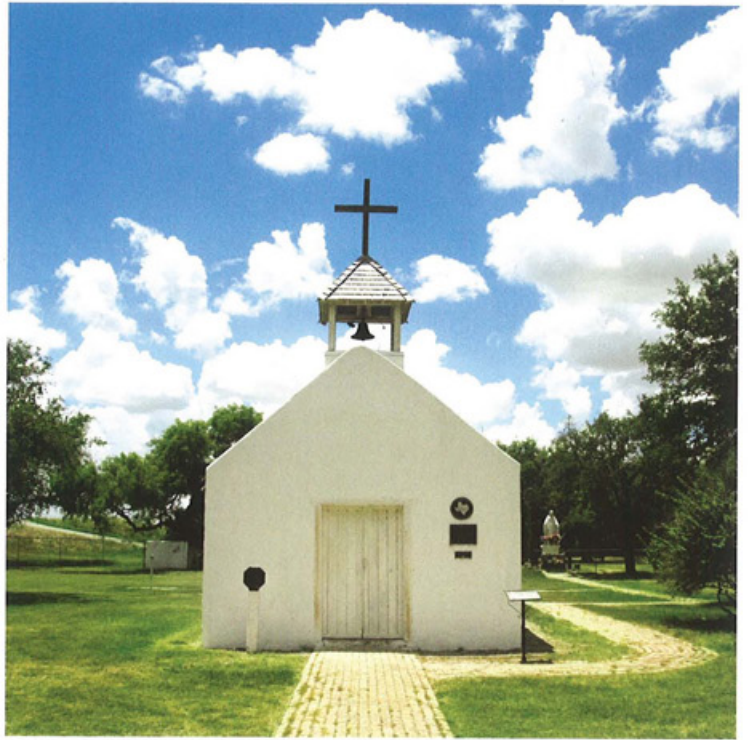




# DESIGN AWARDS TO THOUSAND T



## La Lomita Chapel

by MICHAEL E. ALEX, AIA

UPON HIS DEATH IN 1861, A FRENCH MERCHANT FROM REYNOSA named Rene Guyard, bequeathed a tract of land along the Rio Grande near present-day Mission to two Catholic priests “for the propagation of the faith among the barbarians.” Thus began the 150-year history of La Lomita Chapel as a rendezvous point for Oblate missionaries in their travels through the wild borderlands.

These priests, members of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, would ride on horseback for weeks at a time to minister to communities in deep South Texas and northern Mexico. It was an inhospitable frontier with dangers at every turn. The chaparral was nearly impenetrable, and the brush was likely to swallow anyone who risked going beyond the few blazed trails. Getting lost without water was a very real concern. In fact, in 1872, one of La Lomita’s founding priests, Pierre Y. Keralum, did exactly that and died as a result. His remains were found 10 years later. Today, more than a century after the death of the “Lost Missionary,” parishioners of La Lomita still pray through his name for trust and confidence in God.

Thought to have been built in 1899, the tiny chapel of La Lomita (“the little hill”) stands near a lonely prominence on the otherwise flat horizon of the coastal plains. In 2007, concern over the building’s deterioration prompted preservationists to plan how they might save one of the region’s few remaining nineteenth-century structures and the namesake of the town of Mission. Through an agreement with the Oblates and the Catholic Diocese of Brownsville, the City of Mission commissioned the San Antonio-based firm of Kell Muñoz to develop a restoration strategy.

