It’s been almost 25 years since Los Angeles’ LAX airport received a major addition, but that may be changing. Denver–based Fentress Architects on November 17 unveiled models and renderings of a new terminal and other extensive updates to the cramped, aging airport. The last major new building at LAX, the Tom Bradley International Terminal, was completed in time for the 1984 Summer Olympics.

The newest element of the plan is the Midfield Concourse, located behind the Bradley Terminal, for domestic and international flights. According to the RFP issued earlier this year, the structure would measure between 500,000 and 600,000 square feet to accommodate eight to nine Airbus A-380 jumbo planes. The terminal’s rhythmic, sloping glass and steel roofs, said Fentress Architects, are meant to evoke the breaking waves of the nearby ocean. The building’s flat-seam stainless steel canopy would stretch over several column-free structures. A new two-level arched bridge would cross a new taxiway, connecting passengers to the concourse from the Bradley Terminal. The bridge’s design refers to the airport’s 1961 Theme Building, with its iconic parabolic arches.

Fentress’ other plans for the airport include major changes to the Bradley Terminal, which is already undergoing a $723 million renovation by Leo A Daly Architects (now about 65 percent completed, according to LAX spokesperson Tom Winfrey). These would include larger...
push...
...illuminated doorbell buttons
It’s finally happening! We have a president who cares about architects! And architecture! And the urban environment! And infrastructure! As noted elsewhere in this issue, President-elect Obama has promised to invest billions in alternative energy, to increase new and existing building efficiency, and to revamp our nation’s decaying infrastructure.

It goes without saying that I’m not the only one now holding my breath and hoping that he follows through on these promises. But I’d like to ask our leaders-to-be to go even further. First, in implementing his new agenda, he needs to take architects and other design leaders on board and single out the built environment in his strategic planning. I agree with recommendations recently circulated by the AIA that a high-level advisor on green buildings must be part of the White House advisory team, and that the White House ought to develop its own office of Urban Policy. Our country has cabinet members dedicated to the health of our national parks, our housing, and our transportation systems. Why not members dedicated to green building and urban issues? Plenty of political pundits are all coming together on the subject of green building and infrastructure as a sure way to save our environment, and even rescue our economy. Furthermore, we need to pay closer attention to the health of our cities—where the majority of our citizens live and where most of our wealth is created—has an immediate impact on such issues as public transportation, coordinated planning, and affordable housing. Singing these areas out will send a message that President-elect Obama takes the environment seriously. Whether cabinet-level or urban policy office, either one would help to better organize efforts that are now scattered across various government branches. At the very least, these topics should be given specific managers, empowered to spearhead efforts and whom we can hold accountable, within existing departments.

And regarding the President-elect’s promises on infrastructure—something we know about here in California—he needs to push not only for more funding, but for trying that funding firmly to much more innovation and integration. Forget the same old same old, it’s time to use our technology and our design skills to create transit systems and support systems that increase efficiency, usability, and safety; preserve and enhance open space; meet our green building goals; and blend seamlessly and dramatically with our cities and our neighborhoods. In order to help spur this effort, AN is teaming with SCI-Arc’s newly inaugurated SCIP (Southern California Institute for Future Initiatives) program to develop a competition for architects, engineers, and urban planners to propose new ideas for LA’s—and the country’s—infrastructure. LA County’s recently-passed Measure R, which will provide up to $4 billion for transportation in the next 30 years, is an opportunity we can’t afford to squander. Nor are federal infrastructure promises. Stay tuned to our pages for more updates on the competition, which will launch early next year. We need you, and our best minds in all fields, to think together to come up with the best solutions. This is our chance of a lifetime.

Enlightened leaders have promised to invest billions in alternative energy, to increase new and existing building efficiency, and to revamp our nation’s decaying infrastructure.

Lindsey also told The Los Angeles Times that the airport will finance the modernization with higher landing fees, bonds, revenue from airport concessions, and seed money from a portion of $850 million in bonds sold by LAWA earlier this year.

In order to follow the airport’s Sustainable Design and Construction Guidelines released last year, the project must “optimize recycled materials, mitigate the amount of energy used in construction, and optimize energy efficiency,” according to the standards. The plans still have to complete a rigorous environmental review process before moving forward.

RE-LAX

The report’s call for more efficient airports comes in the wake of neighborhood lawsuits and concern about the environmental impact of the project. The plans still have to complete a rigorous environmental review process before moving forward.

Skeptics have wondered where the money for green initiatives will come from in these tough economic times, especially given the high price of many sustainable technologies. Some even warn of a coming “green bubble.” The USGBC said it would like to see more concrete design and implementation plans to prove out green building initiatives, not just national ones.

California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger promised to work with Obama on these and other green measures. While Eric Lamoreux, spokesman for the California Department of General Services, noted that many of Washington’s green building initiatives are already in place in California. These include a 2004 executive order that all public buildings be LEED certified; AB 32 (2006), set to reduce carbon emissions in California to 1990 levels by 2020; and new state standards calling for all construction to reduce energy and water usage by 15 and 20 percent, respectively.

Among the less-publicized items in the government’s $700 billion bailout package passed on October 3 was a whooper for the architecture and construction industries: significant tax credits for renewable energy initiatives like solar, biodiesel, wind, and geothermal. The legislation, known as the Energy Improvement and Extension Act of 2008, includes an extension of the 30 percent tax credits for residential and commercial solar installations. The solar credits, originally enacted in 2005, were set to expire at the end of this year, but will now continue for another eight years. Their former cap of $2,000 has been removed. The Solar Energies Industry Association said that under this extension, there will be $232 billion more invested in solar installations over this time period.
YES, THEY REALLY CAN!

So never mind all that about the economic slowdown, because it would appear that a win for Barack Obama and Joe Biden is a win for all American architects!

Not only does their platform address infrastructural improvements and green-technology upgrades, Obama and Biden have both expressed that if they hadn’t become politicians, they would have wanted to be architects (elevating, we calculate, the Cooper-Hewitt’s National Design Awards to Academy Awards status). But Biden took his architectural aspirations even further, designing his own Wilmington, Delaware home! In 1997, Biden designed his family’s three-story Neo-Colonial-style house located on four lakeside acres. According to lore, there are tales of him sketching plans during his daily Amtrak commutes to Washington. Vice presidents, they multi-task just like us!

LOOKING UP IN A DOWNTURN

A recent event at the A+D Museum in LA featuring The Next American City editor Diana Lind, our very own AN editor Sam Lubell, and The LA Times’ Christopher Hawthorne gave us some food for thought (and not just when Hawthorne lamented the latest, most scathing layoffs at the Times, whose owner Tribune Co. recently filed for bankruptcy, even after axing, in his words, the people “doing the best, most creative work at the paper.”) Including architect Scott Timberg and film critic Carina Chocano, the panelists discussed what would happen to architecture in a recession, and Hawthorne mentioned that the slowdown in work might spur a new age for criticism: “If architects aren’t so busy designing buildings, hopefully they’ll take more time to write about them.” A more pensive era was also predicted by grand dame of architecture Ada Louise Huxtable in an interview with The New York Times. “This will give us a chance to think, to take stock,” she said. “I am so weary of these stupid things becoming really irritating, and probably less relevant. So I think we should serve as a capstone to Wunderman’s trove to the University of Texas at Austin.

