Better Living

After several flush years, supportive housing for LA’s homeless faces an uncertain future. But that hasn’t stopped many architects from seeking such publicly funded projects to survive the economic downturn.

At the height of the economic boom in 2005 and 2006, a number of projects for homeless housing, often involving top architecture firms, secured funding. Michael Maltzan completed the

continued on page 9

SILVER SPUR

For 50 years, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) has been advocating sound planning through investigating local decisions, making counterproposals, and conducting community outreach. As of May 28, it will finally have a welcoming space to match its community-oriented

continued on page 9

CROSSING THE LINE

Work on a century-old railroad right-of-way in Los Angeles is chugging right along. With Phase I of the Exposition Light Rail Transit Line well underway—and due for completion by the end of 2010—the line will follow an 8.6-mile route from downtown to Culver City. The University of Southern California’s station is nearly complete in Exposition Park. Pylons for an overpass are rising on either side of La Brea Avenue, tracks are welded in Culver City, and the line’s undulating sun-shield canopies should start shimmering above stations starting in May. Although beleaguered by community groups seeking changes, the Expo Line remains on track.

The $2-billion-plus project, which is managed by the Exposition Construction Authority (Expo, a state agency only partially funded by LA’s transit authority), was given a boost by Measure R. The half-cent county sales tax passed by voters last fall will provide needed funds during Phase II—expansion to Santa Monica—and has lent an overall sense of confidence to the project.

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There has been much talk about President Obama’s push to make electronic medical records standard in the United States. It’s a good idea that despite its upfront costs will increase efficiency and help save billions of dollars. But there is much more that needs to go electronic—and a good deal of it involves architecture and planning.

If you haven’t yet heard about “smart infrastructure,” you will soon. It encompasses digitally organized and controlled building guidelines, energy grids, transportation systems, and food distribution networks, among other infrastructure components. Companies like IBM, GE, Cisco, and Siemens are busy working on the technology behind such systems, and they’ve already proven effective, putting information within instant reach, streamlining bureaucratic processes, conserving resources, and improving coordination and transparency.

While the private sector has already made huge investments in smart systems, public agencies are way behind in taking notice, despite the fact that much of the technology has been developed in the United States and exported to governments elsewhere. IBM, for instance, has developed traffic-monitoring systems in places like Stockholm and London, while improving management for bus and train systems worldwide, and it is even working with food producers to limit the billions of dollars worth of food that is wasted every year. Yet very few American cities have adopted the obvious benefits of such technology.

Take one of the most egregious examples of our backwardness in this area: building permits. A look at the typical building department is a trip down memory lane, with disorganized sheaves of paper documents still dominating. Most of California’s building authorities are no exception, despite steps in the right direction. Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego, for example, offer online permitting, but only for simple permits like electrical and plumbing approvals. Anything requiring planning review is still done the old-fashioned way.

And most cities haven’t even gone that far, which is a waste, according to John Backman, executive director of ecitygov.net, an alliance of city and county governments in Washington State that provides online permitting to 16 cities and one county. They’ve issued 40,000 basic online permits so far, and their group hopes to unveil online review permitting by the end of this year (a more complicated, but very double task, he said). Backman notes that online permitting will save its constituents thousands of hours of time and thousands of dollars. Still, the biggest holdup for most cities is the cost of launching a new service, he said, adding that several municipalities might work together on a system and thus share the cost.

Meanwhile, there are other ways of going electronic. Many of New York City’s building agencies use Buildings Scan and Capture Application Networks (BSCAN), which enable online submittal and retrieval of construction-permit applications. Oregon was the first state to sponsor a statewide e-permitting program, which now extends to over 100 cities and counties. And Atlanta, Salt Lake City, Fort Myers, Florida, and Scottsdale, Arizona also allow online permit applications.

Some might argue that going electronic is a leap into the unknown, but that’s not the case. There is no good reason why most new infrastructure projects aren’t designed to be implemented in new ways. “If the problem is that few seem ready to part with the startup money necessary to install these systems, it’s time to wipe up. We’ve already learned the lessons of sustainable architecture—that those willing to make an initial investment now will be light years ahead in terms of saving money and time down the line. All aboard!” — SAM LUBELL

USHER’S REVENGE? continued from front page when awarding density bonuses (allowances to developers who include affordable hous-

ing in their residential projects). Former LA planning commissioner Jane Ellison Usher, who recently stepped down, was an outspoken opponent of the measure, which in some cases gave bonuses 300 percent greater than those mandated by SB 1818. The ruling prevents the city from approving projects with density bonuses that exceed state law.

The controversial 2005 ordinance has been the target of numerous lawsuits. One suit, filed in April 2008 by homeowners calling themselves The Environment and Housing Coalition Los Angeles, argued that the city acted improperly by approving an ordinance that increased density and height while reducing parking and open space—all with- out environmental review. Judge McKnew agreed that the city’s approval was without reasonable number of proposed developments into jeopardy.

What components have said the ordinance encourages affordable housing and limits sprawl, foes have long argued it was a giveaway to developers and speculators. They claim the new regulations would result in a net loss of affordable housing, as developers raze older apartment complexes to build profitable, market-priced condominiums with one or two affordable units.

In March 2008, Usher authored an email opposing the ordinance and inviting public action. In the now famous missive, Usher pointed to ordinance language that defined some projects seeking density bonuses as “ministerial,” thereby exempting them from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Usher noted that the ministerial designation was at odds with a Categorical Exclusion issued by the Planning Department, which stated that all projects filed in accordance with the ordinance be subject to CEQA review.

To no one’s surprise, Usher is pleased with the judge’s ruling, asserting that the bill had developers “licking their chops.” Will Wright, director of government and public affairs for the LA chapter of the AIA, believes the city’s intent was to cut through the “bureaucratic bog” and make it easier to bring projects to market, thereby increasing opportunities for low-to-moderate housing. Still, Wright sympathizes with those who feared the ordinance would destroy the character and scale of their communities, citing the “low levels of sophistication” that have plagued many residential developments. “Over the last 15 years or so, you’ve seen massive condo projects go up that have no character and no connectivity to the neighborhood—and this represents the monsters,” he said.

