Although Los Angeles recently launched a competition to redesign the troubled 6th Street Bridge, the city has a much larger infrastructure problem on its hands. In a study released in 2011 by the non-profit Transportation for America coalition, many of the bridges supporting the city's automobile network are at a critical breaking point. Early last year the LA Unified School District (LAUSD) announced an innovative program to design contemporary, prefabricated prototype buildings that could serve as new school facilities or as temporary classrooms. Winning designs, produced by LA firms Hodgetts+Fung, Swift Lee Office, and Gonzalez Goodale, ranged from 6,000 to 30,000 square feet and were to be clad in a variety of materials. All of Los Angeles seems excited about the space shuttle Endeavor touching down at its new home, the California Science Center, which is making room for the iconic flyer by the end of this year with a temporary home. But one building in the Science Center complex in Exposition Park is getting much less attention. In fact, one building in the Science Center complex in Exposition Park is getting much less attention. In fact,
It’s the ultimate driver of architectural competitions and, these days, architectural work. The unpaid (or underpaid) internship.

It’s become a staple of architecture. A rite of passage, despite the debt burden from an education that usually costs more than $50,000 a year. And it’s not just small struggling firms. Even top architects get their work done by interns.

Never mind that offering unpaid internships excludes those not wealthy enough to go without pay, or just the fact that they are generally not legal. Not offering money lowers the bar all the way down the line. Soon unpaid positions become expected. The value of architecture is lowered even further.

Will Wright, director of government and public affairs at AIA/LA lays out the dilemma: “Sure, some of the more compelling and innovative architecture firms may not have the budget, nor the clients, to support the financial needs of their interns, but if emerging talent isn’t valued at the onset then the profession will continue to weaken its value.”

Architect Alvin Huang of LA firm Synthesis explained how not paying young architects feeds an ongoing cycle: “We’ll draw it and revise a thousand times, and then we’ll do it again. That becomes a cyclical burden that is packaged as a rite of passage, and that institutionalizes exploitation in the culture of design.”

He added, “I think there is a clear metaphor that relates to figuratively living beyond your means.”

Of course, this does not apply to every architect. But some are indeed working for free.

Surely if interns are of value there and you are making money off of them you should pay them,” he said.

Fitzgerald notes that some internship duties can be ethically performed for free if they are for college credit (and if handled correctly these can be as valuable, or more valuable, than some college courses). But he encourages firms to help students get credit through other means, like mentorships that also help fulfill academic credit, short of providing free labor.

Both the AIA and NCARB (which oversees the profession’s Internship Development Program) oppose unpaid internships, said Fitzgerald. The AIA, for example, won’t allow people to become fellows if they have unpaid interns in their offices. Disclosure: we at the newspaper have been up against similar circumstances, and we do offer unpaid internships, although we do provide a travel stipend. The painful part is that without the unpaid help of interns, we can’t get out the paper.

But we have to wonder about the state of a profession—as architects and as architectural journalists—where unpaid work is so prevalent. Can you imagine banks using unpaid labor? Even professions in similar fields like building and engineering rarely use unpaid work.

It’s just the tip of the iceberg in a profession that seems intent on continuously lowering the bar, from allowing others to call themselves architects to loosening requirements on the need for registered architects (this, of course is another story, and begs the question as to whether or not the AIA offers enough value to people who do become registered.)

Many claim that unpaid internships are just an unfortunate economic reality. But is exploitation worth it? Can’t we just pay someone a little? As Alvin Huang put it, “I can’t tell people what they should pay, but the idea is if you are making money off of them, some compensation is reasonable.”

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Architect: FXFOWLE
A new exhibition pavilion and garden on 1.5 acres beneath Seattle’s Space Needle brings together the largest collection of artist Dale Chihuly’s glass installations and sculptures in the world. Owen Richards Architects repurposed a warehouse, previously housing the much-beloved but aging Fun Forest arcade, into a 12,000-square-foot hall with eight galleries, a theater, cafe, and bookstore. Persian Ceiling, a 36-by-40 foot backlit glass “mural” of marine-inspired sculptures, hangs above one gallery space. In darkened rooms, Chihuly’s pieces glow brightly under spotlights, while shadow box tables and spruce plank walls in the cafe are lined with Chihuly’s eclectic personal collections, ranging from bottle openers to vintage radios.

