Los Angeles Planning Commission President Jane Ellison Usher resigned at a planning commission meeting on December 11. Usher, who transformed the commission through the adoption of a set of principals called “Do Real Planning,” created enemies on the city council when she urged neighborhood groups to sue the city over a state law favoring developers who included affordable housing.

Word instantly swept the Los Angeles planning, development, and activist communities, fueled in part by texted messages, Blackberried emails, and phone calls from shocked attendees. Many asked if Usher, who had at times battled planning department director Gail Goldberg and the city council, had been forced out. In a tightly orchestrated round of interviews, Usher said no, attributing the move in part to financial concerns. Friends continued on page 10

Amid clashing visions for Pasadena’s historic civic center, a proposed expansion to the All Saints Episcopal Church by Richard Meier & Partners was rebuffed for the second time in six months by the Pasadena Planning Commission on December 10.

Meier’s master plan mapped out the addition of four buildings, measuring about 68,000 square feet, to the church’s 2.8-acre site in Pasadena’s historic district. The plan would leave the exterior of the church’s cloister intact while facilitating interior renovations of the parish hall and rectory. New development would be centered around a two-level, cylindrical assembly building for worship opening onto an expansive plaza. Other development would be rectilinear in form and include a two-story building with offices, conference rooms, and an outdoor cafe; a three-story daycare and youth center; and a six-story senior housing building. The plan also called

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More details have emerged about LA philanthropist Eli Broad’s latest art venture: a new museum in Beverly Hills on the western corner of Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards. In a December 9 letter to the Beverly Hills Planning Department, Broad’s lawyer, Thomas Levin, specified that Broad’s “Museum Project” would become the permanent home for the Broad Collections (containing over 2,000 artworks) and would also house a research and study center, as well as the Broad Art Foundation’s administrative headquarters. The foundation currently uses a building in Santa Monica for offices and a gallery, which is only open by appointment. According to the letter and to Gensler, the firm that has been consulting on the project for the last few months to help devise programming and conceptual design, the new five-story building would contain 118,500 square feet of office space on four levels and 68,000 square feet of museum gallery space, archives, and street-level retail, including a museum store. Building height would measure no more than 88 feet. The public galleries, stepped back from the street to

continued on page 3

LA'S LOSS

Ellison Usher resigned at a planning commission meeting on December 11. Usher, who transformed the commission through the adoption of a set of principals called “Do Real Planning,” created enemies on the city council when she urged neighborhood groups to sue the city over a state law favoring developers who included affordable housing.

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continued on page 10

Broader Horizons

2009 may well be the year that California museums wish to forget. Institutions are reeling from drastically reduced endowments: The Getty Trust in December told The Art Newspaper that it faced an $80 million shortfall, more than half of its $147 million operating budget. The high cost of running an art museum, with its high salaries, high rent, and high security, is a factor. Word of the deficit sent shock waves through the art world, as institutions reeled from drastically reduced endowments.
In our last issue I noted The Architect’s Newspaper and SCI-Arc’s plan to launch a competition promoting creative ideas for LA’s transit system. Now it’s official. The contest, called A New Infrastructure: Innovative Transit Solutions For Los Angeles, is open for entries, due by March 13. (Participants can find information and an entry form at www.sci-arc.edu.) The jury will include architects Thom Mayne, Eric Owen Moss, Neil Denari; Gail Goldberg, LA planning director; Aspet Davianidze, director of project engineering facilities at the LA Metropolitan Transportation Authority; Cecilia Estolano, CEO of the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles; and other design experts and civic leaders.

The contest is designed to encourage solutions outside the normal parameters of LAs—and the country’s—existing transportation-related schemes. We hope that entrants, including architects, engineers, planners, or (hopefully) a combination of the three, will explore new transit systems and technologies, new transit-related buildings and neighborhoods, and a new thinking about the relationship between transit, architecture, open space, and urban redevelopment. Competitors will be asked to focus on specific rail extension projects and also take a look at larger-scale, interrelated transit planning challenges.

The competition coincides with the passage of LA County Ballot Measure R, which will give the city up to $40 billion in transportation funding over the next 30 years, and with President Obama’s pledge to make the largest investment in infrastructure since the 1990s.

Here’s our opportunity to think big; to break the outdated boundaries between transit and its surroundings; between design and infrastructure; and between the professions of architecture, engineering, and planning. And to think innovative about existing new technologies such as light rail, zip cars, biofuels, as well as even newer technologies.

Fifty years ago our new highways increased our city’s mobility and its efficiency. But they subsequently destroyed many of our neighborhoods and now they cannot even handle the city’s voluminous traffic. Meanwhile, as much of the nation’s mass transit systems continue to age, LA’s transit remains stalled with limited ridership and a limited reach. Sure, there are subways, and our bus routes are certainly extensive, but who do you know that takes mass transit? I know a few, but everyone else spends their days stuck in traffic.

It’s the Rae Anglolo who believes that the age of the automobile will soon end. And I’m not one of them. People will always relish the opportunity to set out on their own, and cars will continue to become more efficient and ecologically sound. But we still need new transit systems to supplement them, and to insure that our city doesn’t grind to a halt. These systems need to be designed to encourage riders to want to take them, and in ways that nourish and improve our neighborhoods.

Hopefully these ideas will encourage our transit planners, city planners, and civic leaders, some of whom will have a seat on our jury, to be inspired and to think fresher. Maybe a plan will become reality. We also hope this competition will draw attention to an issue that could make or break the prototypical freeway city. If no one is paying attention, we will get more of the same. Or nothing at all. Already the MTA has announced in a report that because of budget shortfalls the Red Line “Subway to the Sea” wouldn’t even reach Westwood until 2012, and that the Green Line extension to LAX would take until 2018. LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has sharply criticized these dates, and we must too. If we are active in this process, imagining schemes and pressuring our government to move swiftly and innovatively, there’s nothing we can accomplish and how far we can travel.

SAM LUBELL

LIFE’S BEEN GOOD
Thank you for reviewing my exhibition at the MODA Gallery and for the kind words about my architectural career (“Designing the Good Life,” CAN 10, 12.17.2008). I would like to make a few minor corrections to the article. I formed my partnership with David Hudson in 1949, not 1962, which is the year I was born. My “51-year-career” is actually 59 years going on 60 this July. I don’t refer to my “design” as a “style,” but rather a “language.” The individual images as shown are identified by “date” but not by location or project.

I look forward to your newspaper for my “architect’s news.” Thanks for doing a great service to the profession.

WILLIAM KRIESEL

CORRECTION
In our feature on practicing in China (“China Express,” CAN 10, 12.17.2008), we erroneously referred to Beijing’s National Aquatics Center as the Ice Cube. It is properly known as the Water Cube.