Counselor Ed Reyes, who chairs the council’s Planning and Land Use Management Committee, was unavailable for comment, as well as the representatives of the city’s planning department. While the City Council may appeal Judge McKnew’s ruling, Usher hopes they’ll instead redraft the ordinance in a manner that promotes smart growth over sprawl-inducing densification. “I think the city has to grab hold of its future growth patterns and look forward to the next 15 years or so,” he said. “We can’t be a bog” and make it easier to bring projects to market, thereby increasing opportunities for low-to-moderate housing. Still, Wright sympathizes with those who feared the ordinance would destroy the character and scale of their communities, citing the “low levels of sophistication” that have plagued many residential developments. “Over the last 15 years or so, you’ve seen massive condo projects go up that have no character and no connectivity to the neighborhood—and this represents the monsters,” he said.

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NEW DEAN ON THE BLOCK

On July 1, Jennifer Wolch, professor of geography and urban planning at USC, will become dean of the University of California, Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design (CED). The college encompasses Architecture, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning programs. Wolch, who received her Ph.D. at Princeton and has been at USC since 1979, was a founding director of the university’s Center for Sustainable Cities. She also worked to develop the City of Los Angeles’ strategic plan for its downtown, and she plans to use her social, political, and environmental expertise to help shape the college’s future plans. She noted a desire among students for coursework that dealt with sustainability and an ongoing need for faculty to influence planning and government policy through research, testimony, and participation in public forums. Students must involve themselves with grassroots organizations as well as with major architectural firms, she said. Wolch said that the college could take better advantage of Berkeley’s resources in fields like public health, engineering, energy resources, transportation systems, and material sciences. She also hoped to ramp up the school’s advanced technical facilities, with “a shop of the 21st century,” featuring new architectural fabrication tools, experimental materials, and more software related to architectural visualization, and GIS, and community planning. “These shouldn’t replace conventional tools and fundamental ideas, but they’re an important part of what contemporary practice is about,” she said. Wolch will be the college’s first female dean, and indicated that as many as five new professors could be coming on board in the next couple of years. She replaces Harrison Fraker, who stepped down last year.

SAM LUBELL
Elegance is expressed in the purest forms.
preservationists fight to save century plaza hotel
Midcentury Mess
It would seem that the work of Minoru Yamasaki can’t catch a break these days. The now-deceased pioneering modernist—he designed Seattle’s Arch, New York’s Twin Towers, and LA’s now all-but-doomed Century Plaza Hotel—is known less for being one of the 20th century’s staunch modernist architects and more for being the architect of the damned, the doomed, and the destroyed.

His midcentury-modern Century Plaza has been a recent flashpoint in the ongoing debate between development and preservation in LA. Though the hotel sat quietly unnoticed but heavily used for decades, things heated up last December when the 726-room hotel’s new owner, local investor Michael Rosenfeld (who bought the property with the D.E. Shaw Group), released this seemingly pro-preservation statement: “Properties like the Century Plaza Hotel are one-of-a-kind; they have lasting value in any economic environment. This is a rare opportunity to buy a jewel in my hometown.”

But just a year later, Rosenfeld announced plans to raze the hotel and replace it with a mixed-use development containing two 50-story Pei Cobb Freed & Partners-designed hotel/residential towers. At a cost of $2 billion, the more than five-acre site will hold 100,000 square feet of office space, a 240-room Five Star hotel (still to be operated by Hyatt), 130 luxury condos, and nearly 240-room five-star hotel (still to be operated by Hyatt), 130 luxury condos, and nearly 240-room five-star hotel (still to be operated by Hyatt). The developer must now submit plans to the Planning Department and initiate environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act, which will likely take 12 to 18 months to complete. The developer must now submit plans to the Planning Department and initiate environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act, which will likely take 12 to 18 months to complete.

connectivity and sustainable design.” Rosenfeld and Co. also touted the new development as very green. The project is expected to be LEED Silver certified, and will use environmentally “correct” construction materials, with some structures featuring “green” roofs. This was too much for local preservationists, who brought out their big guns in late April in a splashy, Hollywood-style press conference, held across the street from the Century Plaza in a screening room at talent agency CAA. In a surprise move, the Washington, D.C.-based National Trust for Historic Preservation announced that the hotel had been placed on their list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2009. Though inclusion on the list might seem merely a gesture, only six structures placed on the list in the last 22 years have been destroyed.

Unlike the buildings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, midcentury modern structures, especially those used for commercial purposes, have been a tougher sell in the preservation conversation. Modernist buildings can seem cold and unwelcoming, and have often seen little support from the public when threatened. The Welton Becket-designed office complex just down the road from the Century Plaza is headed for the chopping block this summer, with little fanfare and even less opposition. Perhaps the biggest irony of the situation: This year marks the 50th anniversary of Century City’s founding. Leo Marmol, of Marmol and Radziner Associates, whose remodel of Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann House in Palm Springs is among the storied acts of midcentury modern preservation, noted, “To make our cities more dense is a positive thing, and I support development. But Century City has seen a loss lately.” He added, “The question is, will they allow the continued destruction of the fabric of their history, or will they say enough is enough?”

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SPACE AT LAST
LA'S A+D MUSEUM LANDS ITS OWN SPACE AT LAST

HOME SWEET HOME
After years of nomadic existence, LA's A+D Museum is finally getting its own home, at 6032 Wilshire Boulevard, across the street from the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM) on Museum Row. The museum signed a six-year lease (with an additional five-year option) for its ground-floor space on April 17, and plans to occupy it in September. Since its founding to "celebrate and promote an awareness of architecture and design," the A+D has bounced around LA, occupying locations donated by philanthropists like developer Ira Yellin, who gave the museum its first facility in downtown LA's Bradbury Building in 2001. It then moved to Santa Monica (2003), to West Hollywood (2003–2005), and finally to its most recent location at 9800 Wilshire (2006–2009), a large space donated by developer Wayne Ratkovich.