NEW FRENCH MUSEUM

The poet, dramatist, and artist Jean Cocteau has finally gotten a home he might deem worthy of his work. An onerous composition based on the artist’s sinuous graphic line, the Cocteau Museum is set to rise in the French Riviera town of Menton, to a competition-winning design by architect Rudy Ricciotti. Yet in fittingly paradoxical fashion, the project has its roots in Orange County.

The museum was instigated by the late California art collector and philanthropist Severin Wunderman, who donated hundreds of works from his vast collection to the city of Menton. The Belgium-born Wunderman, who made his fortune designing and marketing Gucci watches, had previously opened a Cocteau museum in Irvine, near his longtime Laguna Beach residence, and was well known for his holdings, having also donated a large trove to the University of Texas at Austin. Expected to open in 2011, the new building should serve as a capstone to Wunderman’s career. It replaces an existing Menton museum devoted to Cocteau, who adored the seaside town and decorated its marriage registry office in the 1950s. Set atop a belveloos, parking structure on a waterfront site, the museum is carefully positioned to accent an adjacent town square and 19th-century market, while keeping a low profile that preserves views of the sea.

The structure itself, however, is anything but meek. Composed of white, self-consolidating concrete with terrilike piers touching down from the roof, the museum celebrates the artist’s restless imagination. “The dreamlike work of Cocteau demanded that we abandon the terrorist cultural practices of minimalism,” Ricciotti told AN in an email. “Massivity, a strong identity, and sensuality mark the southern temperament of the museum.”

Perhaps Cocteau, who died in 1963, should have the last word on his architectural legacy. “If I exhibit my painting I unsettle, and if I don’t exhibit it, I unsettle,” the artist wrote. “I will unsettle even after I am dead.” Given Ricciotti’s forcefully shapely forms, that much seems assured. JEFF BYLES

CA PATRON BACKS NEW FRENCH MUSEUM

Situated on an oddly shaped lot across from Adams Square in Glendale, the new Library Connection Satellite Library—a first-ever satellite branch—is anything but square. Exercising design muscle honed from years of building schools and institutions, Glendale-based Osburn Architects challenges the notion of a traditional library throughout. The semi-circular satellite library is located in the front of a brick building that was once part of an open-air market but now contains an office and retail store. Rather than fill the space with intensive stacks, Osborn pushed the books to the periphery, opening up the center for community interaction. A custom semi-transparent flex shelving system made of laser-cut acrylic panels holds books along three exterior walls, allowing for maximum natural lighting. Stack shelving along the fourth wall accommodates the rest of the constantly evolving collection. Acoustic tiles are hung from the double-height ceilings almost as ornament.

Bright chairs and tables by Magis and colorful Baleri ottomans adorn the central community space, inviting visitors to sit, read, or hang around on the communal laptops. The result is a cheerful, transparent, and inviting space that constantly captures the attention of people on the busy intersection outside as they pass by.
A PAINSTAKING RESTORATION OF A FAMED HOLLYWOOD NIGHTSPOT IS COMPLETE

“Everyone in Los Angeles has their Palladium story,” said Christopher Coe, the Culver City architect who renovated the iconic Hollywood dance hall, which opened its doors in 1940 to a room full of waltz-happy couples that sashayed the night away in step with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. By Gehry Partners.

But perhaps no one knows the Palladium’s architectural history as intimately as Coe and Peyton Hall, the historical consultants on the project. As they set about bringing the building back to its original streamlined moderne splendor for use by concert operator Live Nation, the task became more architectural sleuthing than simple restoration.

“When I took the job I thought it would be a slam dunk,” said Coe about the building that was originally designed by renowned Los Angeles architect Gordon B. Kaufmann, who designed, among other iconic Southern California buildings, the Hoover Dam, the Los Angeles Times building, and the Greystone Mansion. “For as famous as Kaufmann was, there just wasn’t much there.”

The original plans were archived at the Los Angeles Building Department, but they had been copied so many times they were barely legible. As for pictures, Coe found one vintage daytime exterior shot in color, another one taken at night in black and white, and a newsreel clip of Marilyn Monroe getting out of a car in front of the building. The latter proved invaluable because the motion footage demonstrated the animation of the neon signage and the marquee that fronts Sunset Boulevard.

After six months of preparation and six months of construction that required they blow up those small post-card-size images to 800 times their original dimensions, they were able to get the scale just right to produce detailed drawings of every last detail. “It was like architecture CSI. We didn’t have much to go on, but as we found one clue, it led to another and another,” Coe said about the $20 million overhaul. A forensic paint study revealed the original palette—cream, blue and green, and when they removed the cladding that had been put up in 1962 to accommodate the long-running Lawrence Welk Show (Googie signage and all), they were pleased to find the original poured concrete in good shape, as well as a portion of the metal grid that defined the original facade design. They also found small pieces of blue vitrolite glass enabling replication of the original exterior cladding in the exact color.

In a city that’s short on nostalgia and long on demolition, the Palladium’s survival can be attributed least partly to its storied pop music history. It started with the Big Band era, and then came shows by Glenn Miller, Led Zeppelin, Barbra Streisand, the Who, and Ray Charles. In the 1980s, the Palladium regularly hosted bands like the Ramones and the Clash, and as the years went by, Björk and Courtney Love graced the stage as well.

With Hollywood’s recent renaissance (helped along by the Community Redevelopment Agency, the Business Improvement District, and Councilman Eric Garcetti) the Palladium was perfectly positioned to become another historic building that got a painstaking renovation.

“There is a very strong preservation ethic in Hollywood, and that really differentiates us from other entertainment destinations like City Walk or the new L.A. Live,” explained Kerry Morrison, the executive director of the Hollywood Property Owner’s Alliance, which manages the Sunset and Vine Business Improvement District. “We have original authentic venues from the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s and little by little, we are revealing these great stories from the past as we peel away the facades and bring them back to their original state.”

This back-to-the-future philosophy certainly dictated the Palladium’s first booking upon its re-opening in October of this year. After all, who better to represent the modern incarnation of Frank Sinatra than Jay-Z?

Coe admits it wasn’t easy getting to opening night. But now, at the end of the day, when he drives down Sunset and sees the neon anchor on the boulevard, he said, “It’s just been a remarkable transformation.”

STACEY STURKIN

Left: The original Deco facade: Below: the dance floor in the 1970s.

UNVEILED

GEHRY PARTNERS NEW OFFICES

Gehry Partners, which has over 160 employees, is moving from its 40,000-square-foot studios in West Los Angeles to the beachside town of El Segundo early next year. Their new campus will add 15,000 square feet of space to an existing 60,000-square-foot complex of 1960s warehouse-style structures on Beatrice Avenue between Utah and Alaska Avenues. NSB Associates will develop the property with Gehry Partners. The existing structures on the site have 20-foot-high ceilings and large skylights. A new wood trellis structure by Gehry to connect them bears striking resemblance to the pavilion that the architect built for London’s Serpentine Gallery this past summer. The trellis appears to consist of large wood planks projecting at skewed angles, although the intensity of their disorder is certainly toned down from the London project. The site measures 114,000 square feet total, with room for parking and possible expansion.