DIVERSE TEAM PITCHES NEW NATIONAL DESIGN POLICY
Get To Work!

With President Obama’s election heralding a new role for design in government, representatives from several professional design associations met in Washington last week to formulate a proposal for a national design policy.

The unprecedented summit included members of the AIA, the Industrial Designers Society of America (GSDA), the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), the International Interior Designers Association (IID), and other design advocacy groups, as well as various design-related government departments. A policy briefing with the summit’s findings, “Redesigning America’s Future,” aimed to reach out to Congress and reach out to their representatives for support.

While a similar effort, the Federal Design Improvement Program, convened designers in the 1970s under the National Endowment for the Arts, this movement specifically addresses current issues facing the economy today, said AIGA’s executive director Ric Grech.

The two main tenets of the policy include recognizing design innovation as a driving force for the U.S. economy and as a tool for efficiency in government and urban design. Some of the ten policy proposals, like establishing a 2030 goal for carbon neutral buildings and increasing research and innovation grants for designers, seem achievable, while others are more of a stretch, such as pumping up funding for intellectual property and protecting an Assistant Secretary for Design and Innovation.

Summit attendees also hope to re-establish the American Design Council, a unified body that once represented all design fields until it was dissolved in the 1980s. The Presidential Design Awards, which attendees also want to revive, commended the best government-funded design projects, but have not been awarded since 2000.

It was Obama’s specific call to service that motivated the group to come together, said summit organizer Don Tunstall, a professor of design anthropology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “Obama seems more open to any form of citizen engagement. Looking at his campaign, I had a sense that he has a sensitivity towards design. But really, it worked as a summary and now as an initiative because as a leader, he inspires people want to act.”

Besides the accolades heaped upon the Obama camp for the design of its campaign materials, design-related projects already on the Obama radar include the digitizing of government records (including the country’s medical records), a push to augment green design standards, and a major push for bridges, dams, roads, and schools.

John Kaliski, recently sworn-in as president of AIA Los Angeles, called the proposal “very smart,” although he hoped its insistent on design’s functionality would not lessen the importance of experimentation. Coincidentally, said Kaliski, the summit’s findings are in line with AIA/LAs theme for the year: Architecture and Urban Design Matters. “We too talk about the link with economic development,” he said. “But I try to put a contribution bank that allows room for the creative quotient.”

ALISSA WALKER
EAVESDROP: ALISSA WALKER

**ELECTRONIC BLIGHT ORCHESTRA**

Make it stop! Los Angeles’ ongoing battle to put the lights out on those searing electronic billboards got another surge of power this month as statewide legislation was introduced to help fight the blight. After LA enacted a three-month citywide moratorium on new digital billboards in December, this month Assemblyman Mike Feuer introduced Assembly Bill 109, which proposes a two-year statewide moratorium on the construction and conversion of digital billboards. Yes, billboards were preparing to build and digitize themselves!

It’s like Transformer! AIA board member and LA Planning Commission member Michael Woo, who first proposed the LA moratorium in December, wrote a fantastic piece in the LA Times where he explained these shiny suckers are not only dangerous, they’re actually plotting to take over the city! A new type of LED-embedded glass will turn entire sides of high-rises into king-size animated ads for Full Throttle energy drinks. Watch for local residents gouging their eyes out with spoons.

**FALLOUT OF THE HOUSE OF USHER**

The very public reverberations continue after the December resignation of LA’s Planning Commission president Jane Usher, who bade farewell to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa with a spirited letter of wishes for the city to carry out in her absence. (Our favorite: “We must begin by ending our current artifice: we have not enforced our billboard permit program ban.” Ahem.) After her dramatic exit, Kevin Roderick said in his weekly commentary on KCRW that Usher’s outgoing statement was actually much more vicious than it appeared at the outset, saying that it “essentially called BS on the mayor’s approach to letting developers build wherever a bus might someday pass, in the name of transit-friendly growth.” Ouch! Although critics were initially incensed that the overly developer-friendly Sean O. Burton was appointed to fill her seat, everyone was quite pleased to hear that architect Bill Roschen was named as president early this year. The principal of Hollywood-based Roschen Van Cleve Architects describes his work as “place-based design.” It’s about time.

**WILL MISS HERB KATZ**

On a sad note, a beloved fixture in the architecture community and a pioneer of Santa Monica’s revitalization, Herb Katz, died on January 7 after a long battle with cancer. As president of RTK Architects since 1966, Katz was the designer of a diverse list of projects, including many civic, institutional, and educational works in Santa Monica, where he also served as mayor. Hundreds of people attended his memorial service on January 12, which was covered in the next day’s Santa Monica Daily Press, slugged the “We’ll miss you, Herb” issue. Katz was first elected to Santa Monica’s city council in 1984 and served the city in some governmental capacity every year until his death. Now that’s what we like to call community service.

SEND TIPS, GOSSIP, AND TASTEFUL BILLBOARDS TO AWALKER@ARCHPAPER.COM

Brooklyn-based Para Project, along with Manhattan-based OFFICE/Giancarlo Valle, recently transformed a 5,000-square-foot former auto body plant in West Hollywood into Phillip Lim’s third fashion boutique. The building’s windowless facade lets the fashion be experienced intimately, said Para architect Jonathan Lott, who added that his firm worked on “changing the typography of the typical storefront.” The closeness of the entry is drawn out as amoeba-shaped walls unwind into distinct niche rooms with varied styles. The rooms display clothing on thick recessed curving partitions juxtaposed to mirrors, creating the illusion that the rooms are actually circular, and “making the store’s layout less aware of the geometry of the box,” said Lott. The space’s unwinding character brings about what Lott describes as a “prolonged experience,” spreading exposure to the merchandise over a winding path. The intricate design—a opposed to the minimal clothing display—also contrasts to artificially lit back rooms with soft, spiky walls and adjacent sky-lit spaces where the surfaces are made of bamboo, cork, and leather.

OPEN BOUTIQUE

**GATEWAY PROJECT**

Broader Horizons continued from front page

Gateway.” The long, linear building would have an unobstructed floor plate and mediate between the busy nature of Santa Monica Boulevard and the pedestrian-oriented Little Santa Monica Boulevard.

Broad, recently in the news for bailing out the ailing Los Angeles County Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) to the tune of $15 million, only just cut the ribbon on the $56 million Renzo Piano-designed Broad Contemporary Art Museum at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—also on Wilshire Boulevard—last year. Gensler was executive architect for that project and the firm said it would be happy to be considered for the new museum. The Broad Foundation could not be reached for further comment on the project.

