Orange County’s Newport Beach is a resort town known for its marinas and its political conservatism. But when it held an open competition for its new civic center, city leaders ended up picking an unconventional design by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

“We were the only out-of-town firm on the shortlist, and we guessed that they might prefer something a bit more conservative, so we thought it was a long shot,” said Greg Mottola, a principal in the firm. The architectural firm, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, was chosen for its design, which was a bold statement in contrast to the conservative expectations of Newport Beach. The new civic center was designed to be a civic landmark, reflecting the city’s unique character and addressing the needs of its residents.
In mid-March, the website Curbed SF revealed a list that purportedly named six of the eight architecture firms shortlisted for SFMOMA’s planned 250,000-square-foot expansion. The roundup included well-known players like David Adjaye, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Steven Holl, OMA, Snaehto, and Renzo Piano. As we point out in Eavesdrop this month, the list may not even be accurate. But whether or not it is (the official shortlist isn’t due until late this spring), it has provoked serious discussion about who should be considered for such a major cultural commission.

The opportunity to design a museum addition in one of the world’s great cities does not come along often. And the importance of the project means that focused attention on the selection process is merited. That said, the first criterion for any competition should be architectural excellence and the capability to skillfully execute a complicated, high-profile task. All the architects on this list could pull the project off effectively. But there are other factors to take into consideration if the goal is to draw attention to the city’s cultural strengths and status. And this list does not accomplish that.

To begin with, why not include at least a few local firms? Despite San Francisco’s reputation for architectural conservatism, the city does have more than its share of talented and groundbreaking architects. This commission would be the perfect chance to showcase one of them. My SF colleague Lydia Lee pointed out several firms on our blog (including some very talented women, another group largely missing from the would-be shortlist), among them Ogyrdzaki/Priulger, Anne Fougeron, Stanley Saitowitz, IwamotoScott, and Aidlin Darling. These architects, along with others in the area, are creating fantastic new work, yet remain relatively unknown beyond the West Coast.

Equally problematic is how the shortlists for major projects have become so predictable. Often enough, such work feels unrelated to the particularities of place. Piano, OMA, and others are part of a rolling band of (admittedly extremely talented) architectural conquerors that almost inevitably trump lesser-known talent. Even if they partner with local firms, the design vision is all theirs. And it isn’t about place; it’s about their own process and their brand. This is the new international style: elegant, trade-marked, and generic.

We understand that SFMOMA wants to draw attention to its new addition, and a big-name firm is an excellent way to do that. But a stunning design from a local firm can do just as well and can provide a freshness that these architects’ now-familiar designs cannot. Local firms can also bring a deeper understanding of the city and a deeper sense of cultural awareness and values. No matter what SFMOMA decides, we hope it will choose a talented architect. But wouldn’t it be great if it chose a firm that also brought their brand. This is the new international style: elegant, trade-marked, and generic.

Our annual best sources feature (“Sourced Up.”) CAN 02_02_24.2010 gave an incorrect photo credit for Swati Miens Architects’ Tea House. The photographer was Tim Griffin. A Q&A with William Krisel (CAN 02_24.2010) misstated the name of one of the architect’s tract housing projects in California. It is Corbin Palms, not Gordon Pains.
**DRAMA AT SFMOMA**

In mid-March, Carved SF revealed, via an unnamed source, six of the eight architects that it claimed had been shortlisted for SFMOMA’s planned expansion, which would house the late Donald Fisher’s art collection. The list included international big-hitters like David Adjaye, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Steven Holl, OMA, Snøhetta, and Renzo Piano. And so began rumor-mill heaven. Since that post, the veracity of which has been questioned (although first taken at face value by the likes of the LA Times’ Christopher Hawthorne), we’ve heard from various sources that Peter Zumthor and TEN Arquitectos are being considered, that Gensler is also on the shortlist (not a coincidence perhaps, since Art Gensler is the vice chairman of the SFMOMA board), and that Norman Foster, who was basically booted out of town after winning a stimulus-aided renovation of the city’s 50 UN Plaza building, turned down the competition altogether.

A call to Diller Scofidio + Renfro revealed that the firm had heard nothing from the museum. And one architect told us the list was no list at all, hinting that it came straight from the lips of CCA director (and loyal AI source) David Meckel. Meanwhile the museum said, not surprisingly, that it can “neither confirm nor deny” the leaks. But oh what fun it is to pontificate.

**SCARLET LETTER IS BLUE**

New social networking/architecture site Architizer hosted its LA launch party at the new A+D Museum space on March 18. The usual suspects all showed up in their best duds, but far and away the best-dressed was KCRW radio host Frances Anderton’s daughter Summer. Looking stunning in an eclectic and colorful boho-chic ensemble, Summer, 7, wore sparkling shoes, embeded with the usual lame single blinking red LED light, but a whole kaleidoscope of dazzling bright white wonders. Oh, and Architizer founders Marc Kushner and Benjamin Prosky weren’t too shabby either, working the monochrome dark suit, Mad Men thin-tie look that added a touch of class to the event where the site’s omnipresent “A” logo was emblazoned on everything from t-shirts and lapels to a stack of chairs arranged in a rickety A formation.

**FIRMING UP**

It seems every month we hear of another struggling firm being swallowed up by a biggie. First Eberle Becket was taken over by AECOM, then WWCOT merged into DLR. Now we hear from our rumor-mongering friends that Bay Area firm Fisher Friedman is on the block, and its primary suitor is NBBJ, who already took over Cambridge firm Chan Krieger Sieniewicz this month.

**SHIPPING NEWS**

Continued from front page recent history that the Port has tried to rejuvenate the site, which is known by many San Franciscans as the location of the police impound lot. But the area is no longer so isolated from downtown, thanks to a building boom in Mission Bay and the Third Street light rail. Still, the costs of the project are daunting: Just restoring the buildings and infrastructure is estimated to cost $660 million. Proposition D, passed in 2008, allows the Port to act like a redevelopment agency and put money raised from property and payroll taxes back into the project. Even so, as the draft masterplan states, “the financial complexities of the project—developing 65 acres of infrastructure, three million square feet of new buildings, 700,000 square feet of rehabilitation of historic buildings, associated parking, and 20 acres of open space—require a sophisticated real estate development partner to fashion a development program acceptable to the real estate and capital markets.”

Because of the working shipyard, the plan for the rest of the site calls for commercial and light industrial uses, but no residential. The port also hopes to create a destination attraction. Among the 20 historic buildings in this adaptive reuse project, the architectural jewel is the 1886 Union Iron Works Machine Shop (see front page). Built before steel framing, the brick-and-concrete building is 70 feet high and longer than a football field, with arched windows and no internal columns. “It’s like a cathedral,” said Beaguer. “We really think the public should be able to enjoy the grandeur of it, so we’re looking for a cultural use.”

