After much anticipation, SFMOMA and the Berkeley Art Museum have both revealed the shortlists for their major new architecture projects, and the Bay Area’s cultural scene is poised to go prime-time.

SFMOMA on May 11 announced that it had shortlisted four firms with international reputations, but no San Francisco firms made the list. The shortlists will be narrowed down to one firm by August 14, and construction of the new building is expected to begin in 2012.

Located next to the LA Coliseum and USC, LA County’s Natural History Museum (NHM) has long been trying to carve out a more naturalist approach to its exhibits and programming. After years of planning, the museum has announced a major outdoor spread, known as “For the Birds,” which will feature interactive exhibits and educational programs to engage visitors of all ages.

San Francisco is known as a city where it can be tough to get almost anything built, and the fate of the condo tower known as 555 Washington has added more polish to that reputation. The proposed high-rise, located next to the Transamerica Pyramid, squeaked narrowly through the planning commission, only to be rebuffed by the board of supervisors.

Meanwhile, officials at the LA County Museum of Art (LACMA) have offered to lend their expertise and fundraising power to help conserve south LA’s iconic Watts Towers. The collection of quirky steel-and-brick towers has long been a symbol of the city’s cultural diversity, and LACMA’s involvement is seen as a major boost for the project.

After years of nomadic existence, LA’s A+D Museum, created in 2001, is finally unpacking its suitcases. On April 27, its new space opened at 6032 Wilshire Boulevard, right across the street from LACMA and next to the Petersen Automotive Museum.

The museum’s new home is a near duplicate of its former digs, and the move is seen as a major step forward for the institution, which has struggled to find a permanent home in the city. The new space will feature a range of exhibitions and programming, including a focus on the work of LA-based architects and designers.
Between sky-high unemployment, wilting public funding, and still-dormant private markets, it may not be a great time to be an architect in California. But it is a great time for something else: ideas competitions. Not since we started the California edition has there been such a wealth of inspiration. It seems the slow economy has brought about the golden age of California brainstorming.

Topicality and originality are in order as such contests as the LA Forum’s Dingbat 2.0, reconsidering Los Angeles’ ubiquitous “dingbat” apartment building for the 21st century; The Architect’s Newspaper and SCI-Arc’s Los Angeles Clean Tech Corridor/Green District Competition, calling for new sustainable planning, power, and architectural ideas for LA’s Clean Tech Corridor; advocacy group Rail LA’s call for ideas to envision high-speed rail options for LA; the LAUSD’s upcoming contest to renovate—and not abandon—its existing schools; Good Magazine’s school garden design competition; and more. You can check out our online competition page as well as the LA Forum site to find a full list of these undertakings.

Not only do these competitions encourage innovative thinking about the cities and buildings around us, but they’re a perfect way for architects and designers to show off their skills and to experiment with new ideas. Of course, entering competitions takes time and money, and the latter is in short supply these days. Many competitions don’t have much to offer in terms of prizes, another casualty of the recession. We encourage those putting contests together to do whatever they can to come up with suitable prizes for those entering, and we encourage potential sponsors to dig into their pockets to support the kind of innovation that will be likely to pay back solid dividends soon enough.

But firms should see slow times as a way to experiment and grow, even if that means losing some money in the process. It’s an investment that will be well worth it in the long term. Invariably, firms use at least part of the designs they’ve developed in future projects.

Competitions are a rich tradition in architecture—more so in Europe than in America. In boom times, architects across the spectrum are too flat out busy banging out documents and presentations to engage in the pause and reflection that competitions demand. But it’s high time to use the current downturn to tap the wells of creativity latent in so much architectural thinking.

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SAN FRANCISCO-Russian magnate Michael Milken is known for his conceptual designs, but an office building on One Kearny and 710 Market streets offers a tantalizing glimpse of their fully realized work. The team designed the lobby of One Kearny—a tripartite unit that consists of a 1964 building sandwiched between a 1964 Charles Moore addition and a contemporary office by Charles Bloszies—creating a permanent installation that is a modern riff on the traditional coffered ceiling. Here, the coffers have metamorphosed into lights made from sheets of paper-thin wood veneer, and the traditional square form is skewed into diamonds that reflect the angles of the lobby hallway. Lightfold was able to qualify as art for the city’s “two percent for art” funding requirement for projects—and is something you can catch without braving the lines at SFMOMA.