**PROJECT** La Lomita Chapel Restoration, Mission

**CLIENT** City of Mission and Diocese of Brownsville

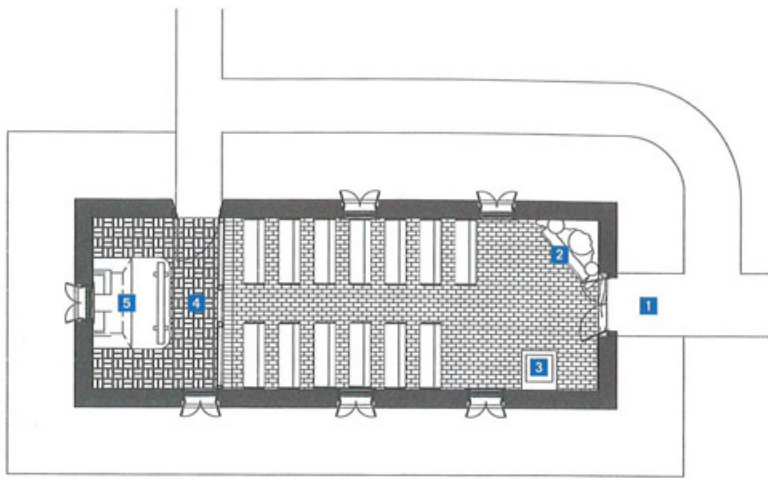
**ARCHITECT** Kell Muñoz

**DESIGN TEAM** Steven Land Tillotson, AIA; John Stanley; Ed Carleton, AIA

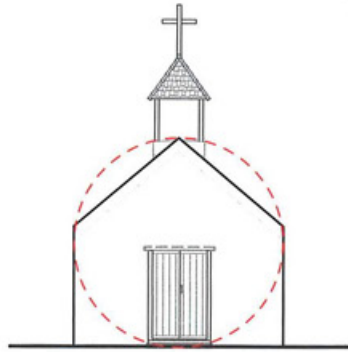
**CONTRACTOR** The 5125 Company

**CONSULTANTS** Hinojosa Engineering (structural); UTSA Center for Archeology (archeology)

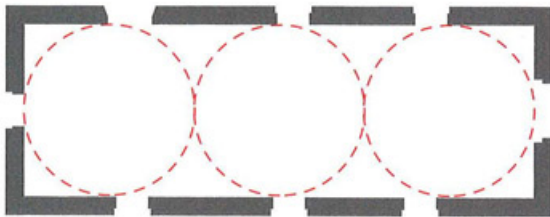
**PHOTOGRAPHERS** Rebecca Rivera; MPC Studios; Nicki Martinez



FLOOR PLAN  
 1 MAIN ENTRY  
 2 GROTTO  
 3 PEDESTAL  
 4 CHANCEL  
 5 ALTAR



HARMONIC PROPORTIONS



In the course of the preservation studies many structural deficiencies emerged. Most critical was the integrity of the roof and the four walls that form the chapel's diminutive rectangular plan (15'-6" x 40'-6"). The roof structure lacked sufficient bracings and connections to withstand wind speeds above 30 mph. The load-bearing exterior walls – about 7'-6" high and about 15'-6" at the peak at the gable ends – were apparently constructed by a native process called *rejoneado* where large stones are supported in a matrix of smaller stones and mortar. Due to age and soil dynamics, all walls exhibited signs of instability. Also, both gable walls leaned outward at their peaks, raising fears of imminent collapse, and the lower portions were deteriorated due to capillary action of ground source moisture.

The study also revealed previous efforts to improve the chapel over its long history. In particular, the belfry was thought to have been constructed in 1939 to replace one of greater height.

Steven Land Tillotson, AIA, principal-in-charge for Kell Muñoz, recently recalled the strategy his team developed for the project: "Even though there were some indications that the building had experienced previous construction episodes, the approach we took as a basic preservation philosophy was to restore La Lomita to the period of about 1900–1912," he said. "If we tried to restore it to an earlier period, we would have had to start taking things away and that would lead to conjecture about what had been there before." Tillotson said the accepted founding date of 1899 is more likely to have been when the building was at its highest point of structural integrity, and that led to the decision to restore La Lomita to that period.



Once the preservation team was hired, the scope of the project centered on restoring the previously mentioned elements. With a budget around \$230,000, the team devised a strategy to repair the roof without destabilizing the supporting walls.

Before the roof was removed, it was determined that the walls had to be temporarily braced, both inside and out. The team also replaced undersized framing members, a subtle dimensional change that is barely noticeable but nonetheless provides the required structural integrity. To ensure a positive connection between the new roof and the existing load-bearing walls, the architects embedded a continuous stainless steel angle. Welded to that are equally spaced threaded rods that needle into the top of the wall.

La Lomita Chapel has always had a unique charm and humility that, in an enduring way, combines with its robust and rustic appearance. The architects' successful renovations have gracefully and respectfully honored the building's ageless splendor. And time will continue to march on for this little relic because this author is grateful to report that the recent epic floods along the Rio Grande did not inundate this structure. The Oblates know that much like the Biblical deluge, the flooding of June 2010 comes with a divine promise, a reassuring promise from above that gives them fortitude of purpose.

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RESOURCES LUMBER: R&D Lumber; CEDAR SHINGLES: True North Cedar;  
PAINT: Coronado Paint; STAIN: Sherwin Williams