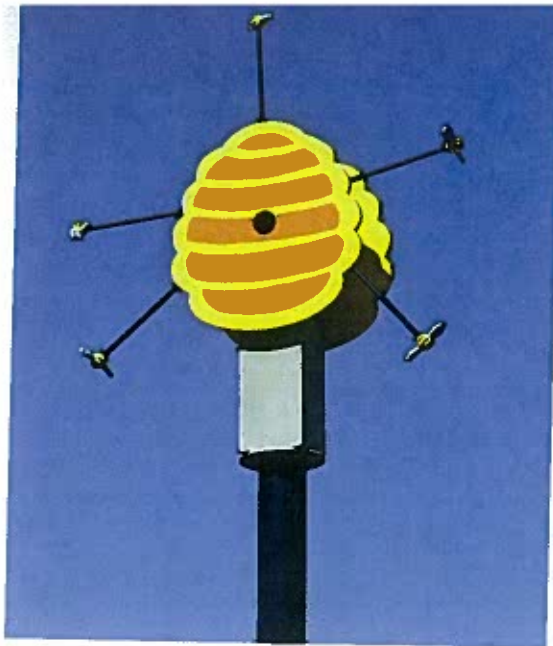
From vision to reality

San Diego-based Fabrication Arts was responsible for translating Visual Asylum's design intent into three-dimensional reality. "This is the kind of project we love doing," says John O'Connell, vice president. "We enjoy helping to create sculptural elements and working with designers on materials, finishes, and processes."

Fabrication Arts used aluminum extensively in the project, beginning with the banner poles and banner blades with digitally printed faces. The sculptural birds atop the banner poles were waterjet-cut from _-in. thick aluminum and protected with Matthews polyurethane.

A major fabrication challenge was creating elements that could stand up to potential thieves and vandals. Heavy coats of colored paint may fool thieves looking to steal metal, says O'Connell, but if that doesn't work, tamper-resistant hardware requires special wrenches the typical thief won't carry.

Creating the circular shape of the interpretive kiosk was also a challenge, in addition to engineering it for weather and vandal resistance. "And we had to make sure that children didn't mistake the spinning elements of the kiosk for more playground equipment," says O'Connell.

Three roll-formed, conical aluminum panels spin on a central pole in lazy Susan fashion, allowing visitors to learn about the park and its indigenous birds. Interpretive graphics were embedded into Fossil high-pressure laminate covering the panels. "It's a very vandal-resistant way to embed graphics subsurface." O'Connell adds. Braille was also required for the project, so it was embedded in the HPL on a non-rotating panel.

Tweet Street won a 2008 Orchid Award from the San Diego Architectural Foundation. Jurors called it "an urban gem that steals back an unused Caltrans right-of-way to create a much-needed shady green space. Bravo! We need a hundred more of these." X

Above: AIGA San Diego invited local artists, designers, and architects to create urban birdhouses that would attract indigenous birds back to the neighborhood.

Right: Designers realized that families would also want to bring their dogs to the park. A garden of colorful fire hydrants was planted to entice dogs and help preserve landscaping.

Below: Tweet Street has become a welcoming oasis for local families.

TWEET STREET PARK
Location: San Diego
Client: Centre City Development Corp.
Design: Visual Asylum
Design Team: MaeLin Levine (principal, project creative director), Amy Jo Levine (principal, project signage designer), Joel Sotelo (senior designer, project identity designer)
Consultants: Estrada Land Planning (landscape architecture), Nasland Engineering (engineering)
Fabrication: Fabrication Arts
Suppliers: Fossil Industries (high-pressure laminate), Matthews Paint (polyurethane finish)
Photos: Jim Coit