BIG GREEN SLAM
Frank Gehry is always honest, and we love that. Especially when it gets him into trouble. Speaking to Thomas Pritzker, the CEO of the Pritzker Organization, during the annual lecture on Urban Life and Issues in Chicago, Gehry called LEED purely political and complained, “A lot of LEED is given for bogus stuff.” He added that the costs of making a green building are “enormous,” and “they don’t pay back in your lifetime.” Ah, the privileges of fame, and being 70-plus.

EROGENOUS ZIONING
We’ve learned from our friends at the SF Chronicle that SF planning director John Rahaim has recommended the firing of four senior planners—including longtime zoning administrator Larry Badiner—for receiving and circulating X-rated photos and videos. According to the Chronicle’s city hall deep threat, as many as two dozen staffers may have received e-mails at work containing sexually explicit material, along with joking comments that some construed as racist and homophobic.

PARTY OF THE YEAR
The gala to celebrate the A+D Museum in its new home surpassed even the museum’s expectations, with hundreds crowding into the new space and spilling over into the back parking lot. While celebs like Wolfgang Puck showed up, the real stars were those who produced models and paintings for auction, including Richard Meier, Thom Mayne, Hiroshi Abe, David Arquette (Hubby of Courtney Cox), Bruce Mau, Max Neutra, Lorcan O’Herlihy, and many more. It was a great launch for a great museum.

AT THE WEALTH SPRINGS
Diane Keaton is always a welcome sight, particularly when she’s promoting preservation, as she did at LA Magazine’s breakfast discussion with LACMA Conservancy director Linda Dishman at FIG restaurant on April 28. At the event, Keaton made some missteps: She couldn’t think of her favorite Department of Water and Power Building or her favorite place to go downtown; but she did raise a very good point about the unwillingness of LA’s super-rich to fund the restoration of some of its most precious architecture. She voiced her hope that LACMA, the Getty, or someone like Brad Pitt would purchase such vulnerable treasures as Frank Lloyd Wright’s Ennis House. And who better to convince them but a fellow star? Later that night, this guttersnipe was a lucky attendee at a dinner for the Milken Global Conference, where we talked to host Michael Milken. He professed a great love of architecture, but we didn’t dare ask him to name names.

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WATTS HAPPENING? continued from front page

The 710 Market streets offers stainless steel wire rope products and connectors

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WATS HAPPENING? continued from front page

mortal structures, completed by outsider artist Simon Rodia after 30 years in 1954, reach up to 100 feet and are covered with mosaics of broken glass, sea shells, pottery, and tile. Due to gradual neglect, they are now plagued with peeling paint, crumbling concrete, and degrading glass.

The cash-strapped city’s Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) that has long overseen their upkeep can no longer afford to properly conserve them.

“The idea is, we’ve offered to be helpful and offered to coordinate others who will be helpful,” said DCA director Michael Govan. According to DCA Executive Director Olga Garay, $5 million is needed to complete the deferred maintenance of the towers, but the agency will only be able to direct about $178,000 toward the effort this year. Moreover, DCA’s historic site curator has opted to take early retirement.

LACMA will most likely be working with the Getty Conservation Institute, which has offered to collaborate on the project, and is also talking with officials at the California African American Museum, which has offered staff and fundraising resources, said LACMA spokesperson Christine Choi. Govan said it’s still too early to detail what specific work will be carried out and what funds will be raised, but he did say that LACMA wants to look at the structures as pieces of fine art, a perspective that the city has been lacking for years. “They don’t have the same focus on object conservation,” he said.