A few potential partners—including the Exploratorium and the National Maritime Museum—considered moving here but decided not to go forward.

The Port has spent the last couple of years working out a masterplan, bringing in ROMA Design Group for the urban planning and Carey & Co. for the historical analysis. With the plan in place, the Port hopes to attract architects and commercial developers with a taste for tricky projects; Wilson Meany Sullivan, the developer of Treasure Island, is among those who have expressed interest. A team is expected to be selected by the end of the year.

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[Image of a window with text: ENERGY EFFICIENT . . . AND BEAUTIFUL TOO!]
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SEND HOSTILE BIDS AND GOLDEN HANDSHAKES TO EAVESDROP@ARCHPAPER.COM

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LYNDA LEE

MARSHALL FREDERICK PHOTOGRAPHY

Leave it to Las Vegas for a new take on glitz, this time with organic undertones. Mastro’s Ocean Club, inside Daniel Libeskind’s Las Vegas CityCenter Crystals entertainment complex, boasts a swanky terrace inside an 80-foot-tall, twisting “Tree House” created by David Rockwell, with interiors by KAA Design Group. The Tree House itself weighs 50,000 pounds and is made of a complex configuration of mahogany and resin beams that looks alternately like a giant hair dryer or the Nā’vi village in Avatar. The interior of the restaurant is entered through a portal of wood-lined ceilings and undulating walls. It includes a dining area of curving white leather booths, chairs made from ochre leather, and banquettes surrounded by curving beams of mahogany and sapele wood. Glittering circular chandeliers are made up of jewel-like, irregularly-shaped glass.

SAN LUBELL
ULTIMATELY THE CITY, THAT THE TRANSFORMATION WITH MOCA, THE FIRE DEPARTMENT’S PLANNED FANS OVER THE YEARS. BEFORE SEALING THE DEAL ADOBEC BRICK AND RAMMED EARTH STRUCTURES MODERNISM, ITS CONCRETE SHELL IS AKIN TO THE BUILDINGS. UNLIKE STEEL-AND-Glass DESERT, IT WILL BE DEEMED A HIP PALETTE AND A PERFECT MATCH AT THE TIME OF ITS CONSTRUCTION ARE SAID TO ACCOMMODATE THE HARSH CLIMATE.

THE TENACITY AND PATIENCE OF A DECADE’S WAIT AND THE SCOUTING OF NEARLY 40 BUILDINGS LEAD MOCA TO ITS NEW HOME—WILLIAM WILDE’S 1973 BRUTALIST CENTRAL FIRE STATION, A SYMPHONY OF SMOOTH POURED-IN-PLACE CONCRETE FRAMING, A “WIDE WAIST CORDUROY” STAIR TOWER, AND A CROWN OF GOLDEN, ROUGH, RIBBED EXPOSED-AGGREGATE PANELS. IN SPITE OF THE BUILDING’S EVOCATIVE MACHINISMO, FIREMEN AT THE TIME OF ITS CONSTRUCTION ARE SAID TO HAVE FOUND THE ORANGE INTERIORS TO BE “SISY.” LITTLE COULD THEY FORESEE THAT IT WOULD LATER BE DEEMED A HIP PALETTE AND A PERFECT MATCH FOR MOCA’S IDENTITY.

WILDE’S FIRE STATION IS A SIGNIFICANT WORK WITHIN TUCSON’S NETWORK OF BRUTALIST CIVIC BUILDINGS. UNLIKE STEEL-AND-Glass DESERT MODERNISMO, ITS CONCRETE SHELL IS AKIN TO THE ADOBE BRICK AND RAMMED EARTH STRUCTURES INDIGENOUS TO THE REGION, EXEMPLIFYING A DESERT ETHIC WITH ITS HIGH THERMAL MASS AND PASSIVE SOLAR ORIENTATION. BUT THE LACK OF WARM AND Fuzzy QUALITIES DID NOT WIN IT FANS OVER THE YEARS. BEFORE SEALING THE DEAL WITH MOCA, THE FIRE DEPARTMENT’S PLANNED MOVE TO A LARGER FACILITY PUT WILDE’S CONCRETE FORTRESS IN JEOPARDY OF DEMOLITION AND REPLACEMENT WITH ONE MORE OF TUCSON’S MANY SURFACE PARKING LOTS. RUSSELL’S RESEARCH AND INTUITION CONVINCED HER, AND ULTIMATELY THE CITY, THAT THE TRANSFORMATION FROM FIREHOUSE TO ART-HOUSE WOULD BE TURNKEY. INDEED IT WAS; IN SIX WEEKS, WORKING ROUND THE CLOCK FROM POSSESSION OF THE BUILDING TO MOCA’S GALA EVENT IN FEBRUARY, THE DREAM BECAME A REALITY.


GIVEN MOCA’S HISTORY OF TENACITY AND DIVERSE PROGRAMMING, WE CAN ANTICIPATE IT BECOMING AN EVEN BIGGER (ORANGE) BEACON OF DESIGN IN THE DESERT. BETH WEINSTEIN

SWEPT AWAY continued from front page

ALL TOGETHER NOW continued from front page

For Tucson’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), homelessness has long been a kind of calling card. A band of DIY artists founded the museum in 1999 as a vehicle for the production and distribution of experimental work, appropriating empty downtown storefronts and warehouses as their venues. That’s about to change. Since becoming MOCA’s director in 2002, Anne-Marie Russell’s mission has been to find a home for this iconoclastic museum. Beyond the constraints of a shoestring budget and diverse programmatic needs, MOCA wanted a diverse programmatic needs, MOCA wanted a home for its iconoclastic museum. Beyond the constraints of a shoestring budget and diverse programmatic needs, MOCA wanted a home that suited its diverse programming, we can anticipate it being a flexible floor plan and optimal lighting and views. Both buildings will receive LEED Gold certification. They will add classrooms and labs, two 100-seat lecture halls, a student services center, a learning and conference center, as well as faculty and administration offices. With a combined cost of $125 million, the buildings mark the beginning of LA Trade Tech’s nearly $240 million renovation and expansion plan. This includes additional open space and sports facilities, a new Child Development Center, gallery space, parking garage, and facilities management and operations headquarters, as well as the renovation of virtually every existing building on campus to maximize space, efficiency, and environment.

The intense activity is part of a $6 billion voter-approved proposal and bond initiative (Proposition A in 2001, Proposition AA in 2003, and Bond Measure J in 2008) that seeks to transform all nine of the City’s Community Colleges into green campuses, including 185 new structures. Trade Tech’s new buildings were completed just in time for the school to host the 2010 California Higher Education Sustainability Conference to be held from June 20 to 23.

GUNNAR HAN

A sail-like scrim wraps the double-height council chambers.

THE ARCHITECT’S NEWSPAPER MARCH 31, 2010

THE TUCSON MUSEUM MAKES A HOME IN A BRUTALIST FIRE STATION

A sail-like scrim wraps the double-height council chambers.

