

WORSHIP FACILITIES

# Designer

WINTER 2012

RIVERSIDE REVERIE

Rio Roca Chapel,  
Palo Pinto, Texas

# A RIVER RUNS BESIDE IT—TEXAS CHAPEL

They say that early Spanish settlers called it RIO DE LOS BRAZOS DE DIOS (THE RIVER OF THE ARMS OF GOD), and it's easy to understand why.

By Carolyn Heinze

"Breathtaking" is another way to describe the Brazos River, the longest in this state. Or, one could succumb to the notion that some things are simply beyond words.

It is along the Brazos River that, back in 2006, the Richards family founded the Rio Roca Ranch in what is now Palo Pinto County, Texas. Spanning several thousand acres, the site and its surrounding areas boast their fair share of history, fact, fiction and legend: the famed—and ill-fated—Comanche war chief Peta Nocona is said to have crossed through here on his last raid on white settlers in the early 1860s. The Trail of the Iron Ponies, a series of statues that adorn a two-mile stretch leading up to the property, commemorates this battle, during which Nocona supposedly stole 600 horses.

*All images courtesy of Walter Jennings.*

# A PLACE FOR RESPITE IN GOD'S COUNTRY

## **RIO ROCA CHAPEL, PALO PINTO, TEXAS**

Architect | Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings Architects PLLC ([www.mauricejenningswalterjennings.com](http://www.mauricejenningswalterjennings.com))

Project Team | Maurice Jennings, Walter Jennings, Lori Yazwinski Santa-Rita, David Pullium

General Contractor | English Heritage Homes of Texas Inc. ([www.englishheritagehomesoftexas.com](http://www.englishheritagehomesoftexas.com))

Structural Engineering | Myers-Beatty Engineering PLLC

MEP Engineers | HP Engineering Inc.

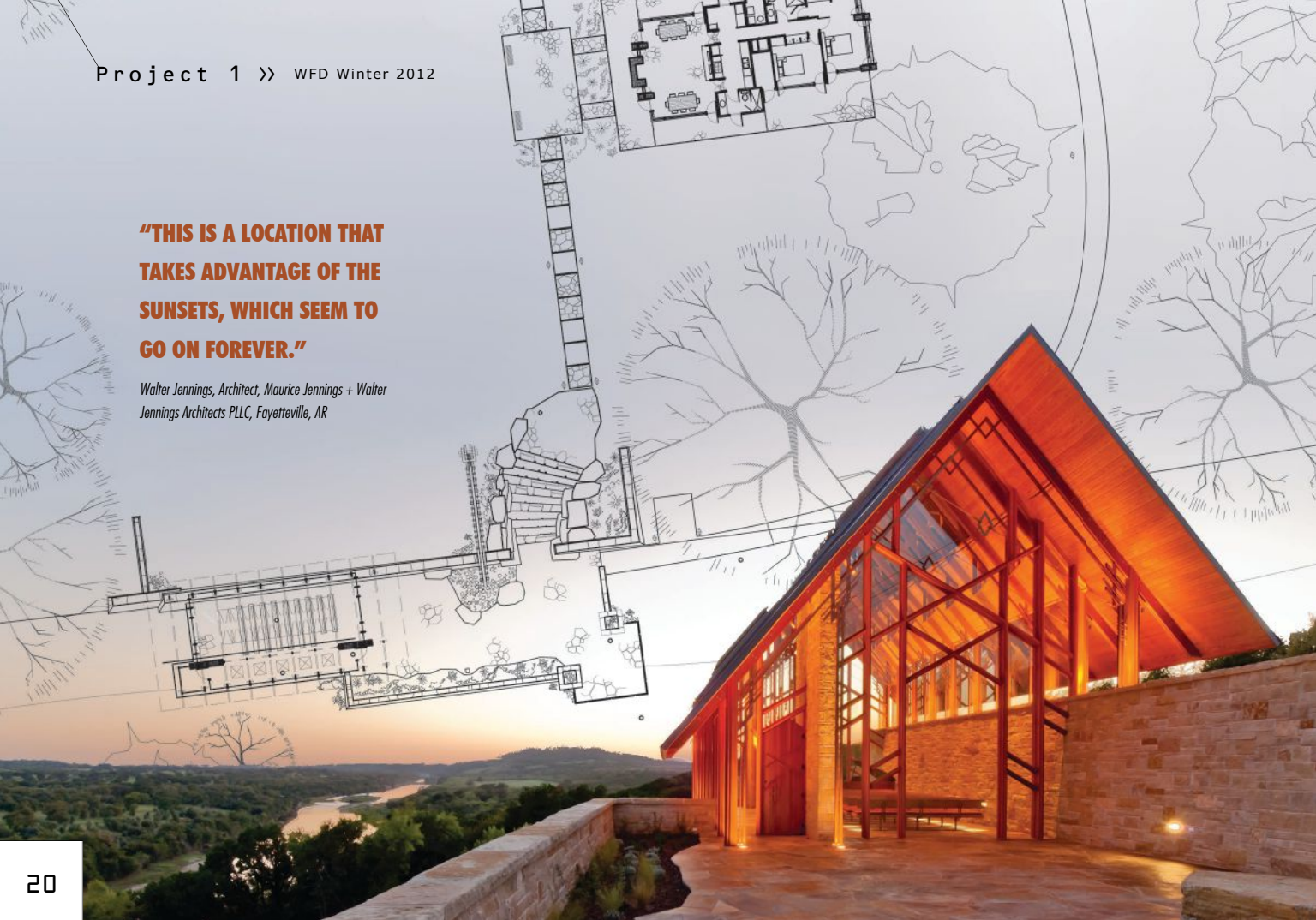
Awards | 2012 AIA IFRAA/*Faith & Form* New Facilities Merit Winner