Send tips, gossip, and tasteful billboards to awalker@archpaper.com

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Jovan Haskovic
LA CONSERVANCY RELEASES PRESERVATION REPORT CARD

A-LISTERS

The Los Angeles Conservancy has released its 2008 Preservation Report Card, evaluating the preservation efforts of all local governments within the 9.9 million square miles of Los Angeles County. In the report, the Conservancy identifies an honor roll of seven cities that earned “A” grades, eight surprising “Notable Improvements,” and a discouraging 32 cities considered “Preservation Truants.”

Among the “A”-listers was Los Angeles, which established an Office of Historic Resources in 2006 and boasts the state’s second largest Mills Act program, allowing jurisdictions to enter into contracts with owners providing lower taxes in return for preservation. The city has also embarked on its first historic resources survey, the largest project ever undertaken by a single municipality, covering over 800,000 parcels. Another “A” went to Long Beach, which has 130 designated landmarks, longstanding preservation programs, and a preservation ordinance that’s now being strengthened. Other top marks went to Pasadena, South Pasadena, Santa Monica, West Hollywood, and Whittier.

Among the “Most Improved” were cities like West Covina, Calabasas, San Fernando, and Huntington Park, which before 2006 had no historic protections whatsoever, but has now adopted an historic preservation ordinance for designating significant public or semi-public interior spaces and signage. Michael Buhrer, director of advocacy for the Conservancy, calls the city a “poster child for the positive effects of our first Report Card.”

Less impressive was the high number of “Preservation Truants,” 32 cities with no legal protections for historic resources. Those include Downey, where legendary Goggle-style coffee shop Joe’s was torn down last year. The good news: the city has committed $900,000 to insure that the shop is accurately reconstructed and is discussing a preservation program next year.

Other cities on the “Truants” list include: Agoura Hills, Arcadia, Bell, Bellflower, Bradbury, Carson, Cerritos, Compton, Diamond Bar, El Monte, Hawaiian Gardens, Hawthorne, Hidden Hills, City of Industry, La Habra Heights, La Mirada, Lakewood, Lomita, Lynwood, Maywood, Monterey Park, Palos Verdes Estates, Paramount, Palos Verdes, Rolling Hills, Rosemead, Santa Fe Springs, Temple City, Walnut, and Westlake Village.

Yet despite these downers, Buhrer was pleased with the findings overall: “Certainly things are better since 2003. Over a dozen cities have improved their ratings, and adding cautiously, “There’s a lot of work left to do.” The full Report Card can be downloaded at www.laconservancy.org.

MICHELE SCHULTZ
Elegance is expressed in the purest forms.
planned exhibitions, as well as continuing work on three
Brooke Hodge said she is an architecture and design curator at MOCA's architecture firm in Berlin. Another bright spot for architecture and design is at the Getty Research Institute in LA, which recently announced the formation of a design and architecture department. Headed by Wim de Wit and associate curator Christopher James Alexander, the department includes the Getty's impressive holdings like Julius Shulman's archives and the papers of architects and critics like John Lautner, Pierre Koenig, Ray Kappe, Daniel Libeskind, Philip Johnson, and Reyner Banham, and unique acquisitions like the Bauhaus Papers and archives of the International Design Conference at Aspen. The first exhibition planned under de Wit's tenure will unite many of these: a survey of California architecture from 1940-1990, tentatively planned for 2013 or 2014.

De Wit will also launch a consortium for architects to share best practices, including practical information about the economy. “These will be to meet and learn more about each other’s works and see how we can help each other,” he said. De Wit is looking forward to more collaborations like the symposium organized in conjunction with the Hammer Museum’s John Lautner show last fall. While museums are busy saving themselves, chances are there will be less outreach to rescue endangered mid-century modern houses. A few years ago Michael Govan, then newly named director of LACMA, banded about an interest in acquiring some mid-century architecture to help preserve it. A groundbreaking move. While LACMA has yet to deliver on such a promise, hope may lie in the strength and agility of smaller institutions: The LA-based MAK Center just added a third house to its roster, the Fitzpatrick-Lauder House, designed by R.M. Schindler.

I think this time will allow us to be more thoughtful and discriminating,” he said, noting that he is now on the lookout for big-ticket pieces at a discount. For spring, Urbach has scheduled the first solo exhibition of J. Mayer H., an architecture firm in Berlin.

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California Science Center Phase II

 Constructed from a BIM model created by Morley, the 170,000 sf Phase II Expansion of the California Science Center will feature science museum exhibits, administrative office space and back-of-house support spaces. The exhibits include living habitats, interactive museum elements and the World of Ecology, featuring a 180,000 gallon kelp forest tank.

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SHANGHAI SURPRISE

Eighteen years ago, Shanghai’s financial zone was just farmland. Today, Pudong is bustling and newly dubbed the “Supertall District,” a designation soon to be reinforced by Gensler’s Shanghai Tower (above), a 2,073-foot building, the tallest in China and second tallest in the world.

Some might think that with the global economic downturn in full effect, it is a poor time to begin construction on such a project, which broke ground on November 29. But firm founder and chairman Arthur Gensler disagrees. “By 2014, when the building is done, the economy should be really booming,” he said. “All those big international firms that are pulling back right now will be looking for space and making deals in two or three years; they’ll be looking to expand into China again.” Also working in Gensler’s favor are the falling costs of materials—most notably steel—which may result in that rarest of architectural feats: a project that comes in under budget, by as much as 30 percent according to Gensler.

Gensler beat out four international offices and five Chinese architecture institutes with a spiraling glass office tower whose startling transparency sets a new precedent for Shanghai. The building’s 120-degree twisting form was derived from wind tunnel tests, with the resulting optimized enclosure reducing wind loads by 20 percent. But the spiraling envelope is only the outer layer of a double-skinned building. An inner skin encloses nine stacked cylindrical towers with eight atria dividing the Shanghai Tower vertically. These “sky gardens” were derived from a building code requirement for areas of refuge that expanded to provide green space and commercial services, and to accommodate HVAC systems. Along with their local partner, the Architectural Design and Research Institute of Tongji University, Gensler hopes to achieve certification from both the China Green Building Council and the U.S. Green Building Council. Wind turbines will generate on-site power and a spiraling parapet will capture rainwater for reuse within the building. A multi-level retail podium will mitigate the building’s scale at ground level, standing in stark contrast to the heavy, bomb-shielding bases of neighboring high rises.

The Shanghai Tower will complete a supertall triumvirate with Jin Mao Tower and Shanghai World Financial Center. Gensler gave the trio a name: “The past, the present, and the future.” JINNY STAMP
Clive Wilkinson Architects have specialized in transforming industrial lofts into exuberant workspaces, but to house himself, Wilkinson sought what he called “a neutral studio feel.”