El Segundo, just south of LAX airport, was once a center of aviation and aerospace manufacturing, more recently revitalized as a center for creative and technology-based companies. “It’s a great coup for our city,” said El Segundo mayor Kelly McDowell. “Frank Gehry is truly a giant in the field of architecture.” The town has a population of 16,000 and a commercial district with 85,000 employees.

Architect: Gehry Partners
Developer: NSB Associates
Location: Beatrice Avenue, El Segundo
Completion: 2009

THE PLOT THICKENS continued from front page:

Two-story structure that emphasizes the formal geometries of the former parade ground. As an alternative, it is proposing a history center on the same site, replicating the barracks typology of the Main Post grounds.

However, the Planning Commission also stated that none of the alternate proposals, including the history center, were a reason-

able alternative to the proposed project. Instead, it urged the completion of the Section 106 National Historic Preservation Act review, a mandatory impact review required of all properties listed on the National Register. It felt that Alternative 1, a visitor and community center using the existing buildings, would have the least impact of the four schemes. The Presidio Trust, which oversees the park, has also asked for changes to a lodge on a nearby site, including downsizing it from 125,000 to 110,000 square feet.

According to a report in The San Francisco Chronicle, the Presidio Trust now wants Fisher to go back to the drawing board, moving the museum to the west, away from some sensitive archaeological sites, breaking it into two buildings, and putting about half of the new construction underground. The museum may be only one story high, no higher than adjacent historic buildings. Asked if a redesign was in the works, Gluckman told AN, “Fisher is considering all his options.”

As an alternative, architect Mark Horton has invited several local architects to present concepts for an alternate museum design for the Presidio museum at his 3A Gallery in the South Park district. The projects include a proposal to locate the new museum under the Main Post, and one to locate the muse-

um’s collection in multiple towers scattered around the Presidio. The exhibition, CAMP: Reconsidered will run until December 23 at the gallery, on 101 South Park.

ERIC LUM

Top: A typical vernacular building on the site; Below: Rendering of Gluckman Mayner’s proposed two-story museum.

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE continued from front page In between—could be ferrying passengers at speeds of up to 220 miles per hour by 2030. While a whopping $9.95 billion in state bonds was allocated by the proposition, development cannot continue until matching funds are secured from federal, local, and private sources. A business plan for the program was released on November 7, equating it in scale to the State Water Project, the world’s largest public water and power system, funded by a 1960 bond measure. California High Speed Rail Authority chairman Quentin Kopp called the proposition’s approval a “21st-century golden spike.” Once funding is secured, the Authority will focus first on the LA-to-San Francisco “backbone” segment. Environmental impact reports have been completed for the route and alignments chosen, with the exception of the Northern Mountain Crossing connection between San Jose or Oakland and the Central Valley.

In Los Angeles County, another major transit proposal, Measure R, reported 67.93 percent voter approval when a 2/3 majority was needed. The 30-year, half-cent sales tax increase will fund improvements and expansions for light rail and subway lines, HOV lanes, freeways, and traffic reduction. According to Metro spokesman Rick Jager, the tax will go into effect next July, and citizens could start to see evidence immediately, since a portion of the funds will go directly to LA-area city governments. “The local return is an important element because these 88 cities will start getting their 1% percent share from the tax that’s generated,” he said, noting that many cities had plans for street resurfacing, pothole repairs, improving left-hand signals, pedestrian improvements, and bikeways. It also postpones a planned Metro fare increase to 2010.

The rest of the funds generated by Measure R will be available in 2010, when the major projects up for funding will be an extension of the Gold Line that goes to Azusa (the first six-mile extension of the Gold Line, begun in 2004, is on budget and on schedule to open in the summer of 2009), the Green Line extension to LAX, and the second phase of the light rail Expo Line stretching from downtown LA to Santa Monica. The first segment of the Expo Line’s route from downtown to Culver City is scheduled to open in 2010, and with this burst of funding, it could reach Santa Monica as early as 2013. Later, funding will become available for the Purple Line or “Subway to the Sea” extension in 2013.

In Santa Monica, the hotly-contested Proposition T, which would have limited development in the city to under 75,000 square feet annually, was defeated 59.92 percent to 44.08 percent. This was a relief to many architects and developers who had fought hard against the measure, including Gwenn Pugh of Pugh + Scarpa, who, in his role on Santa Monica’s planning commission, will address Proposition T’s concerns in the city’s new Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE), which is currently in environmental impact reviews. “The LUCE has addressed this issue by stating that there will be a goal of ‘no new net trips,’” he said. “Unlike previous plans, this will be monitored, and development phased as resources are developed such as the Expo Line.” After Beverly Hills’ city council approved a 12-story, 170-room Waldorf-Astoria hotel and two condo buildings on the site of the Beverly Hilton in May, opposed residents gathered enough signatures to put the decision on the ballot as Measure H. After results were too close to call for several weeks, on December 2 the city certified that Measure H had been approved by 129 votes, meaning that an architectural design review and tract map will move forward as planned. In San Francisco, Proposition B, which would have required the city to set aside 2.5 cents for every $100 of assessed value over the next 15 years for affordable housing, failed 47.4 percent to 52.6 percent. This was disheartening to housing advocates and the city’s Board of Supervisors, who strongly urged its approval to prevent what they called an “affordable housing crisis” due to budgetary concerns. Proposition B would have allocated $30 million to help house those making less than $18,000. According to housing advocate Calvin Welch, the budget currently only reserves $3 million for affordable housing. Mayor Gavin Newsom was one of the strongest opponents of Prop B, arguing that it was unnecessary. And while its outcome did not directly impact architects, another Measure R, this one also in San Francisco, was certainly a topic of conversation for anyone working in infrastructure: This ballot initiative that would have renamed a Bay Area sewage plant in honor of President George W. Bush was soundly defeated.

ALISSA WALKER
NEW PLANS FOR SAN PEDRO WATERFRONT REVEALED

PORT PROMENADE

A surreal area long dominated by towering steel shipping facilities may be about to get a friendlier, more community-oriented focus. The Los Angeles Harbor Department and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in October released the Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for their San Pedro Waterfront plan. The 400-acre project is set to replace the Port of Los Angeles’ now-relocated industrial ports and docklands along the west side of Los Angeles Harbor’s Main Channel with a new promenade, bike paths, park spaces, commercial spaces, and cruise ship facilities.

Following a public review phase that ended on December 8, the plan would take about five to seven years to complete. Groundbreaking is set for summer 2010. LA-based Tetra Design, Inc. is coordinating the project. EDAW’s LA and San Francisco offices are developing the master plan, landscaping, and urban design. And Oakland-based Hood Design and Pasadena-based Cityworks are assisting with landscape and urban design. Costs are still being estimated, but the port is setting aside $66 million for the project. The Port said the scheme would help revitalize San Pedro, in addition to providing much-needed recreation opportunities. According to estimates provided by the Port, the plan would provide over 1,000 new jobs, about $38 million in new wages, and about $30.8 million in passenger spending.

