Last fall, an architect colleague wrote in this column about the vast differences in two new library sites on opposite ends of our city, and how the architect responded to the specific cultural and site conditions that were presented at each location. Our central library, an important piece of our downtown architectural fabric that is lovingly referred to as “the Red Enchilada,” has been a striking addition to our downtown, and will remain a focal point in our skyline for the many decades to come.

During the early part of my career, the city of San Antonio decided to host a design competition for the new central library. The effort, led by Marie Schwartz and then-Mayor Nelson Wolff, followed what at the time was a recent trend of major American cities sponsoring design competitions for their library facilities.

I was familiar with the work of Ricardo Legorreta, but I had never met him. So, when I called him out of the blue, I was surprised that he took my phone call.

I remember he told me that he normally did not enter competitions, but that because he liked San Antonio so much, he was willing to team with us (Sprinkle Robey Architects). One thing that always stuck with me about that conversation was his one caveat: he said that he would only enter the competition with us if he could present a design that he thought would be best for the city and not a design that we thought would necessarily win.

With that statement, I knew that I was talking to a visionary.

After we made the short list along with four other teams for the competition, Ricardo came to San Antonio a few times to explore the city and get a feel for its 'vibe.' I was lucky enough to spend a week at his office in Mexico City to assist in the preparations of the final competition drawings.

During my time there, I was moved by how there seemed to be no separation between Ricardo's life and his work. He made the experience of working with his staff enjoyable and full of laughs. He actually lived 20 steps away from his studio.

Our submission was unanimously selected by the jurors as the winner. There were a number of things I learned from Ricardo, and they continue to inform my work.

One is the notion of mystery in architecture; the idea that the forms and spaces should unfold and open up in unexpected and delightful ways.

Of course his use of color was outstanding and I feel like he gave us all license to be freer with our use of color in our work – with the exception of one color. I once asked Ricardo why he never used the color green in his work and he responded, "Because that color was reserved for God."

He was also very good with lighting, both natural and artificial. If you look at his interiors, rarely do you see any light fixtures, only the glow emitted from behind slots, holes and gaps in the ceilings and walls.

Most importantly, there is a sense of joy and exuberance in his work that is held in check by his strict geometric vocabulary. His work has a dream-like quality that stays in our minds long after visiting one of his projects.

The design for our most important city library has been a winner in so many ways – culturally, aesthetically, and contextually. My friend and respected mentor, Ricardo Legorreta, recently passed away. I will miss him.

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