Initially, he planned to convert a trio of West Hollywood rental units into condos that would generate income. After that project stalled, he was offered a triangular-shaped double lot at a bargain price across Melrose Avenue from the Pacific Design Center, and decided to do something ambitious. Yet though the house came out at 3,500 square feet, it’s almost hidden from the leafy side street, and has a rural sense of seclusion from within.

Wilkinson tore down two decrepit bungalows to clear the site and designed a pale-toned stucco house that is outwardly plain and set back behind a forecourt planted with olive trees. A high blank wall extends along the north side, shutting out the commercial properties on Melrose and a tall building to the north, and reducing heat from the sun. On the other side of the wall, thanks to large sliding glass doors, you can look all the way through the house from forecourt to rear garden, and the feeling of openness and transparency strengthens the fusion of interior and landscape. The house is naturally ventilated, from the sliders to the five electrically operated skylights. The projecting roof and good insulation reduce the need for heating, cooling, and artificial lighting. The unaffected simplicity of the structure recalls the Case Study era, but Wilkinson has infused it with a spirit of invention. He has rotated the house a few degrees to accommodate the angularity of the site. There’s an emphasis on diagonal axes in the linear sequence of rooms that open onto a pool to the south and a Japanese garden to the west. One enters through a corner of the low-ceilinged living room and continues on through the sliders to the pool, or from the opposite corner to the lofty dining area and open kitchen. Unenclosed stairs lead up to a studio and guest bedroom. At the far end of the house is the master bedroom, a free-standing tub, and a stepped dry garden reminiscent of the desert around Palm Springs where he likes to spend weekends.

Exposed wood ceiling studs and concrete floors give the interior the character of an industrial loft, but the raw surfaces are softened by plantings and eclectic furnishings. A free-form wood dining table was crafted by Wilkinson’s 88-year-old father. The palette is monochromatic, except for two elements from recent jobs: vibrant green plastic curtains, laser-cut in a leaf pattern, from the JWT offices in Manhattan, and honeycomb storage units in golden yellow acrylic, left over from the Children’s Place in Pasadena.

MICHAEL WEBB

Robbie Ferris loves InsulBloc

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Sculpture: Goya, Thomas H. Sayre, N.C. Museum of Art

*To hear more from Robbie Ferris visit www.insulstar.com/rferrisAN

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“Do Real Planning” position. Woo also cited the commission’s mission from a “passive, quasi-judicial role” into a proactive, policy-making body as exemplified by the commission’s revisions to the city general plan’s housing element. “We set higher targets for more housing [despite] opposition from some business groups that thought we were doing too much,” he said. “But the city council approved our version.” Woo added that Usher discovered and leveraged each commissioner’s specialty, that her ability to work collaboratively fostered votes that were unanimous, and that her skills as an attorney will be missed.

Few had thought Usher would survive the controversy last March surrounding her open letter of opposition to the city’s enactment of SB 1818, the affordable housing density bonus. Usher objected not only to the ordinance, but also to the fact that the city had enacted it before the planning commission had an opportunity to review it. She rapidly deployed via the internet an open letter in which she laid out a precise legal blueprint for the ordinance’s legal deficiencies, and encouraged neighborhoods to sue over what she believed to be a usurpation of neighborhood authority, despite her often-expressed support of smart growth.

Her resignation letter, which ran four pages, was full of such contradictions. While lauding LA Live, which many in the architectural community view as an inward-facing island, she advocated neighborhood-centered planning. Divided into seven categories, the letter recommended, among other things, providing mixed-income housing, enacting urban design guidelines and street standards, and updating the city’s environmental mitigations.

In regards to density, she suggested that the city build vertically, but not in a precipitous fashion. “Please reject any proposed update that relies on the careless, sprawl-inducing approach of adding density at every rapid bus stop; this would be unnecessarily hostile to many of our appropriately low-rise residential neighborhoods that also reside along our long, multi-faceted corridors,” the letter said. At the time of Usher’s resignation, she said she had not yet secured her next position. 

LA’S LOSS continued from front page colleagues of Usher did not break ranks with her official explanation, despite widespread rumors to the contrary.

Usher told AN, “I have pushed my message and my agenda, and I have made progress.” But, she said, “there is a time and a place for every leader. Sometimes [it requires] a new leader to push the message to a new level.”

Usher had served as the commission’s chair since 2005, when she was appointed by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, but her participation in Los Angeles politics reaches back to Mayor Tom Bradley, whom she served as an in-house attorney. While initially focusing foremost on pragmatism and compromise, Usher rapidly became an advocate of sound planning policies and what she called “elegant density.”

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Her departure was seen as the loss of an advocate on issues ranging from a billboard moratorium to thoughtfully unwanted development. Neighborhood groups to protect communities against Her resignation letter, which ran four pages, was full of such contradictions. While lauding LA Live, which many in the architectural community view as an inward-facing island, she advocated neighborhood-centered planning. Divided into seven categories, the letter recommended, among other things, providing mixed-income housing, enacting urban design guidelines and street standards, and updating the city’s environmental mitigations.

In regards to density, she suggested that the city build vertically, but not in a precipitous fashion. “Please reject any proposed update that relies on the careless, sprawl-inducing approach of adding density at every rapid bus stop; this would be unnecessarily hostile to many of our appropriately low-rise residential neighborhoods that also reside along our long, multi-faceted corridors,” the letter said. At the time of Usher’s resignation, she said she had not yet secured her next position. 

LA’S LOSS continued from front page colleagues of Usher did not break ranks with her official explanation, despite widespread rumors to the contrary.

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Using the concept of reduce, reuse, recycle, Israeli-born products designer Liora Manné has created the Kobu Collection of Textiles. Produced by her own patented Lamontage process, in which acrylic fibers are layered and then interlocked by needle-punching to create custom colors, Manné designed a collection of textiles that are both sheer and opaque and can be used for fabrics, screens, shades, wall coverings, or floor coverings. Made from both acrylic and recycled fibers, Kobu Circles is available in natural and charcoal shades and comes in sizes as wide as 17 feet by 8 inches and as long as needed. www.lioramanne.com

Retro-amoeboid without looking old hat, these cellular compositions are the latest from Chilewich’s line of hospitality products. Developed and designed by Sandy Chilewich, Dots embodies the look of fine linen in a modern, durable, and easy-to-clean vinyl textile. Made in the United States from an outmoded industrial process using pressed vinyl, this product can be used as a tablemat or runner for both commercial and residential applications. Available in 14-by-19-inch and 14-by-72-inch rectangular sizes and a variety of colors—black, citron, grass, smoke, and white—Dots liven up any room with its organic print and energy-efficient material. www.chilewich.com