The plan’s waterfront promenade would include an eight-mile-long, 30-foot-wide pedestrian path stretching from the Cabrillo Bath House at the south end to the Vincent Thomas Bridge to the north. The plan also proposes two new harbors—the 75,000-square-foot Downtown Harbor, and the slightly smaller 7th Street Harbor—to accommodate visiting cruise ships and other vessels. Among the plan’s several (and interconnected) new public parks would be the Town Square, at the foot of San Pedro’s Sixth Street; the 7th Street Landing, adjacent to the new 7th Street Bridge; and an 18-acre central park that would include an amphitheater seating up to 3,000 people. The area’s existing port of call would be enhanced with 375,000 square feet of complementary development, including commercial, retail, and restaurant uses. Finally, the plan calls for two new two-story, 200,000-square-foot cruise ship terminals along the area’s outer harbor.

While architectural choices have yet to be made (schematic design begins in January), EDAW says the plan will focus all uses on the water, with a continuous waterfront and various districts within this stretch merging the public realm with the area’s existing waterfront activities. Part of that, pointed out Sacha Schwarzkopf, senior urban designer for EDAW, is drawing on the existing drama that the channel presents.

“One of the things that San Pedro has to offer is that you can have ships at the curb,” he said. “Cruise ships. Tall ships. Industrial ships. Having that sense of awe looking at them is a unique experience.” According to the EIR, plans would also draw for inspiration on the city’s “maritime industrial history,” as well as on the unique character of San Pedro.

To help people get to all of these new facilities, the plan will include a series of transportation improvements, including the expansion of existing roadways; intersections, landscape, and parking improvements; extension of the Waterfront Red Car Line (which will run parallel to the promenade); and water taxi berthing facilities. And to protect the environment, the plan pledges to use recycled water for landscaping; drought-tolerant plants; LEED certification for all buildings over 7,500 square feet; solar power; and pedestrian and bike connections throughout.

Yet to some in the area, these efforts are not enough. Local website Curbed LA described the plan as a “Disneyesque happyland of shops, tourists, and cruise ships,” and pointed to comments by June Burlingame Smith, who heads up a port advisory panel overseeing the waterfront planning. “The current plan is a ‘drive-by’ plan,” she said. “Drive by the waterfront, drive by downtown San Pedro, drive by the museums, monuments, restaurants and shops to get to a cruise ship where dreams of happiness will be found in faraway foreign playgrounds.” Schwarzkopf disagreed: “We’re not trying to make this themed. There wants to be a nice waterfront layer to it, but it has to feel real. San Pedro is about muscle and it’s about working ports that are right at your doorstep. It’s about honest, genuine development.”

SL
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Volunteers and skilled laborers are toiling together in the variegated shade of Watts Towers on an ambitious, grassroots revitalization project that was launched this fall. The focus of their efforts is not Simon Rodia’s historic landmark, but the 20 small bungalows that line East 107th Street just south of the towers.

The Watts House Project (WHP) seeks to transform all 20 residential properties into vibrant works of art. Beyond simply renovating each home’s facade, the goal is to re-imagine the interior, exterior, and front and back yards of each home to reflect the resident’s vision and reinforce a sense of community.

The WHP is intended to be a malleable artwork as much as it is an urban revitalization. To explain his inspiration and strategy, artist and WHP director Edgar Arceneaux pointed out that Rodia’s quixotic spires emerged as a process of trial and error. Rodia would construct something one day and tear it down the next. “It really was a site where he was building something and didn’t know ultimately what shape it would be. We’re trying to operate in the spirit of that,” he said.

To that end, Arceneaux begins the process by providing each resident books and magazines, such as Dwell, to help them develop their own ideas. “I’m not trying to master plan the whole thing,” he said. He then introduces them to an artist and an architect to begin work on their house’s design. While each property is an autonomous project, Arceneaux points out that because there are three sets of households who occupy adjacent properties, an opportunity exists to do something architecturally that “blurs the property line.”

Reflecting the heavy concentration of skilled labor in South Los Angeles, much of the work is being done by people who actually live in the neighborhood. The block of East 107th Street that is home to the WHP also boasts a blacksmith, a family of roofers, a cabinetmaker, and a professional house painter, among other tradesmen.

To do the financial heavy lifting, Arceneaux has had to look farther afield. The WHP has thus far raised about $85,000 from Creative Capital and LAXART, a small but significant portion of a projected $900,000 to $1 million Arceneaux said they will need to complete the initial stage of the project. Additional funding is coming from local art collectors and through limited edition pieces Arceneaux has created and sold through LAXART.

The UCLA Hammer Museum is also supporting the project as a partner. While the WHP falls outside the boundaries of the Community Redevelopment Agency’s Watts Redevelopment Project, Arceneaux is in conversation with the agency’s South LA branch in an effort to involve them in four of the facade improvements. Arceneaux is also hoping to attract architects who would be interested in working on a small-scale project that might not be possible in other parts of the city. “Because Watts has been more or less neglected, you can get away with a lot more,” he said. “The city’s not breathing down your neck.”

The transformation of the homes on East 107th Street is scheduled for completion by 2013. The second phase is what Arceneaux calls the project’s “five essential programs”: an Artist in Residency Program, with a workspace, gallery and housing; the Café Project, addressing the current lack of a space for people to eat, drink, and view the Watts Towers; the WHP Office Project, to provide a permanent space for WHP activities; a Social Services Program to address needs, such as daycare; and perhaps the most important, the Residential Housing Project, where WHP hopes to purchase seven to ten properties on East 107th Street and Santa Ana Boulevard to create low-income housing.

Sitting on a front porch belonging to Felix and Christina Madrigal against a chequered backdrop of colorful paint samples, Arceneaux reaffirmed his Rodian vision for the WHP over the din of power tools at work in the Madrigal’s driveway. “I tell the residents, ‘Nothing is permanent, so why not do something adventurous now and we can change it later?’”

MIKE SCHULTE
LA COUNTY WEIGHS DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS IN MARINA DEL REY

ROUGH WATERS

With proposed development in Marina Del Rey that could add over 3,700 residential units and 630 new hotel rooms, the County of Los Angeles just began a process to determine whether it will adopt recent California Coastal Commission recommendations to limit and examine this development and bring the community’s Local Coastal Plan into compliance with the California Coastal Act.

On October 29, the county held a meeting to gather public input about the Coastal Commission’s 67 recommendations—made on October 16—concerning density and urban planning. These included changing land use designations of parks or parking lots; a comprehensive study of anticipated future development; and incentives for free or lower-cost public uses on waterfront parcels. While the county is not required to follow the recommendations, it must provide the commission with a report specifying its reasons for not following them.

As the aging marina—one a bastion of stewards when air travel was the sleek new way to go—has been slated for updates and new development, the county has faced increasing contentious opposition to its handling of the roughly 950-acre marina, initially financed through a publicly-funded bond measure. Underlying community objections is the fact that the county both owns the marina’s property and controls all planning in the area. Officials negotiate terms of leases with developers in closed-door sessions, leaving the public and urban planners with little capability to adjust those terms once they reach the design process. The Coastal Commission has therefore been viewed as a nonpartisan decision-maker.

“The county is the landlord on every property, and development partner on every property,” noted Steve Friedman, a Venice resident who lives just feet from the marina’s property line. “I think there’s a term for that—conflict of interest.”

Freedman’s assertion is disputed by David Sommers, a spokesperson for County Supervisor Don Knape, whose 4th District includes the marina. Sommers said the dual role, which dates back approximately 50 years, was “not a conflict,” and all decisions made by the Board of Supervisors are reviewed by several other entities.