ARTS ON FIRE

BETH WEINSTEIN

THE GREAT HALL. COURTESY MOCA

MDA Johnson Favaro's LA Trade Tech buildings.

A sail-like scrim wraps the double-height council chambers.

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MADISON HEDGES

MDA Johnson Favaro's LA Trade Tech buildings.
NOTIONS OF GREEN continued from front page include seven acres of park space between Santa Monica City Hall and the Santa Monica Pier that will connect the area’s Civic Center to the rest of the city. Land for the project was made available when the RAND Corporation relocated its headquarters to the southernmost location of its 15-acre site back in 2004.

Out of the 24 teams that submitted for the RFQ, the six shortlisted teams included Field Operations, Peter Walker and Partners, Gehry Partners, Studio Works, Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, and SWA Group. The selection panel for the project included Qingyun Ma, dean of the USC School of Architecture; landscape architect Ken Smith; and Marc Fisher, campus architect at UCSB. The panel coordinated with staff from the city’s Community and Cultural Services, Planning, and Public Works/Architecture Services departments.

Teams presented qualifications, not concept designs, in their interviews. And Field Operations, best known for its work on New York’s High Line, was hailed by Barbara Stinchfield, Santa Monica’s director of Community and Cultural Services, for its “commitment to making places for people.”

Stinchfield also stressed that the team was selected for more than their impressive resume. “It wasn’t just this one really high-profile project [the High Line]. It’s their dedication to sustainability and public art and engaging the community,” she said.

Lisa Switkin, associate principal at Field Operations, agrees that her firm excels at involving the public. “We are good listeners,” she said. Switkin added that while a design is far from being developed, the firm is interested in exploring the site’s historic significance, its local plant life, its bluffs and dunes, its grade changes, and even its nearby freeway interchange. “We’d like to amplify the site’s existing characteristics,” she explained.

According to the project’s RFQ, the Town Square is set to be a space for cultural and civic events, while the Palisades Garden Walk, to its south, will include a botanical element and water features. Streetscape improvements, as well as pedestrian and bicycle paths, will connect the parks to the city. “We’re pretty built-up at this point, so it’s definitely one of the last open spaces that we may have to develop for a long time,” said Miriam Mulder, from Santa Monica’s Architectural Services department.

Passing over Gehry Partners was not easy, said Mulder. But the selection committee decided it was best to choose a team that focused on landscape architecture. “This particular piece doesn’t really have much architecture associated with it,” she said. “It’s nice to imagine there might be more architectural pieces that come up.”

The project is being paid for through $25 million in redevelopment agency funds, and the city hopes to tap into additional design department money. Santa Monica’s Stinchfield said that her department anticipated finalizing the team’s contract and making a recommendation to the City Council at its last meeting in March. Mulder added that the city would like to finalize the design by late 2011 or early 2012.
Despite a grand plan that’s
dashed so many projects in
California, L.A. Live, the mixed-
use downtown mega-complex,
is actually finished. Hovering
above everything, the 55-story
JW Marriott/Ritz Carlton Hotel
and Residences at its eastern end
opened this month. Designed
by Gensler, the $1 billion project
includes 877 Marriott guest
rooms, 124 Ritz hotel rooms,
224 condos, and an 80,000-
square-foot conference center.

While the two-million-square-
foot building’s irregular, tapering
shape is impossible to miss from
anywhere within eyeshot of
downtown, what’s perhaps most
interesting about this project are
the construction and planning
techniques that helped create
the form, streamline the process,
and fit a monster of a program
neatly into one complex building.

The tower’s bulging profile
was brought about by the need
to make the Ritz Carlton suites
and condos larger than the JW
Marriott rooms below. Marriott
rooms are all 10 feet tall and 30
feet long, while Ritz Carlton rooms
and residences above them vary
from 10 feet 6 inches to 14 feet
tall and 38 to 42 feet long. The
move was made possible
through curved steel columns
installed near the top of the
building, making it easier to
hang the building’s giant glass
curtain wall and support the
main structure. This curtain wall
was installed from the outside-
in via a massive crane, a more
efficient technique than
installing from the inside, as is
usually done in such buildings.

To keep these many height
differentials from cluttering the
façade, Gensler unified it with
a mosaic of colored glass. This
skin, or “veil,” is composed of
alternating transparent, translu-
cent, colored (blue, silver, and
gray), and fritted glass, and
accented with metal panels.
The veil’s glass becomes more
transparent as it rises vertically,
providing more transparency for
the condominiums while meeting
Title 24’s new 60-percent-glass
skin transparency requirements.
Because all the glass has the
same light transmission values,
the different colors appear the
same from inside.

The L-shaped building’s
demanding program, which
features well over 1,000 rooms,
was also complicated because
Marriott wanted to separate the
Ritz rooms and amenities from
those of the Marriott. They
loaded both intersecting wings
of the first segment with Marriott
rooms, and then stacked the
Ritz portions above, creating an
intimate Ritz entry on the 26th
floor. The Marriott’s cavernous
50-foot-tall lobby is located on
the ground floor. That podium
space has an effective visual
connection to L.A. Live and
to downtown through glass
facades that cantilever from the
building frame to create point-
supported “floating” walls. Each
entity also has its own pool deck
and private bar—the Marriott’s
on the 4th floor and the Ritz’s on
the 26th floor.

The earthquake-proofing is
sophisticated. The building’s
system used a thin, steel-plate
shear wall system instead of the
usual thick concrete shear walls
in order to speed construction,
avoid concrete settling, increase
the square footage inside the
building, and maximize views.
The steel plates range from one-
quarter inch to one-half inch in
width, instead of the usual three-
foot-thick shear wall. In all, the
process saved four months of
concrete work and thousands
of pounds of concrete, and allowed
the building to rise four stories
higher. The building is further
braced horizontally with outrig-
ger trusses at the 26th and 53rd
floors, an alternative to a thick
concrete core.

The thin steel system also
required fewer building materials,
a green component joined by
water-efficient fixtures and
landscaping and solar reflecting
materials on the roof. It’s not a
groundbreaking list of green
features, and the aesthetics
of the building, while certainly
dynamic and effective, are not
especially elegant or inspiring.
But overall the tower is a major
step forward for L.A. Live, an
urban project that has been sore-
ly lacking in innovative design
and urbanism. SL
SLOTLIGHT LED
“...solid design...”
“...attractive placement of LEDs...”
“...diffusion lens and color-rendering qualities [are] impressive.”
“...a nice alternative to fluorescent [products].”

CAREENA ™
“...uniform luminosity and good brightness control...”
“...unique picture frame lens design...”
“...good color qualities and overall brightness.”