Leading the way in that conservation would be Mark Gilberg, director of LACMA’s conservation department, and Frank Preussner, LACMA’s senior conservation scientist. Preussner, who works as a private consultant, has been involved with the towers for years. Among other things, the team will gather archives from Cultural Affairs, speak with volunteers who have offered conservation assistance in the past, and re-evaluate a preservation plan developed by city and state in the 1980s, said Choi. More information on the plan will be available after the team completes its initial assessment. DCA and LACMA should have a Memorandum of Understanding, with a full plan for the renovation, completed by July, according to DCAs Garay.

Govan stressed that there is no silver bullet to fix the towers once and for all. “The damage is ongoing and cumulative,” he said, “it needs constant attention, at a higher level over time.”

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Flexibility is a virtue, particularly when you work on wildly diverse sites as Owen Kennerly Architecture & Planning does. The four-person San Francisco firm makes the most of the city’s urban framework, creating unique spatial progressions and view corridors while building on tight or even sloping plots. They’ve also learned to work in rural areas, where environmental and landscape restrictions are completely different from urban settings. “It’s not just making it look slick and beautiful, but the internal problem-solving that goes into these projects,” said founder Owen Kennerly, who sees each as an “investigation.”

The studio is also flexible in terms of style, often incorporating classic ideas in a modern way. “I don’t like to be polemical,” Kennerly stressed. Kennerly, who graduated from Berkeley in 1994 and works together with his wife Sarina Bowen Kennerly, is one of the city’s rising stars, and his firm was one of six to win an AIA SF Emerging Practices Award last spring. The downturn has slowed some of their projects, but things seem to be getting back on track with fascinating work.

**27th Street Residence**

The project is nicknamed the “Vessel” because “it feels like it’s surfing on the land,” Kennerly said. In fact it is a 3,800-square-foot addition to a small home in San Francisco’s Noe Valley. The existing building volume is clad in a scrim of cedar pickets stretching back into the slope of the site’s steep hill to establish a podium of bedrooms and service areas. To prevent the dark centers that often plague townhouses, front-to-back living spaces with glass at both ends open to a panoramic view and garden. And to make an unusual progression of space feel more unified, each square foot gets used: hallways become stairs, and vice-versa. Shaped by the slipstream of neighbors’ views and sightlines, the faceted-cedar master suite is suspended overhead like a ship (another reason for the house’s name), set between skylights.

**Lake Tahoe Beach House**

Conceived as three conjoined cabins, this 2,400-square-foot vacation home combines modern architecture with rustic living on a challenging north shore site of Lake Tahoe. In response to local ordinances that require new structures to minimize their drainage “shadow” along the perimeter of the lake (Kennerly hired a botanist to make a study), the design lifts the bulk of the dwelling a full floor above grade with generous cantilevers that reduce its effective footprint. Kennerly calls this form “an inverted ziggurat.” Thus the existing spatial flow of the site is retained, and a sheltered patio is created at grade. Accessed by a long ramping stair, the home’s slight variations—like mild level changes and walls that pinch in subtly—make it cozy for two people or as many as 20. The material palette combines blackened zinc with board-formed concrete, natural cedar, and glass.

**Photo Studio**

Located on a small 37-by-75-foot lot on a non-descript block on the south slope of Nob Hill, this five-story building reinterprets the city’s traditional architecture by taking the classic order of base, middle, and top, and unifying it behind a terra-cotta rain screen. It employs San Francisco’s omnipresent bay windows, but here the minimal double-height openings resemble sleek prisms and allow views both outward and around the block. A two-story lobby slips up between the windows. The top apartments feature mezzanines opening onto private roof decks with views across downtown.
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Ball-Nogues' installations—Maximilian’s Schel at Materials & Applications in 2005 and Liquid Sky at New York’s PS1 in 2007—have brought them a well-deserved cult following. Their latest piece, Table Cloth, has just been completed in the courtyard of the Herb Alpert School of Music’s 1970s-era Schoenberg Hall at UCLA. It consists of 268 finished plywood dining tables and stools, loosely connected via metal rings and flexible plywood members, and hanging like a curtain from a steel beam bolted into one of the building’s topmost lintels. From straight on, each faceted piece glitters when struck by sunlight. From the side, it looks more like spiky chain-mail armor. “They’re engineered to hang on each other, so we’ve essentially made a piece of cloth,” explained principal Ben Ball.

