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Snøhetta's craft-forward Vesterheim Commons opens in Decorah, Iowa page 12

The Sphere, designed by Populous, hosts inaugural concerts in Las Vegas page 12



REX, Davis Brody Bond, and Rockwell Group complete the Perelman PAC page 13

AN checks out interior architectures by New York-based Modellus Novus page 18

14 PAU in Williamsburg
15 SHoP's Brooklyn Tower
16 Pictorial: a83
74 Marketplace
82 A comic by Amelyn Ng

AN at 20

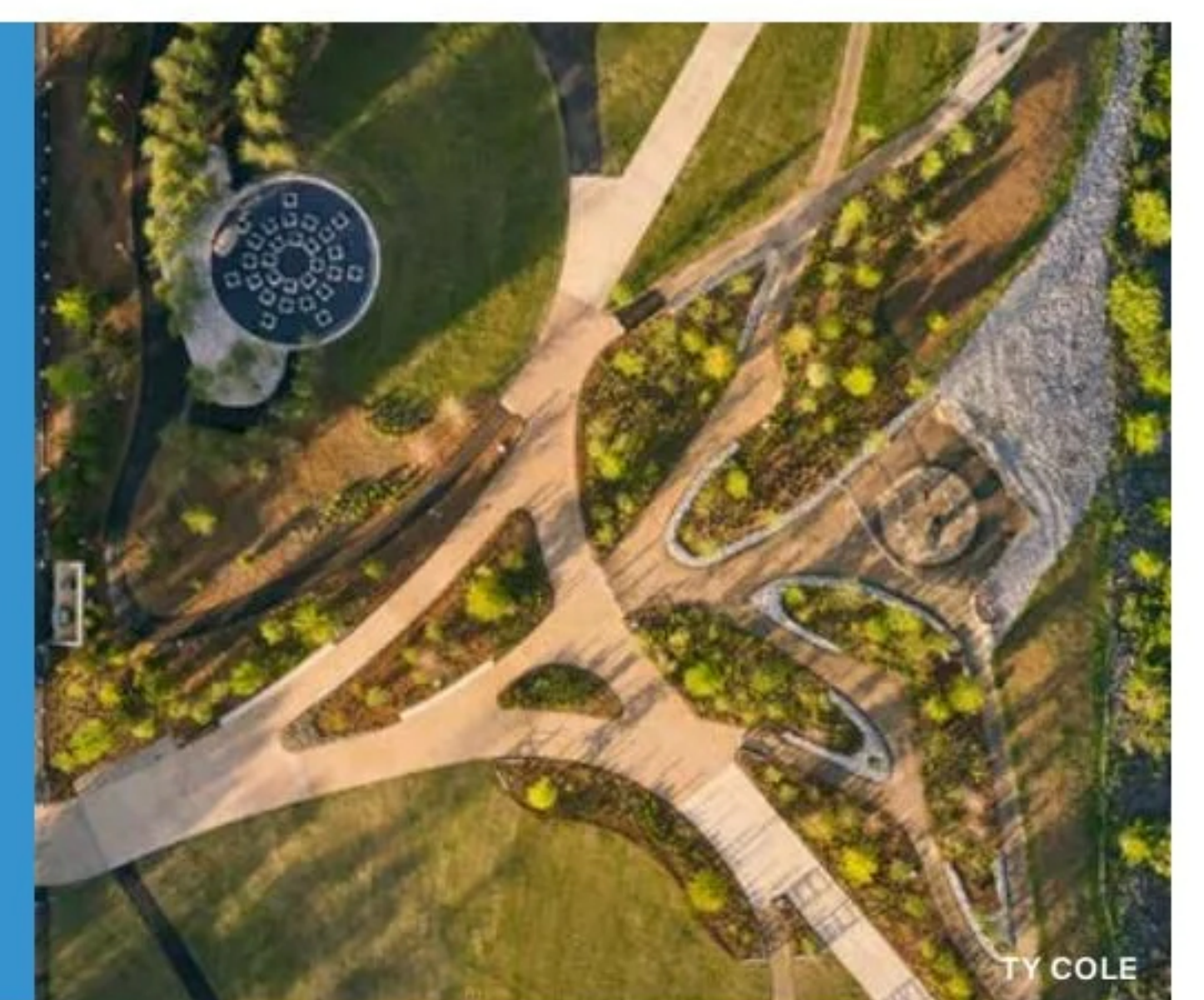
Read on page 20.



AN FOCUS

Landscape

Parks, products, and more.
Read on page 51.