But in October, the Board of Supervisors shifted some responsibilities, as well as the meetings of the local review board known as the Design Control Board (DCB), to the county’s regional planning commission downtown. A person familiar with the decision who agreed to speak with AN on condition of anonymity believed the move was partially to limit decisions that ran against developer interests, as in the case of the Woodlin Hotel, initially slated to be situated on protected wetlands. Though the project is now moving forward, the DCB delayed its approval, requiring that its site plan be changed.

In an email to AN, Susan Cline, the DCB’s chair, said, “The recent action, removing site plan and conceptual review from the board’s authority, diminishes our ability to help the marina become all that it could be.” Cline cited recreational activities like boating, walking, and cycling, essential to producing income for the area, that had been sidelined in favor of residential and commercial development.

“The magnificent thing about the marina is that it was designed as a resort for daily life,” observed John Chase, co-author of Everyday Urbanism. “But because the marina is county territory… there is little local control and accountability for the nature and quality of development there.”

According to Gina M. Natoli, supervising regional planner with the County of Los Angeles, the county will address the commission’s recommendation for a comprehensive study of development and the DCB will continue to exercise design review authority after the county has approved site plans. Among those on the DCB are planners like Simon Pastucha, whom LA Planning Director Gail Goldberg appointed to the Urban Design Studio to set a design criteria system for walkable streets in the City of Los Angeles.

Additionally, the county’s Department of Beaches and Harbors is planning a study on the cumulative effect of all redevelopment projects that are in the proprietary or regulatory processes, according to Kerry Silverstrom, chief deputy director. The review will study the impacts of such large projects as the 19-story, 424-room and time-share unit Woodlin, large residential projects like a 544-unit apartment complex, and large-scale restaurants, book retail, and mixed use.

The county’s October 29 public meeting also kicked off a series of working groups organized to review the Coastal Commission recommendations and report their input to the county’s Board of Supervisors. Natoli anticipates the county will complete its response to the Coastal Commission’s recommendations by October 2009. TIDBY ROTHMAN
Where New Honors Old

The staircase treads were recycled from fir joists in the original building.

Seattle architects and recently-announced AIA 2009 Firm of the Year winners Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen (OSKA) have used their delicate touch to create a beautiful new building for the Wing Luke Asian Museum, a Seattle institution dedicated to exploring the culture, art, and history of Asian-Pacific Americans. Set in the heart of the city’s International District, also known as its Chinatown, the museum’s design combines the best of historic preservation adaptive reuse.

The Asian’s new home is the product of a community-driven $23.2 million capital campaign. Previously located in a nondescript, 7,500-square-foot rental space first alongside a commercial strip, the new 60,000-square-foot location is built out of the shell of a four-story 1910 brick hotel called the East Kong Yick Building.

The firm’s biggest challenge was to modernize and bring light into the building while still maintaining the unique spirit of the structure. OSKA opened up the building’s first two floors, creating airy spaces for the lobby, galleries, main staircase, and a theater. To retain the building’s character, the firm preserved original materials in unique ways, while intentionally keeping wall and floor treatments simple to draw attention to exhibits. Many original materials were salvaged, from timbered floors to fir joists recycled into stair treads. The original building’s zinc fire doors have become furniture and wall decorations for the new lobby. The upper two floors draw from the building’s history as a social center and living quarters for Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants. The small, one-room apartments and narrow hallways have been repurposed as they were at the turn of the last century to immerse visitors in the past.

The architects interpreted this past without imitating it in two second-floor “lightwells,” adapted from the opening and closing of shutters, the shafts look like hidden alleyways between historic row houses. Visitors can easily envision the homes of newly arrived Asian immigrants behind the window-lined walls that border the shafts. With transparent skylights and built-in sound and sculptures, the lightwells capture the intimate yet public nature of a street to the relaxed atmosphere of Southern California’s indoor-outdoor living, more residential than commercial. “It’s a comfortable, warm environment more than anything else,” noted Wen. The firm will start design for the offices that lie above the entry segment in January 2009.

IN DETAIL > WILLIAM MORRIS HEADQUARTERS

Few creative processes today could be as different as that of the entertainment and architecture industries. “The industry” usually green-lights projects based on the least risk-taking path—the known star, the worn formula, the sequel. Meanwhile, architects in Los Angeles (with obvious exceptions) often transform and drive the creative community with the untried, the testing, the innovative—if not always the successful.

And so it was hardly surprising when two powerful entertainment industry talent agencies, Creative Artists Agency and William Morris, commissioned the same architectural firm to design new headquarters on LA’s west side. If something went awry with the visual, an exec couldn’t be blamed for not betting on a sure thing.

Gensler’s commission for the Creative Artists Agency headquarters in Century City was completed in 2007, accurately projecting the agency’s calling card—the unabashed exercise of power—through a monolithic, monochromatic building. For William Morris, Gensler takes a much different tack: it dispatches a variety of warm spaces for the public segment of the building that read: Be inspired here. Real estate firm George Comfort & Sons first commissioned Gensler to design the 185,000-square-foot, retail-and-office building for the agency. The firm itself then selected Gensler to design interiors, through a competition. While design for the core and shell has been approved and the building broke ground in spring 2008, interior work is ongoing.

Interestingly, the tone, identity, and innovation of the William Morris commission are derived from Gensler’s solutions to challenges rather than opportunities. The Morris headquarters are to be housed in the first office building to be constructed from the ground up in approximately 20 years in Beverly Hills, a notoriously conservative city in terms of design. When Gensler first presented the plan to the city, they asked, “Can’t you make it look like Barney’s?” To dedicate essential ground floor space for the building’s retail component, the agency’s entrance needed to be placed in a track from the street, ruling out an imposing lobby on the first floor. Meanwhile, on two of its four elevations, the building was to be interfaced with existing restaurants and Beverly Hills retail endeavors of a far smaller scale.

Gensler’s solution led to a structure that dissipates massing, facilitates required setbacks, and supports a dramatic exterior terrace for hosting the talent during events. The firm replaced the traditional office building rectangular block with five shifting horizontal planes visible from the property’s main elevation on Beverly Drive. A single story of ground-level retail space is contrasted with a narrow second plane that shifts to the south and serves as a base for the exterior terrace on the second floor. Alighting on top is a three-story volume that slides back to the site’s northwest corner. The next volume, which is two stories, shifts to the south, creating a 30-foot overhang that frames the first terrace while facilitating an executive terrace available only to agents with fifth floor offices along Dayton Way.

While the multiple planes may sound dizzying, their visual expression is decidedly unbusy: simple volumes that produce tension. Gensler wraps the building with a skin of blue and pewter glass that changes color based on its density to emphasize the different planes on the Beverly Drive and Dayton Way elevations, but also to recognize the sameness of the alley exposure, where, due to budget and structural constraints, the headquarters reads as a single rectangular volume. An irregular pattern of narrow vertical and horizontal sunshades adds depth and variation to the exterior surface.

Gensler’s response to the constraints placed on the William Morris’ lobby is best exemplified by their indoor/outdoor space serves as an informal gathering place for clients attending William Morris events in the screening room. Sheathing the far end is a wall that separates the so-called living room from the bridge that punch through to executive offices at the same level and to the link below.