The installation serves as a backdrop for performances by music department students: A plywood stage can be placed over sections that touch the ground, and the irregular geometry of the installation helps reduce echo and reverberation. The first performance was on April 26. Ball-Nogues developed the project with students at UCLA’s Department of Architecture and Urban Design. Music students also contributed. The irregularly shaped three-legged tables and stools were made individually by a CNC router. “We wanted to make furniture that was appropriate for the [late-modern] era of the building,” Ball said.

Perhaps the most innovative feature is that the tables and stools will be reused by UCLA students and departments when summer’s over. “We thought, how can you build another life out of materials instead of just recycling them?” said Ball, who hopes to provoke fresh thinking both about art installations and sustainability. “Something doesn’t have to become less valuable when you take it apart.” The project was funded by grants from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies and the UCLA Arts Initiative. Buro Happold provided engineering pro bono. And music students are already asking how they can perform on or with Table Cloth.

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Jon Frishman traded in jobs at SOM, Gwathmey Siegel, and Richard Meier & Partners (where he worked on the Getty Center) for independent practice in a house-studio that has taken him 12 years to complete. Despite recurring setbacks, he achieved the same crisp elegance and light-infused serenity that Meier brings to his best houses at a fraction of the cost (about $150 per square foot). The steep view site is located high in Laurel Canyon—a neighborhood that was hippie heaven in the 1960s but is now quite gentrified. He acquired a decrepit old house perched on a steep slope at a bargain price in 1997, and immediately sat down to design his own. Inspired by jazz rhythms (Frishman plays African drums in a downtown LA park on Sundays) and the Constructivist geometry of El Lissitzky, he dashed off the working drawings in two weeks. It took only six months to secure permits, demolish the old house, reinforce the existing foundations, and erect a delicate steel frame.