The architectural highlight of the $20 million privately funded complex is the 4,500-square-foot glass house, an addition inspired by historical conservatories like the Crystal Palace erected for London’s Great Exhibition of 1851. Forty-foot-high white metal beams support five connected red and yellow platoon worlds. The adjacent plaza and surrounding garden, designed by AHBL, weave whimsical, Dr. Seuss–like floral sculptures amid dogwoods, camellias, black mondo grass, and a green wall on the east facade. ARIEL ROSENSTOCK

LONG BEACH’S RANCHO LOS ALAMITOS REOPENS WITH RESTORED GARDENS AND NEW VISITOR CENTER

Driving through the gated community of Bixby Hill Estates in Long Beach, one passes a collection of unremarkable 1960s and 1970s tract homes sitting atop a mesa. But tucked inside this suburban sprawl is an oasis called Ranchos Los Alamitos. In seven acres, and a half acres it captures the history of the region, from its indigenous peoples to the early Spanish and Mexican settlers and on to the ranching and farming eras. Instead of being a big showplace but a real place where people lived. Keeping the integrity of the site also informed San Francisco-based Stephen J. Farneth, the project architect of the new Rancho Center. His design is integrated with the original barn structures, using glass, metal, and wood as the palette. He stated, “We didn’t want an assertively modern structure, because often on historic sites the new becomes the foreground and the historic becomes the background.”

But the building is far from a reproduction. With sleek rooflines, plenty of natural light from skylights, and a geothermal heating and cooling system, the updated exhibition center brings Rancho Los Alamitos into the future in the most intimate way. “This place never feels like a public park to me,” Farneth said. “It has such a personal character. This is not a place you come to be entertained. You can have your own way of getting to know it, and that is rare.” STACIE STUKIN

BUCKY ON FILM

There’s something about Buckminster Fuller. Already there have been a spate of documentaries about the eccentric, geodesic dome-loving designer. They include The World of Buckminster Fuller, by Robert Snyder; Buckminster Fuller: Thinking Out Loud, by Karen Goodman and Kirk Simon; and A Necessary Ruin, by Evan Mather. But now we hear a rumor that filmmaker Steve Reiss is working on a full-length feature about Fuller called “Bucky, based on a screenplay by Ron Bass. Stay tuned as we get more details. And hold on to your domes.

SEND WHIPS, NIPPLE CLIPS, AND POTATO CHIPS TO EAVESDROP@ARCHPAPER.COM

BUCKY ON FILM

David Hecht of San Francisco firm Tannerhecht recently presented the plans for a mid-rise condo in the city’s SoMa district in a community meeting held on site at an S&M Club. No, the architects are not into bondage. In fact Hecht had originally been told the site was vacant, but it turned out that the longstanding club was still around, so instead of presenting in a community hall the plans were displayed, we hear, among leather costumes and lots of Purell bottles.

If everyone is thinking alike, then someone isn’t thinking.

George S. Patton
Driving through Tacoma, a city 30 miles south of Seattle, you might get lost on your way to the LeMay America’s Car Museum. But once you get there, you can’t miss its aerodynamic, curved metal-clad shell, as long as a football field, rising from the ground—a nod to the chrome plating that has adorned many an automobile. The museum is located on a 9-acre campus with a 3.5-acre show field, across the street from the Tacoma Dome, a sports and concert arena. The museum, which opened on June 2, hosts the largest collection of antique and vintage cars in the world. The planning, design, and construction of the 165,000-square-foot museum has taken a decade, at a cost of $60 million. The late Harold LeMay, the owner of a waste-management business, acquired over 3,000 cars during his lifetime. Along with his wife Nancy, they established a nonprofit organization in 1998 to create a museum to display his collection. The city of Tacoma then donated over $10 million in land, and secured a $1 million planning grant. Los Angeles–based Grant Price Architects (GPA) were hired to lead the design.

Entering the museum is like approaching the mouth of a cave. The entrance, a simple glass wall beneath the corrugated metal roof, hides the immense depth of what lies behind—a pavilion with three levels buried underground that can hold up to 500 cars. The entry, explained architect Alan Grant, executive director of GPA, was inspired by a Victorian train entrance he saw in Europe when he was younger: its deceptively unassuming front disguises a grand interior. Beyond the ticket lobby, the museum begins in the expansive main gallery—over 300 feet long and 100 feet wide—featuring highlights from LeMay’s collection, including a white, red, and brass 1906 Cadillac Model M, a 1930 Duesenberg Model J, and a 1954 Pontiac Chieftain Deluxe Eight. Floors are a dark gray concrete and the ceiling resembles the skeleton of a ship’s hull, wrapped in laminated Oregon spruce timbers, a material selected for practical concerns as much as aesthetic ones.

GPA originally considered using steel, but fireproofing was too expensive. With cost closely shaping the design, repetition was paramount. The LeMay construction budget was close to $100 per square foot, a feat that seemed nearly impossible since the average museum usually costs around $400 per square foot. In their research, GPA found that the only structures that fit within that budget were parking garages. So they turned to the garage for their design foundation. Pragmatically and thematically it works—the three underground levels each contain bays connected by gently sloping ramps that rise about 10 feet over 300 feet. Instead of requiring an expensive elevator, cars can be easily driven from floor to floor. And visitors have more choices: they can progress through displays by targeting one side of the building, or traversing each bay and ramp. Automobiles are arranged on ramps and bays in long, neatly ordered rows carefully lit to minimize glare on reflective finishes and grouped both chronologically and geographically.