New York-based Maharam brings quality design and a clean aesthetic to all their products. Mechanism, one of Maharam Design Studio’s latest textile collections designed in-house, uses a technical grid pattern to create a futuristic feel. Using a filament yarn with a metallic sheen, the fabric is knit in a repeating rectangular pattern. Made of 100 percent polyester, Mechanism is available in a variety of colors and sizes. www.maharam.com

KnollTextiles’ January 2009 collection, designed by Suzanne Tick and named The State of Matter, comprises a range of upholstery, panels, drapery, and wall coverings made from a variety of polyester fibers, some containing recycled postindustrial or post-consumer content. Air Rights, a drapery fabric made from 100 percent polyester, is organized around a grid system composed of octagonal and rectangular shapes. The semi-transparent fabric serves as both a privacy screen and as a viewport to adjacent settings. www.knolltextiles.com

 Appropriately named, Carnegie’s most recent upholstery collection, Night Sky, combines bold colors and celestial designs. Fabricated using Crypton Green, a high-performance fabric optimized for the environment with at least 50 percent recycled content, Night Sky is as sustainable as it is aesthetically pleasing. Designed by in-house creative vice-president Mary Holt, Night Sky is available in seven patterns and 58 colors, including Eclipse and Pebble (pictured). www.carnegiefabrics.com

As the newest additions to Unika Vaev’s Archive Collection, the Hoffmann Collection is comprised of three different historic Josef Hoffmann prints: Bijou, Linien, and Windrad. Developing the patterns and the repetition of forms for which the Austrian architect was well known, the patterns create classic, elegant, and luxurious designs that still look modern. Designed in 1906, Windrad, or “Windmill” in German, is built upon square elements. Made up of 52 percent viscose, 46 percent cotton, and 2 percent polyester, Windrad is available in a variety of colors, including White Noise and Black Pixel, which pay tribute to Hoffmann’s interest in black and white within his patterns. www.unikavaev.com.

When reviving a Joseph Hoffmann print or producing a high-performance fabric, the most dynamic new textiles play off the multiplication of cellular shapes.
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Checking In

Despite a national downturn in hotel construction, California is still riding a catch-up wave of new projects. By Alissa Walker
A slew of new hotels have debuted in California over the last year, riding what will likely be the last big wave of development for some time due to a slowing economy and dismal travel forecasts. They're the lucky ones: The results from the November 2008 STR/TWR/Dodge Construction Pipeline show that 91,219 hotel rooms nationally were abandoned in various stages of development, from preplanning to in-construction. That's a 75 percent increase in such abandonments since 2007. Other data from the Pipeline also point to a slowdown: Through November 2008, 1,569 hotels nationally were in construction, down from November 2007, when there were 1,609 hotels in construction.

In California, most new properties were a long-time-coming response to hotel room deficits in many tourist-heavy areas. In Beverly Hills, for example, a luxury hotel had not been built from the ground up since the early 1990s, while in San Francisco, the 32-story InterContinental is the largest hotel to open in the city in two decades. Two major California cities saw massive and much-needed room additions adjacent to their convention centers: the 420-room Hard Rock Hotel in San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, and the aforementioned 550-room InterContinental San Francisco, located near the Moscone Center in SOMA. (Los Angeles will have to wait until 2010 for its 54-story Ritz Carlton, part of the downtown development LA Live.) Across the U.S., this seems to be the case as well: The country has seen an exceptionally slow growth of only five percent in new rooms since 2001, according to the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

This cautious expansion led to an age of conservative design for California hotels. Even the most anxiously anticipated debut in the state, the SLS Hotel—the first venture into the hotel niche from nightlife wunderkinds SBE Entertainment (famous for their Philippe Starck-designed LA bars and restaurants like Katsuya, S Bar, and XIV)—went for wit and whimsy rather than over-the-top, cutting-edge design. It’s a huge departure from the sleek, cold modernism of the recent past—think the Standard or Mondrian of the late 1990s.

“Instead of a very sparse, modern design, the approach we took is multi-layered in color and texture and decor and accessories,” said Theresa Fatino, chief creative officer for SBE. “Guests can come back over and over and feel that same sense of discovery, these feelings of rejuvenation and delight and wonderment and surprise.” This sensation—that they’ll discover another Starck design pun, or find a new favorite dish on José Andrés’ menu—aims at bestowing upon guests a feeling of belonging to some perpetual in-crowd.

While the boutique concept is alive and well—Thompson Beverly Hills and London West Hollywood both nod aesthetically to their New York predecessors—these properties have seen the same style evolution, towards warm, sumptuous luxury and a sprinkling of nostalgia. “In the LA area, there’s a trend of capturing the glamour of old Hollywood and incorporating it into a design relevant to today’s lifestyle,” said Bryan Oakes of Gensler, project architect for the Hotel Palomar in the Westwood neighborhood of LA. The Montage Beverly Hills is modeled after the Mediterranean-influenced estates that sprang up in the city during the Golden Age of Hollywood, while Hotel Palomar and the London West Hollywood reference the same period with dramatic, sparkly interiors and Hollywood-referencing art. The Thompson Beverly Hills indulges a noire-ish theme, with deep, dark interiors that are signature of the designer Dodd Mitchell. Here, black leather upholstery, black lacquered wall panels, and glossy black wood floors convey Chinatown chic.

California continues to capitalize on the renovation of its older hotels by elevating former discount motel-like properties to luxury status, said Oakes. “One of the successes of Palomar is that we took a dated 1970s building, originally built as a Holiday Inn, and elevated it to a chic four-star hotel.” This seemed to work best for new boutique operations like the Thompson Beverly Hills, which inhabits a crisp white modernist box that was once a 1960s Best Western, and the London West Hollywood, a
revitalization of a tired, nondescript Wyndham Bel-Age. For the green-aspirational, a renovation could also be spun as a huge sustainable selling point: The Good Hotel in San Francisco combined two aging hotels into one eco-friendly property, complete with room appointments made from reclaimed materials and the option to contribute to a carbon offset program upon check-in.

While the hotel pool has traditionally been the place for designers to show off, a growing emphasis is focused on creative public spaces that are twists on the hotel bar. Whether these are seamlessly melded indoor/outdoor lounges or multi-functional lobbies, designers are giving guests more reasons to come out of their rooms and hang out. “Trends ebb and flow, but I think that one area that should always be emphasized is that of the social gathering space,” said David Rockwell of the Rockwell Group, who calls for public spaces that are “open, transformable, and comfortable.” He outfitted the first W’s for the Starwood chain and designed the Aloft (scheduled to roll out 500 locations worldwide over the next five years) with three major areas that encourage congregation and socialization: a communal lobby area with gaming and pool tables, the wxyz bar, and a 24-hour snack bar. The Bazaar at the SLS Hotel is broaching yet another approach: a warren of spaces blending bar, lounge, restaurant, and boutique for design retailer Moss, allowing guests to nibble and sip (and shop) in a variety of environments throughout an evening.