The new venue is on the ground floor of a small midcentury office building, and will feature large storefront windows and bright, welcoming signage. Design work for the raw and minimalist space will be donated by both Richard Meier & Partners and Gensler and will encompass 4,800 square feet, including a 3,500-square-foot main gallery, plus space for offices, conference rooms, and project storage.

"We see this as our next big step," said A+D's president, the architect Stephen Kanner, who stressed the museum's desire to stay in the Museum Row area, near major institutions like the LA County Museum of Art, BCAM, and the California Craft & Folk Museum. "This will allow us to have a broader outreach and more shows because of the new, stable location," he said. Kanner added that the museum has been fundraising through top architects and designers in the city over the last nine months, and will announce several top donors at its fall fundraiser.

Over the years, the museum has hosted exhibitions about architects like Ray Kappe, and has put together thematic shows on emerging architects (New Blood: Next Gen), and design-savvy developers (Enlightened Development), and on the destruction and rebuilding of New Orleans (After The Flood). Future shows—roughly four per year, said Kanner—will split evenly between architecture and design. Exhibits might feature production design, commercial design, graphic design, and film-set design in addition to a variety of architecture-based shows.

Before construction begins, the A+D will host a pop-up exhibition in the new space from May 8 to 23 called Upcycling: Recuperating Past Lives, featuring art and design objects made from recycled materials.

Let Them Eat Art
The recession may be crippling institutions across the country, but the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is forging ahead. On May 10, SFMOMA opened a $24 million rooftop sculpture garden, which adds 14,400 square feet of exhibition space for newly acquired or rarely seen large-scale works. San Francisco–based Jensen Architects received the commission in a 2006 design competition, and construction took about a year. The garden’s debut follows another ambitious move: the museum’s April 2 announcement of a plan to double its exhibition space to accommodate its growing collections, exhibitions, and educational programming.

Located on the eighth floor of a parking garage, the garden space comprises a series of indoor/outdoor areas where patrons can mingle with works by Alexander Calder, Barnett Newman, and Louise Bourgeois, among others. It connects to the fifth floor of the museum’s main building through a 110-foot-long bridge that is something of a technical feat: a hanging walkway suspended by beams that are hidden above the ceiling. Entry is gained through an overlook space. With a glass wall framed by black-painted flashings and copings used elsewhere in the museum’s exterior, this 1,000-square-foot room acts as a transitional area, leading from enclosed exhibition space to a wide-open view of the two outdoor gardens that flank an enclosed pavilion and the South of Market skyline.

Jensen chose subtle materials. Walls of dark gray lava stone enclose the garden areas and pavilion. Concrete floors were chosen because they can be used to bolt down large works—such as Ellsworth Kelly’s 18-foot-tall slab of steel—and are easily repaired. Inside the 2,000-square-foot pavilion, Jensen used a traditional flooring material—narrow slats of tongue-and-groove European white oak—on one wall framing a Blue Bottle Coffee Bar.

On April 2, the museum announced the selection of Gensler’s San Francisco office to plan a future 50,000-square-foot addition and guide the reorganization of the museum’s collections, storage, and office facilities. The firm’s founder, Arthur Gensler, is vice chairman of SFMOMA’s board of trustees.

As proposed, the new addition will not alter the 3rd Street view of the now-iconic 1995 Mario Botta building, with its full-height central atrium and cylindrical turret. Rather, the wing will be located on a series of lots that back onto Natoma Street and bridge over a parking area on Hunt Street, a dead end. A new entrance will be added on Minna Street to improve access to the auditorium and better accommodate school groups. The expansion will also allow the museum to consolidate its offices, 60 percent of which are currently off-site.

Last summer, SFMOMA’s trustees endorsed an initial planning phase for the expansion, but then put fundraising on hold when the economy took a downturn in the fall. A spokesperson for the museum indicated that part of Gensler’s scope of work would be to determine a budget. A capital campaign and architectural selection will commence after the planning phase, which is expected to conclude over the next year.

The expansion comes at an unusual time, as museums all over the country struggle to raise money. But with the museum’s rapid growth since the opening of the Botta building, museum director Neal Benezra said now was the best time to act. “Continuing this planning is critical, since it will enable us to move forward quickly and confidently with a fundraising campaign once the nation regains its economic footing,” he said in a press release.
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When Austin Kelly, a partner at LA–based XTen Architecture, considered building a new home for a small family on a 30-by-40-foot lot in Hermosa Beach, most of his architect and contractor friends told him not to do it.

“People talk about this kind of building in Tokyo, not in LA,” noted Kelly. But he decided to ignore them, making the most out of every square inch to give the family the maximum amount of usable space.

“It was like designing a cabinet,” Kelly said. The solution was to locate most public spaces nearer to the corners, and also high up where there was a little more breathing room. After accounting for parking, circulation, and outdoor space, the size of the so-called Surfhouse was down to 22 feet wide and 26 feet deep.

The large, angular fissure in the top floor forms an expansive balcony that gives views to the ocean without sacrificing privacy or shade. This outdoor room extends inside to meet the top floor’s open kitchen and living room. A rooftop deck above provides an even better vantage point, where the roofs of this dense beach-side town spread out in all directions.

The rest of the 1,400-square-foot house consists of a vertical progression of rooms designed to minimize the amount of square footage dedicated to circulation and maximize living space. The entry floor includes a guest room and office in front and a garage in back. The second floor holds a master bedroom suite in front and a children’s bedroom that cantilevers over the garage below, enlarging interior space. Unlike its often ornate, faux-Spanish-villa neighbors, the compact three-story structure is monolithic: a single box, darkly clad in ship-lapped rough cedar that will wear over time. Its black exterior and irregularly placed windows prevent a viewer’s differentiating between individual floors. The color not only contrasts dramatically with residences nearby, but also with the house’s light, airy interiors, which feature white walls and bamboo floors.

While the Surfhouse went up, the owners, a couple with a young daughter, lived in a tiny summer cottage on the property. “They realized they didn’t need a lot of stuff,” said Kelly. “When they moved into a house that was 1,400 square feet, it felt like a palace.”