"Museums should be simple, fun, and inexpensive," said Grant. Even as cities slowly shift away from the car as the preferred transportation mode, the museum is a reminder that the automobile still remains an indelible part of our culture, a pioneer in merging technology with design. With vibrant colors and an abundance of glass and mirrored surfaces, LeMay’s cars still recall the words of philosopher Roland Barthes, from his 1957 essay on the Citroën DS: “I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals…conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.”
In 1969 Los Angeles’ Carthay Circle Theatre was demolished, and its grand Spanish Colonial Revival tower collapsed into a swirl of vaporous architectural memories. But this month you’ll be able to have dinner inside, or rather inside its very close approximation, as part of a five-year-in-the-making expansion of Disneyland’s California Adventure, 26 miles southeast of LA.

On June 14, the California Adventure park, which is adjacent to the original Disneyland, revealed the additions of Buena Vista Street and the Carthay Circle Theatre, both featuring close facsimiles to 1920s-era LA landmarks. A third new exhibit area, Cars Land, will not feature Los Angeles architecture, but instead the Pixar town of Radiator Springs. Buena Vista Street replaces the park’s original entryway, Sunshine Plaza, which didn’t have a unified concept, said Coulter Winn, Imagineer and architect for the project. “Although the previous entry was unique, it didn’t resonate with our guests because they didn’t feel like they were transported to a place and time,” said Winn. The Imagineers redesigned the LA-inspired entrance to have the same transformatory effect of Disneyland’s Main Street, modeled in part after Disney’s hometown of Marceline, Missouri, at the turn of last century. “We wanted to create the spirit of Los Angeles that Disney saw when he arrived in 1923 with $40 and a suitcase.”

As guests enter the park, varied architectural styles work together to create a convincing 1920s-era environment. Retail spaces like Los Feliz Five and Dime and Atwater Ink are meant to feel like the mom-and-pop storefronts in the neighborhoods where Disney lived and worked. Turnstiles have been reimagined to echo the Pan Pacific Auditorium, the Streamline Moderne theater in the Fairfax district that was destroyed in a fire in 1978. A large bridge spanning the entrance (previously the Golden Gate Bridge) has been converted to the Hyperion Bridge, over which Disney himself often drove as he traveled from the Disney studios in Silver Lake to his favorite restaurant, the Tam O’Shanter, in Atwater Village.

The centerpiece of the plaza is a compelling rendition of the Carthay Circle Theatre, the mid-Wilshire Avenue movie palace constructed in 1926. It was here that Disney premiered his first film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, in 1937. Inside the theater will be a restaurant and lounge. The Imagineers spent months exploring photos from the Los Angeles Public Library and Metro’s Transportation Library and Archives, while also drawing references from existing buildings in Silver Lake, Atwater Village, and Westwood. In a bid for authenticity, they used locally sourced materials from Southern California artisans. Winn estimates they used 430 different kinds of tile, working with East LA ceramic shop California Pottery and Tile Works to create accurate historical reinterpretations of the original designs. They also took care to bring LA’s dismantled transportation system back to life. Red Cars of the Pacific Electric Railway run through the park, and besides the decoy catenary wires (they’re battery powered, not electric), Winn said the gleaming trolleys are probably about as authentic as it gets. “It’s basically a real Red Car system in here,” he noted. It especially works because Buena Vista Street is adjacent to the existing Hollywood Land, which already features some excellent interpretations of Hollywood Boulevard architecture. A ride on the Red Car includes a seamless transition between the two old LAs. Yes, confirmed Winn, “you can take the Red Car to Hollywood.”

Winn is careful to note that these buildings are not replicas but “narrative-driven architecture.” Still, he’s inspired by the fact that they might trigger real nostalgia. During D23, an expo for Disney fans, Winn gave a presentation on the project and was inundated by questions from historic architecture fans. “These individuals could remember riding the Red Cars,” said Winn. “They said they couldn’t wait to take their grandchildren on them.”

ALISSA WALKER

CALIFORNIA DRAFTING

Disney Revamps California Adventure Park with City-Inspired Architecture

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ALISSA WALKER
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LA architect Francois Perrin grew up in France watching James Bond movies and dreaming of someday building one of the villains’ epic modernist houses. It would be perched on a mountaintop or in some other seemingly impossible-to-reach location.

His dream finally came true, minus the villain part, when Perrin was commissioned to build a 3,000-square-foot glass house on an extraordinarily steep site just around the corner from the Hollywood sign.

In fact, when you look at the precarious landscape around the house, it’s impossible not to wonder just how the architect was able to pull it off. Perrin said it was pretty simple and akin to building a gigantic staircase, actually a giant concrete retaining wall, and then stacking the house—a series of terraced glass boxes—on top of it.