Then the problems began. Frishman had to do all kinds of jobs (including a parking garage for Disneyland) to make some money. No contractor could achieve the quality he insisted on at a price he could afford. The first set of windows leaked badly and had to be replaced. It took a year to find a glazier who could install the large sheets of plate glass. Subs came and went, and he ended up doing much of the work himself. Week after week, year after year—with time out to build his practice—he installed the aluminum and stucco cladding, drywall, and built-in cabinets. “Friends thought I was crazy,” he said. “I wondered about that myself.” From the street, you see only an expanse of translucent glass. This slides away to reveal a scarlet Alfa-Romeo Spyder in the garage and a tiny landscaped forecourt. Outside and in, there’s a sense of lightness in the thin walls and sharply cut openings, but the purity of the design is tempered by the human scale and materiality. Frishman learned from his teacher, William Turnbull, that skylights should be placed at the edge of a room so that light washes over walls. The honed slate pavers of the open living area flow out through glass sliders to the terrace, which hovers like a diving board above the canyon. A grating in the living room can be flipped up to reveal springy steel stairs leading down to a studio suspended among the eucalyptus trees. A staircase with laminated glass treads leads up to the master bedroom and an ipé wood terrace, where every piece was calculated in advance to eliminate waste. Frishman wrapped a powder-coated steel sink around a black walnut cabinet (which is a native wood and therefore “greener” than imported Chinese bamboo) in the two bathrooms, and located an open-sided shower beneath the stairs. That’s one of a dozen original details in a 1,700-square-foot house that conceals the frugality and improvisations of its construction. Michael Webb
The Mullin Automotive Museum, which opened last month in Oxnard, California, is one of the most impossibly beautiful car collections in the country, on display in one of the nation’s most nondescript locales. Peter Mullin, a Brentwood businessman and chairman emeritus of a multibillion-dollar executive compensation and benefits planning firm, has parked his curvaceous French art deco machines in a 1990s tilt-up warehouse, in the middle of an industrial park on converted farm-land flat as an iron skillet. Before Santa Monica architect David Hertz revamped it, the building literally was the architecture of nowhere. The museum houses more than 50 Bugattis, Delages, Delahayes, Talbot Lagos, Hispano-Suizas, and Avion Voisins. The cars are marvels of engineering, sweeping, hand-hammered fenders and coaches built around aluminum chassis and super-charged straight-eight and V12 engines. No other automotive designs have so successfully alloyed pure sumptuous sensuality to a blast of raw, roaring horsepower. After rejecting a proposal to remodel the structure in a literal interpretation of streamline saloons, cabriolets, and racers, Mullin recruited Hertz to give the museum an identity without succumbing to idolatr-y. Hertz, known for developing the lightweight concrete Syndecrete, and for his ongoing Wing House (made out of pieces of a Boeing 747) in Malibu, has intervened with restraint. “The sophistication of the cars speaks much more eloquently than any attempt to mimic them,” he said. The tilt-up previously held Times-Mirror scion Otis Chandler’s assemblage of muscle cars and motorcycles—a California surfer’s obsession. Oddly, Chandler had never bothered to adapt the bland structure to suit the image of his collection. The museum remained a warehouse, complete with a single door leading to a small office that was the “foyer.” To get to the showroom, you passed a typical front desk, as if you were going to inspect an overseas shipment stacked in cardboard boxes, and not some very valuable, and beautiful, cars. Hertz’s instincts are good. He attacked the building head-on by punching a large entrance into the off-street side of the huge concrete shell, while essentially leaving the rest of the building alone. Hertz then deepened the opening and installed an inverted stair-step lintel composed of clear anodized aluminum plates with exposed rivets (inspired by the monocoque frames of early Bugattis). A canopy made of dozens of Ford Econoline van windshields laid onto a sloped steel framework—referring, obliquely, to the Paris Metro canopies of Hector Guimard—covers a landscaped patio. By extending the building envelope outward to claim the driveway and inward to seize hold of the interior, Hertz has offered not just a sense of procession—but he’s blasted the orthodoxy of the height of the building, announcing the “Mullin Automotive Museum.” Nothing bold here; just enough to shed the anonymity that otherwise would permanently cloak the museum’s identity. A few strokes complete the interior. Hertz blacked out the ceiling, punched an elevator shaft straight through the roof, where he added a deck—a complete anomaly in a landscape of unused flat roofs—and purposely laid out the museum’s cars. The exterior canopy (above) is made of van windshields. parking lot, he added a museum on its long axis to unveil the collection as slowly as possible. Hertz also convinced Mullin to make the building largely energy self-sufficient (although there are no plans to pursue a LEED rating). The rooftop includes 20 wind turbines, 132 solar panels, and an ESD square-foot green roof, not to mention spectacular views of the nearby Los Padres National Forest. The 60,000-square-foot project, which took eight months to complete, cost about $6 million. “That’s less than the cost of any one of the cars in the museum,” quipped Hertz. Well worth the price for providing a subtle sense of identity, while shrewdly loosening the confining boundaries of industrial park architecture.

GREG GOLDIN
FOR THE BIRDS continued from front page niche. And in late April, the museum announced its new North Campus plans, which will essentially be a heavily-planted outdoor exhibition space and welcome mat for visitors, due to open in the summer of 2011.

The $30 million, 3.5-acre project will include lush gardens and plazas, outdoor exhibits, and integrated architectural elements. The project is the most ambitious merger of architecture and landscape in California since San Francisco unveiled the undulating green roof of Renzo Piano’s rebuilt California Academy of Sciences in 2008.

The plans are being overseen by a team of local firms, including CO Architects (now completing a historic renovation and seismic retrofit of NHM’s 1913 Building), Mia Lehrer + Associates, and Cordell Corporation project management.

“Exhibits, architecture, and landscape will all be integrated. You won’t be able to tell where one begins and one ends,” said CO Architects associate principal Fabian Kremkus, who has been working on the project for about two years.