For more information on SLOTLIGHT LED and CAREENA, please visit www.zumtobel-led.com.
Vondom’s Vases series, designed by JM Ferrero, are made of recycled plastic doing double duty as a pot-and-bench combination. The collection includes self-watering pots with bench seating that can be lacquered or illuminated with LEDs in a range of colors. www.vondom.com

The Olivio Bollard accommodates two lamp-head sizes with a 180-degree rotation that can be adjusted on site. Supplied with LEDs, the fixtures can be customized with surveillance and multimedia technology, and are certified by the International Dark-Sky Association for reduced light pollution. www.selux.com

Landscape Forms and BMW Group DesignworksUSA collaborated to create the Metro40 line of furnishings. The Mobius strip–shaped Lo-Glo lamp is a 3-foot-tall LED pathway light (a 12-foot-tall Hi-Glo model is also available) with replaceable diode cartridges. www.landscapeforms.com

The Bike Garden’s organic bike racks provide multiple locking points with “stems” that can be installed individually or in pre-configured layouts. The corrosion-resistant metal components contain up to 76 percent recycled content and can be surface-mounted or cast-in-place. www.forms-surfaces.com

The Lace Fence from Dutch design house Demakersvan is available in galvanized iron or white PVC-coated wire, both suitable for indoor or outdoor use. Patterns are customizable, and frameless panels can be designed to hide or embellish a space, prevent climbing, or withstand extreme weather. www.droogusa.com

The Branch outdoor collection of seven complementary pieces includes a sunshade inspired by a tree. A top a three-branched epoxy-coated steel frame, the fixed shade is a solid disk made of heatstop material that blocks UV rays. www.coroitalia.it

Arik Levy’s honeycomb-inspired trellis comes in three sizes, allowing the system to be configured in a range of shapes. The powder-coated, zinc-plated sheet metal adds a modern graphic pattern to walls while plant growth matures. www.flora-online.de

Belgian firm Vyvey & Partners designed the Romeo & Juliet bench with large and small spaces in mind. The 10.5-foot-long Jatoba wood seats can be installed end-to-end to create a line of evenly spaced seating and trees, which are planted within fiberglass pots. www.extremis.be

Designed by Naoto Fukasawa, the Titikaka outdoor bench has a curvilinear form that is sculptural as well as ergonomic. Eight-foot-long Jatoba wood seats are installed end-to-end over an aluminum frame to reach the ground in the front and back, but the sides are open, creating a wave when used in multiples. www.bebitalia.it

WITH THESE OPTIONS IN FENCING, SEATING, SHADIES, AND MORE, BORING STREETSAPES AND SIDEWALKS ARE NO LONGER AN ALTERNATIVE.

BY JENNIFER K. GORSCH
We have very good things to worry about. California is probably major seismic event? preparedness for a next 30 years will be California during magnitude-6.7 or Geological Survey’s wondered if the U.S. Caterino on February 22. spoke with AN’s Jennifer and reconstruction, and for existing buildings, the costs and benefits over the past two data. Comerio’s research in collecting scientific Research Institute (EERI) She also assisted the United Nations’ a consultant to the post-earthquake aftermath Cannondale Elsinore Hayward-Rodgers Creek San Jacinto N. San Andreus Elsinore Calaveras Garlicc This year is shaping up to be a busy one for Mary Comerio, former architecture department chair and a professor at University of California, Berkeley. When the magnitude-8.8 earthquake hit Chile on February 27, the architect and disaster-recovery expert was in Haiti. As a consultant to the post-disaster branch of the United Nations’ Environment Program, Comerio was brought in to identify and strategize recovery issues. She also assisted the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI) in collecting scientific data. Comerio’s research over the past two decades has focused on the costs and benefits of seismic rehabilitation for existing buildings, post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, and loss modeling. Comerio spoke with AN’s Jennifer Caterino on February 22.

The Architect’s Newspaper: Recent events have us wondering if the U.S. Geological Survey’s prediction of a magnitude-6.7 or larger earthquake in California during the next 30 years will be borne out sooner than later. How would you assess our state’s overall preparedness for a major seismic event?

Mary Comerio: California is probably the best-prepared place in the world. With that said, we certainly have things to worry about. We have very good building codes, so many of our modern buildings will do fine. But we still have older concrete buildings that are vulnerable. Particularly, we happen to have a lot of these buildings that are vulnerable. We have the building codes that are old, but we will have lots of people displaced, and we will have a big open ground for either parking garages or commercial spaces. Those buildings are vulnerable to damage. It won’t be as dramatic or widespread as something in Haiti, but we will not have a lot of people displaced, and pockets of more severe damage, and deaths depending on the time of day.

What do you see as the relationship between green and seismic right now, where there is so much emphasis on retrofitting existing buildings? There is an important opportunity for working in tandem with the green movement and renovations of existing buildings. Your building isn’t going to be very sustainable if it falls down. If you do this renovation in year one, and in year three it collapses in an earthquake, you haven’t done much for sustainability. Typically, people operate in silos. The architects don’t always talk to the structural engineers or the mechanical engineers kind of live in their own world. The green movement helped bring some of those groups together, and the next step is to start bringing some of the seismic safety components into that.

Who is promoting better dialogue between different disciplines? That’s certainly a goal of an organization like EERI, which is a multi-disciplinary organization. Its members include sociologists, planners, architects, psychologists, and geotechnical engineers. But one organization isn’t enough. I think the public groups are actually very important. The San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) has been incredibly important in bringing together developers, architects, building owners and tenants to talk about the soft-story issue. It really needs to be in the civic realm—because that’s where many of the players are. The owners and the tenants don’t come to our technical meetings.

What do you see happening next in seismic-related legislation? I think the next legislation will involve performance-based design. We’re not ready to go there yet, but there is a lot of research on this. We’re beginning to see changes from absolute prescriptions in the building codes to really understanding how buildings perform and designing for those performance levels.

How long do you think it will take before this gets introduced into the codes? Anytime you’ve got new innovative ideas, there is a timeline of about 20 years before they are really adopted. We’re probably ten years into the early adopters of different performance-based concepts, so we’re just starting to see architects and engineers working with these ideas. I think it has another decade before we really start to see changes at the code level, but it’s definitely coming.

SPECIFICALLY SPEAKING continued from front page their general plans along a design-heavy path, well beyond their traditional zoning and land use–based requirements. Santa Monica, for instance, is now updating its Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE) with a major focus on urban form, zeroing in on place-making, boulevards, and specific districts. It also aims to ensure that new and remodeled buildings are compatible in scale with their surroundings, and contribute to neighborhood pedestrian character.

Some think increased focus on design will pay dividends for planners and architects, while others find the more visual guidelines too constraining, even unrealistic. Sacramento passed its 2030 General Plan last March, mapping out its physical design goals for the next 20 years. The image-heavy document makes it easier to see the types of neighborhoods and places the city wants to create. It’s written in terms that are easy to understand, not “planish,” said Woodie Tescher, a principal at PBS&J, an engineering, architecture, and planning firm that consulted on the update. The plan won the Comprehensive Planning Award of Excellence from the California chapter of the American Planning Association in 2009.