Perrin actually embedded the retaining wall and the floor-to-ceiling glass-clad boxes into the earth, keeping the house remarkably temperate. The dug-in aspect also helps block the harsh sunrays that a house perched on top of a cliff usually suffers from. In addition, the stacking of the cantilevered roofs creates shading for each successive level, like a pagoda.

Such delightfully low-tech sustainability also includes a great deal of cross ventilation, made possible through huge sliding glass doors on multiple frontages, and by smaller windows embedded into the glass panels that can be left open even after the sliders are closed. Stacked stairways create a chimney effect, forcing hot air up and out.

But the house is also quite high-tech. Louvers along the side are filled with rainwater—collected from the roof—which help warm the home’s water when heated by the sun. Water-filled tubes under the concrete floors and even under the cement patio keep surfaces cool while also heating the water in the pool. Many of these elements were produced by the home’s owner, Yves Lefay, owner of Eliosolar, which specializes in “architectural hybrid shades.”

On the construction side, building a behemoth staircase was not so easy. To support the perched home, 30 to 40 builders at a time dug 41 caissons; often the builders were supported as they worked only by ropes.

As a result, the house, with its bermed sitting and three large glass boxes—a studio below; guest rooms, kids rooms, and an entrance above; and master bedroom and living room on top—feels like a cave that quickly opens up and extends outward.

Large decks hanging off each box create more square footage and make the outdoor space almost as plentiful as the indoor.

From the outside, its dark steel frame and reflective glass give the house what Perrin describes as “a tendency to disappear” into the surrounding vegetation, a goal of the architect, who hopes to add still more vegetation and can’t wait for what is already there to eventually envelop the house. It’s a refreshingly sensitive approach in a landscape of often ego-driven hillside houses. Besides, if you’re going to defeat James Bond, you don’t want to stand out, do you?
WINNERS OF SEATTLE URBAN INTERVENTION COMPETITION ANNOUNCED

PUBLIC AWAKENING

When it comes to public space, linear paths and waterfronts have been generating a lot of attention—like the nonprofit Sculpture Park in Seattle, the High Line in New York, and the upcoming Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago. But it’s also important to rethink how traditional urban park space can thrive in the next century.

In May, the three finalists of the Seattle Urban Intervention: Howard S. Wright Design Ideas Competition for Public Space met at the Intiman Playhouse to present proposals for redesigning a 9-acre site that is currently home to Memorial Stadium at the Seattle Center. The goal of the competition was to generate dialogue and innovative ideas for the Seattle Center based upon the Center’s 2008 Century 21 master plan, a 20-year scheme for unifying its cultural, civic, architectural, and commercial spaces. The winning project, InClosure, by Paris-based ABF-Lab (Paul Azzopardi, urban engineer; Nick Basch, climate engineer; Elizenne Fehrer, architect) envisioned a new public space called the Seattle Center that would encourage top-climbing, performances, and even campsites—solutions, where the human is at the middle of the process. The runners up included KoenigElizenBerg Architecture and Planning and ArchIP of Los Angeles for Park, a plan that included various programs: a pool, a pavilion area, a forest trail, cantilevered stadium seating, and a space for a farmer’s market. And Boston firm PRAUD for Seattle Jelly Bean, which incorporated terraces, courtyards, and a playing field with a giant blimp-like interactive “jelly bean” that would be both a micro-climate control device and a display screen.

The finalists’ schemes will be on display through June 30 in the lobby of the Intiman Playhouse at the Seattle Center.

MAY DAY (continued from front page)

Zoltan Pali, it will become one of the city’s most important museums.

On May 30 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences officially named the duo as designers of their new museum inside the May Company. The five-story building will contain movie archives, exhibit spaces, a theater, and a 20-year plan for unifying its cultural, civic, architectural, and commercial spaces. The winning project, InClosure, by Paris-based ABF-Lab (Paul Azzopardi, urban engineer; Nick Basch, climate engineer; Elizenne Fehrer, architect) envisioned a new public space called the Seattle Center that would encourage top-climbing, performances, and even campsites—solutions, where the human is at the middle of the process. The runners up included KoenigElizenBerg Architecture and Planning and ArchIP of Los Angeles for Park, a plan that included various programs: a pool, a pavilion area, a forest trail, cantilevered stadium seating, and a space for a farmer’s market. And Boston firm PRAUD for Seattle Jelly Bean, which incorporated terraces, courtyards, and a playing field with a giant blimp-like interactive “jelly bean” that would be both a micro-climate control device and a display screen.

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PARIS-BASED ABF-LAB’S WINNING SCHEME

“Boxes” that could house market stalls, cafes, greenhouses, micro theaters, and even mini libraries.

