Project Brings UT Austin School of Nursing Space to Life

Imagine a courtyard space so austere that its only visitors were the wind and dust. The School of Nursing at The University of Texas at Austin had such a space—one that challenged collaboration among students, faculty and staff.

In 2009, the School of Nursing expanded by closing the one open side of its central courtyard. According to Dr. Alexa Stuifbergen, dean of the school, “Up to that point, there had been somewhat of a view. With no view, concrete planters, and few users, the area was deserted.” School leaders recognized at that time the need to unify the 2009 addition with the original building and leverage the courtyard to invite movement and connect the spaces.

Then, in 2014, the university’s Dell Medical School and surrounding Health District construction began. Nearby green space in an adjacent park and tennis courts also disappeared with new construction. It was clear a transformation was needed to create a space in the School of Nursing that was more fitting to the healing characteristics of the nursing profession.

With that impetus, the school reached out to Project Management & Construction Services (PMCS), the university department responsible for renovation projects valued under $10 million. The school compared proposals from three different landscape architects to the one submitted by PMCS Project Manager Nina Hammoudeh and decided that her approach best suited the school’s vision of a space that would be functional as well as symbolic of the nursing profession in renewing lives.

“The environment was a stark concrete box,” said Hammoudeh. “We decided not to fight the box, but instead to work with it to create a three-dimensional space that had a variety of gathering areas.”

When Hammoudeh took on the project, the perimeter of the “box” was lined with gray concrete planters—some containing dead plants. Much of the space was in full, blazing Texas sun, with a small area in dark shadow. Metal tables and chairs completed the stark atmosphere.
Although Hammoudeh’s proposal incorporated existing planters, she and School of Nursing leaders wanted to bring in natural materials such as wood and hardy plants that could adapt to sun or shade as needed.

“We wanted to bring in wood for an organic feel and create a sense of harmony and collaboration,” said Hammoudeh. “We also wanted to create a space that spoke to the healing and humane spirit of the nursing profession.”

Part of the solution was literally next door. During construction of the medical school, several large live oak trees in the area were relocated, but some oak, pecan, and elm trees were not suitable for removal and replanting. Under a new sustainability initiative at the university, those trees were repurposed into lumber and mulch for campus projects, including hardwood lumber for furniture. When word of this repurposing initiative reached Hammoudeh through Margaret Hill, assistant dean of the School of Nursing, Hammoudeh contacted Armando Blanco, supervisor of the PMCS Carpenter Shop. Blanco crafted a prototype bench for Hill and Hammoudeh to inspect. Hill gave approval for the Carpenter Shop to make additional benches and tables for the school.

Blanco got to work designing and leading his team in crafting several pieces. Together, skilled Carpenter Shop staff members Jeff Bachschmid, Laura Burrows, Robert Delware, Matthew Frymire, Michael Phalan, Kenny Rhinehart, and Timmy Torres produced eight benches for the courtyard, a five-piece bench with two side tables that can be configured in various shapes, three picnic tables (two large, standard height; one smaller, bar height), and several more benches for the outside front of the building. The team also made a large accent piece from a tree stump—roughly three feet in diameter—and a small table with four stools. (See photos of the team members working on various pieces, pages 4 and 5.)

Carpenters constructed the benches from pecan and elm and the other pieces from live oak, all from Blanco’s free-form designs. Dubbed “the Wood Whis- perer” by Hammoudeh, Blanco explained that “the wood tells me what to do.” With his guidance, the shop team finished the pieces with weather-proof varnish and a few flourishes such as turquoise inlay or an accent of bright paint.

Dean Stuifbergen noted that the unique pieces of repurposed wood reflect the nursing profession’s focus on the uniqueness of every human being and on renewal. “Each piece speaks to the heart of a unique,
special place,” she said. “The wood transcends a dead tree to build something really positive.”

In addition to the wood pieces and existing furniture, the project enhanced the courtyard with new tables, patio umbrellas for shade and chairs. The PMCS Paint Shop painted the concrete planters a warm, rich red, and the university’s Landscape Services team filled them with native and adaptive plants.

The budget for the courtyard project was $100,000. Using repurposed wood and collaborating with the Carpenter Shop and other university crews brought the actual cost to about half that amount. Supporting this collaboration, the school allowed flexibility in the project delivery schedule to accommodate the time needed to make the custom wood furniture pieces.

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School leaders are not the only ones pleased with the results. Asked for her reaction to the project, nursing student Kayce Campbell said, “I never came out to the courtyard before. Now it’s like ‘Let’s go study outside today!’” Nursing sophomore Charlotte Wright commented, “The plants make you feel like you are able to see green—it’s not just concrete. The natural wood benches are fun and fresh. I love it.” Dean Stuifbergen noted that the students were excited from the start of the project, particularly embracing the repurposing of the trees.

For the university’s urban forester, Jim Carse, who oversaw relocation and repurposing of trees from the medical school construction area, “the idea to build the courtyard furniture at Nursing was amazing. It was exactly what I had in mind when we decided to salvage wood from the medical school site.”

Carse explained that when Landscape Services heard that the School of Nursing was interested in the wood, “it made perfect sense because they are an integral part of the [Dell Medical School] project.”
The medical school welcomed its first class on July 5, 2016, and its students will use the simulation lab located in the School of Nursing. They are likely to spend time in the courtyard as well.

For Carse, “the best part of the courtyard project was to see the beauty in the native trees after they were milled, and how well the pieces were crafted by our own carpentry staff.”

Reflecting on the positive outcomes of this collaborative, creative project, Stuifbergen said, “We could have spent five times this much and not gotten what we wanted.”

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Dean Alexa Stuifbergen, School of Nursing

Michael Phalan attaching seats to a picnic table. Photo by Armando Blanco.

Jeffrey Bachschmid assembling a hardwood bench from a repurposed tree. Photo by Armando Blanco.


Rob Delware sanding a bench after assembly. Photo by Armando Blanco.

Laura Burrows applying weather-proof finish to a completed bench. Photo by Armando Blanco.

From left, Matthew Frymire and Michael Phalan assembling cedar bench. Photo by Armando Blanco.