Photo: Matthew Millman Photography

SETTING THE SCENE

An inspired façade is the breakout star at Arizona State University

By Michele Zimmerman

The Arizona State University Media and Immersive eXperience (MIX) Center welcomes students participating in the ASU Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, including The Sidney Poitier New American Film School programs, with a dynamic façade set to motivate a new generation of creatives. Located on the university's Mesa campus, the building's 366-ft-long illuminated façade is the work of multidisciplinary architectural lighting firm Auerbach Glasow. Rebranded in 2023, the firm transitioned to Apeiro Design to celebrate 50 years in business; Apeiro's work on the project began in 2019 when architect Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, a partner it had worked with before, called the company in to light the MIX's interior public, faculty, and student

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Left: A lobby dissects the MIX Center into the Theatre Block (left) and the Production Block (right).

Right: "Blades" of color-changing lights graze each side of the narrow windows on the Production Block.

areas, as well as the exterior illumination. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that the architect's concept for the façade, replete with a 30-ft-high by 70-ft-long LED screen, would become a breakout star of the project, requiring an expansion of Apeiro's contract to include its illumination.

Where the Magic Happens

The MIX Center, where hands-on, project-based learning in the fields of fashion, film, video games, virtual worlds, and more takes place, is architecturally "divided into two distinct blocks separated by a lobby," explained project lead and Principal at Apeiro Patricia Glasow. "To the west [of the lobby] is the Theatre Block, which houses the Screening Theatre and Screening Room. The Theatre Block is wrapped in color-changeable, direct-view, RGB 'dots' of light. To the east [of the lobby] is the Production Block, which houses the production and post-production facilities: sound stages, labs, recording studios, classrooms, and offices. The articulated terracotta façade of the Production Block is grazed with concealed linear lines of RGBW light."

To integrate the "dots of light" on the Theatre Block cube, architects designed 55 vertical, 49-ft-tall fins around the north, south, and west sides of the architectural cube, with shorter partial fins on the structure's east side. The architectural fins act as wiring channels for more than 5,500 dots, concealing all wiring so that it is invisible to onlookers. The dots, which are Signify ColorKinetics iColor Flex LMX Gen 2, "peak out from the fins," added Glasow, and can be viewed from all angles.

Then, to achieve the "lines of light" on the Production Block, the team incorporated one 30-ft-high, vertical "blade" on each side of 20 narrow windows, for a total of 40 blades of light. Fed from the roof and mounted approximately 10 in. in front of the façade, the RGBW Boca NanoMix color-changeable linear fixtures have lightly diffuse lenses and 120-deg optics. Most importantly, the fixtures were selected for use because louvers on the fixtures provided "excellent shielding" and the fixtures did not require external drivers, explained Glasow.

An additional component of the façade includes pathway lighting on the underside of the trellis beneath the windows. Mounted between trellis slats, wet-label-lensed linear downlights by A-Light provide wayfinding for students and staff as well as

Photo: Bill LeGoullon/Grey Shed Studio

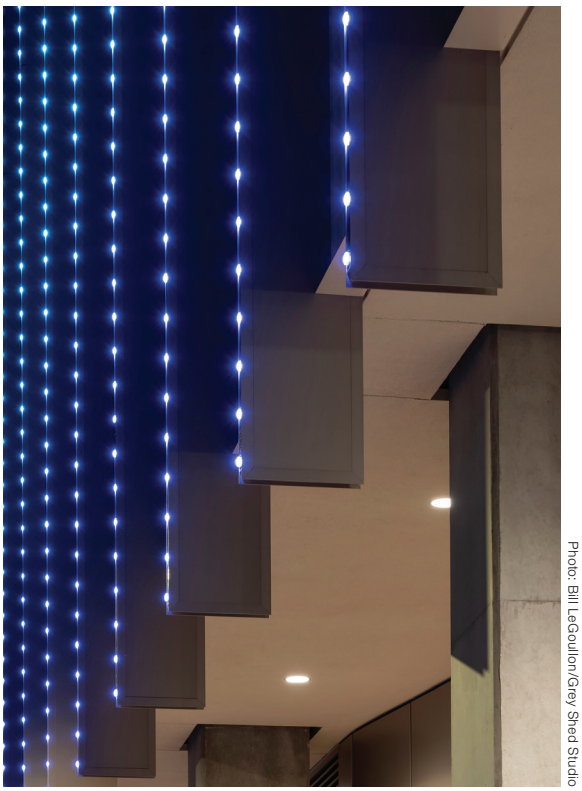

Photo: Bill LeGoullon/Grey Shed Studio

cohesion with interior linear fixtures, as the exterior luminaires were purposefully aligned with luminaires inside the building.

