

ARTS

SAN DIEGO CITYSCAPE



HELEO ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN PHOTOS

Barbara Leon and Carlos Hernandez are the co-founders and principals of Heleo Architecture & Design.

Architects thrive on both sides of border

Heleo's straightforward aesthetic works well in a variety of contexts, whether in City Heights or Tijuana

BY DIRK SUTRO

Raised on both sides of the border, immersed in experimental and sustainable architecture since they met as students at SCI-Arc (Southern California Institute of Architecture), Carlos Hernandez and Barbara Leon are making their mark in San Diego and Tijuana since forming Heleo Architecture & Design in 2015.

Their straightforward aesthetic works well in a variety of contexts: strong forms in materials such as steel, wood and concrete, each project tailored to a neighborhood's proportions, textures and scale, whether in City Heights, Tijuana or South Park.

"We want our buildings to be functional, adaptable and of their time," Hernandez said. "They should relate in some way to their context, and our passion is to create spaces that engage the community that surrounds them."

Earlier this year, Heleo won awards from the American Institute of Architects for Sage & Fire, a cannabis boutique near Lone Pine, and for the Cervecería Insurgente brewery in Tijuana. It has also designed seven Urbn Leaf cannabis stores in San Diego, Grover Beach, West Hollywood and San Jose.

Projects on the boards at its downtown studio on Kettner Boulevard, where jazz or classical music often streams, include an Izola dough factory, a retail store and a cafe in City Heights. Also on tap is Sycuan's Sessions by the Bay "cannabis consumption lounge," a striking repurposing of the former California College San Diego complex in National City, with lounge spaces, retail areas, an immersive cannabis exhibit and outdoor seating.

'Creativity and experimentation'

Heleo is also moving into development. Conjunto Libertad

will be 12 long- and short-term rental units in Tijuana within walking distance of the border. It will support "a trans-border lifestyle for working-class residents crossing the border daily to work in the U.S., as well as temporary visitors coming south to receive medical services." In South Park, a lot split will result in a single-family home and two accessory dwelling units (one of them consisting of the repurposed small existing home).

The idea of designing buildings to suit a neighborhood's character — which often involves reusing what's already there — is something the architects experienced firsthand at SCI-Arc's campus in the former Santa Fe Freight Depot in Los Angeles' downtown arts district.

"SCI-Arc had a large impact," Hernandez said. "The industrial landscape in a way permeates the minds and projects the students are developing. The depot had layers of history. It is a concrete structure layered with steel and glass to carve out spaces and circulation. There was something very pure about it, and it fostered an environment of creativity and experimentation."

SCI-Arc was an early proponent of new technologies, and Heleo's studio is well equipped. Heleo uses AI to suggest design possibilities, such as variations of a prototype for a 3D-printed house



Cervecería Insurgente in Tijuana, designed by Heleo, won an award from the American Institute of Architects.



A residence designed by Heleo Architecture & Design.

that could be built for less than \$99,000.

In addition to their professional partnership, Leon and Hernandez are married with two young children, and they seem ideally suited to each other. Leon, they agree, is "book smart," somewhat introverted and the more structured thinker, while Hernandez is a "street smart" extrovert prone to wide-ranging brainstorms.

"I grew up primarily in Los Angeles, but spent kindergarten through first grade living in Ensenada," Leon said. Hernandez grew up in Tijuana but crossed the border to attend San Diego schools, including St. Augustine High School.

Both were drawn to the arts and design early on. Leon built a scale model of Jerusalem in eighth grade and was soon sketching landmark L.A. buildings, older and newer. "My mom taught me that art and design can convey feelings and emotions."

Hernandez's older brother played drums, his sister drew and painted. He spent hours looking at covers of classic albums by bands like Led Zeppelin and Rush in his brother's collection. Like a building, he says, an album cover can convey a "strong sense of visual storytelling."

Along with their SCI-Arc training, Leon studied at Kyoto Seika University in Japan. Early in her career, she worked on residential towers in Los Angeles and modernist tract homes in Palm Springs. Alongside his architectural education, Hernandez was trained in real estate (at USC) and construction management. His early experience ranges from multi- and single-family residential to retail and commercial, plus urban planning for international real estate giant Vanke.

Needless to say, Heleo is versatile. It often controls all aspects of design, from a building's look and materials, to signage, lighting and logos, which gives a seamless look to its projects.

'Modern and metropolitan'

You won't find Bob Marley posters, neon green interiors or steel bars at Sage & Fire. Its rustic exterior of metal and wood suits the Sierra town, while the open, airy interior would be at home in an upscale shopping district. Urbn Leaf's stores, with display cases, product packaging, lighting and seating designed by Heleo, are intended to be "modern and metropolitan with a bit of an edge," Hernandez said.

In a different context, Cervecería Insurgente picks up the industrial sprawl of its gentrifying Tijuana neighborhood, but its height and expanses of glass create a hub of activity. Cylindrical brew tanks double as sculptural elements, and a rooftop deck provides views of the rapidly rising metropolis.

The Izola bakery in City Heights will be yet another exercise in contextual design. Heleo is adding a large new building with a dramatic steel skeleton to an existing steel warehouse for a total 12,000 square feet of space. Izola earned a five-star rating on Yelp last year. Inside the large new facility, customers will savor Izola's signature croissants and sourdough loaves as they watch new batches slide out from large ovens by the hundreds. (Izola's current downtown outlet recently closed for an estimated 90 days in order to bring its "cottage food" license up to full cafe standards).

With projects on both sides of the border, Leon and Hernandez note some differences.

"Working in San Diego and Tijuana brings its unique set of challenges and advantages," Leon said. The cost of materials is similar in both locales, but labor in San Diego is significantly more expensive. Tijuana offers custom millwork, metal work and other hand-crafted items at affordable prices, and Heleo often incorporates such items in its U.S. projects.

As other architects and builders will agree, San Diego's permitting process could use streamlining. Leon and Hernandez would also like to see closer scrutiny of architecture, perhaps under the guidance of a city architect within the planning department. "We often see recently completed buildings that already look dated," Leon said.

In large part the pair seem to be succeeding on their own terms, which is admirable, since many young architects wind up working in tedious jobs at large architecture companies or switching fields entirely.

"I can count on one hand the number of students who have gone on to the very difficult thing of having their own office," said Peter Zellner, a longtime SCI-Arc faculty member who spotted Hernandez's talent when he was an intern building meticulous cardboard mockups of furniture designed by Zellner for Redcat Lounge at Disney Concert Hall. "I am impressed they are managing to make a go of it."

Sutro writes about architecture and design. He is the author of the guidebook "San Diego Architecture" as well as "University of California San Diego: An Architectural Guide." He has also covered architecture for a variety of design publications.