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Katerina Paragiotakis, Aikaterini, former designer at Olson Lewis Doli & Doktor Architects, Manchester, MA

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For too long, the architecture of most roadside gas stations—with a few notable exceptions from masters like Mies van der Rohe and Albert Frey—has been either purely practical or painfully kitschy. A pocket park next door, with its own curved elements, provides much-needed breathing room for the community.

But then the building gets bogged down in overly familiar references and forms. A ramp in back swoops up audaciously, appearing to lead drivers around to the canopy itself. It only wraps around to a ground level walkway. This is a letdown—perhaps a hint that not everything here finishes what it starts. The station’s large block lettering, meant to be contemporary, feels more imitative of 1960’s, not 2000’s, futuristic architecture. The curving pump stations and the V-prop columns around them are too noticeable where they could have deferred to the canopy, letting that element dominate and unify the bold thought. Even the canopy, upon closer inspection, seems a little too heavy to be revolutionary. Inside, bright, colored tiles echo a modernist diner, or modern mini-mart. This design is more effective (if less fun), and a reminder that architect-designed stations can improve a staple of the American landscape. But it could have swooped off our feet and really into the future. More to the point, this earnestly futuristic design implies the car is future, clearly not true (particularly not cars that only take regular gas, as they do here). Unlike the new “green” BP station not too far away, this United Oil station doesn’t provide any alternative fuels or make any contribution toward a new way of consuming and pumping gas. Perhaps that’s why much of the futuristic symbolism seems dated. Once gas stations were a beacon for our world’s possibilities. That time is long gone in a world burdened by traffic, fossil fuels, and dying car companies. Looking to the future now means looking somewhere entirely different.
STUDIO VISIT>
FREDERICK FISHER AND PARTNERS

In the post-Bilbao era, as pressure to torque form and space rises, California architect Fred Fisher continues to go his own way, dropping simple, quietly evocative spaces into sometimes challenging settings. Since 1980, when he founded the firm to focus on arts and residential work, Fisher has designed close to 70 galleries, studios, and museums. The artists’ work that his interiors “frame” (the term he employs), rather than his own machinations, have always taken center stage. “That lesson came very early,” he said, cultivated in his first studio commission for the artist Else Rady. His ethos was also fed in part by the light and space pieces of James Turrell and Robert Irwin, which focused more on internal than external orientations of the individual.

In several new public projects, including a completed museum and one on the boards, Fisher, who works out of a restored courtyard studio designed by A. Quincy Jones, extrapolates this low-key philosophy and uses design to foster small-d democracy, nurturing interaction with both users and site. His residential work for art patrons emphasizes understatement and economy of expression in the service of spatial experiences for the inhabitants. TIDBY ROTHMAN
measures as wealthier Westside residents. The Citizens’ Campaign focused their efforts on the Exposition Boulevard–Farmdale Avenue crossing, deemed too close to Dorsey High School: Students would have to cross the at-grade alignment. After a February ruling that deemed the crossing unsafe, Expo began work on a new proposal to include a pedestrian bridge and a likely permanent closing of Farmdale. An Environmental Impact Review will be available for public comment this summer, and major changes could delay the opening for a year.

On April 2, Expo announced the preferred alignment for the project’s Phase II to Santa Monica, exiting Culver City on the existing Exposition right-of-way through a corner of Cheviot Hills to the art complex at Bergamot Station, and continuing along Colorado Avenue in Santa Monica, ending just blocks from the Pacific. Although the route is not confirmed, it already has its own set of issues. Some residents in Cheviot Hills rallied unsuccessfully for a new alignment down Sepulveda that avoided their neighborhood completely. And further west, Santa Monica residents are up in arms about a potential Verizon facility recommended as a maintenance yard (it has not yet been purchased, but Expo is in negotiations). Groups were so incensed about the yard butting up against one of the city’s lowest-income neighborhoods that they put forth a proposal to use the ancient maintenance yard at Bergamot Station instead, striking fear into the local arts community.

The Bergamot takeover is a non-issue—it has never been considered as the site—but with the right design and input from residents, a maintenance facility with a park or mixed-use buffer could actually be an asset to the neighborhood,” said Genick. “We are heading into a new city and one that, while very supportive, is pretty opinionated,” he added. As the Expo Line continues to travel west (Phase II could be operating by 2014 if construction begins next year as planned), it will be serving more affluent residents, meaning riders who will demand more from their transit system. “You need a solution for the majority, and good design can solve a lot of problems,” said Genick, who welcomes the challenges. “Developing designs that are cognizant of the community concerns will result in the communities being invested in the project, and it will be a better project for it.” —ALISSA WALKER

PLANNING BITES THE DUST

The Petaluma City Council voted in late April to eliminate the city’s planning staff because of a lack of development activity and a $4.5 million budget deficit. Ironically, Petaluma was the first city in California where voters approved a growth-control initiative, in 1972. According to the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, the city’s planning functions will now be handled by consultants and former city employees working on a project basis.

CASH FOR CITYCENTER

MGM and Dubai World, co-owners of the massive Las Vegas CityCenter, ended months of infighting by signing a pact under which they will fund their remaining contributions to CityCenter via letters of credit, while current lenders will fully fund a $1.8 billion senior secured credit facility.

FULLER LOFTS LIVE AGAIN

Southern California developer Lee Homes is helping continue construction on Pugh + Scarpa’s Fuller Lofts in L.A.’s Lincoln Heights. The 104-unit building, which was being developed by now-defunct nonprofit Livable Places, was foreclosed last year. Citybank still owns the project, and Lee Homes President Jeff Lee said the building will be completed next November.

