In a city known for its performing arts scene (think “Austin City Limits”), the new Cirrus Logic headquarters stands as its own piece of performance art.

Wrapped in a shell of zinc panels, the building’s warm-yet-crisp exterior earned the 2013 MCA Chairman’s Award for commercial/industrial buildings. Judges in the competition noted that the tasteful use of metal enhances the almost sculptural quality of the building.

Completed in March 2012, the building stands next to a residential neighborhood, which is generally not a good locale for making an aggressive industrial architectural statement. Given the building’s geographic constraints, architect Jorge Muñoz had to create a building that met in the middle of a veritable Venn diagram of factors: neighborhood acceptability, Cirrus Logic functionality, and, of course, aesthetic quality.

“The project had to be accepted by the adjacent residential neighborhood and had to simultaneously establish a strong presence on 6th Street, which is a very commercial street,” says Muñoz, principal of Muñoz + Albin Architecture & Planning, Inc. “The massing of the mixed-use building is a response to that dual demand, but the exterior skin is a direct response to the residential component.”

Muñoz created that blend, in part, by placing interlocking horizontal zinc panels around the majority of the building’s exterior. To complement that, Muñoz called for perforated, corrugated zinc panels around the building’s naturally ventilated garage, which faces West Street.

“And it just worked beautifully,” Muñoz says. “It provides a lot of visual separation and yet ventilates the garage very nicely.
You can’t tell, unless you look really closely, that it’s a garage behind it, so that’s very nice.”  

Cirrus CFO Thurman Case, who oversaw the building project from the beginning, agrees. Case says that when Cirrus decided to purchase the land, Muñoz already had done the design work on the current building—and Cirrus loved it. Though some changes were made to make it a single-tenant building, the overall concept (including the zinc) thrilled Case and his team. Furthermore, lower material prices accompanying the start of the recession in 2008 didn’t hurt, either. 

“The idea of leaving zinc on the office space was easy for us,” Case recalls. “We thought it really made it very distinct. In 2008, pricing was a lot better than it is right now. We were able to actually do some of these things at a very reasonable cost.  

“The zinc and the paneling helped make the garage area… blend in with the rest of the building and make it look good so it wasn’t an eyesore for the neighborhood,” Case adds. “We loved what they did.”

According to Case, fitting into Austin’s downtown and the burgeoning cultural scene around 6th Street was one of Cirrus’s main reasons for choosing to relocate there several years ago.

“We wanted to be part of the downtown area,” Case says. “We wanted to create a very vibrant and exciting atmosphere at the company. 6th Street has been moving in that direction in terms of restaurants and bars and other types of entertainment venues, so the area we’re in is becoming more and more vibrant, as well as being close to some quiet neighborhoods. It’s a very interesting spot.”

For as much window space as the 135,000 sq. ft. building has, the zinc panels give the building’s exterior a softer feel than other potential materials might have. “Not only for its scale and texture, but zinc also has this amazing matte finish that gives the building a warm feel,” Muñoz says. “We wanted to be as soft as possible with the neighbors. The natural patina of zinc is very attractive to the eye. 

“We were looking for a material that would provide the scale and texture of a residential neighborhood that has principally horizontal siding,” he adds. “We like the idea of maintaining the horizontal siding look with a sophisticated material. The horizontal reveals punctuate the double-story windows in a very effective way.”

The building has contributed more than a positive aesthetic statement to the neighborhood, according to Case. It has helped make Cirrus a model workplace; in fact, it has been voted as the best place to work in Austin numerous times in recent years. “The building was a key piece of that, for our ability to make it a great place to work,” Case says. “We think it’s been a great success for the company.”

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