Not all are enamored. Kris Barkley, a principal at Sacramento-based Dreyfuss and Blackford Architects who has watched Sacramento planners take more control over the design process, said, “It’s like an idealized, theme park attitude rather than coming up with interesting pieces that come together into a whole that’s interesting in itself. It can be very difficult from a design perspective.” PBS&J’s Tescher noted that the city’s attention to design is part of a growing trend.

Most municipalities are conscious of the need to think seriously about infill and intensified development,” he said. “There is a tendency to ask, how do we make projects acceptable to our community groups? How do we design projects to make more livable places, rather than just the traditional zoning we used to rely on to implement our general plans?”

But simply throwing more prescriptive guidelines at designers and architects could be disastrous, according to Tescher. He suggests inviting architects into the guide-line-writing process as early as possible.

“Bring in architects who are really doing exciting projects and get them to do prototypes for you,” Tescher said. “And then bring in a developer economist and run a pro forma. See if it really works.”

Another way to maximize impact is to focus on subsections of the city through specific area plans. A good example is the Downtown Design Guide adopted by LA in April 2009. Simon Pastucha of the city’s Urban Design Studio said creating a similar plan for the whole city wouldn’t be appropriate in all parts of town. “It’s really hard to come up with guidelines that allow for flexibility or really apply in different context, because you don’t really know until you start looking at specific sites,” said Pastucha.

Indeed, the most effective plans appear to balance prescriptiveness and flexibility. “What I want is an urban plan that’s clear about what planners want,” said architect Wade Kiffler, founder and partner at Kiffler Flammang Architects in Santa Monica. “The key is to find out the limitations, and then do what you want to do within those limitations.”

NATE BERG

AT DEADLINE

BROAD’S DOWNTOWN DETOUR

First he was eyeing Santa Monica, then Beverly Hills, and now Martha Welborne, managing director of the Grand Avenue Committee, which advises on the development of the Grand mixed-use project in Downtown LA, has told AN that philanthropist Eli Broad wants to locate his new art museum there. The proposed museum would be located on the site of two parking lots just south of the Walt Disney Concert Hall and across the street from the LA Museum of Contemporary Art and the Colburn School. The site is currently slated for retail development within phase two of the now-stalled 3.5 million-square-foot development, also known as the Grand Avenue Project, by the Related Companies. According to Welborne, the economic downturn has convinced Related that it might be a good idea to replace some retail (of the over 100,000 square feet planned) with a cultural component. The Broad Foundation maintains it is still considering all three options for the project.

BARN SAVERS

Architecture enthusiasts in LA can breathe a sigh of relief now that A. Quincy Jones’ much-beloved barn, which the architect once used as his home and studio, has been purchased by the Metabolic Studio, an arts program affiliated with the Annenberg Foundation. The barn had been on the market for over two years. The studio purchased the property last November, and this month began a renovation, undertaken by Frederick Fisher, who also designed the foundation’s Annenberg Community Beach House in Santa Monica. The home will be occupied by Chra, an Annenberg-sponsored arts incubator that will use it for offices and for its artist-in-residence program.

AFTER BATTLE, THE REWARD

Eric Owen Moss’ 9040 Sunset Doheny Hotel was officially approved by the West Hollywood City Council on March 15. The 11-story, 270,000-square-foot mixed-use project will have a glazed curtain wall set with floating steel panels, while its smaller residential block will wrap around public and private courtyards. The hotel has gained tacit approval from the final go-ahead after one of the project’s development partners, Ezri Narvar, gave up management control of the project amid a fraud investigation and bankruptcy proceedings.
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The coffee shop has undergone an evolution. Out are the generic designs of chains like Starbucks and Peet’s, which first introduced designer coffee years back. In is a new type of café more rooted in location, authenticity, and—luckily for architects—design. These new shops—even those owned by growing chains like Intelligentsia, Lamill, Blue Bottle, Four Barrel, and Stumptown, some of which are fast expanding to places like New York—celebrate their environs over a corporate formula. Designs are eclectic: Some have a cavernous, raw, modern feel more indicative of an artist’s space than a coffee shop; some use high-quality materials and meticulous lighting to create an ambiance similar to a wine store; and some use DIY and simple details such as vintage tiles and strange brewing apparatuses to create a quirky, bohemian environment. Many, keeping up with our current obsession with craft, present a tactile character that includes rough finishes, open storefront spaces (including communal tables), and exposed brick, steel, and wood. The new Intelligentsia in Venice rethinks the experience of buying coffee altogether, removing separation between barista and customer.

Old is new again, as the latest coffee shops become community magnets, drawing tightly-packed crowds that rival any retail establishment. Perhaps the need to congregate is a natural reaction to the social distance imposed by technology. To keep up with the shift in zeitgeist, even Starbucks is trying to recast its shopworn image with two new stores in Seattle—15th Avenue Coffee & Tea and Roy Street Coffee & Tea—employing reused materials and a raw aesthetic in a bid to recapture the just-us-devotees spirit their own early coffee houses once embodied. A most welcome objective will be achieved should customers become as addicted to the pleasures of interesting design as they already are to coffee highs.

By Sam Lubell and Lydia Lee
Silver Lake Boulevard.

importantly—drivers along to walkers and—perhaps more but shows off the shop window in front not only expos-

ing another. The large and a pastoral Renaissance

Young vintage swivel chairs, upholstery, vinyl red banquettes,

for chairs, animal skins for palette includes crocodile vinyl

contemporary edge. The country club with a

he describes as a midcentury

but still modern. The shop,

ironic, intricate, and retro—

they embraced the area’s vibe:

modern. Over time, however,

assumed it would be sleek and

Lamill decided to open a Silver

AND BKARC

RUBBISH STUDIO

SILVER LAKE

LAMILL

13

strings.

porcelain bulbs hanging from “tattoos” on the walls, and

includes patterned blue tiled “bohemian modern” aesthetic,

fits what some have called her eclectic combination, which

was at the same time modern, focused on creating a space that

the city,” said Bestor, who also

it to feel like a living room in

main seating areas are informal:

MASS principal Ana Henton. The

that divided people up,” said

“We didn’t want to have a wall

that divided people up,” said

MASS principal Ana Henton. The

main seating areas are informal:

stops would be “more

as coffee drinkers to the street,

but shows off the shop to

walkers and—perhaps more

importantly—drivers along Silver Lake Boulevard.