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will demand more from their transit system.
“Developing designs that are cognizant of the
affluent residents, meaning riders who
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incensed about the yard butting up against
one of the city’s lowest-income neighbor-
hoods that they put forth a proposal to use
the ancient maintenance yard at Bergamot
Station instead, striking fear into the local
art community.
“The Bergamot takeover is a non-issue—
it has never been considered as the site—
but with the right design and input from
residents, a maintenance facility with a park
or mixed-use buffer could actually be an
asset to the neighborhood,” said Genick.
“We are heading into a new city and
one that, while very supportive, is pretty
opinionated,” he added. As the Expo Line
continues to travel west (Phase II could be
operating by 2014 if construction begins next
year as planned), it will be serving more
affluent residents, meaning riders who
will demand more from their transit system.
“You need a solution for the majority, and
good design can solve a lot of problems,”
said Genick, who welcomes the challenges.
“Developing designs that are cognizant of the
community concerns will result in the com-
munities being invested in the project, and it
will be a better project for it.”

PLANNING BITES THE DUST
The Petaluma City Council voted in late April to eliminate the city’s planning
staff because of a lack of development activity and a $4.5 million budget deficit.
Ironically, Petaluma was the first city in California where voters approved a
growth-control initiative, in 1972. According to the Santa Rosa Press Democrat,
the city’s planning functions will now be handled by consultants and former
city employees working on a project basis.

CASH FOR CITYCENTER
MGM and Dubai World, co-owners of the massive Las Vegas CityCenter, ended
months of infighting by signing a pact under which they will fund their remain-
ing contributions to CityCenter via letters of credit, while current lenders will
fully fund a $1.8 billion senior secured credit facility.

FULLER LOFTS LIVE AGAIN
Southern California developer Lee Homes is helping continue construction
on Pugh + Scarp’s Fuller Lofts in LA’s Lincoln Heights. The 104-unit building,
which was being developed by now-defunct nonprofit Livable Places, was
foreclosed last year. Citibank still owns the project, and Lee Homes President
Jeff Lee said the building will be completed next November.
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NINE SAN DIEGO ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS ARE REDEFINING HOUSING, DEVELOPMENT, AND URBAN DESIGN IN THEIR OWN CITY AND BEYOND. THE LA JOLLA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART HAS TAKEN NOTICE, GIVING OVER MOST OF THE MUSEUM TO INSTALLATIONS THAT ENCAPSULATE THE CONCERNS AND CRAFT OF A GENERATION THAT IS DEDICATED TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE.

BY SAM LUBELL

ON THEIR MARK

SEBASTIAN MARISCAL STUDIO

LEFT AND TOP: SEBASTIAN MARISCAL CREATED A TUNNEL INTO THE EXHIBITION USING RECYCLED PLANKS TIGHTLY LAYERED TO PROVIDE A CONCENTRATED EXPERIENCE OF ENTRY.

ABOVE: THE RECENTLY COMPLETED CASA VISTA HOUSE IN LA JOLLA POETICALLY WEAVES TOGETHER WOOD AND STEEL. ANOTHER HOUSE, TWO INNS, ON A STEEP HILLSIDE IN LA JOLLA, IS ONE OF TWO THAT MARISCAL DESIGNED FOR HIMSELF AND HIS BUSINESS PARTNER.
In 1982, the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (now known as the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, or MCASD) held an oddly-named exhibition called The California Condition: A Pregnant Architecture, which presented the work of 13 highly original California architects. The show augured great things for the designers, including then-rising stars like Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, Eric Owen Moss, and Rob Wellington Quigley. “A group of risk-taking, rule-breaking, inventive, and innovative architects is creating a new architecture in California today,” said one essay in the exhibition catalog.

Now over 25 years later, the museum is embarking on another blockbuster exhibition, called Mix: Nine San Diego Architects and Designers, showcasing the original, risk-taking talents of another generation. This time, the designers, who graduated from architecture school in the 1980s, are all from San Diego—a center for emerging talent and creative practice that has been somewhat overlooked nationally. The show, which has taken over most of the museum, is on view through September 6. It is not just a roundup of each firm's work, but a series of installations developed and inspired by creative processes, by theories of architecture (and of society, politics, and community), and, perhaps most importantly, by each firm's own work.

“It's a moment of self-analysis,” said Lucia Sanroman, assistant curator at MCASD, who curated the show. “It's very much about the process of design and a focus on experimentation. The gallery becomes a sort of studio.” Sanroman noted that the participants are all medium-sized firms with sophisticated, distinct styles, whose work is highly specific to context, and who have developed interdisciplinary practices with their own idiosyncratic presences in the city. Some are developers as well as architects, some create furniture and other crafts, some are activists for sustainable architecture and urbanism, and others have created new models for collaboration in San Diego and elsewhere. The seven firms (which include nine principals, hence the nine in the show's title) are estudio teddy cruz, LUCE et Studio Architects, Sebastian Mariscal Studio, Public, Rinehart Herbst, Lloyd Russell, and Jonathan Segal.

Each firm has been given a gallery space to occupy inside the museum. Some spaces are rectilinear, while others have irregularly-shaped walls, or are even hallways. Sanroman assigned the galleries based on an intuition of each firm's work. For instance, she felt that Mariscal’s intricate designs would suit a more enclosed, intimate space, while Segal’s muscular creations would suit a lofty environment and Luce, who specializes in interiors, would adapt well to an unusually-shaped space.

A visit to the museum about a week prior to the show’s opening was more exciting than your usual gallery installation. Dust filled the air, saws were grinding, hammers were banging, and concrete was being pounded. Sanroman said there had never been this many people working at the same time inside the museum. Amid the tumult, Segal and his team were creating an exhibition that would showcase the cost-efficient, multifamily developments for which they are known around San Diego. An entry corridor—with angled fins that echo the design of his latest building, called the Q—will present small models of projects, along with detailed business plans that show the hard number-crunching behind his work as a developer and builder. A larger section of the space will showcase much larger models and pictures of his projects, intended to give viewers a feel
for the expanding scale of the work.

Nearby, Lloyd Russell and his team were thumping freshly-watered Quikrete with wood planks to help set a pedestal for one of his models. Russell is becoming well-known for his craft-driven, quirky designs—many of which he has developed himself—such as the Triangle Building in San Diego’s Little Italy and the Rimrock Ranch house in Pioneertown, California. Here he’s riffing on his distinctive model-making process, in which he hand-works primitive blocks of wood and metal. Models are showcased in several ways: hanging from the ceiling, set on steel rods (into a creation he calls the “abacus”), and presented in varying scales on rough pedestals. “I hate the idea of architecture being precious,” said Russell.