One trend perfectly timed with the sagging economy is that of the discount design chain, which has swept into Southern California with the opening of two new ventures: Andaz is Hyatt’s first design hotel, and Starwood’s Aloft designed to deliver W-level accommodations at Holiday Inn prices. “One major trend in the last few years has been the recognition that the everyday traveler also appreciates a high level of design,” said Rockwell. (Aloft’s first California location is in Rancho Cucamonga.) “We transformed this type of otherwise nondescript hotel into a chic oasis by using materials and amenities that are state-of-the-art, but simple and affordable.” The 257-room Andaz was designed by New York-based Janson Goldstein to give personality to the former “Riot House” Hyatt on the Sunset Strip in LA, with a variety of colorful appointments from local retailers that add high-end flavor to simple, modern rooms. (Of note to music fans: The hotel’s famous balconies, once launching pads for televisions and other after-party detritus during the hard rocking years, have been replaced with glassed-in sunrooms.)

According to trend-tracking site HotelNewsNow.com, 2009 national occupancy is only predicted to dip slightly, down 3.9 percent, but that’s where the discount design trend might win over guests: In a December 2008 survey of business travelers by Orbitz for Business and Business Traveler, only half of the respondents expected to travel less in 2009, but 79 percent of travelers said they have been pressured to cut costs. For those hitting the road, there still might be a few new places to write home about.

ALISSA WALKER

Clockwise from top left: Starwood’s Aloft concept designed by the Rockwell Group brings urban-inspired, loft-like accommodations—nine-foot ceilings, big windows, high-energy public spaces—to the discount chain world; The pool at the London West Hollywood, where the decor combines British wit (bulldogs, English topiaries) with Hollywood glamour (leather, fire pits) as designed by Collins Design Studios; Located at the entrance to San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, the Carrier Johnson-designed Hard Rock Hotel provides an aesthetic transition between the city’s all-business convention center and its fun-loving entertainment district; The meticulously-landscaped (by Nancy Goslee Power and Associates) Montage Beverly Hills is a Mediterranean-inspired oasis of courtyards and terraces meant to feel like rambling Hollywood estate in the heart of the city’s business district.
DIARY

SUNDAY 5
WITH THE KIDS
Family Art Stops / Enfoque Artístico
2:00 p.m.
The J. Paul Getty Center
1200 Getty Center Dr.,
Los Angeles
www.getty.edu

TUESDAY 3
TRADE SHOWS
SURFACES 2009
Through February 5
Santa Clara Convention Center,
Las Vegas
www.surfaces.com

FEBRUARY

WEDNESDAY 28
LECTURE
Susan Jackson, Betsy Saar, Carolyn Peter
Modern Art in Los Angeles: A New Architecture for a New Education
AIA San Francisco
Center for Architecture + Design
1450 Sutter St., San Francisco
www.aia.org

THURSDAY 29
SYMPOSIUM
Schools of the 21st Century: Architecture, Politics + Policies
10:00 a.m.
AIA San Francisco
130 Sutter St., San Francisco
www.aia.org

FILM
Utopia: A Living Documentary
7:30 p.m.
The Exploratorium
3601 Lyon St., San Francisco
www.exploratorium.edu

SATURDAY 31
LECTURE
Dr. Susan Lowery
Constructing and Reconstructing Our World
6:00 p.m.
Santa Barbara
Contemporary Art Forum 653 Paseo Nuevo,
Santa Barbara
www.sbcart.org

Margaret K. Hofer
The Women of Tiffany Studios
7:30 p.m.
Art Center College of Design
1700 Lida St., Pasadena
www.gamblehouse.org

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JANUARY
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1700 Lida St., Pasadena
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FEBRUARY

SUNDAY 8
EXHIBITION
World of Concrete
Through February 8
Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas
www.worldofconcrete.com

WEDNESDAY 14
EXHIBITION OPENING
Bob Dob
Francisco Rodriguez Maruca
Billy Shiva Fine Arts
7500 Washington Blvd., Culver City
www.billyshivafinearts.com

EVENT
Compostmodern 09
8:30 a.m.
Harbor Theatre
401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco
www.compostmodern.org

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SUNDAY 15
LECTURE
Dewayne Crumpler, Matthew Thomas
Spirituality + Abstraction: A Dialogue Between Artists
2:00 p.m.
California African American Museum
900 State Dr., Los Angeles
www.caam-ca.gov

EXHIBITION OPENING
Dan Graham: Beyond Museum
260 South Grand Ave., Los Angeles
www.moca.org

EVENT
Free 8 Tours
Through February 17
Palm Springs Art Museum
101 Museum Dr., Palm Springs
www.psmuseum.org

THURSDAY 17
EXHIBITION OPENING
La Roldana’s Saint Girès: The Making of a Polychrome Sculpture
The J. Paul Getty Center
1200 Getty Center Dr., Los Angeles
www.getty.edu

FILM
Architects Herzog & De Meuron: Alchemy of Building
6:00 p.m.
Palm Springs Art Museum
101 Museum Dr., Palm Springs
www.psmuseum.org

CONFERENCE
The Center Summit 2009: Expanding the Vision of Sustainability
10:00 a.m.
Pasadena Convention Center
300 East Green St., Pasadena
www.centersummit.org

THURSDAY 24
EXHIBITION OPENING
German and Central European Manuscript Illumination
The J. Paul Getty Center
1200 Getty Center Dr., Los Angeles
www.getty.edu

WEDNESDAY 25
CONFERENCE
CAA 2009 Annual Conference
Through February 28
San Francisco
Convention Center
1201 South Figueroa St., Los Angeles
www.collegeart.org

EXHIBITION OPENINGS
Gala: A Hundred or So Stars
Visible to the Naked Eye
Taking Refuge: Buddhist Art
from the Land of White Clouds
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
1265 Durant Ave., Berkeley
www.bamfpla.berkeley.edu

SUNDAY 22
EXHIBITION OPENINGS
Continental Rifts
Contemporary Time-Based Works of African Transformations: Recent Contemporary African Acquisitions
Fowler Museum of Art
308 Charles East Young Dr., Los Angeles
www.fowler.ucla.edu

MARIO GARCIA TORRES
MATRIX 227
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
2625 Durant Ave., Berkeley
www.bamfpla.berkeley.edu

WITH THE KIDS
Drop-In Art-Making: Drafting and Drawing
10:00 a.m.
Contemporary Jewish Museum
736 Mission St., San Francisco
www.thejcm.org

MONDAY 23
LECTURE
Sally Singer
Constituent Consumption: Sustainability and the Future of Luxury
7:00 p.m.
The Hammer Museum
10899 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles
www.hammer.ucla.edu

