



# CLIMB ON

By **CLAUDIA ALARCON** Photography by **ANDREA CALO**

For many people in Central Texas, rock climbing is a way of life. It's not uncommon to see intrepid men and women attempting daring climbs on the many natural rock formations that make our area famous. So, what happens when the weather turns their passion into a dangerous sport? Gyms have turned to indoor rock climbing as a safe alternative. But while most dedicate a single wall or small room to this pastime, a team of professional architects and designers has converted a former produce processing plant in East Austin into the Austin Bouldering Project. At 50,000 square feet, the facility is currently the largest bouldering gym in the world.

The project was conceived in January 2013 and construction started in May of 2014. Co-owner Zach Olschwanger hired interior designer Lilianne Steckel, who came on board the project in late summer of 2014. The project also included Dylan Johnson Associates Architects, who met remotely with the local team on a weekly basis. "When the clients first came to me with the project, we discussed at length the look to most climbing gyms," says Steckel. "All of them are avid climbers and have visited many different gyms all over the US. They appreciated the traditional look, but wanted to try something different that would vibe well in Austin, and that would attract people to feel comfortable and hang out for as long as



they like." The idea was to stray from more sterile climbing environments, and design is a perfect tool for achieving this goal. "Most climbing gyms don't start with hiring an interior designer, so we were already branching out from the get go."

Steckel's initial design inspiration stemmed from admiring Arrow Energy's office in Queensland, Australia, designed by Geyer, a global interior design firm. "I loved the energized pops of color and layers of materials," she says. She wanted to continue this theme to help prevent the space from feeling overwhelmingly large and cold. "It is such a big space, so we wanted to keep everything feeling intentional, continuous and welcoming. We wanted each room to feel warm and connected to the rest of the space, so you could wander and weave throughout the building and have all the design undertones, materials and colors flow with you."

To create this unusual multi-purpose space, the team had to keep in mind the needs of both customers and staff alike. First, they divided the huge room into two climbing areas. They designed a wall dedicated to kids and added a "birthday room," where parents can hold special parties for the little ones. Above, they built a balcony that is one half observation deck for parents and the other a Wi-Fi-equipped member's lounge and working space. A set of stadium stairs allow fans to watch the action in the main climbing area and can also be used to hold staff meetings. The space also includes a fitness area with weights and full equipment, a 1,200-square-foot yoga studio and a 900-square-foot fitness studio for classes and private training. The reception desk is just inside the glass-covered entrance, flanked by a hand-painted mural by Sophie Roach, whose studio is directly across the street at Canopy. Around the corner from the reception desk are the ample dressing rooms and showers, decorated with music posters and Austin memorabilia. "We wanted the ABP to reflect Austin — its hipness, its community strength and its talented makers and artists," says Steckel.

To create the desired look and feel, they added new, slightly refined industrial details: roll-up garage door fronts, skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows, steel and wood railings, red oak wall cladding and custom elements such as the reception desk and benches which were designed by Steckel and built by Olschwanger and the ABP team using reclaimed steel from the original plant and red oak. The chandelier was made by A&K Woodworking of Austin. Next, they shaped the space with lots of linear angles and lines, creating small zones and furniture arrangements for members



to sit and chat. Lastly, they added elements of color, texture, fabric and plants throughout the space. A bold Astek wallpaper in a geometric black and white pattern contrasts with the dozens of colors and odd shapes of the boulders in the climbing rooms. "The materials, colors and natural light combined create balance, allowing it to be more welcoming, warm and gender neutral," says Steckel.

The 23,000 square feet of climbing surfaces are as unique as the rest of the space. The shapes and colors of the geometric volumes were custom-designed and made. The irregularly shaped holds came from a variety of vendors and are coordinated by difficulty. The climbing routes, known as problems, rotate every two weeks to keep them fresh and challenging; expert climbers participate in the design to mimic things they have found in nature. The perimeter walls and freestanding "boulders" simulate caves and sharp-angled natural features, and the flooring is made from super dense foam covered in thick, black vinyl.

Austin Bouldering Project was designed as a flexible community space that addresses a lot of needs. "Each time you visit, there is flexibility in how you can use the space. You could spend several days a week there and use different parts of the facility each time," says Steckel. Plans are afoot to include a café, a coffee shop and a brewery within the same complex as ABP in the near future. Steckel concludes, "Design was kept open to see what needs to be developed. We want it to be a happy, feel-good spot." ♦



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