Next to Russell, Sebastian Mariscal, known for poetically combining refined and imperfect materials in residential projects like Two Inns and the Wabi House, is building four varied spaces: a long, narrow entrance tunnel made of unevenly stacked recycled wood planks; a large room full of “vestiges” of the firm’s work, like models, pictures, and shop drawings; and two video rooms focusing on process and completed work. For their part, Public, who have created original architecture at a variety of scales in San Diego, from small houses to block-sized downtown condos, are presenting a 3-D diorama of all their built work on one gallery wall in the form of a shallow relief, models, images, and projections. The firm is also presenting models inside clever tool boxes, and a mural of text by partner Jim Brown that relates to his development schemes for the no-man’s-land between the United States and Mexican borders. Rinehart Herbst, a firm that has gained a reputation for its skillful use of low-tech materials to create very contemporary structures, is dividing their gallery with a lightweight “fence” created from a folded model of one of their recent projects: the elegant, lofty, and colorful
Woodbury University School of Architecture, itself built out of the utilitarian frame of a former hardware building. The fence is woven with photos, drawings, and surfaces with varying degrees of transparency.

Probably the best known in the group, Teddy Cruz, whose community-oriented development schemes have changed the urban dynamic in places like Hudson, New York, and throughout Mexico, is focusing his installation on his efforts to help residents in the rural Nicaraguan village, La Prusia, become their own construction crew for prefabricated housing. The installation, which Cruz had not yet built at press time, is to include models and even a piece of truss section from the project as well as a huge mural, practice diagrams, and maquettes from such past investigations as Living Rooms at the Border, a community center and housing project in Ysidro.

The only woman in the show, designer Jennifer Luce, is known for her use of precious materials and for her exquisite craftsmanship. Luce is layering several ideas into one as a reflection of her entire body of work, which includes pristine homes, steely tables, and glamorous showrooms. Her team is using chalk to create a full-scale construction drawing of their exhibition space, including delineated measurements on the floors and up the walls, along with an 80-foot stretch of table made out of steel, acrylic, and wood (a reflection of the materials the firm uses) to create a border surrounding an intimate inner exhibition space, to contain her sketchbooks, models, and films.

Among other display elements, Luce is dedicating a corner to objects collected from those who have inspired her, among them Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, and landscape architect Andy Spurlock. “It’s been retrospective and introspective and tough sometimes and joyful other times,” said Luce, who added that she’s long been fascinated by the questions at the heart of the architect’s work: “How do you get to the core of what you do?”

And it is the elemental inquiries into process and identity that make the show’s concept so riveting as it captures the raw creative energy and scale that’s often so lacking in architecture exhibitions. It gives architects the rare opportunity to present their skills to the public in a museum, and it gives creative practices the chance, as Sanroman put it, “to say what they’re about.” And while it’s too early to tell if Mix will launch their careers to the extent that the 1982 show did for the architects of an earlier generation, there’s no doubt that something special is taking shape. “This is it,” said Segal. “I don’t think there’s going to be another show like this in our lifetime.”

SAM LUBELL IS CALIFORNIA EDITOR AT THE ARCHITECT’S NEWSPAPER.
Los Angeles is the inscrutable city. Every effort to explain the place—to take it in, whole—inevitably is surpassed by the city’s hurtling reality. From the first encounters of Father Juan Crespi, who found “this delightful place among the trees on the river,” to Carey McWilliams’ “An Island on the Land, rife with eccentricity and darkly tinted ambitions, to Reyner Banham’s joyous embrace of chaos as the mystical armature of the city’s greatness, to Mike Davis’ prognostication of its privatized and hyper-exploitative demise, Los Angeles has defied comprehensive reading. In his introduction to The Infrastructural City, Kazys Varnelis, who until fairly recently lived in Los Angeles and thus had to suffer its impassable streets, admits that “a total approach” is not possible. The book, instead, is offered as an “atlas... a manually, however incomplete.” This may sound like a cop-out, but isn’t. The 16 contributors to this densely-packed series of essays are trying to map the contours of a contemporary city that can no longer be understood simply by eating fast-food and learning to drive—as Banham famously did. Varnelis correctly notes, “Los Angeles exists by grace of infrastructure, a life-support system that has transformed this wasteland into the second largest metropolis in the country.” Far-flung aqueducts tote its water, vast stretches of freeways connect its sprawling suburbs, electrical cables spanning half a continent feed its voracious appetite for megawatts. Yet this kind of steel-and-concrete-and-pylon infrastructure no longer defines the city, or more precisely, the region. Simply, this infrastructure is out of control. Water is a dwindling resource for which there are no new supplies. Freeways are clogged, and building new ones only increases congestion. Electricity consumption climbs faster than the ability to build new generating plants. Meanwhile, even if we could readily grasp this old infrastructure, the emerging one is more slippery to pin down. The new consists of myriad layers of political, social, economic, and technological forces—a tangle of interlocked and often unwieldy systems that defy definition as readily as they escape the imposition of a hegemonic will.

To begin to see the outline of this “networked ecology,” many of the components of traditional infrastructure are recapitulated—from the Los Angeles–Long Beach Port (the nation’s largest) and the Alameda rail corridor through which the port’s containers are transported, out of sight and below grade, ending up in warehouses on the plateaus of the Tejon Industrial Complex far to the north of downtown, to the gravel pits of Inwindale (great depressions that occupy more area than the grade portion of the city) and the countless oil derricks (which still pump the liquid gold that once was so abundant and that, until 1970, supplied all of Los Angeles’ needs). Cobbled atop these bedrock elements are things like cell phone networks, with their faux Deodar Cedar microwave repeaters, computerized traffic-signal controls, and buildings like One Wilshire, the former office tower at the hub of downtown, where the entire telecommunications of Asia, Latin America, and the western half of the United States are, literally, tied together in “meet-me rooms.”

