

New Mexico Architect Is Tuned Into His State

ENR Southwest Legacy Award winner Van Gilbert is a longtime partner with the construction industry, a green-design exemplar and mentor **BY DAVID M. BROWN**



For 40-plus years, Van Gilbert has combined his love for the topography, history and culture of New Mexico with an equally passionate dedication to designing not just structures, but buildings that help create communities.

“An architectural practice can make a broad contribution to society, a contribution that often extends beyond the building to support the complex needs and goals of communities and institutions,” says Gilbert, this year’s Southwest Legacy Award winner.

Jim King, chairman of Albuquerque-based Bradbury Stamm Construction, the state’s largest and oldest con-

tractor, says, “From the beginning, Van was a true architect who believed in designing buildings of the highest quality with uncompromising attention to detail.” King was the 2019 Legacy Award winner.

His company has collaborated with Gilbert’s firm, Albuquerque-based VHGA, on 21 projects in New Mexico, including the 1997 design of the aquarium at ABQ BioPark in Albuquerque. “Building a Van Gilbert design has always been challenging and uncompromising,” King adds. “But his passion for the work brought out the very best in everyone on the team and led to wonderful results.”

ON THE JOB
Van Gilbert visits the 9th Grade Academy gym under construction in Albuquerque.

EDUCATION One of Gilbert's many projects for the Albuquerque Public Schools is the 9th Grade Academy at Rio Grande High School.



MERGING OLD AND NEW The Domenici Building at New Mexico State University mirrors the California Mission style of the campus.



“He definitely will be remembered as one of the greats in K-12 design.”

— Karen Alarid, Albuquerque Public Schools

School Design

A proponent of contemporary regionalism, Gilbert has designed hundreds of projects—more than 90% are education related, and most were done in New Mexico with in-state contractors—from K-12 schools to a wide variety of college-campus structures.

“He definitely will be remembered as one of the greats in K-12 design,” says Karen Alarid, executive director of capital construction and director of facilities design and construction for Albuquerque Public Schools. “He has touched so many APS campuses.”

One noteworthy example is the 9th Grade Academy at Rio Grande High School, which opened in 2016, hosting an underserved population. “Instead of a renovation of old facilities,” Gilbert says, “the new academy is open, bright, an energizing and inviting presence as the students approach it each day.”

At ~~New Mexico State University~~ **NMSU** in Albuquerque, Gilbert has completed six buildings, more than any other architect. To honor his accomplishment, the **NMSU** School of Architecture + Planning named Gilbert a Distinguished Alumnus in 2005.

Three additional projects are restorations of landmark buildings by John Gaw Meem IV (1894–1983), whose pueblo revival work has inspired Gilbert throughout his career. One of those projects is Meem’s 1938 masterpiece, UNM’s Zimmerman Library, which Gilbert expanded and restored in 1994.

NMSU’s Domenici Building combines two structures to create the Institute for Public Policy, which honors the late Sen. Pete Domenici for his six terms

in the U.S. Senate. “With its red tile roofs, deep overhangs, tower elements and portals, the building design ties to NMSU’s historic California Mission design idiom,” Gilbert says.

Gilbert’s career also has included zoos and other wildlife-sensitive attractions and public-space commissions such as the 1988 band shell and lake at Albuquerque BioPark. “These are places,” he says, “where people of all ages come together to experience the common humanity we all share.”

Critical Relationships

For every project, the architect must hear what the client is expressing and then intuit the goals, explains Gilbert. “When in the early programming and planning stages I’ve heard, ‘That’s what I was trying to say,’ I knew we were on track and could consistently go on to produce beyond what was envisioned.”

In the same way, successful projects require engaged relationships and collaborations. “I’ve always focused on the process as a team endeavor between owner, designer and contractor and am thankful for the firm’s good fortune of working with so many exceptional New Mexico contractors,” he says.

The Albuquerque Aquarium’s shark-tank walls, for example, required satin-smooth finishes because shark skin is surprisingly delicate. “Jim King and his Bradbury Stamm team ran their hands over every inch of the surface to ensure they had achieved a smooth finish,” Gilbert recalls.

In school designs, architectural goals coalesce with pedagogical ones. Through collaborations with environmental-design pioneer Anne Taylor, professor emeritus at the University of New Mexico, Gilbert integrated the concept of the classroom as a learning tool. “In this way,” he says, “each project enhances learning and strengthens the campus context.”

Buildings and Place

As a native son, Gilbert was influenced early on by the landforms, colors, sky and light of New Mexico. “Protection from the seasonal elements was a constant: looking for shade, escaping the howling spring winds and the torrential summer rains and then being startled by the beauty of the landforms and spectacular sunsets behind the ancient volcanic formations,” he says.

“What the best architecture of the region accomplishes is a timeless harmony with the striking natural environment and an accommodation of the challenging climate,” he adds. While attending Valley High School in Albuquerque, he met lifelong mentor Don Schlegel, longtime chair and professor at the UNM School of Architecture and Planning. “It was always

PHOTOS BY PATRICK COULIE ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

an honor when he would ask me later in my life to be part of the semester-end charrette of student projects at the university,” he says. Gilbert continues to mentor students at the university and other schools.

