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# Mestizo City

by Phil Zimmerman, Assoc. AIA

**Project** Mestizo City, Miami Beach, Fla.

**Client** Art Basel Miami Beach 2012

**Architects** Muñoz & Company

**Design Team** Geoffrey S. Edwards, AIA; Henry R. Muñoz III; Robert Rodriguez; Theresa Wyatt; Chris Gutierrez; Pedro Cortez; Stephen Nelson; Larry Servin

**Photographer** Chris Gutierrez Muñoz & Company

**M**estizo, or *mestizaje*, is an expression used historically to describe a blending of European and Latin or Native American cultures. Today, the term often illustrates a way of life prolific throughout the country and ingrained in places like San Antonio. These modified forms of Latino-Anglo traditions have flourished in well-knit, border-region communities, creating new cultural practices and patterns. Geoffrey S. Edwards, AIA, Chief Creative Officer of Muñoz & Company explains that “impromptu architecture, where people use nontraditional building materials to generate spaces that seem fresh, exciting, and vibrant,” is typical of San Antonio. Ideas of impermanence and color often associated with the *mestizo* culture inspired the conceptual basis for the firm’s award-winning installation, “Mestizo City.” Henry R. Muñoz III, Edwards’ partner, elaborates: “‘Mestizo City’ embraces the ideas of community-based thinking, taking informal culture and honoring it, elevating it.”

In 2012, “Mestizo City” made its debut at the annual art-world nexus, Art Basel Miami Beach, located in the heart of the city’s design district. Muñoz & Company wanted to create a project that would be both fun and fresh, and at the same time, the design team aspired to open a dialogue about regional parallels of *mestizaje* culture. “Miami is all about the mixing of cultures,” says Muñoz. “It is a city founded on the imposition or blending of Latin American cultures with mainstream culture in Florida.” For the design team, the opportunity to highlight the symbiosis of San Antonio and Miami was unique.

The project was installed within a relatively compact vacant urban lot in Miami Beach’s high-end design district. Drawing from the site’s context



**Opening spread** *Jarritos* soda bottles were chosen as an unconventional building module that represented Latin American culture and *mestizo* vernacular.

**This page clockwise from top left** *Brightly colored street art evoked the sense of free creativity and spontaneous inventiveness of the project. The cube was carefully constructed, with each vibrant band consisting of a single flavor of Mexican soda. At night, the installation transformed into a gleaming jewel box.*



of low-rise luxury retail storefronts, the architects created a temporary, inflated-rubber entry facade. “In San Antonio neighborhoods, many families have giant bouncy-castles in their backyards for parties,” explains Edwards. “We wanted to enclose the space in a guerrilla fashion.” The inflatable portal was emblazoned with *mestizo-ized* versions of the luxury branding prevalent throughout Miami Beach — a tongue-in-cheek observation regarding dichotomies between the opulence of Art Basel and the more relaxed sociocultural environments of South Texas.

Once they bounced through the installation’s threshold, visitors were confronted with the anchoring element of “Mestizo City,” an impressive yet whimsical multicolored cube. Almost as tall and wide as the surrounding single story buildings, the vibrant installation made clear reference to Donald Judd’s modernist sculptures in West Texas. From a distance, it was luminescent and appeared to be made of oversized glow-sticks. On closer inspection, however, the box turned out to be a creative

*As a tribute to the project’s temporary nature and the idea of architecture as an interactive environment, the cube was carefully dismantled, and the soda bottles were distributed for the delight of art patrons and bands of neighborhood kids alike.*

vernacular expression built almost entirely of unopened bottles of brightly colored Mexican *Jarritos* soda. Edwards explains: “We settled on the idea of *Jarritos* bottles because they are super-vibrant colors. The way light was able to interact with the color was exciting to us.” Muñoz continues: “The *Jarritos* seemed appropriate to us. They are part of everyday culture on both side of the Texas-Mexico border, and we thought the colors would resonate in Miami.”

Texas Society of Architects 2014 Design Awards juror Marlon Blackwell, FAIA, described the concept as “delightful” and capable of inspiring “sheer joy.” He noted, “It is one simple unit repeated many times to make something that is wonderfully dynamic.” The vivid cube can clearly be interpreted as an art object, which was partly the intention of the design team and appropriate to its venue. The architecture is more subtle and exists in the space and environment created between the cube and the shell of the project’s urban lot. Throughout the duration of the installation, “Mestizo City” was the site of various happenings: a Breakfast Tacos at Tiffany’s event, a concert by the Texas rock band Robert Rodriguez’s Chingon, and open discussions of *mestizo* style. The intimate spaces between the inflatable facade, neighboring buildings, and the shimmering core created the perfect setting for social interactions that articulate the mingling of cultures that inspired “Mestizo City.”

“The idea was to create this complete environment, an enveloping experience,” elaborates Edwards. In the evenings, the cube was lit and the project’s spatial relationships intensified. As a tribute to the project’s temporary nature and the idea of architecture as an interactive environment, the cube was carefully dismantled, and the soda bottles were distributed for the delight of art patrons and bands of neighborhood kids alike. “It is one of those great city events that has a dynamic life,” commented juror Andrea Leers, FAIA. “It was lit by night, colorful by day, and goes away gradually as it’s used up. It’s a wonderful idea.”

Phil Zimmerman, Assoc. AIA, practices architecture at DIGSAU in Philadelphia.



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