Much of this is not new. The nature of infrastructure is constantly reinvented itself at least since Al Gore started to claim credit for inventing the information superhighway. So when the authors of the chapter “Traffic, Blocking All Lanes” argue that “most new progress is made at the level of code,” citing the example of “optimizing algorithms,” you are left wondering where the irony is. The only algorithm that can optimize the flow of traffic is one that eliminates those of us behind the wheel. Similarly, when Lane Barden notes that “Los Angeles is a dispersed metropolis, “a polycentric matrix of aging suburbs embedded in a larger urban fabric,” he is telling a twice-told tale that dates to the time when Henry Huntington installed his electric trolleys and invented sprawl. However, it would be a mistake

The Heller House, Beverly Hills (1950), continued on page 19

Artistry on the Line

Richard Neutra, Architect: Sketches and Drawings Los Angeles Central Library, Getty Gallery Through September 6

The exhibition of Richard Neutra’s drawings at the LA Central Library adds another dimension to the meticulously composed images (most by Julius Shulman) that we’ve seen time and again. Here is the man behind the work, and the preparatory studies that fed into familiar buildings. An idealized self-portrait in charcoal is juxtaposed with the utopian vision of Rush City Reformed. Luxuriant plantings soften the rigorous geometry of the houses. A spiral parking structure Neutra sketched for Frank Lloyd Wright in 1924 draws on the curvilinear forms of Eric Mendelsohn, with whom the fledgling architect worked in Berlin, and it anticipates the rounded bays of houses he would build in LA. Curator Thomas Hines, author of the definitive Neutra monograph, has made an inspired selection from the UCLA archives to portray an architect who was also a gifted social and economic system. From the UCLA archives to portray an architect who was also a gifted artist and modernist with a strong romantic streak.

Handsomely installed and thoughtfully explained, the drawings are arranged chronologically to trace Neutra’s career, from his early years in Europe through his 45-year practice in LA. They are also grouped by theme, to show how skilled he was in capturing the spirit of places he explored, natural forms, and the context in which it was built. It’s fascinating to jump from the hothouse world of Vienna, where he mingled with such giants as Gustav Klimt, Arnold Schoenberg, and Sigmund Freud, to the tabula rasa of the American southwest. That was the fulfillment of Neutra’s dream, in the bleak aftermath of World War I, to escape the winters of northern Europe and live on an idyllic tropical island. Adolf Loos turned the young man away from ornament and traditional architectural forms, and his earliest architectural drawing—a house for an estate in Berlin—has the same purity of line as his last. In contrast to R.M. Schindler, who constantly reinvented himself, Neutra was rigorously consistent. There are fascinating glimpses of unrealized projects, including an austere gym deftly linked to a Spanish-style villa

IN THE WEB

The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles Edited by Kazys Varnelis Actar, $39.95

The Heller House, Beverly Hills (1950), continued on page 19
Breathtaking for the power with which they soar up from the ground, skyscrapers seem to break free of constraints that keep other buildings earthbound. And yet the skyscraper’s form is in fact rigidly constrained—by the structural demands of supporting its extreme height; by the myriad zoning laws mitigating its effect on the light, air, and character of the surrounding city; and by the complex financial calculations that dictate how such an expensive project repays its investors.

So what room is there, a new book asks, for innovation within such a tightly constrained typology? Or, to borrow a query from the introduction to Scott Johnson’s Tall Building: Imagining the Skyscraper: “The only problem is, as a designer, how to make your tall box different from the rest?”

Tall Building chronicles the various ways in which that question has been answered over the history of the skyscraper—and how it’s being answered now in new contexts like Asia and the Middle East, increasingly the nexus of skyscraper construction. In 1996, eight of the world’s ten tallest buildings were American; by next year, Johnson reports, all ten are expected to be in the developing world.

Cities in the developing world have been a particularly fertile ground for experimentation, where the skyscraper comes with potent associations of prestige and modernity. Yet at the same time, those cities grapple with how to integrate the monumental Western forms into their own cultures. Sometimes the results are striking and seminal, like Gordon Bunshaft’s National Commercial Bank in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Though its iconic triangular shape is western, its opaque stone exterior staves off the oppressive desert sun, and the rectangular cutouts in each tower ventilate the building’s central atrium. Some eastern cities have also begun to cultivate an idea that never managed to take off in the west—the mixed-use tower. It’s simpler and easier to build each floor the same, Johnson notes, which is why the tallest buildings have traditionally been vertically undifferentiated office towers. But in Japan, mixed-use has gained traction as a form of downtown infill, to reduce demand on an overburdened transit system. It’s also a way for them to compete with other business centers like Shanghai and Singapore, through giant complexes that supplement business with destination tourism and luxury retail.

Even public uses are now being integrated into new skyscrapers in Asia. Japan’s Roppongi Hills complex, for example, features a public roof deck, art museum, and education center on its highest-most and most-visible top floors. And its “swirling and highly pedestrianized base” is architecturally inventive while still echoing the intricate character of the surrounding city.

Johnson is in his element when he’s delving into the theoretical. His previous book, The Big Idea: Criticality and Practice in Contemporary Architecture (2006), was a meticulously researched argument for the relevance of theory to building construction. He takes the same approach in Tall Building, devoting a good third of the book to the ways in which theorists and artists have conceived of the skyscraper.

But although it’s a fascinating tour, in the end it’s hard to agree with Johnson that theory and conceptual art have anything useful to say about new forms for the skyscraper typology. Sifting through the plentiful examples in Tall Building, theory comes off as impotent at best. Deconstructionism, for instance, is one of the most prominent theoretical movements of the latter 20th century, but its attempts to translate theory into form produced nothing but embarrassingly literal renderings of “deconstruction” as a contrived jumble of fragments.

And at worst, theory seems not impotent but destructive. Johnson chronicles how the writings and sketches of European theorists like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, in the 1920s and ’30s, led to the modernist building style that has proven so remarkably tenacious. It’s been decades since modernism was rightly judged to be “technocratic,” “non-communicative,” and disruptive of city fabrics, yet it’s still going strong; designer-brand ed late-modern monoliths are even now becoming the dominant style for residential towers across the United States.