TUESDAY 24
EXHIBITION OPENING
De Meuron: Architects Herzog & De Meuron
10899 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles
www.hammer.ucla.edu

EXHIBITION OPENINGS
The State of Affairs:
Architecture + Design
Center for Architecture + Design
130 Sutter Street, San Francisco
www.aia.org

SCHOOL BUILDINGS – THE STATE OF AFFAIRS:
A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW EDUCATION
AIA San Francisco
150 Sutter Street, San Francisco
Through March 27
While good architecture is not always synonymous with good education, the designs on view at the AIA San Francisco Center for Architecture + Design Gallery demonstrate the powerful role the built environment plays in students’ ability to learn. Based on the original exhibition presented in Zurich in 2004, the show explores the changing needs of educational facilities and ways in which architecture has adapted to new pedagogical demands. With teachers requiring more flexible spaces—not only class-rooms but also community halls, new-media labs, and athletic venues—architects have made a welcome break with the dark warrens of the past. Once airless hallways have given way to light-filled spaces full of riotous color and new materials that convey both serenity and joy. In the process, educators are finding that design can have a surprising impact on students’ social and emotional well-being. In an era of shrinking municipal budgets, the 31 recent projects in this show—from Switzerland, Austria, Finland, Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands (including Utah’s 2005 Voom School by Franchen & Schall Architects, above)—also suggest how schools can fit into mixed-use projects to build not only better lives for students but healthier neighborhoods for all.

IMAGE
COURTESY J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

DIALOGUE AMONG GIANTS:
CARLTON WATKINS AND THE RISE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN CALIFORNIA
The J. Paul Getty Center
1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles
Through March 1
From California’s scenic mountains and coastlines to its burgeoning cities, Dialogue Among Giants captures a pictorial history of the state in the 19th century through photographer Carlton Watkins’ camera lens. Best known for his photographs of San Francisco and Yosemite, the San Francisco–based Watkins also produced a rich body of work along the Pacific Coast and in Southern California, including pictures of the Columbia River in Oregon—such as The Dalles, Extremes of High and Low Water, 92 Feet, Columbia River, Oregon (circa 1883, above)—California’s 19th-century missions, and silver mines in Nevada. Thematically arranged, the show examines Watkins’ previously unknown early career as a daguerreotypist, enamored by California’s Gold Rush era, and follows his switch to a mammoth-plate camera in the 1860s that allowed him to take stunning images on 18 by 22-inch glass negatives. The exhibit also discusses contemporaries such as Eadweard Muybridge and Charles L. W. Muybridge, who went on to create Yosemite and left behind a fascinating visual dialogue, as the various photographers re-created one another’s views. More than 150 pictures are presented in this superb survey of Watkins’ career, which was sadly truncated when San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed his negatives.
More Mobile is the sequel to Jennifer Siegal’s earlier collection of inventive and whimsical proposals from around the world, Mobile: the Art of Portable Architecture. “Anything you can’t fold up and take with you is a blight on the environment and an insult to one’s liberty,” was her mantra then, and still is. As founder of the Venice-based Office of Mobile Design, she is both polemicist and practitioner, and her latest projects are included alongside those she has assembled by an international cast of other architects in this new, seductive pocket book. The timing couldn’t be better for a collection of ingenious experiments. Waves of foreclosures, a near-Depression, and an enlightened new administration committed to fresh approaches can provide an opportunity unmatched since the critical housing shortage of the mid-1940s. Then, Buckminster Fuller and others proposed that factories churning out tanks and bombers could be retooled to manufacture habitats. Special interests—the unholy trinity of builders, unions, and loan officers—snuffed out this and other bright ideas for rational construction. The Dymanox house was forgotten; Levittown triumphed. Now, here’s a second chance. Mobility is one aspect of pre-fabrication—as in the Airstream trailer—and it can be combined with sustainability to create a new paradigm for human settlement. Siegal puts a fresh spin on that classic in Storehouse, a modular titanium-and-fabric display unit with a roll-out molded plastic base that doubles as seating. Commissioned for the National Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt, it’s designed for mass production. Still more adventurous is Siegal’s Hydra 21, an emergency shelter that inflates on contact with the sea and expands to resemble a giant jellyfish. When the oceans start to rise, we may all be living this way, or food horizontally and sleeping on the equivalent of a waterbed. Studio Dre Wapenaar in Rotterdam has fabricated a lightweight reading kiosk that looks like an up-ended lampshade, and teardrop-shaped tents for tree-huggers that can be suspended on high branches, out of reach of predatory animals. Elsewhere, extruded plastic capsules alternate with habitable vehicles. One could imagine a collection of these structures touring the country on a flatbed truck to spread the message.

Few of the schemes shown here are likely to furnish literal solutions, but their diversity and audacity should inspire every architect and plant seeds for new growth. The houses and suburbs most Americans live in are as outmoded and wasteful as a Cadillac El Dorado: Siegal is mapping a path to the future.
Then shows that the building material, despite perceptions of its only being used by and for the poor, is popular with every economic and social class in the world. In China, for example, 100 million people live in earthen homes, as does 15 percent of the rural population in France. Even Ronald Reagan, at Rancho del Cielo, and Chairman Mao lived in mud brick buildings. Rael investigates works of architecture that employ “the ancient technology of earth” but are informed by issues of contemporary society. He begins with the role of earthen architecture in the theories of Vitruvius, Semper, Loos, and Speer, and with the French builder François Cointeraux, whose “new way of thinking about rammed-earth architecture” influenced both Boullé and Ledoux. Le Corbusier is featured for his system of rammed-earth and compressed-earth blocks at the Murondin project, where the mechanical services in these mud-huts were so sophisticated they impressed even Reyner Banham.

Rael also discusses Egyptian Hassan Fathy on modern perceptions of earthen structures, and how rammed-earth architecture influenced the non-earthen structures of early modernist architects Antoni Gaudi, Rudolf Schindler, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Contemporaneous earthen projects (47 of them) are divided into four categories: structures of rammed earth, mud brick, compressed-earth block, and molded-earth projects. We find the usual array of southwest adobe McMansions, wineries, modern residences using earthen materials by Will Bruder, Marwan Al-Sayed, and Antoine Predock, and a surprising number of projects in far-northern climates like Germany and Sweden. But the best projects are the low-cost ones, like a modular prototype for a peat bog house by the Irish architects N3, and a spectacular sculpture mimicking the circular Chilean mud ovens used to make charcoal by traditional charcoal-makers. Adobe Alliance’s Simone Swan, who learned her trade from Fathy, keeps his philosophy of earthen construction alive with self-built vaulted mud structures near Presidio, Texas. 