After opening three successful stores in Chicago, deluxe coffeemakers Intelligentsia have transformed the coffee culture of Los Angeles with two extraordinary locations and another on the way. The first, Barbara Bestor’s cafe in Silver Lake, has become that neighborhood’s unofficial town center, with crowds spilling into the street day and night. The store broke the mold by putting most of its seating outdoors, with a smaller area for sipping inside (a counter keeps drinkers close to baristas) and tables that are both semi-enclosed and completely al fresco. “I wanted it to feel like a living room in the city,” said Bestor, who also focused on creating a space that was at the same time modern, authentic, and irrevinent. This eclectic combination, which fits what some have called her “bohemian modern” aesthetic, includes patterned blue tiled floors, plywood ceilings, vinyl “tattoos” on the walls, and porcianal bulbae hanging from strings.

Intelligentsia’s second location is less bohemian and more like “a lab: stark and modern,” said Kyle Glanville, who coordinates all of the company’s California locations. Designed by LA firm MASS, the space is full of stainless steel and a combination of light and dark woods. The biggest experiment here was breaking the barrier between barista and customer, giving each server a sort of working desk where they can walk out to join the fray, rather than be stuck behind a counter. “We didn’t want to have a wall that divided people up,” said MASS principal Ana Henton. The main seating areas are informal: concrete stairs in the back and a new ramped courtyard in front that fits more drinkers than tables would, creating a frenetic, urban atmosphere. Intelligentsia is also opening a store in Pasadena to be designed by MASS this summer. That location’s design is a closely guarded secret, but Glanville did let slip that it would be inside a historic building and that its aesthetic would be “more of a throwback.” This includes a 55-foot-long bar of reclaimed wood and extensive seating to create the impression of a modern-tinged speakasy.

In a neighborhood of industrial warehouses already in turnaround, Coffee Bar shows how you can put a corner load-
docking to good use. The split-level space in San Francisco’s Media Gulch features a warm-

hued awash of Douglas fir that first forms the bar, then travels up the wall and forms a shell, then continues across the room to create the upper-level railing and seating area, where patrons can peer over their laptops to see who’s just come in. “It’s one long ribbon that ties everything together,” said Hulett Jones of Jones | Haydu. “We were intent on seeing how we could unify the space and create a communal feeling, while sticking to a strict budget.” The largely, 1,700-square-foot cafe has been very popular in the community, and the owners have embarked on a new venture—offering sommelier-led wine tastings. And for the connoisseur, there are gourmet dinners created by “romantic kitchens,” including one of Ryan Farn’s first whole-

pig feasts.

In an effort to freshen its ubiquitous brand, Starbucks has jumped on the “authenticity” wagon, creating two stores in Seattle that, ironically, draw inspiration from the chain’s original location: a real coffee house built specifically for its own neighborhood. The shops are full of exposed materials, many sourced from existing Starbucks locations. Recycled elements include a bar top, chairs, and doors from a nearby store, a community table whose wood comes from an old ship, and timber cladding from an old barn. Even a chalkboard, which lists coffee in a much friendlier way than usual, came from Starbucks’ corporate “Support Center,” also located in Seattle. The 15th Avenue location has a 20-foot-wide mural created by a local artist, who also fashioned the store’s metalwork. In addition to this intensive re-design, the stores offer more varieties of coffee than the chain’s other venues, and even serve beer and wine.

Creating a neighborhood hub wasn’t just a happy coincidence for architect David Freeland; it was the point. His 1,000-square- foot Café de Lache, located on a pedestrian-heavy portion of Highland Park’s busy York Boulevard, is an architectural tribute to his community. Its most noticeable element is a large mural that he designed, a colorful interpretation of a photo taken from Freeland’s house with “layers of color corresponding to the layering of space in the community’s hills.” The store embraces tattstum from reddish concrete to exposed brick, adding low, key but fresh touches like bright green Caesar Stone counters, hanging fluorescent, and built-in cabinets. The cafe also includes a kid’s area in back (nicknamed the Kid Corral), with toys hand-designed by the architect.
MARCH
WEDNESDAY 31
Lectures
Gail Petzold
Matter as the Substance of Everything that Exists
6:00 p.m.
University of Southern California
Wong Conference Center
823-29 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles
arch.usc.edu

Eric Avila
The Center Cannot Hold
7:00 p.m.
SO-Arc
960 East 3rd St., Los Angeles
www.siac.edu

Robert Fick
7:00 p.m.
University of California Berkeley
112 Wurster Hall, Berkeley
www.ced.berkeley.edu

APRIL
FRIDAY 2
Lecture
John Bohn
So far...so what?
1:00 p.m.
SO-Arc
960 East 3rd St., Los Angeles
www.siac.edu

MARCH
WEDNESDAY 31
Lectures
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Robert Fick
7:00 p.m.
University of California Berkeley
112 Wurster Hall, Berkeley
www.ced.berkeley.edu

FRIDAY 9
Exhibition opening
Carroll Dunham
Blum & Poe
727 South La Cienega Blvd.
Los Angeles
www.blumandpoe.com

TUESDAY 10
Exhibition opening
Daria Martin: Minutiae
Hammer Museum
10889 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles
www.hammer.ucla.edu

EVENT
Spring Green Festival
10:00 a.m.
SF Concourse Exhibition Center
635 8th St.
San Francisco
www.afft.org

SUNDAY 11
Exhibition opening
Las Vegas Studio
MOCA Pacific Design Center
8887 Melrose Ave.
West Hollywood
www.moca.org

EXHIBITION OPENINGS
The Red Book of C.G. Jung
Creation of a New Cosmology
Hammer Museum
10889 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles
www.hammer.ucla.edu

Charles Long:
100 Pounds of Clay
Orange County Museum of Art
850 South Clemente Dr.
Newport Beach
www.ocma.net

EVENTS
AI/A Los Angeles Spring Home Tours
11:00 a.m.
Various locations
www.aiawsan.org

LA Heritage Day
11:00 a.m.
Heritage Square Museum
3800 Homer St.
Los Angeles
www.heritagesquare.org

MONDAY 12
Lecture
Herman Diaz-Alonso + Jason Payne
6:30 p.m.
University of California Los Angeles
Broad Art Center Auditorium
240 Charles E. Young Dr.
www.aucl.ucla.edu

TUESDAY 13
Lecture
Anfer Amalou: Etgar Keret and Harvey Pekar in Conversation
6:30 p.m.
Contemporary Jewish Museum
726 Mission St.
San Francisco
www.thejcjm.org

FRIDAY 16
Exhibition opening
Ike Uyehara:
Recalibrating Urban Infrastructure
6:00 p.m.
University of Southern California
Wong Conference Center
823-29 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles
arch.usc.edu

Jeanne Marie Tutton Finishing Touches:
Conserving Wall Paintings and Other Architectural Surfaces
7:00 p.m.
J. Paul Getty Museum
1200 Getty Center Dr.
Los Angeles
www.getty.edu

WEDNESDAY 20
Lectures
Mia Lehrer
Recalibrating Urban Infrastructure
6:00 p.m.
University of Southern California
Wong Conference Center
823-29 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles
arch.usc.edu