Within minutes, visitors have taken a multi-level journey containing a variety of spaces that transition from the frenetic, “hard work” environment to the relaxed atmosphere of Southern California’s indoor-outdoor living, more residential than commercial. “It’s a comfortable, warm environment more than anything else,” noted Wen. The firm will start design for the offices that lie above the entry segment in January 2009.

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Located on a steeply-sloped site in a residential neighborhood of scattered houses, razor-thin alleys, and tightly packed apartment houses, Portland-based Architecture W's M House doesn't have a lot of room to breathe. That's not surprising, considering it's located in ultra-dense Nagoya, Japan. So the task for firm principals Brian White and Michael Weenik (who lives in the house with his family) was to give it the illusion of lots of space. The restrained, box-shaped house, clad in a thin pattern of corrugated metal, does indeed feel spacious, thanks to creative siting, massing, and lighting.

The first major space-maximizing move was a surprising one. Despite the inviting mountain views to the north, the firm cantilevered the house (via steel trusses) 15 feet over an adjacent alley to the south, providing a place for parking and for Weenik's son to play. On this newly-created plinth, the firm built a small, concrete-lined reflecting pool, filled with lilies and set with elegant square steps. Underneath, the architects fit an underground apartment for the Weeniks' in-laws, a common concession in a country where older parents almost always live with their children.

Above the cantilever, there's an airy living area clad with exposed concrete walls and floors, enclosed on both the north and south facades by floor-to-ceiling sliding glass walls that open completely to the distant mountains, not to mention the sun and breezes. The north-facing elevation feels almost impossibly open because it has no railing (building rules are not as strict in Japan). Light pours in, thanks to a glass-enclosed yellow stairway leading to a large, top-floor roof deck and a dramatic circular skylight. Space in the open-plan main space is used in a familiar Japanese way. One single white wall, beset with built-in plasterboard cabinets, contains almost all of the house's storage space, including a Murphy bed.

White and Weenik had worked together in Japan for the San Francisco firm K+D before starting their small practice—with footholds in Portland, Nagoya, and Tokyo—in 2001. White said they like to bring the best of Japan and the U.S. to their work. The American touch includes bits of nature like the reflecting pool and the wide-open expanses, and the Japanese touch comes from the superb craftsmanship and concrete work (thanks to highly trained local builders). The overall effect, White said, is especially effective because of the house's simplicity. "Why get too tricky? This works pretty well," he said.
GATHERING GLOOM  continued from front page  for the survey.

To put that number in perspective, an ABI score below 50 is symptomatic of a slowdown.

In September, inquiries remained relatively consistent at 51.0, but fell to 39.9 in October. Not surprisingly, many of those participating in the survey pointed to difficulties in client financing as the primary factor affecting new projects.

The inevitable rash of layoffs has spread to every sector of the business, as firms reorganize in response to the crisis. Among recent cuts, Johnson Fain is reported to have laid off six architects for an architecture-related construction halt. Calls to the firm’s Los Angeles office were not returned. An official at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill would only confirm that there have been layoffs at the firm’s West Coast offices.

SB Architects, which specializes in high-end hospitality projects, has cut staff by 20 percent in their San Francisco and Miami offices. The collapse of financial services firm Lehman Brothers scuttled a number of the firm’s most significant projects, including a Southern California Ritz-Carlton. According to SB president John F. Eller, when the announcement was made that Lehman had failed, the contractor simply walked off the job.

While SB has sustained damage from the downturn, Eller said the firm has new projects on the boards. “We’re holding our own, relative to current staff levels and workload,” he said. Eller notes that SB’s conservative staffing projection extends to the end of the firm’s fiscal year in June 2009. “With the volatility of the current situation, we will expect some additional pieces of bad news, we’re just not sure where it’s coming from next,” he said.

Carrier Johnson, a San Diego–based firm that averages between 18 and 24 million dollars per year in gross fees, has seen a ten percent loss of volume since last year, resulting in a 15 percent decrease in staff. Company principal Michael C. Johnson considers his firm’s cutbacks modest in comparison with others in the region. “Some firms in town are almost gone,” he said.

As construction has recessed over the last year and a half in California, Johnson has witnessed larger firms increasingly undercut smaller outfits to weather the downturn. “I think you’re going to see some of the bigger firms competing in areas where they weren’t competing,” making it even harder for smaller firms to survive, Johnson added.

The institutional sector has largely remained behind the downward curve, experiencing its first statistical weakening in four years this September, according to the AIA. CO Architects, a Los Angeles–based firm with an institutional specialization, saw a 15 percent of their staff midway through 2008, the result of stalled projects in the U.C. system. While the firm has re-staffed in response to a strong backlog, Scott Kelsey, managing principal of CO, sees an uncertain future. “We’re not sure what will happen in 2009. The farther we move out, the less sure we are.”

Both Eller and Kelsey express guarded optimism, largely because their firms are not tied exclusively to the California economy (SB is active in the Middle East, while CO’s practice is national), but others sound a more pessimistic note.

Paul Milton, CEO of Hart/Howerton, a firm with offices across the country, sees no regional safe harbor from the economic storm. “We’ve got the benefit of looking at this from a global perspective, and there is nowhere that is immune,” he said. To illustrate, Milton points out that Dubai home prices were off 19 percent in October. His 250-person firm has undergone a 15 percent staff reduction in the last three months—half of which are in the architectural realm, with the additional cuts being made among the firm’s landscape architects, planners, and interior designers.

Milton sees his firm’s bulwark against the current financial storm not in geographic diversity, but in the economic resilience of its “ultra-high-net-worth” clients. He notes that many of these clients can afford to move ahead with construction projects. “We’re working on a private island in the Persian Gulf,” he said. “Gone are the days of master spasms not in geographic diversity, but in the economic storm. “We’ve got the benefit of looking at this from a global perspective, and there is nowhere that is immune,” he said. To illustrate, Milton points out that Dubai home prices were off 19 percent in October. His 250-person firm has undergone a 15 percent staff reduction in the last three months—half of which are in the architectural realm, with the additional cuts being made among the firm’s landscape architects, planners, and interior designers.

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An architect from Quebec, Luc enjoys playing golf and barbequing—though not simultaneously. He also enjoys working with Vectorworks Architect, where 2D drafting and 3D modeling can occur at the same time. Luc and his firm, King & King Architects, depend on Architect for this flexibility, especially as they strive for platinum LEED certification in their office renovations of an old warehouse in downtown Syracuse.

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Luc Lefebvre, Team Leader–CAD Coordinator/Instructor, King & King Architects, LLP
China Express

Technology Helps California Firms Thrive in China.

By Amara Holstein
As people tuned into the Olympics this past August, they saw buildings like the evocatively nicknamed Bird’s Nest and Ice Cube settling into the Beijing landscape. But what wasn’t seen so clearly by Olympic viewers were the challenges of working in this frenetic setting, and the logistics of trading design drawings with clients and colleagues over five thousand miles away. It’s a world where technology plays a central role, increasing in importance and complexity.

Within the U.S. Chinese economy has been nothing short of miraculous over the last few years, turning a development nobody into one of the hottest markets in the world. Although new signs are ominous—a recent report in The New York Times said that housing sales in big cities this year have dropped by as much as 40 percent, and several firms told AL that commercial construction in the country is way down—China is still the place to be for Western architects, including many of California’s top firms looking for large-scale work.