Museum staff dreamed up the North Campus plan in the hope of capitalizing on the local climate and continuing to re-energize the museum after its recent addition of seven new galleries and five new permanent exhibitions. The campus was made possible when LA County agreed to fund a new $10 million, multi-level car park for the museum, freeing up land once used for surface parking. The additional $20 million for the campus will be raised by the museum. The car park, located on the northwest edge of the project, is on the site of a potential museum addition by New York architect Steven Holl, first proposed in 2002, which hasn’t been able to attract enough funding to go forward, said museum spokesperson Cynthia Wornham.

“There are no plans at this point, but we continue to reserve space for a building if funding becomes available in the future,” she said. The addition could be juxtaposed with the car park if necessary, she explained.

With the new North Campus, the entry experience from Exposition Boulevard will be dramatically altered. Visitors will make their way through 11 thematic zones, including the Urban Edge, made of a series of butterfly habitats. The new Main Entrance Bridge will be made of curved white steel trusses, abstractly emulating mammoth whale bones, and its concrete walkway will be set with shells. The work will also include a stepped landscaped seating area in front of the museum called by the awkward name “the Strampitheater” (for stair, ramp, amphitheater), for outdoor events.

Kremkus thinks that the new project is a step beyond what was built at the SF Academy of Sciences, since its natural elements will be easier to visit and literally made largely for educational instruction. Many of these habitats will be intended for visitors, but others will be used by museum scientists to carry out experiments.

Major architectural elements include Plexiglas skylights and stepped wooden platforms in the Pollinator Garden that would allow visitors to get as close as possible to the wildlife. Even the car park will merge with the land, fitted with a wire mesh canopy of flowering vines and hummingbird and butterfly habitats. The new Main Entrance Bridge will be made of curved white steel trusses, abstractly emulating mammoth whale bones, and its concrete walkway will be set with shells. The work will also include a stepped landscaped seating area in front of the museum called by the awkward name “the Strampitheater” (for stair, ramp, amphitheater), for outdoor events.

Kremkus thinks that the new project is a step beyond what was built at the SF Academy of Sciences, since its natural elements will be easier to visit and literally more down-to-earth. The whole thing is a scientific learning opportunity, he said.

“We all know what a raccoon is, but did you know that there are 96 species of bees?”
**DIARY**

**10**

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Pacific Palisades
17985 Pacific Coast Hwy.
7:30 p.m.
Mary Miller

**LECTURE**

WEDNESDAY 2

**10899 Wilshire Blvd.**

The Hammer Museum

Spectral Gesamtkunstwerk

Los Angeles

7:00 p.m.

Mel Chin: So I guess it has to be this way...

Santa Monica Museum of Art
2526 Michigan Ave.
Santa Monica

www.smma.org

**EXHIBITION OPENING**

Hiroshi: Visions of Japan
Norton Simon Museum
411 West Colorado Blvd.
Pasadena

www.nortonsimon.org

**SUNDAY 6**

**SONO EXHIBITIONS**

Arable Ecotony: A Retrospective
MOCAtv

25th Street Grand Ave.

Los Angeles

www.mocatv.org

Here Not There:
San Diego Art Now
Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

700 Prospect St.
La Jolla

www.mcasd.org

**MONDAY 7**

**SYMPOSIUM**

The Disappearing Hand: Architectural Representation After Representation

UCLA College of Architecture and Urban Design

Wynott Dr. and Hilgard Ave.

Los Angeles

www.aud.ucla.edu

**TUESDAY 8**

**LECTURE**

Alex McDowell, Lisa Feldstein, Ada Chan, et al.

A Regional Dialogue on Community Planning

MetroCenter

101 8th St., Oakland

www.justmetropolitics.org

Colson Whitehead

7:00 p.m.

The Hammer Museum

www.hammer.ucla.edu

**SATURDAY 19**

**EVENT**

Lewis Mumford Awards

6:00 p.m.