Susan Krikel, Architect
Jake Goist, 2010, 86m
7:00 p.m.
J. Paul Getty Museum
1200 Getty Center Dr.
Los Angeles
www.getty.edu

FRIDAY 23
Exhibition opening
The Biennale of Sydney 2012
11:00 a.m.
The Morris Museum
1000 Washington Street
Morristown
www.morrisarts.org

SUNDAY 25
Exhibition opening
Celia Hervey
The Range
6:00 p.m.
The Broad
200 Grand Avenue
Los Angeles
www.thebroad.org

MONDAY 26
Lecture
Jim Pfeiffer
The Range
6:00 p.m.
The Broad
200 Grand Avenue
Los Angeles
www.thebroad.org

TUESDAY 27
Exhibition opening
Celebrate 2010: Grand Opening Exhibit
6:00 p.m.
A+D Museum
6032 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles
www.aapid.org

SATURDAY 30
Exhibition opening
Catherine Hopper
The Range
6:00 p.m.
The Broad
200 Grand Avenue
Los Angeles
www.thebroad.org

To create 49 Cities, New York-based architects Work AC selected 49 urban schemes, ranging from Le Corbusier’s Radiant City to Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer’s plan for Brasilia (1957, above). Originally exhibited at New York’s Storefront for Art and Architecture, the show illustrates each plan with a map and metrics such as floor-area ratio (FAR) and population density. Alongside works like Ebenzer Howard’s Garden City are satires such as Rem Koolhaas’s Exxodus, which envisioned a division between old, “bad” London and a new “zone of architectural and social perfections.” Work AC sticks ribbons next to various plans—“Best All-Around: FAR” or “Winner: Density”—teasing out the tension in these schemes between vision and delusion.
Here. The words and phrases at the Vaseline. Dude. I think there is of Alexandra Schwartz’s new study, star-dusted adoptive city (he grew relationships between Ruscha and his queasiness, exaltation. The city itself: fascination, perplexity, often inspires the same feelings as carefully calculated public image— highly ambiguous achievement entire ethos. It is a testament to this art, but as the foundation of an only as the subject matter of his stations, the word “dude”—not ming pools, parking lots, gas places of the City of Angels—swim—on the banal-sublime common—protean career, Ruscha has seized throughout his restless, formally is to drastically understate the case: Los Angeles in the popular imagi—nation. Yet to call him an “LA artist” is to drastically understate the case: Throughout his restless, formally protein career, Ruscha has seized on the banal-sublime common—places of the City of Angels—swimming pools, parking lots, gas stations, the word “dude”—not only as the subject matter of his art, but as the foundation of an entire ethos. It is a testament to this highly ambiguous achievement that Ruscha’s work—as well as his carefully calculated public image—often inspires the same feelings as the city itself: fascination, perplexity, queasiness, exaltation.

The complex, symbiotic relationship between Ruscha and his star-dusted adoptive city (he grew up in Oklahoma) is the subject of Alexandra Schwartz’s new study. Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles, which is, shockingly, the first full-length critical treatment of the artist. The book is loosely organized around four major aspects of Ruscha’s career: his role in LA’s early avant-garde art community that coalesced around the Ferus Gallery, his ambivalent engagement with Hollywood culture, his ongoing interest in the urban structures and built environment of Los Angeles, and his canny self-promotion in the media. While each of these topics constitutes an original, potentially fruitful approach to Ruscha’s life and work, Schwartz has unfortunately spread herself too thin. Few of the book’s premises are developed in sufficient depth, and the lack of a substantive overall argument about Ruscha’s relationship with LA deprives the study of a coherent narrative. What we are left with mirrors, unintentionally, some of the sprawl and tangle of a freeway interchange.

The book’s strongest thread by far deals with Ruscha’s strategic adoption of various mythical SoCal personae, such as the classic cowboy, the bohemian avant-gardiste, the Hollywood “bad boy,” and the “carefree California funster.” As critics and historians have tended to focus more on Ruscha’s formal artistic production than on the performative aspects of his career, this shift of focus is both original and overdue. Particularly appealing is a discussion of Ruscha’s highly theatrical self-presentation in publicity photographs destined to appear in magazines and exhibition materials; here, the author admirably captures the disconcerting ambiguity of Ruscha’s media machinations: Is he a sardonic critic or a cynical exploiter of Hollywood-style mass culture, or both? Overall, Schwartz is circumspect in her treatment of the artist’s “sly, self-conscious masquerade.” While she approves of its potential as an ironic deconstruction of artistic, sexual, and social identity, she judiciously observes that Ruscha’s position as a white, straight, male, critically-sanctioned avant-garde artist allowed him the security to try on various provocative guises without running the risk of being ridiculed or marginalized.

Unfortunately, the problem of identity is the only theme that Schwartz treats with adequate critical and contextual depth. A chapter focusing on Ruscha’s social and aesthetic involvement with Hollywood culture, typified by his close relationship with Dennis Hopper, begins promisingly enough but fizzles out in a welter of quotation and anecdote. Further on, Schwartz intriguingly proposes to elucidate the relationship between Ruscha’s photographic projects and new developments in contemporary urban theory; yet instead of a coherent account of this relationship, we get summaries of classic texts by Kevin Lynch, Reyner Banham, and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown interspersed abruptly and almost arbitrarily with descriptions of Ruscha’s deadpan architectural taxonomies. Here, as elsewhere, the author

**THE DUDE**

Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles
Alexandra Schwartz
The MIT Press
$29.95

A Blvd. Called Sunset. Sand in the Vaseline. Dude. I think there is something dangerous going on here. The words and phrases at the center of Ed Ruscha’s paintings and drawings consistently evoke the places and ideas, the tropes and attitudes that characterize Los Angeles in the popular imagination. Yet to call him an “LA artist” is to drastically understate the case: Throughout his restless, formally protean career, Ruscha has seized on the banal-sublime common-places of the City of Angels—swimming pools, parking lots, gas stations, the word “dude”—not only as the subject matter of his art, but as the foundation of an entire ethos. It is a testament to this highly ambiguous achievement that Ruscha’s work—as well as his carefully calculated public image—often inspires the same feelings as the city itself: fascination, perplexity, queasiness, exaltation.

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LONG LIVE THE MCQUEEN
continued from page 17
futuristic, and ethereal,

I was drawn to McQueen's garments as much for their meticulous, often architectonic construction as for their historical allusions, such as those conjured by the slashed tartans of the iconic Highland Rape collection (fall/winter 1995–96); for the strong references to issues of identity seen in the romantic and melancholy Widows of Culloden (fall/winter 2006–7); for the extraordinary sculptural silhouettes seen in It's Only A Game (spring/summer 2005); and for the sensual, sci-fi combinations of fabrics and prints, seen in Scanners (fall/winter 2003–4). In McQueen's spectacular presentations, the clothes were truly one with the designer’s complex and often fantastical visions. Remarkably, McQueen made the leap from runway to retail quite successfully, but the clothes could never be completely separated from the fantasy.