Among these entrepreneurial spirits constantly boarding flights that “would drive me nuts if I thought about it,” according to Andy Froel, president of Pasadena-based F+A Architects, technology allows the once time-eating, mundane coordination of cross-continent business to be managed electronically through innovative new data sharing, construction management, and teleconferencing technologies.

“Working on projects in the early ’90s, we would print up designs, box them up, and then have to schlep stuff over there. People were on the plane every week, information got lost in transportation, and it was prohibitive both in terms of cost and personal life,” said Mehrdad Yazdani, principal of Los Angeles-based Yazdani Studio of Cannon Design, which is now working on a concert hall, a restaurant, and a villa as part of the huge Ordos project in China. “My experience now is completely different,” he said. His firm uses the Polycom System (a hardware appliance linked to an overhead projector, a camera, and a computer image system) to conduct videoconferences with colleagues in China.

Gene Schnair, managing partner of SOM’s San Francisco office—which is working on over 20 projects in China—noted his firm’s use of the Polycom system and gozmeecting, which enables users in different locations to work on documents simultaneously, for tele-conferencing. Morphosis, which is working on ambitious projects in China as well, uses the web-based project management system Aconex, in which the contractor in China posts drawings and images on the website for U.S. architects to review and send back with changes. For videoconferencing, the firm uses the Tandberg system, which like Polycom uses cameras and projectors to link teams over the internet. The firm’s videoconferences are further enhanced through the Tintagel tablet by Wacom, an LCD tablet imbedded in the firm’s conference tables that allows architects to instantaneously share sketches with their overseas counterparts.

The firm also employs a software called Gathering Place, which displays architects’ desktops on colleagues’ computers in China. There are still more work-saving and work-enhancing technologies on the way. A New York company called iBeam sells to architects and construction managers a handheld camera that beams live video from anywhere on a construction site to any computer screen; it can be shared by multiple remote viewers. And IT companies like Control Data provide comprehensive electronic tracking systems; or firms can do it on their own with software like Microsoft’s SharePoint, which allows huge document transfers from a central repository, with version tracking, vaulting, and other tools.

And since wages are significantly lower in China, firms are able to take advantage of a technique that is more controversial: outsourcing to Chinese offices. “Before, when I hired recent graduates of Harvard or Cornell or USC, we’d have them pick up red marks or do area calculations on a computer in Los Angeles,” said Yazdani. “Now, we have our team in Shanghai do that, and it frees up our California team to do more important work.”

Michael Mann, a principal at Los Angeles firm DMJM Design, has had limited success with shared platforms, since “what we’re finding is that our Chinese counterparts have AutoCAD as their basic platform. Revit isn’t implemented to the degree that it’s become a commonplace utility.” Yazdani has had more success sharing complex modeling platforms, and explained that “it’s good that things get done quickly, the expectations are often unrealistic. You have a huge project, and the clients say they want to start construction in three months, and the project isn’t even designed, yet they start digging anyway. It’s really bizarre.” It can drive American architects slightly insane, as vocal clients demand completion of projects based on impatience rather than on realistic (and functional) schedules.

Overall, however, despite any challenges raised, most architects involved in China feel that their work there is worth the effort. “Some view China as an opportunity for exciting design,” said Yazdani. “But for me, the more important reason to be there is that architecture is a global proposition, and if you want to be involved in that dialogue, you need to be in China.”

And so, high-tech tools in hand, California architects continue to communicate through frequent-flier miles—or just travel electronically—as they pursue the profit in Chinese construction—and the dream of contributing to the next worldwide architectural sensation.
Tech-aided design: A rendering of Morphosis’ Giant Group Pharmaceutical Campus outside Shanghai (top); a preview of NBBJ’s Chinatrust Headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan (middle); Yazdani Studio’s planned concert hall in Ordos, Inner Mongolia (left).
All Consuming
We bring to you our editors’ idiosyncratic picks of treasures, large and small, silly and serious
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8 WINE CARAFE WITH OAK STOPPER
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9 LE CORBUSIER: A LIFE
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10 LONDON 2000+
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www.yalepress.yale.edu
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18 WOOD BLOCKS PUZZLE OCTAGON
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3620 Morris Avenue
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www.reedwood.com
$98.00

19 SOFTS
YoYoNation
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20 SOLAR & WIND CHARGER
For recharging your phone on the Appalachian Trail
Flight 001
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www.flight001.com
$80.00

21 FUTURE SYSTEMS FLATWARE
Whole service, including zoomy shot glasses
Alessi Los Angeles
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www.future-systems.com
$352.00

22 THINKING OF YOU NOW
Pop-up vase by baroque-ster Tord Boontje
Artecnica
www.artecnicainc.com
$46.00

23 HUMIDIFIER
Matter
www.mattermatters.com
$55.00

24 BORN CRUCIAL MILK 2% YoY
YoYoNation
www.YoYoNation.com
$59.99

25 I AM NOT A PAPER CUP
I am a ceramic vase
MoMAstore
www.momastore.org
$20.00
Through intricate metalwork, furniture, and glasswork, the brothers Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene fused American, English, and Continental styles, as well as with the great regional sensitivity particular to California. Greene and Greene trained in the “art of the hand,” and like its counterpart in the English Arts and Crafts movement of the early 20th century. In a sense, their career culminated in the creation of such furnishings. Their career culminated in the creation of such architecture and design. New photographs by J. S. Sirén (above) allows us a glimpse of what the Greene-Jetsonens, historic material from the Museum of Finnish Architecture, and models made by Tulane University students bring some 20 examples of this tradition—spanning the last hundred years and including many lesser-known Finnish architects—richly to life.

For a few scant summer months of the year, the Finnish mansion affords its people time to bask in the sun’s magical extremes. Since the latter part of the 19th century, the tradition of leaving the urban environment and communing with nature became a part of Finnish culture, with whole families heading for the shores of lakes and the seaside to best enjoy the long days. For Finnish architects, the summer villa quickly became a means to experiment with distinctly vernacular and experimental building styles, where a designer’s romantic dreams could be incorporated. As photographer Jari Jetsonen and architect Sirkkiisa Jetsonen, who constructed and designed the displays in this fine exhibition, put it: “summer houses are very personal—they are like journal entries.” Peeking into the villa-journals of such luminaries as Elsi Saarinen, Juhani Pallasmaa, and J. S. Sirén (above) allows us a glimpse of what the architects created when at their most candid. The generous provision of light and air dominates these spaces, but so do the individual whims of each designer. New photographs by the Jetsonens, historic material from the Museum of Finnish Architecture, and models made by Tulane University students bring some 20 examples of this tradition—spanning the last hundred years and including many lesser-known Finnish architects—richly to life.

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William Krisel, the architect who played a major role in putting a modernist stamp on Palm Springs and wide expanses of the San Fernando Valley, is the subject of this small exhibit at the MODAA Gallery. Krisel, who is still alive, was part of an outstanding crop of architects to emerge from the University of Southern California after World War II. His early influences were Raphael Soriano and Garrett Eckbo; he apprenticed with Paul Laszlo and later, Victor Gruen.