Although the book might leave one leerly of ideas with a capital “F”, that doesn’t suggest that the unconscious forces of commercialism necessarily offer a better alternative. Johnson usually refrains from prognostication, but when he does make predic tions, they leave a dystopian taste in the mouth. His vision is a world in which the surfaces of tall buildings are more valuable than their interior spaces, turning them into “armatures for commercial content.” It’s already happening in Tokyo, New York City, and Hollywood, Johnson notes, and he sees the trend spreading as globalization progresses.

There’s plenty of eye candy in Tall Building, in the form of full-page black-and-white photographs of many of the buildings described in the text. And the book itself is a stylish package: tall, with text arranged in two slender columns per page. The sparse monochrome layout is broken up only by the occasional page of pale blue between sections, like glints of the sky between the titular towers.

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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
(1867–1959) A superb, architecturally important piece, being an original signed hand-drawn architectural drawing measuring 34"x20," and showing three elevations for a house designed drawn by Wright, this plan is titled “Sheet No. 3 House for Mr. & Mrs. Eric Pratt Galesburg Country Homes.” Finely drawn in pencil with red details, it is signed at bottom right by Wright: “F LL Wr Mar. 20 49.” In 1936, Wright developed a series of cost-controlled homes dubbed “Usonian.” Prompted by the economic depression of the time and modeled on his earlier Prairie Style, the Usonians were designed simply, and without an attic or basement. The one-story domiciles were modularly constructed with concrete blocks and designed to be configured in a number of ways. The Eric Pratt House was an example of this design aesthetic, which Wright later referred to as “Usonian Automatic.” …….$25,000

A signed blueprint for a Wright “Usonian” home

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This glass box in the center of Portland, Oregon, has hosted performances by The Beatles, Luciano Pavarotti, and Elvis Presley. The Dalai Lama has spoken within its cavernous volume, as did Barack Obama during his presidential campaign. The Trail Blazers, Portland’s beloved NBA franchise, won its sole championship in the building in 1977, and UCLA took home one of its many titles from the venue a decade before that. Allen Ginsberg, while attending the aforementioned Beatles concert, was struck by inspiration and wrote a poem entitled “Portland Coliseum.”

While its cultural history is impressive, that will not be enough to save the venue from demolition: The Memorial Coliseum has been threatened by a proposal to build a minor league baseball stadium in its place. But the structure’s exquisite beauty and refined engineering has motivated a host of architects, sports fans, historians, artists, and design enthusiasts to join together in an attempt to preserve it.

Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and dedicated on January 8, 1961, the Memorial Coliseum was shaped in part by Gordon Bunshaft, the firm’s best-known architect, famous for landmarks such as Lever House in New York. It is one of the more unique arenas in the United States, if not the world, because of its high level of transparency. The 12,000-seat seating bowl is structurally independent from the surrounding glass box, which, in spite of its massive four-block expanse, stands on only four columns. When the bowl’s encompassing curtains are drawn open (something that hasn’t happened in many years), the arena can be flooded with natural light. In the book Modernism Rediscovered, a photograph by legendary architectural photographer Julius Shulman (taken shortly after Memorial Coliseum’s opening) shows the hockey arena during the day without artificial light. This transparency also extends to the outer concourses. Instead of walking through a rabbit warren of interior circulation spaces closed off from the outside, visitors to Memorial Coliseum enter and exit the seating bowl with panoramic floor-to-ceiling views of the downtown skyline.

The coliseum sits in the Rose Quarter, a loosely knit sports-and-event complex that also includes the larger 20,000-seat Rose Garden arena. Most cities upgrading to new professional sports venues have torn down the arenas they replace. Most recently, Philadelphia tore down The Spectrum, which had a history at least as illustrious as Memorial Coliseum’s—but was arguably less architecturally significant. The Rose Garden, however, isn’t the biggest threat to Memorial Coliseum. The demolition danger has arisen from proposed changes to PGE Park, another stadium across town. Merrill Paulson, owner of the Portland Beavers AAA baseball franchise and the Portland Timbers minor-league soccer team, has won initial approval from Major League Soccer to bring the sport to the Rose City. But MLS prefers its teams to play in soccer-only venues. That means Paulson’s baseball Beavers need to vacate PGE Park so it can be converted for soccer, necessitating the need for a new home for the baseball team. Initially, Paulson and Portland Mayor Sam Adams hatched a plan for a baseball stadium to replace Memorial Coliseum. But at a public open house in April to introduce the plan, Adams heard a chorus of opposition. Public and media skepticism for the plan has been overwhelming: Two opinion polls found a more than 8-to-1 advantage for those opposing razing the coliseum. The City Council was set to vote on a plan on April 22, but the mayor postponed the vote indefinitely after it became clear that he would lose 3-2. As of this writing, city planners and Paulson’s advisors are considering several alternate locations for a baseball stadium, though the Coliseum site remains an option.

Even if Memorial Coliseum avoids demolition, it could be significantly altered by future Rose Quarter plans. Although owned by the city, billionaire Blazers owner Paul Allen’s Oregon Arena Corporation (OAC) manages the site. The company has proposed opening an entertainment zone inside the coliseum, pending the removal of its distinctive seating bowl. An open-air music venue has also been proposed, which may reduce the arena to a mere skeleton. Research by William Macht, associate director of Portland State University’s Center for Real Estate, also shows that OAC’s management deal gives the company a financial incentive to break even in operating the coliseum, but a disincentive to turn a profit, contributing to the building’s current disrepair.

While the threat to the Coliseum highlights the difficulties faced by mid-20th-century modernist architecture when seeking acceptance as historically significant, there may also be optimism found in its boisterous defense. In this case, a small but vocal group of architects and activists may have successfully stared down the opposing interests of two billionaire sports franchise owners and a sex-scan-dal-plagued mayor desperate to complete a major project before a recall campaign this summer. So for the time being, when it rains in Portland, which is often, locals can seek solace in their glass palace.

BRIAN LIBBY IS A PORTLAND-BASED FREELANCE WRITER.
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