Wurster Hall

UC Berkeley

Bancroft Way and Telegraph Ave., Berkeley

www.adpsr.org

**MONDAY 27**

**CONFERENCE**

California Higher Education Sustainability Conference

8:00 a.m.

Los Angeles Community College District

770 Wiltshire Blvd., Los Angeles

10thghedsustainabilityconference.org

**TUESDAY 22**

**CONFERENCE**

LA Convention Center

515 3rd St.
Los Angeles

www.laconvention.com

**THURSDAY 24**

**CONFERENCE**

Mobius LA

LA Convention Center

8:00 p.m.

700 Alamada St.

Los Angeles

www.mobiusla.org

**FRIYAY 11**

**LECTURE**

Denny Zane

It’s Time to Move LA

12:00 p.m.

Various venues

Los Angeles
downtownartwalk.com

**SATURDAY 29**

**EXHIBITION OPENING**

Julie Orser: Playback
Steve Turner Contemporary
6026 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles

www.steveturnercontemporary.com

**SUNDAY 30**

**LECTURE**

Julian Brooks

Leonardo da Vinci versus Michelangelo: Battles in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

3:00 p.m.

The J. Paul Getty Center

1200 Getty Center Dr.

Los Angeles

www.getty.edu

**JUNE**

**TUESDAY 1**

**LECTURE**

Kurt Ross

Spectral Gesamtkunstwerk

1:00 p.m.

The Hammer Museum

10899 Wilshire Blvd.

Los Angeles

www.hammer.ucla.edu

**WEDNESDAY 2**

**LECTURE**

Mary Miller

Envisioning a New World

7:30 p.m.

The J. Paul Getty Villa

17855 Pacific Coast Hwy.

Pacific Palisades

www.getty.edu
When Learning from Las Vegas was published in 1972, the oversized book rocked the world of architecture. The treatise was a bowspirt assault on modernism, which Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour believed had become desiccated and uninteresting. In Las Vegas, where the trio had conducted investigations over the course of several years in the mid-1960s, they saw architecture bursting with energy and noise and, above all, commercialism. From the street, where they took in Vegas neon lit strip as part of a studio class for the Yale School of Architecture, they began to dissect and distill a recipe for design that elevated the vernacular and reinstated the symbolic. Systematic and methodical, the book was intended as a template of sorts for a new, avowely rhetorical architecture—what became postmodernism and with it, some of the worst buildings of the late 20th century.

Las Vegas Studio: Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown occupies the one-room second-floor gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art’s West Hollywood outpost at the Pacific Design Center. The exhibit consists principally of 80 photographs snapped by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour together with students from Yale University, as part of their 1968 study of Las Vegas.

A friend who took his students to this exhibit said the young architects “didn’t get it.” Naturally. The confrontation between modernism and postmodernism has largely run its course. Still, this show reminds us how urgent and necessary the battle was when the fight began—and how little Frisson there is right now that might sustain such a confrontation today.

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National World War I Museum, Ralph Appelbaum, Exhibition Design

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As a firm engaged in landscape architecture, planning, architecture, and product design, Rios Clementi Hale Studios seems to be weathering the recession better than most. AN's Marissa Gluck spoke to principals Bob Hale and Frank Clementi about their latest projects, from the Grand Avenue Civic Park and the Century City Greening Plan to their new espresso cups for Intelligentsia.

The Architect's Newspaper: Tell us about the origins of Rios Clementi Hale Studios. How did you find each other?

Frank Clementi: Mark Rios started the company with another partner in 1985. He's a landscape architect and architect, so right from the beginning the office has been multidisciplinary. In 1989, Julie Smith and I were working together at another office on the Sepulveda Arts Park competition, and through that collaboration Julie came to work in this office.

About a year later, I came over. Bob Hale: I met Mark through Eli Broad's house. I was working at Frank Gehry's office on the house and Mark was selected as the landscape architect. That was in 1990. I left Frank's office in 1993 to go work as the VP of design and planning at Universal Studios, where I was responsible for the development of all the projects in Hollywood.