Materials used to create the scheme’s modular structures would include stacked local timber, mirrored facades, and a running track made from panels that would generate electricity through movement. The team lovingly drew their inspiration from Seattle’s vibrant stalls at Pike Place Market. While imagining that these boxes could find new homes in other public spaces in Seattle, ABF-Lab also created at the Seattle Center that would encourage top-climbing, performances, and even campsites—solutions, where the human is at the middle of the process. The runners up included KoenigElizenBerg Architecture and Planning and ArchIP of Los Angeles for Park, a plan that included various programs: a pool, a pavilion area, a forest trail, cantilevered stadium seating, and a space for a farmer’s market. And Boston firm PRAUD for Seattle Jelly Bean, which incorporated terraces, courtyards, and a playing field with a giant blimp-like interactive “jelly bean” that would be both a micro-climate control device and a display screen.

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Norwegian firm closing in on new LA theater

Banks of the LA River

FALLING DOWN (continued from front page)

are on the verge of unsound. The survey, originating with the federal government’s 2010 National Bridge Inventory, finds that in Los Angeles County alone, over 60 bridges have been deemed “structurally deficient,” with at least one of the three parts of each bridge identified by engineers as having a “major defect.” The defects indicated the necessity for general seismic upgrades, complete bridge replacements, and more, leaving architects and a team of engineers working through the auto-centric metropolis.

The study’s geo-graphic coordinates red bricks at the most used sections of the Los Angeles freeway system. For instance two of the most traveled bridges downtown the freeway corridor are in dire condition: one at the 10 freeway and Normandie Avenue, and the other at the 10 freeway and South Central Avenue. Both bridges carry well over 300,000 people daily and are critical transportation links within the knot of downtown Los Angeles. Other key structurally deficient nodes include the bridge at the 101 freeway near the LA River and the 5 freeway and the 110 freeway intersection.

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Warriors and developers have released plans to build an arena near the LA River.

In a surprise public announcement, the Golden State Warriors NBA team recently announced their intention to move from the Oakland Coliseum into a proposed new arena at Piers 30-32 on the San Francisco waterfront. In addition to housing the Warriors, the arena would be a concert, entertainment, and convention venue on one of the most prominent sites on the San Francisco Bay. “Building a world-class, state-of-the-art sports and entertainment facility will create thousands of new jobs for local residents,” said Warriors co-owner and CEO Joe Lacob. “Given San Francisco’s penchant for lengthy reviews and extensive public comment periods, employers are questioning that schedule." Private financing is seen as crucial; the San Francisco electorate would be highly unlikely to approve funds at local and national levels.

Further complicating the project are seismic issues facing Piers 30-32, which have been deteriorating for decades. Estimates for seismic repair to the piers are in the $100 million range and will also be funded by the Warriors.

Solving the labyrinthine entitlement process is a multitude of overlapping agencies and commissions including the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Planning Department, Port of San Francisco, Bay Conservation and Development Commission, State Lands Trust, and the State Historic Preservation Office. Although conceptual renderings of the arena were released, very few details about the arena are in place. According to Johnston, an architect has yet not been selected; sources indicate that Ellerbe Becket (now part of AECOM) is bidding on other sports architecture firms such as Populous (the former HOK Sport) or NBBJ are also being considered.

Warriors’ co-owners Peter Guber and Jacob have set forth an aggressive redevelopment schedule. Envisioning two years to permit and entitle the project and another three to build it, they plan to open the new facility in time for the 2017 NBA season. Given San Francisco’s penchant for lengthy reviews and extensive public comment periods, employers are questioning that schedule." Private financing is seen as crucial; the San Francisco electorate would be highly unlikely to approve funds at local and national levels.

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GeorgeCalys
West Coast architects talk about translating expectations into reality when building in a fast-changing China. By Guy Horton

THE CHINA CONSTRUCT
Given the cooling of its once red-hot economy, is China the right place for western architects? Do ambitious firms have a choice? The United States has been nearly paralyzed by the foreclosure crisis and two major wars. The euro has been showing signs that it may collapse. Brazil has been faltering. The once breakneck pace of development in the Middle East has significantly fallen off. With its strong bureaucracy and centrally controlled market economy—somehow not a contradiction—China still beckons, despite these known risks.

But whether or not China is the right place for architects depends upon whom you ask. Once thing is certain: China is not an easy place in which to work. Since the 1980s foreign architects have traveled there, wide-eyed and full of optimism, to realize projects they generally would be unable to do in their home countries.

Recalling the empire-spreading colonials of the past, some architects seem to do quite well at taking on China. Steven Holl, for example, has built some of his fantastic watercolor sketches. Chinese developers and government officials (often one and the same) seem willing to let OMA do whatever it wants. Young architects just a few years out of internships, like Beijing-based MAD’s Ma Yansong, have landed huge commissions, including iconic high rises, while their counterparts in the U.S. are lucky to receive jobs designing a downtown loft renovation. But the promise of success in China can come with a price. As architect Neil Denari put it, “There is that knowing wince when you mention China.” The wince apparently means, “Have you made every effort to understand the world you are operating in?”