I selected the pieces for Skin + Bones during several visits to the designer’s unassuming London studio. Although I didn’t meet McQueen himself, I always had the impression that he was there, working on the floor above, and that nothing was done without his tacit approval. Calvin Tsao, who designed the exhibition, wanted something especially strong for the first gallery to signal the intersection of fashion and architecture to viewers. The cupola shape of the leather bodice from It’s Only A Game echoed the glass bubbles of a corner of Greg Lynn’s Slavin House, while the structure of both McQueen’s laced leather dress from Scanners and Lynn’s Blob Wall was created through the repetition of a single module: a simple shoelace for McQueen and a tri lobed plastic blob for Lynn.

McQueen’s spring/summer 2010 show Plato’s Atlantis, presented in Paris in early October 2009, was a tour de force. In an interview conducted just before that show, Nick Knight asked McQueen where and when he was happiest, and he answered that it was when he was scuba diving. In Plato’s Atlantis, which had been, radically, broadcast live from the runway, McQueen succeeded in bringing to life the world that he saw beneath the sea and in his mind’s eye. Feet planted firmly on the ground—albeit in outrageous lobster-claw shoes—models walked the runway wearing garments printed with complex, digitally generated images inspired by nature in shapes that at times recalled a crustacean’s carapace and at others the gently undulating tentacles of a jellyfish. McQueen, fittingly, described Plato’s definition of Atlantis as “a metaphor for a kind of Neverland, where people find sanctuary in bad times.”

THE DUDE continued from page 17
appears content to remain on the surface of a potentially fascinating topic. This tendency to substitute description and citation for sustained critical analysis is the major flaw of Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles. While Schwartz is often successful in evoking the profound ambiguity of both Ruscha’s artistic project and his relationship to Los Angeles, she generally declines to make any sweeping or even modest conclusions about what this ambiguity might mean—either about Angeleno and American culture, or about Ruscha’s place within art history. The next critic to tackle this artist’s enigmatic, deceptively superficial oeuvre will need to be more aggressive in asking what lies behind the palm trees and parking lots so beloved of American art’s coolest dude.

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On April 15, the San Francisco Planning Commission will again take up the proposed 38-story 555 Washington Street tower, designed by Heller Manus for AEGON, Lowe Enterprises, and Liberty Hill. At its March 18 meeting, the commission certified the project’s EIR. (Because of a public notice problem, the rest of the agenda was held over, but my sense is that the tower already had the votes going in.)

At an earlier hearing on February 11, community activist Sue Hestor asked the commissioners, “Does ‘new urbanism’ say that we have to fight suburban sprawl by putting 400-foot buildings everywhere in San Francisco?” Hestor has a point. For far too long smart growth has meant density über alles on both sides of the Bay. The result is a dog’s breakfast, for the most part, much of which has little to do with walkable urbanism and nothing to do with urbanity. It’s time to get nuanced about density. As 555 Washington demonstrates, density’s context is not just the block itself—the immediate environs—but what is influenced and perhaps threatened by its increase.

The 555 Washington tower disregards current zoning for the block it shares with William Pereira’s 1972 Transamerica Pyramid, still the tallest building in the city. Next to it, the new tower doesn’t look so big, of course, and it comes with a package of ground-level amenities. For Heller Manus, best known for political acumen, the design is okay, if cribbed from the late-modern playbook. All of this has won it an endorsement from the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, an important advocacy group.

So far, so good—I can imagine the trail of logic that brought SPUR on board. It all seems fair and, if it violates the planning code in the process, well, the code’s out of date anyway. Why should the Planning Commission hesitate to move ahead with 555 Washington when it takes it up again? There are three good reasons for them to slow the tower down and reconsider its larger context.

First, let’s put a halt to case-by-case rezoning. Dropping a housing tower into the Pyramid block continues a sorry tradition of case-by-case rezoning in San Francisco. Back in May 2009, John King—addressing the 555 Washington tower specifically—spoke up for “a re-imagined, focused plan for the financial and retail district.” He also noted the price the city pays for not having one. “As long as downtown is up for grabs, in effect, count on the process to grow more ad hoc and cynical.” San Francisco’s Planning Department may be hobbled by the down-turn, King observed, but isn’t the real opportunity of a downturn to plan intelligently for the future?

Given the state of the housing market, there’s no urgency at all to approve the tower. By delaying it, the commissioners can avoid repeating the travesty of exempting Heller Manus’ Folsom/Spear Towers, now the Infinity, from the Rincon Area Plan. (They were approved, and then a new Rincon plan was announced—with a dotted line around the towers that suggested that its eastern boundary had been quickly redrawn.)

Second, add density to the core, not the edge. The Pyramid block is on the northern edge of San Francisco’s Financial District, considerably past California Street. To its north, the buildings are much lower, an eclectic mix whose tenants benefit from its current density. This is where you find two of the region’s best bookstores, City Lights and Stout’s, and many of its best dealers in the decorative arts. You want urbanity? It starts here, yet the area clearly thrives because of its proximity to the financial district. Shanghai, facing the same dilemma, has opted to preserve similar areas like the Puxi district, recognizing—as Singapore did not—that they are irreplaceable. This is why SF’s planning code sought, a generation ago, to preserve the area.

Let’s give its framers some credit for foresight. The question 555 Washington raises is whether it’s inappropriate for its site, but what happens next. As UC Berkeley’s Peter Bosselman once pointed out to me, adding density at the edge puts pressure on the lower-density neighborhoods that adjoin it. He was talking about the Rincon area, but the comment is even more applicable to the north end of the central business district, where recent and proposed projects along Kearny Street are also testing the higher-density waters. A generation ago, KPf’s building at 600 California had to step down to blend in with lower buildings to the north. That’s the power of a planning code that’s actually enforced. If enough exceptions to it like 555 Washington get approved, the current 400-foot “wall” along Washington Street is unlikely to hold.

Third, focus on urbanity, not just density. The question to ask of density is what does it really contribute to the city? This takes in everything: scale and mix, design quality, effect on microclimates, synergy with surrounding uses, transit access, etc. Instead of giving 555 Washington a pass, the Planning Commission still has the opportunity to send a much-needed message to the city and the developer community: No more case-by-case! Now—in the lull before the resumption of business as usual—is the right time to take a comprehensive look at how the district should grow, gaining rather than losing urbanity, and how much added density, if any, the areas north of it should absorb. These are the real and pressing issues that the EIR did not address. The commissioners have one last chance to do so. They should take it.

John Parman writes for An Arcade, and ARCCA. He edits print and digital publications for Gensler.
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