Frank Clementi: A lot of multi-partner offices have a silo condition, where each partner is responsible for a certain discipline or certain projects. We're a little more fan-shaped. We all started in architecture and we're all back-to-back in the center of the circle, but the areas we look at are overlapping. I have a strong product design and graphics background. And Julie is now president of noNeutral, which is our product and pattern design company. So all of us have this interest in planning, but also have questions about how the different disciplines build on each other.

What are the major differences between disciplines?

BH: That's one that's interesting is the relationship between pattern-making and landscape architecture, and its overlap with product design. I never really approached an urban or landscape problem from that standpoint, but in fact it becomes a huge piece of it.

FC: This gets a little esoteric, but just the word "field" as it relates to "figure" as opposed to "landscape." When you are so close to something that you can't see anything but the details, those details become the most important thing. But when you're so far away from something that it dissolves into a field, then how it all works together becomes really important. And landscape is a condition that exists at all of those scales. It goes from being right in your face this minute—

this flower is blooming—with graphics, nametags, typography, to planning for 50 years from now when this hotel needs to be here, so how do we put streets in place in order to make sure the valets can work without pissing off the neighbors? Architecture sits in the middle of all that.

From a business perspective, how do you integrate the different disciplines organizationally?

BH: We have a relatively flat office hierarchy. In the last ten years, we've added designations of partners and senior associates and associates and designers, so there's just four levels. A partner is involved in every project, and a senior associate deals with its day-to-day management. There's a lot of interoffice communication. We're a networked organization more than a hierarchical one. We all work together, we all have similar values in terms of design, but also financial things.

FC: The money goes into one pot.

BH: This is a firm that is driven by ideas and exploration. Anytime we get a little too compartmentalized, we move to something different.

Let's talk about your collaboration with Intelligentsia on coffee cups. How did that come about? I guess you guys really love coffee?

FC: I'm a dilettante compared to those guys. There's a contact high, similar to our experience with Austin City Limits, of working with people that are into what they do. It's completely different from a spec office building. You're designing for a very specific condition. Intelligentsia is serious. They are very empirical, they don't care about the rules, they'll try anything. They saw we were like them. We weren't going to just do things the way they were always done. We had to prove they were the right way to do them. It's a very democratic and pragmatic method. We end with a product as small as a cup at the same time we're working on a 16-acre park downtown with some of the same staff.

How do you transition from private developer to working on a civic project for Century City?

BH: We've done lots of work for both private firms and public entities. We got to know the public through having initiated work from a private developer.

FC: Century City had systemic problems. Each of the blocks will never have a connection to another block unless you deal with it systemically. Originally, the planners thought that it didn't have to have pedestrians.

BH: It's been interesting. There is a lot of work going on there now like the Century Plaza hotel. We're also doing the masterplan for Universal Studios. In terms of acreage, it's the biggest project but it's only at the planning and entitlement level.

The Grand Avenue Civic Park is about to go out to bid. That's the largest landscape we're building. There was a lot of civic engagement in terms of process. The Related folks had to pay the lease on the land upfront. The check had cleared before they started having problems. It's the only part of the whole Grand Avenue project moving forward.

FC: If you're a populist, then it's a huge lucky break for the city.

When do you expect to break ground on the Civic Park?

FC: It should break ground by June.

Let's talk about the direction LA has been taking in the past decade. Where do you see it moving in the next decade?

FC: You can float along, but you still should know where the waves are. I grew up here and what I like about the city is its nodal quality—it's centerlessness. I live in Venice and deliberately don't work there. I take public transportation. There are overlapping layers of the city. I love classical cities like Paris and Manhattan where you have an understanding of the hierarchical condition. But I like the rhizomatic nature of Los Angeles. The concern I have is that an antiquated notion of a central condition is the only option. I still question if that is the only way. Technology makes it not so necessary to be in the same physical place. This idea of shifting centers is intriguing. I don't argue that Silver Lake is better or worse than Venice. I love the balkanization. There's a cultural richness that resists homogeneity.
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