At a recent LA Forum Pecha Kucha night devoted to working in China, a certain darkly humorous tone permeated the stories told by veterans of building overseas. There were many moments when the shared “wince” emerged as a collective groan or sigh, often ending with sympathetic laughter about compromises made: “Here’s another podium with icon tower”; “There was no program”; “They wanted it blue so we made it blue.”

One presenter summed it up by declaring, “China is about time, process, and metaphors. There is no time, no process, and everything is about the metaphor.” Like many, the speaker, who did not wish to be identified because he would like to continue working in China, is still trying to make sense of his China experience.

To get to the truth about the horror stories from China is not easy—even at an open-bar Pecha Kucha. Speculation and vague rumors are rife. Have you heard that so-and-so had a project built from renderings? Did you know that so-and-so had his designs stolen and he might need to close his office? Did you hear about the firm that lost the competition only to have their idea built elsewhere? Did you hear about the competition that was cancelled after all the submissions were handed in? These are the sorts of unspoken stories that go into The Wince.

Yet the fundamental drive to work in China remains, despite the risks. And architects are developing different ways to navigate these complexities with business savvy.

As Denari observed, “Everybody working there knows about the things that can happen. It’s about gathering intelligence to reduce risk and doubt.” In fact, in the six years his firm has been engaged with China, Denari hasn’t built anything. He figures that 95 percent of the inquiries he receives don’t even get to the discussion stage. “We don’t treat it differently from anywhere else,” he said. “We don’t work with doubt.” He added, “When the visions don’t sync, then the project can’t achieve its highest good.”

Denari, it appears, manages the risks by saying no. Then there is Alvin Huang, a young Los Angeles architect. For him the China market has been a place to dive in and start building a reputation for his LA firm, Synthesis Design + Architecture. Huang, a Chinese American, started with an unbuilt project that led to a commission for a beach resort in Quanzhou. Everything seemed to be going according to plan until he noticed that the clients kept coming back
for more and more changes and development beyond the concept deadline. “It’s not a horror story, yet, and I hope it doesn’t turn into one,” Mr. Huang said. “I was trying to be cooperative, but at some point I just had to let them know we weren’t doing any more work.” There was “radio silence” for weeks. Mr. Huang started contacting other people to see if they could find out what was going on.

“It’s not like I could go over and pull a Tony Soprano,” he said, noting that there is little opportunity for recourse, even with a contract. Finally the client emailed to apologize for the delay in payment, promising to move forward. From his prior experience he was used to delays, but he had never had someone simply disappear. If the project does go to the next phase, he said he’s going to require 50 percent of the fee in advance. “This isn’t a loss yet, but it’s definitely a learning experience,” he said. “You can count on them to take the shirt off your back,” said William H. Fain, Jr., partner and director of urban design and planning at Johnson Fain in Los Angeles. “They have a ‘take no prisoners’ attitude when it comes to business.” He’s speaking from fourteen years of engagement with China, a journey that began when his firm was asked to develop the master plan for Beijing’s Central Business District in 1998. OMA’s CCTV and other high-profile projects now sit within the plan. Still, Fain said, “We’ve never lost anything significant.” This is one reason they concentrate on city planning. “The outcomes for buildings are too hard to control,” he said. Planning is a different market with a different species of client. Fain notes how government officials are inclined to follow signed contracts because they are too high up and vulnerable to being investigated if anything goes wrong. Moreover, he added, one of their rules is that they get paid upfront. “It’s a frontier out there, kind of like cowboy-land. You have to stay on top of the whole thing.”

Craig Hartman, a partner at SOM in San Francisco, points to his deep relationships with “well-connected individuals” as the best way to reduce risks. His advice for architects just starting out on their China adventures? “Learn Mandarin, be culturally attuned, and don’t be a carpetbagger.” (Hartman himself does not speak Mandarin: “Happily, that’s one
Indeed in the popular imagination of the West there exists the tendency to define China as catching up, as being part of the developing world. In the recent past, China has often been cast as inferior, especially when it comes to such so-called borrowed forms of culture as capitalism and even modernity. Such false historical assumptions can factor in to why some firms lose their China campaigns early on. It is easy to get burned if preparations were not thorough. Or if they underestimate the complexity and sophistication of their Chinese counterparts. “Parachute architects.” That is what Michael Tunkey, who opened Cannon Design’s Shanghai office in 2007, calls architects who just drop in without preparation. These are the ambitious practitioners who don’t know the context. They don’t understand where they are and when projects fall apart it seems totally surreal,” he said. Tunkey has seen and heard it all over the years. Foreign architects who lack on-the-ground experience maintain false assumptions and are quick to generalize. “I’ve heard people say they just assumed they would work for free. I always wonder, didn’t they lose their minds on the flight over? Then they get burned and that’s their China,” he said.