*(Source: Faith & Form: The Interfaith Journal on Religion, Art and Architecture's Annual Awards Issue, 2012)*

**A WATER CATCHMENT SYSTEM HARVESTS RAINWATER FOR THE CHAPEL'S FOUNTAIN, AND BOULDERS THAT WERE UNCOVERED DURING EXCAVATION ARE USED AS DESIGN ELEMENTS AROUND THE SITE.**

**"THIS IS A LOCATION THAT TAKES ADVANTAGE OF THE SUNSETS, WHICH SEEM TO GO ON FOREVER."**

*Walter Jennings, Architect, Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings Architects PLLC, Fayetteville, AR*



## REMINISCENCE

Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings Architects PLLC oversaw the design of Rio Roca Chapel. The design is reminiscent of E. Fay Jones' famous Thorncrowne Chapel in Eureka Springs, Ark. In fact, Maurice Jennings worked as project architect alongside Jones on Thorncrowne Chapel.

The most recent history associated with the ranch is hardly as violent. In 2009, the Richards' began construction of the Rio Roca Chapel, a 1,080-square-foot space overlooking the river to one side, and Schoolhouse Mountain on the other. Michael Taylor of English Heritage Homes of Texas Inc. in Dallas headed up construction, while Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings Architects PLLC of Fayetteville, Ark., oversaw the design of the facility, which was to serve as a place of respite.

## WINDING REFLECTION

It's not easy to miss elements of E. Fay Jones' famed Thorncrowne Chapel in Eureka Springs, Ark., which, since its construction in 1980, has continually been recognized as one of the best designs in

the country. Maurice Jennings, who was Jones' partner for 25 years, was project architect for Thorncrowne from 1978 to 1979. He explains that Thorncrowne was inspired by Stoneflower, a cottage retreat on Eden Isle that Jones designed for landscape architects Bob Shaheen and Curt Goodfellow in 1965. "Eden Isle was at my home town of Heber Springs, Ark., and seeing Stoneflower emerge from the site inspired me to become an architect," he says. In 1986, Jones and Jennings collaborated on Cooper Chapel in Bella Vista, Ark.; the firm has designed 14 chapels so far.

One of the first tasks at hand was situating the chapel on the ranch, Walter Jennings recounts. "The fun part was driving around trying to figure out, over several thousand acres, where to put this

**“THE FUN PART WAS DRIVING AROUND TRYING TO FIGURE OUT, OVER SEVERAL THOUSAND ACRES, WHERE TO PUT THIS BUILDING. THERE WERE SEVERAL WONDERFUL SPOTS, BUT THE SPOT THAT WE CHOSE, OVERLOOKING THE BRAZOS RIVER, IS REALLY QUITE SPECIAL.”**

*Walter Jennings, Architect, Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings Architects PLLC, Fayetteville, AR*



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building,” he says. “There were several wonderful spots, but the spot that we chose, overlooking the Brazos River, is really quite special.” The asymmetrical chapel sits on the edge of a mountain, with its form and glass guiding the visitor’s eye down to the water.