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Landscape

- 52 What's Next in Urban Agriculture
- 54 Case Study: SCAPE and Studio Gang in Memphis, Tennessee
- 58 Public & Contract Furnishings
- 60 Case Study: dwg. and Agenda Architecture in Austin
- 62 Hospitality & Residential Furnishings

- 64 Case Study: RIOS in Houston
- 66 Surfaces
- 68 Lighting
- 70 Pictorial: Gardeners House
- 72 Specialties
- 73 Resources

60 Case Study

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October/November 2023

St. John's Encampment Commons

dwg. and Agenda Architecture reimagine a significant site.



CASEY DUNN



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Top: View of Agenda Architecture's pavilion set within the new parkland.
Above: Historic photograph of a 19th century encampment on the site.

Landscape architect: dwg.
Architect: Agenda Architecture
Location: Austin

Structural engineer: Leap! Structures
Electrical engineer: Bay & Associates
Civil engineer: Stantec (park phase)
WGI (pavilion phase)
Client: Austin Community College
Client representative: RedLeaf Properties
General contractor: Harvey Cleary
Steel fabrication: Renfro + Co
Landscape contractor: Strata Landscape
Outdoor furniture: Landscape Forms
Light fixtures: Targetti, Luminii
Pavers: Keystone Hardscapes
Paint: Sherwin-Williams

In 1867, on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation, four African American Baptist ministers, led by the Reverend Jacob Fontaine, founded what would become known as the St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association. The organization still exists today with the same mission: spreading the Christian gospel. In 1893, the association purchased 306 acres of land four miles north of Austin to use for its annual encampment meetings. Fourteen years later, it established on the site an orphanage and school that offered practical industrial training as well as coursework in the arts and humanities to African American men and women. But since a fire destroyed the orphanage in 1956, the site has proved amorphous: Land was sold to a developer who, in 1971, built on it the city's first suburban shopping mall, Highland Mall. Then, that mall was adapted to anchor the Austin Community College's Highland Campus



Current page: The pavilion structure by Agenda Architecture serves multiple public purposes, from graduation ceremonies to performances. Its form was inspired by the tents pitched for annual encampment meetings. Each louver rotates slightly, allowing for varied shade patterns, and gives an illusion of volume.

when it opened its doors to students in 2014. But today, a new, open green space known as the St. John's Encampment Commons has begun to return the site to its roots.

Designed by landscape architecture firm *dwg.* with Agenda Architecture, the commons serve as the campus's eastern gateway as the college seeks to restore the site's historical connections to education and to the African American community, which had been erased over the decades. The project celebrated its official opening on August 28, though it had already been functioning as a *de facto* dog park for nearly a year, despite attempts to deter visitors with construction fencing.

Driving the landscape design was the preservation of four oak trees that had been transplanted from other areas of campus and unceremoniously plopped in 6-foot-high dirt mounds onto what was then a parking lot. This

led to the idea of lifting the grade and working with the site's topology to create a natural amphitheater. The elevation is flanked by winding paths encircling a central lawn, and landscaped beds and seating areas can be found scattered along the perimeter.

Water conservation, too, was a central part of the vision. A nearly 1-million-gallon cistern captures rainwater from the top deck of the adjacent parking garage, as well as AC condensate from the central chilling plant: Like rainwater, the condensate can be collected, and is then used to irrigate the commons, among other purposes. The design team also reduced impervious cover by 90 percent and incorporated a sponge garden, which filters pollutants from stormwater before it flows into a regional detention pond. "This became a profound demonstration of how you can be smart with infrastructure," said *dwg.* president and founder Daniel Woodroffe.

Floating at the site's southern end is a diaphanous event pavilion designed by Agenda Architecture. A structure was initially planned for college functions like graduation, convocation, and outdoor classroom space, but ambitions for the space expanded to the larger campus ecosystem. (The local PBS station, colocated on campus, first pitched the idea of a music venue during planning stages.)

Though the pavilion was first envisioned as a roofed structure, the team pivoted after realizing rain infiltration wasn't a primary concern. The result is a system of white epoxy-painted steel columns and louvers, the form inspired by the cloth tents that once graced the encampments of the congregation, according to Agenda Architecture partner Michael Hargens. Each louver rotates slightly, creating a striated shading pattern and the illusion of a volume that can magically transform from transparent to solid as lighting conditions change.

The 4,750-square-foot structure's irregular column grid was devised in consultation with Leap Structures to keep columns as slender as possible. There's also a rectangular, column-free zone that can host a stage. The shifting roof height and grid divides the canopy space into distinct areas that offer varying degrees of intimacy, appropriate for anything from a dance recital to a conversation over coffee. "The fact that they saw the value of enabling people to come together and do it in a way that will, I hope, stand the test of time and be a talking point for generations is really uplifting for me," said Woodroffe. "The agenda of social, environmental, and economic change has been great to see exemplified in a project like this."

Anastasia Calhoun is the editor of *Texas Architect* magazine.