Krisel formed the firm Palmer & Krisel with partner Dan Palmer in 1924. Their work during the 1940s and 50s reflected the hopes of tract home builders to deliver an informal and invigorating lifestyle for a minimal price. By the mid-50s, Krisel had designed more than 10,000 homes, with flat, A-frame, or butterfly roofs, screened entries, open floor plans, high-beamed ceilings, breezeways, and landscaped yards. Somehow, the workaholic had a hand in all of them. Popular developments in Palm Springs included Las Palmas Estates and Royal Desert Palms, a group of tract houses developed by Bob Alexander, captured in black and white by Julius Shulman. Similar pictures of Krisel’s work are bustling with women in A-line skirts and men pushing babies in prams. This was the good life, circa 1950.

Over his 51-year career, Krisel expanded into office buildings and apartment towers, holding firm to his modernist roots. He also built the House of Tomorrow, an experiment in modern living that impressed developer Alexander so much that he made it his personal residence. Even today, builders in Southern California are recreating versions of Krisel’s old houses for hip new owners: Once again, his style is bringing modernism to the rest of us. The exhibit includes 84 large renderings, along with 14 evocative photographs and numerous reproductions of floor plans that all capture the simple but elegant and lively spirit of Krisel’s work. Unfortunately, other than an introductory note, none of the individual displays are identified by year, location, or project description. Without this information, it is hard to gain a deeper appreciation for the work of a man who did so much to shape the parched, unanimated landscape of Southern California.
Julia Christensen grew up in Bardstown, Kentucky, a place known for its bourbon whiskey and historic architecture. There, she saw Wal-Mart come to town, build, and abandon a big box store, which ended up as the site of the new county courthouse. A writer and photographer who teaches at Oberlin College, Christensen was inspired to visit and photograph other big box stores like Winn-Dixie and Kmart that have been repurposed. Her photographs are currently on view in Pittsburgh at the Carnegie Museum of Art, where her images are included in the show Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes.

In Big Box Reuse, Christensen highlights ten cases. The huge metal sheds have been converted to Head Start centers, senior care homes, and exterior architects of that project. The huge metal sheds have been converted to Head Start centers, senior care homes, and lofts for printing presses sheltering ad agencies—but pay less attention to reuse elsewhere. Still, it is there. Perhaps you have to be a certain age to recognize the many empty stores behind like so much discarded snakeskin. Moreover, the chain wants to keep the empty stores as placeholders against recession, has made most of these buildings modern “ruins.”

Christensen's enthusiasm is an antidote to cynicism, encouraging and humane. “As I stand there in the parking lot,” she writes, “snapping photos of that reused Wal-Mart sign, I look around and observe an endless ribbon of strip malls, full of buildings just like this. I think to myself, they have stories behind them, stories well hidden behind their stoic facades. These buildings have an impact on the lives of people.”

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PALAZZO CASTS A PALL ON WESTWOOD VILLAGE

After two decades of contentious community debate and fierce parochial politics, a major mixed-use development, Palazzo, has opened its doors in Westwood Village. Let the debates continue, for if nothing else, the project points to a disturbing drift in the design world, where heralded mixed-use projects do not necessarily translate into accessible urbanity as promised, but rather into economically isolating banality—at least in this less than inspiring instance.

Woe to Westwood, now promoting as its new heart the Palazzo’s 350 luxury apartments, an array of gift-ile avencies, a cavernous 1,252-space garage, and 50,000 square feet of mostly high-end retail and restaurants. Shoe-horned onto the four-plus acre site and shrouded in a nauseating canary yellow, the heavily hyped development has all the charm of an extended stay mid-city hotel residence. It is more citadel than community.

It is more citadel than community.

A Casden Properties conceit, it was designed with an experienced if predictable hand by the venerable firm of Van Tilburg Banvard & Soderburg in the all-too-familiar Spanish colonial style that has carpeted swaths of sprawling Southern California over the last quarter century. To be sure, the apartments seem to work, deftly maximizing light and air in limited interiors in no fewer than 17 different floor plans. The now-standard gourmet kitchens replete with granite countertops and spacious closets are attractive. But the attempt to clad the exterior in an Andalusian mode of bygone Westwood is more boorish than Moorish. The detailing that distinguishes the style is just not there, no doubt a budget consideration by the infamously cost-conscious CEO Alan Casden, with whom Van Tilburg has worked before.

The project’s aggressive sales pitch may play off of the cultural attractions and amenities of the adjacent UCLA mega-cosm, but with rents in the $4 per square foot per month range—one bedroom apartments are listed starting at $2,940, two bedrooms at $3,875—the Palazzo is more in tune with NYU and New York real estate prices than LA’s. And let us not forget the rock climbing wall and concierge service. We are talking here of “a secluded five-star resort with the advantages of stepping out your door into a vibrant and dynamic cityscape,” in the words of Casden that hint at [Grove developer Rick] Caruso envy. How “dynamic” that cityscape will be is questionable. Clearly, neither Palazzo’s residences and retail nor its streetscaping are designed to serve the penny-pinching, poor-tipping college crowd that in the past so animated Westwood and made it particularly attractive to that forever-18 crowd. Especially fun were the weekend nights when the village’s array of first-run landmark movie theaters existed. For a while, it was LA’s premier pedestrian scene. But that scene has long languished, following several nasty incidents over the past few decades that prompted a security-conscious UCLA to try to keep its students on campus by providing more on-site housing and diversions.

Moreover, the obtuse wannabe Bruin teenagers from the Valley who used to hang out in the village flocked to Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade and elsewhere to act out.

Casden was quite direct in his remarks at the opening, declaring that the hope of the Palazzo is that it will attract deep-pocketed residents and visitors to the faded village, and spur its revitalization and property values, even in these tough times. Echoing this hope for a new community in Westwood of “new people and new top retailers” was Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, ever alert to both old and new campaign contributors.

Conversely, that heralded revitalization was the paramount fear of those objecting to the project during its protracted planning stage, as they quixotically clung to a nostalgic vision of the area’s past as a comfortable college town catering to both students and the surrounding community of postgraduates and professionals. In addition, the feeling was that Westwood did not need to become a regional attraction to pump up its real estate, and in fact was potentially more valuable as a modest yet distinctive development.

Westwood Village was indeed once a village, designed in a fanciful Spanish style and in a suburban spirit to serve a burgeoning Los Angeles in the Roaring ’20s. Planned by one of the more acclaimed land use designers of the time, Harland Bartholomew, the village was the focal point of a high-end housing tract developed by the Janss Corporation, adjacent to a new campus for UCLA that had outgrown its downtown location.

Nevertheless, the hyped development dollars and anticipated local taxes that an ambitious high-end mixed-use project would divert from the adjacent wealthy municipal enclaves of Beverly Hills and Santa Monica was too much for the city of Los Angeles to ignore, even if it meant enduring some raucous public hearings and nasty press and turning its backs on UCLA’s fast-food and fast-forward crowd.

The politically-connected Casden persevered, cheered on by local real estate interests and city economists, who see the village’s future and their profits pinned to high-end development. And if the mixed-use Palazzo doesn’t quite work as hoped, and Westwood slips further into somnolence, perhaps a streetcar going up and down Glendon Avenue would help, just like at the Grove and the Americana. They are all beginning to look the same, anyway.

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