However, the magic behind the eye-catching visuals of the dots and lines lies in the project's control system, conceptualized by Apeiro in tandem with the MIX's Founding Director Jake Pinholster and designed and specified by tech-enabled AV consultant NV5. The ETC Mosaic system allows for individual control over each dot color as well as individual control over each color on the blades in 1-ft increments, for a total of 16,512 DMX addresses for the dots and 4,800 DMX addresses for the lines. The digital, colorful display comes together to reflect the school's forward thinking student body as well as the institution's media and technology focus.

Left: Over 5,000 dynamic "dots" are individually addressable.

Right: RGBW "dots" peak out from fins and are visible at all angles.

B.T.S

Much like a good film, the behind-the-scenes reel of the MIX Center would show that the journey to the project's end was filled with expected and unexpected challenges. One expected challenge going into the project was the budget. As the MIX Center project is a partnership between the City of Mesa and ASU, budget control was of utmost importance; the city managed the design and construction, investing nearly $64 million in the project, while the university contributed $33.5 million for interior work and equipment. "The project was design-build and we worked closely with the contractors to track cost and evaluate suggested cost savings," explained Glasow. "We incorporated cost-saving ideas that did not unduly compromise functionality or design. From the outset, we used budget-friendly products whenever possible. The specialness of the lighting design came from detailing and integration with the architecture, not from expensive fixtures."

Though film sets are full of gag-reel-type-gaffs like actors forgetting lines and the occasional boom mic falling into the camera's view—instances with which ASU cinema students are probably more than familiar—the MIX project faced the unexpected and serious challenge of COVID-19. The pandemic presented extra challenges "when conducting the

Photo: Matthew Millman Photography

The contemporary façade reflects the technology-focused learning that goes on inside the building.

full-scale mock-ups which we knew were required for the success of the design," said Glasow. For example, the pandemic forced the team to get more creative to complete extensive mock-ups in its light lab to determine the center spacing and mounting location for the RBG dots within the channel and the distance of grazing light between window blades to the façade, as well as the effect of the grazing light on the terracotta building material. Traditional on-site full-scale mock-ups were conducted remotely with the lighting designer; the team confirmed light intensity and visual effects via "multiple hours of video chats," explained Glasow. "The architects were at the site and the lighting designer was in [the] office."

Sidney Poitier, the first Black actor to win the Academy Award for Best Actor, known for roles in films like *To Sir, With Love* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*—and the namesake of ASU's film school—is quoted as saying, "If I'm remembered for having done a few good things, and if my presence here has sparked some good energies, that's plenty." Regardless of how the work was completed, there's no doubt that the work done by the design team for the MIX Center will be remembered—and that the building itself sparks good energies for the undergrads making memories and beginning their careers inside. ◎

Director's Note:
When asked about her favorite part of the MIX project, Apeiro Design Principal Patricia Glasow said, "I think the integration of the lighting with the architecture is lovely. My favorite detail is the window blade detail on either side of the Production Block windows."

THE DESIGNERS | Patricia Glasow, Member IES, FIALD, LC, CLD, is a principal at Apeiro Design.

Yue Zhao, IALD, LC, is a lead product designer at Design League Co. and was formerly an associate with Auerbach Glasow.

Karl Backus, FAIA, is principal architect of Karl Backus Architecture and was formerly a principal with Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

Steven Chaitow is campus planner at UC Davis Health and was formerly a principal with Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

Christopher Orsega is a project director at Gensler and was formerly a senior associate with Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

Holly Street Studio also served as an architect on the project.