For culture clash and sheer loss there may be no better example in China than Ordos, a mostly unrealized city in Inner Mongolia. The BBC recently called Ordos, a coal town built on China’s insatiable hunger for resources, “the biggest ghost town in China.” Riding the success of their collaboration on the Bird’s Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Herzog & de Meuron and local architect-dissident Al Weiev formed a partnership with developers to build 100 1,000-square-meter villas in a remote area of Inner Mongolia. They selected 100 architects from 27 countries (China was not included) to design unique villas as a way to attract more tourists. The list of architects involved included MOS, IwamotoScott, Preston Scott Cohen, and Toshiko Mori.

Al Weiev’s resulting documentary, titled Ordos 100, is currently making the rounds at international film festivals. What comes across most clearly is that no one knows how to work together, communications are convoluted and misinterpreted, and expectations are not in sync, to borrow Denari’s term. The 100 architects—many from small firms with relatively little building experience—all have their own ideas. As one said, “I don’t know anything about the client or the people who will use the villa, so I’m simply designing it for myself.”

The film ends with the architects counting their money and then departing for their home countries with no clear understanding of what happened or what the future will hold. Not one of them has been back and there may never be any opening. Mehrdad Yazdani, who runs his own design studio as part of Cannon Design, is one of the lucky ones. He has completed two of three planned projects, all in Ords but outside of the Ordos 100. For Yazdani, the experience was about developing a method of working that goes beyond any one project. “We’ve reduced the unknown by tapping into what happened or what the future will hold. Not one of them has been back and there may never be any opening.”

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Communication is hard enough when you’re brainstorming ideas in creative teams in one place rather than having it spread out all over the world. It just doesn’t work,” Rogers said.

But while strategies may differ, one thing unites these firms: the recession made China even more important. Fain sees this continuing, but not forever. When asked if he thinks China will always need the expertise of U.S. firms, he describes how once clients would just say, “It’s great. Let’s do it.” Today, there is more questioning and more issues of local identity arise. Chinese clients are more critical. “They are learning our methods and it’s just a matter of time before they eclipse us,” he said.

With this in mind, western firms will remain relevant in China only by having something different to offer. Being different is not always easy to define. All have their own approaches and experiences. They know they are not bringing some architectural light to a supposedly mysterious or menacing China. There can be as many Chinas as there are firms and clients, each a series of relationships producing different results within a larger framework of complexity and change. As Fain says, “It’s about listening, luck, skill, and figuring it out.”

And it’s about accepting the limitations of what you can know. With the insight of someone who has known China for a long time, Tunkey summed it up this way: “People who visit China for a week can write a book. Those who go for a month, write an essay. If you live there, there’s nothing to say.”

Guy Horton, Who Has Been Visiting China Since 1985, Spent Two Years Studying Advanced Mandarin at Beijing University Before Training to Become an Architect.
Street Sweeping

Edited by Frances Anderton, USC Pamphlet Series

Grand Avenue: A Story of Ambition, and its Limits, on LA’s Bunker Hill

It is the right time to read architect and historian Sharon Haar’s book on the rich, fraught relationship of universities and the cities they live in. We are in one of the great eras of university expansion. Whether it is the new Yale in Singapore, New York University in its own backyard, or the burgeoning institutions in China, the university is as close to the heart of our current cultural and economic aspirations as it has ever been and the buildings there to prove it. As financial analysts put it about the economy, a correction is possible—the ranks of disaffected, underemployed university graduates are legion across continents. Yet short of a new, harsher recession, the build program will go on, the better for select universities to stand out in a crowded field.

And that crowded field is urban, because whether they still have a big green lawn or not, the majority of new and expanding campuses are in cities, and to Haar, it is time to demonstrate that the “urban campus” is a rich opportunity, not the poor relation of the bucolic tradition of colleges in the country. She sees value in this—believing that the university and the city have the capacity to be profoundly and productively connected, but that while the physical form matters, it has to be understood as a larger history of place. Today’s debates on the future of campuses in American cities—take New York University (NYU) in Greenwich Village, for example, where community opposition has been a...
es, but about the whole way that universities engage the city. She writes, “Higher education is not in the United States, commonly understood as an urban spatial practice.” She aims to change that understanding, through her own approach to theory and fieldwork, and it is not a task for the meek of purpose.

Neither is building a new urban campus. Most city administrations actively support university expansion, seeing it as critical to their municipality’s prestige and competitiveness. Neighbors, however, often protest, finding little common purpose with the institution in their midst in terms of scale and activities. Programmatic differences detailed by Jane Jacobs with a vision still potent 50 years after it was articulated. Campuses are also, with a chapter on the implications of scale and activities, programmatic

...and might be. She ends the book to our knowledge of what has been common mission, however, and but it is not universal.

due to a fundamental socioeconomic differences detailed by Jane Jacobs of scale and activities, programmatic

differences detailed by Jane Jacobs with a vision still potent 50 years after it was articulated. Campuses are also, with a chapter on the implications of scale and activities, programmatic

formation of the “discrete community” and the administration, staff, faculty, and student body that occupy them, are still powerfully drawn to the symbolism of the enclave, and to the formation of the “discrete community” that goes with it. It is time for further research, and no doubt Haar is already on it. For the future of the campus, knowledge is a two-way street. Don’t expect it to be an easy drive.