Earth Architecture is a satirical review of the TVA show at MoMA in 1941, Lewis Mumford asserted that in the TVA, America had produced “modern architecture at its mightiest and best.” Unfortunately, the public program produced “modern architecture at its mightiest and best.” Unfortunately, allied attempts in the late 1930s to create an indigenous craft industry in the model town of Norris was not so successful, because a streamlined aesthetic for domestic products such as teapots and furniture was not popular among rural homemakers. A selection of recent color photographs by Richard Barnes captures the variety of monumental structures and simple recreational settings throughout the project. His photo essay argues that the dramatic interventions of the TVA into the natural landscape have aged well and coexist comfortably now with clusters of houseboats, hikers, and campgrounds. One of the book’s primary faults is its lack of an index. But each chapter contains numerous endnotes that tie the essays to countless other references and make this a convincing historical survey. An appended chapter offers some helpful guidelines for an itinerary through the current facilities, including the tip that a number of powerhouses and observation decks are no longer open to the public, an apparent response to post-9/11 security concerns. As we look toward an uncertain future, the TVA deserves to be revisited.

Wilbur L. Woods is a Senior Planner at the Department of City Planning in New York.
A New Infrastructure: Innovative Transit Solutions for Los Angeles

An open ideas competition sponsored by SCIFI at SCI-Arc and The Architect’s Newspaper

Entries due March 13, 2009

Measure R, a half cent sales tax in Los Angeles County, will provide as much as $4.5 billion for transit-related projects across the city of Los Angeles over the next 30 years.

In response to this historic opportunity, the SCI-FI Future Initiative program at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) and The Architect’s Newspaper are sponsoring an open ideas competition for architects, engineers, urban planners and students to propose new plans for LA County’s transit infrastructure.

The competition jury will include Thom Mayne, Principal and Founder of Morphosis Architects; Professor, UCLA; Gail Goldberg, Director of Planning, City of Los Angeles; Neil M. Denari, Principal of Neil M. Denari Architects; Professor, UCLA; Cecilia V. Estolano, CEO of Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles; and Eric Owen Moss, Director, SCI-Arc; Principal of Eric Owen Moss Architects as well as transit engineers from LA Metro, developers, and local civic leaders.

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KINETIC MAN ON THE MOVE

Seattle-based architect Tom Kundig had what he would call a “really terrific 2008.” In May he was awarded the Architecture Design Award for the Cooper-Hewitt’s 2008 National Design Awards, and last fall the AIA named his firm, Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen, Firm of the Year. Born in California but of mountain-climbing Swiss descent, Kundig spent his formative years in Canada and Alaska, where he first worked as an architect, before turning to architecture at the University of Washington and becoming a partner at Olson Sundberg with Scott Allen in 2000. Kundig quickly became known for his use of natural, sustainable materials and his love for kinetic architecture—designing dynamic elements often powered by antiquated machinery but softened by nature. Kundig talked to AN about the secret to Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen’s longstanding partnership and why Seattle’s architecture might at last be entering a golden age.

THE ARCHITECT’S NEWSPAPER: Some people would say your Cooper-Hewitt win and the AIA Firm of the Year would mean Seattle is finally getting noticed. Do you guys see it that way?

TOM KUNDIG: In the past, I’ve thought that maybe it’s fair that the East Coast and California don’t recognize good stuff that is being done in other places. Now I don’t. I think sometimes work flowers out of an area, and regions get a little bit insecure about what’s being generated in their area. But there’s been work coming out of Arizona for a few years now that’s really been terrific. There’s work coming out of the Midwest that’s really terrific. I think there has been some great work that’s come out of Seattle, maybe it’s better right now, maybe it’s going to get even better. What about personally, how is your own work evolving?

I think one of the important issues every professional has to think about is how you continue to change and morph and still be true to the core of yourself. And I think that’s a full-time job. It’s a chore but I think people like Glenn Murcutt or Peter Zumthor or Herzog and De Meuron or Steven Holl—and there are others, many others—are able to achieve that recalibration and continue to be inventive. That’s a challenge.

You’re known for your residential work. Are you shifting your focus from that?

I’m working on some things that are different in scale, certainly, from the past. Some urban work, some highrise and midrise that, depending on the economy, might be built. There’s one, Sun Valley Center for the Arts, which is looking for funding right now. It’s really my first small community center; it’s a kunsthalle, basically. You’ve become well known for using simple, affordable materials. In fact, you once described something as “dirt cheap,” but in a good way! Maybe it’s just something that’s important to me, being frugal and efficient by nature. There’s the types of materials, first of all. Leaving them as-is makes them beautiful as-is. And it’s humble, it’s modest, and it’s not indulgent. You basically take a material and let it be what it wants to be. That seems awfully efficient, and yes, dirt cheap!

You’re also famous for your experiments with kinetic architecture. How did this become a signature part of your work?

When I was a kid I grew up in a mining-logging-farming area, and of course there was a lot of machinery, a lot of practically-designed—and in their own way, beautiful—machinery. And when I lived in Alaska, I would go way out in the country, hiking and mountain climbing, and I would see these pieces of machinery way back there, powered by water coming off the side of a mountain or by wind. The guys who designed these were geniuses! I think as I was developing an architectural voice, I realized there was something similar about building that I found fascinating: that buildings could be changed by people using them. You can literally move walls or furniture and move it on a scale that reminds you that in fact you’re capable—with geometry and physics—of moving these things.

How did you join Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen?

Jim Olson founded his firm in 1966, and when I came down from Alaska in 1986, of course I knew the old firm, and this new firm that was reconfiguring itself [with Rick Sundberg]. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do because I had my own firm in Alaska and I had started to feel a little more personal about my work. So I joined the firm in 1986 as a test to see if I could work with a group of people and it felt really comfortable. It wasn’t so much that my voice was exactly like their voice, but if you did good work, it was a firm that skeptically but supportively let you use your own voice and develop it.

What’s happening in Seattle architecture that’s exciting?

Hopefully, some of the stuff we’re doing right now. I’ve got some projects I’m excited about, but they’re not built yet. I think there’s some good work going on, but nothing big and splashy like the Olympic Sculpture Park and the Seattle Public Library. Now, those were both out-of-city architects; if we can do something for our own city on that scale, that would be great. The Olympic Sculpture Park would’ve been a dream commission. That integration of the landscape and art in an urban setting—that would have been really interesting to me. Especially in a civic setting, you can’t get much better than that! There are some waterfront projects, too, it’s basically the removal of our viaduct, our Embarcadero, and that could have some interesting possibilities. And of course, Obama’s new infrastructural directive, that could lead to interesting stuff, because during our massive infrastructural building in the 30s, boy, there were some wonderful things being done, from dams to powerhouses to bridges.
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