The sun also played a significant role in the site selection, as well as the siting of the chapel itself. “This is a location that takes advantage of the sunsets, which seem to go on forever,” Walter Jennings says. At the same time, an overhang on the building’s south façade serves the dual purpose of keeping the sun out of the chapel during hot summer months, while letting it in during the winter. Regardless of the season, there is no need for artificial light in the daytime.

Both Thorncrowne and Rio Roca feature glass walls and gable roofs, and their inner verticality lends an aspiring feel to each space. Maurice Jennings explains that Rio Roca’s structural system is in pure tension, its delicate bars pulling the chapel together. “All forces are transferred through these bars and turnbuckles,” he says. “These elements cannot act in compression.”

#### **BUILDING BEAUTY**

The primary materials used in the construction of Rio Roca are steel, glass and wood. A walkway, made of flagstone, links a forecourt to the chapel, which seats 50. Visitors traverse a 10-foot stone wall and on through to the entrance. The chapel’s wood and flitch



#### **MOVEMENT**

A flagstone walkway ties a forecourt to the 50-seat chapel, where form and glass perpetually lead the eye down to the Brazos River that ebbs and flows below.



beam structural design allowed for the steel to be fabricated off-site—a plus considering the chapel's rural location.

"We have some good steelworkers, and if they can do their work in their shop and then have those pieces brought in, the actual erection of a building can go pretty quickly," Walter Jennings says. "In a lot of ways, that's how many things in the area are built; there are a lot of oil decks and pre-engineered metal structures, and it's for the same reasons. You have good control in a shop, building these pieces, and you bring the kit of parts in."

He adds that the steel was detailed with on-site adjustments in mind, requiring

#### ASSIMILATION

Walter Jennings reports that a good deal of collaboration happened between the designers and the steelworkers on the Rio Roca Chapel. Steel was detailed "with on-site adjustments in mind, requiring a significant amount of back-and-forth...."

Another of Jennings' sentiments: "As architects, we need to be open to other suggestions."



**“MAYBE AS THE ARCHITECT YOU WOULDN'T WORRY AS MUCH ABOUT HOW ALL OF THE LITTLE CONNECTIONS AND PIECES LOOK, BUT SINCE THE STEEL REALLY IS THE JEWELRY OF THIS PROJECT, WE HAD TO BE HEAVILY INVOLVED IN THE DETAILING.”**

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Maurice Jennings + Walter Jennings  
Architects PLLC, Fayetteville, AR*



a significant amount of back-and-forth between Jennings and his Fayetteville-based steelworker. “He’d have questions about why we needed to do this, this way, and I would have to say, ‘We need to do this because later on down the road, we’re going to have to attach this window system to it, and we need to make accommodations for it.’ Or sometimes he would say, ‘I know you’ve drawn it this way, but I’ve been thinking about this. I think it would be better if we did it another way.’ As architects, we need to be open to other suggestions. Sometimes there’s a reason to do it the way we’ve drawn it, but sometimes people have good ideas that we need to assimilate.”

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The firm's heavy involvement in the fabrication of the steel was due to its role in not only Rio Roca's structure, but its aesthetic as well, Walter Jennings explains. "It wasn't something that we felt that we could hand over completely to the steelworker, because everything that he did was essentially going to be the finished product," he says. If the steel elements were concealed by a wall, for example, perhaps it would have been a different story. "Maybe as the architect you wouldn't worry as much about how all of the little connections and pieces look," he adds, "but since the steel really is the jewelry of this project, we had to be heavily involved in the detailing."

Conservation and sustainability were also in mind when it came to the specification of both the copper roof and the stone flooring. "Where possible, we tried to use materials that have a long life, that don't need to be replaced,"

Walter Jennings explains. "There is very little that I see going into a landfill in the next 50 years."

A water catchment system harvests rainwater for the chapel's fountain, and boulders that were uncovered during excavation are used as design elements around the site.

Walter Jennings notes that, in his experience, most religious spaces feature a strong vertical aspect—something that was also applied to Rio Roca. "With this one, we were trying to blend that strong vertical element with secondary views, such as the roof that directs the eye down to the river," he says. "When we are designing chapels, we want to deliver something that is pleasing to the eye and interesting to look at, and something you can deconstruct as you sit there. I think there is a level of detail in our chapels that you probably see in aspects of our other buildings, but we really emphasize that detail in the chapels."

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Carolyn Heinze is a freelance writer/editor. **WFD**