In the fall of 1958, Gilbert attended Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., then transferred to the University of New Mexico, completing a bachelor’s degree in 1964. While there, he worked part time for an Albuquerque firm where noted architect Antoine Predock was beginning his career.

After a year with the Air National Guard, Gilbert returned to UNM to complete the architecture program. A one-year tour of duty in Vietnam with the Air National Guard followed. He completed his studies at UNM with a master’s degree in architecture in 1971.

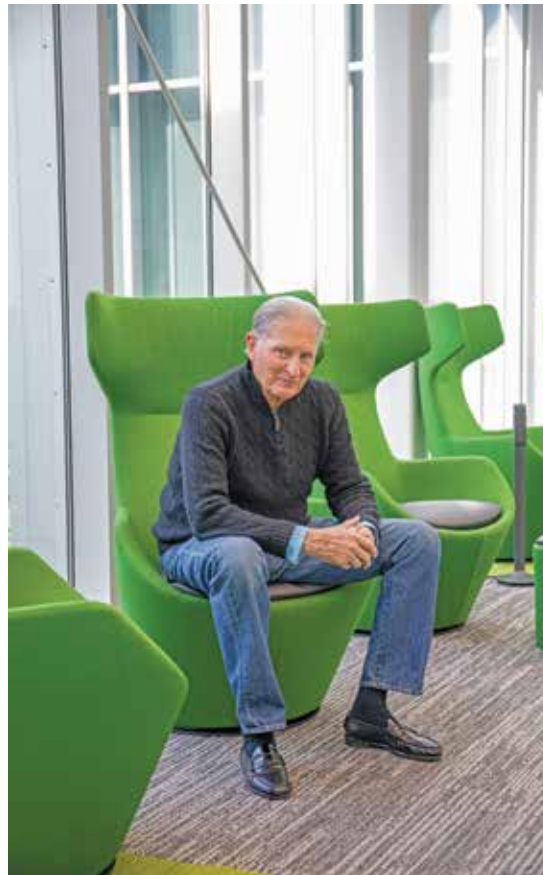
Predock then offered young Gilbert a job, and he worked with the architect for five years. “My time working with Antoine exposed and reinforced in me that the starting point of every design is to observe and evaluate the site, making sure the design is one with the site, that the design is strong but does not overpower it,” he says. “While Meem addressed the environment and acknowledged the indigenous values in place, Antoine encompassed the site into the design and created an unexpected but totally harmonious design solution.”

For VHGA’s first project in 1976, the Bird of Prey Exhibit at the Albuquerque Zoo, Gilbert found just the right place to accommodate both the species being watched and the species watching them. “I sited the exhibit facing south so the birds were warmed in the winter months and shaded in the summer by the long-standing cottonwood trees. And the south-facing exhibit means the sun is to the back of the visitors and does not impede the viewing experience.”

Indigenous cultures also have inspired Gilbert. He learned from the Pueblo people the importance of protected courtyards for gatherings and the covered portal, providing relief from the sun and protection in the rainy season. “They made buildings taller on the north side as a protective wall from the elements and lower buildings and larger openings on the south for maximum heat gain in winter,” he explains.

For example, in 2004 the Santa Fe Indian School New Campus replaced the 1880s-era school, incorporating native design traditions, sustainable elements and contemporary technology. As with his K-12 schools, an enclosed courtyard hosts gathering functions, in addition to providing security. “The multi-story school building on the north buffers the wind and allows outdoor classroom and recreational activities for more school days,” Gilbert says.

His multi-award-winning Sue Cleveland High School Campus for Rio Rancho Public Schools, com-



SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

Van Gilbert shown in UNM’s Physics and Astronomy Interdisciplinary Science Center, which won a Best Project in the green category in ENR Southwest’s 2020 Best Projects contest.

“The starting point of every design is to observe and evaluate the site, making sure the design is one with the site, that the design is strong but does not overpower it.”

— Van Gilbert, VHGA

pleted in 2009 by the Jaynes Corp., exemplifies site sensitivity, sustainability and technology enrichment. The first phase of the LEED Gold campus focused on academic facilities; the second added an athletic complex and the performing arts center, which ENR Southwest named a Best Project in the cultural category in 2011. “The buildings were accurately laid out to integrate the views of the Sandia Mountains throughout the campus,” Gilbert says.

Extending His Services

Roger Schluntz, tenured professor and dean from 1999 to 2010 of the UNM School of Architecture and Planning, asked Gilbert to help raise \$3 million from private donors for the school’s Antoine Predock-designed George Pearl Hall. The approximately \$22-million facility was completed in September 2007 by the Jaynes Corp. Gilbert was “extraordinarily helpful,” Schluntz says. “With the help of other professional leaders, we were able to exceed the goal that the university had imposed before construction could commence.”

Gilbert hopes to be remembered as an architect for the extended community. “I want people to remember that I believed in and created timeless places people like to gather in—places in harmony with the environment, distinctive in expression, functional and efficient in operation, cost effective and sustainable.” ■

ON THE WEB

To read about other design leaders working in the Southwest, go to enr.com/southwest.