

Lab of a Different COLOR

Metal Brings High-tech Beauty to a
University Laboratory / By Jim Schneider

Originally founded in 1961 in response to the sudden expansion of Dallas-based Texas Instruments, the University of Texas at Dallas was born of high ambitions to draw the nation's greatest scientific and mathematical minds to its halls. Today, the university boasts one of the highest rates of computer-science graduates of any higher-education institution in the U.S.

A renewed fervor to stay on the cutting edge of research and inspire even greater enrollment in its math and science programs led to the design and construction of a new, state-of-the-art laboratory. The flexible facility would serve the needs of multiple disciplines, add to the beauty of the campus and provide a centerpiece to the campus' north entrance. It would house offices for faculty, graduate students and administration, as well as provide flexible laboratory space for electrical engineering, material science, biology, chemistry, physics and neuroscience studies.

A Collaborative Environment

Los Angeles-based design firm Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects LLP was brought on to bring life to the Natural Science and Engineering Research Laboratory. "The intention of the building was, from a campus perspective, to create a new main entrance," says Ted Alan Hyman, AIA, a partner with Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects and the partner in charge of the project. "They wanted to plant the flag for research on campus, so the image of the building was intended to be very cutting edge and reflective of the kind of science being performed inside the building."

The 190,195-square-foot (17669-m²) laboratory facility encompasses an array of scientific disciplines. The intent was to create a modular space that could be used by students and researchers of all kinds. "We interviewed representatives from each of the four departments and learned they were crossing all the lines defining the sciences; so we suggested they leave the constraints of the traditional departmental

boundaries behind, making this a truly interdisciplinary building," Hyman recalls. "We weren't designing chemistry labs or biology labs; we were looking to design labs that were flexible and could be used for anything."

This was a somewhat unconventional approach to designing laboratory space—something the design team and the end users knew all too well. "When the university agreed to the idea, there was a bit of trepidation and disbelief on our part," Hyman admits. "But it's actually worked out very well. Because it's a relatively new school and there wasn't a lot of baggage between the different departments, they've really managed to operate an interdisciplinary building; you walk through and don't know if you're in a chemistry building or a physics building. It's just a laboratory building where people are collaborating with each other."

The interior environment is open and adaptable to encourage interaction and collaboration among students and researchers. Cabinets are on wheels, and tables are not