RAY GASTL IS THE CHAIR IN DESIGN INNOVATION AT PENN STATE’S STUCKEMAN SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE.

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Montage of MOCA reimagined by student Jared Shier. Below: MOCA today.
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**CA_05_15_20_FINAL:AN_06_CLH_Mar25  6/19/12  5:23 PM  Page 4**
California’s High-Speed Rail (HSR) project has been back in the news recently, with the state’s High Speed Rail Authority approving the project’s final plan, supporters and opponents at each other’s throats over costs, environmentalists worrying over habitat disruption, and Congress threatening to cut off much of the endeavor’s federal funds. While any project of this scale deserves scrutiny, we must keep our eyes on the prize: high-speed rail presents a critical opportunity for California, one that will catalyze an economically, socially, and ecologically vital future for the state.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA) estimates that the price of expanding the state’s aviation and automobile infrastructure to meet future demand would be nearly twice HSR’s $98 billion price tag. Yet even this revealing figure belies the breadth of HSR’s economic and environmental benefits. If job creation, population growth, economic stagnation, and climate change are the state’s greatest challenges, then HSR offers a compelling answer. Its advantages can reverberate at every scale, benefiting California as well as providing a national model for development that creates robust communities, a healthier environment, and a more resilient, interconnected economy.

Existing high-speed rail systems already demonstrate clear ecological advantages. A Eurostar trip between London and Paris generates 49 pounds per passenger for the equivalent airplane trip. That’s a 90 percent reduction. In California, it’s anticipated that HSR, powered in part by electricity from renewable resources, will reduce carbon emissions by 12 billion pounds per year and save 12.7 million barrels of oil per year as a result of reduced auto and airline trips. Air travel has other downsides beyond its carbon emissions and vulnerability to rising fuel costs. Airports tend to be located far from urban centers, disconnecting these key transit nodes from a city’s densest areas and making airport transfers a time- and energy-consuming endeavor. In contrast, most of the 24 proposed HSR stations will be located in the hearts of their respective cities, spurring more sustainable and denser infill development and accelerating improvements to municipal rail, bus, and bicycle transportation networks. The integration of HSR, local public transit, and urban density is the crux of HSR’s real value for California.

In order to absorb the state’s anticipated population growth of more than 20 million people by 2050, we need a rail system that bolsters efficient regional mass transit with better local public transit and high-density, mixed-use development. A true statewide initiative, the proposed 800-mile system will not only link the state’s key urban centers, such as San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego, it will also provide underserved areas such as Fresno, Bakersfield, Palmdale, and Riverside with improved access for commuters, increased opportunities for knowledge sharing and business growth, and revitalization of their commercial cores.

Refocusing on our urban centers will invigorate our economy, efficiently moving people, ideas, and services through mixed-use, downtown transit hubs that further promote urban regeneration. Already, high-profile projects such as San Francisco’s Transbay Transit Center, the Anaheim Regional Transportation Intermodal Center, and Los Angeles’s Union Station Master Plan competition all anticipate HSR’s arrival. But Bakersfield, Fresno, and other Central Valley cities also are rethinking their central districts, proposing denser, transit-oriented development that counters the region’s destructive legacy of sprawl.

By making it easier and faster to travel between cities, HSR taps into the broader factors driving our state’s sustainability. Communities become closer, spurring new business and job opportunities that in turn strengthen our social fabric. A more interconnected economy will temper the regional isolation that makes some communities less able to weather economic downturns. Equally important, the compact, transit-centered cities that HSR engenders would get people out of their cars, improving air quality, bettering public health by encouraging walking, and fostering greater connectivity among communities.

HSR will create an embedded transportation infrastructure that will serve as a backbone for California’s social, economic, and environmental health and resiliency for decades to come. It’s time to boldly embrace the demonstrated success of high-speed rail systems around the world, and meet the state’s challenges head on. Investing in HSR makes sense at both the regional and local scales. I anticipate the day when I can travel from our Culver City office via light rail to Union Station, jump aboard the high-speed rail to San Francisco, and stroll to our San Francisco office on Grant Avenue, experiencing the inspirational quality of the California landscape and her vibrant cities—all in just over three and a half hours.

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**Conceptual rendering of California’s HSR in action.**

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**THE FUTURE RIDES ON HIGH SPEED RAIL**

**Rendering of HOK and Buro Happold’s ARTIC Station in Anaheim.**

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