

## MOCA: A DOWNTOWN OASIS IN A FORMER WASTELAND

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Nothing in recent years has so beguiled the indigenous cultural imagination as the vision of downtown Los Angeles transformed into a glittering art Mecca. Five years ago the idea was but a fever dream contracted by a few art dealers who caught it from hungry artists ferreting out cheap studio-loft space in the wasteland of industrial buildings east and south of Little Tokyo.

Tossing in their sleep, these pioneers dreamed of bustling crowds in the galleries, boutiques and restaurants of Manhattan's funky-chic SoHo district. They toyed with their own acronyms. Toso? Soto? Tesl? Lest? Nothing quite worked, which failed to dampen the spirit of the faithful. Just "Downtown" was good enough for them.

Today it appears that their vision is on the brink of blossoming beyond their wildest hopes. Aficionados come from far-flung cities for the galleries' annual tour, the LAVA (Los Angeles Visual Arts) Festival. It is estimated that as many as 1,000 artists live downtown. Their institutional hub tends to be the alternate-space LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), which has done so well it is moving from rather cramped digs on Broadway to bigger quarters on Industrial Street.

Insiders take such omens as significant but for the general public the visible proof of the downtown art-in-boom is an arresting structure rising on Bunker Hill. It is, of course, the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The building is already remarkable on several counts. First it is a father that spawned a son before his own birth. The immaculate preconception is the Temporary Contemporary in Little Tokyo, MOCA's interim quarters beloved by all despite a somewhat harried and superficial exhibitions program. Everybody likes TC's converted warehouse quarters so well that in all likelihood it will continue to count among downtown's art venues even after its father grows up.

MOCA pere, the creation of Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, is taking distinctive form on Grand Avenue, as part of the California Plaza project, rising between Second and Fourth streets. Drivers slow to admire skylights shaped like the pyramids of Egypt and a Romanesque barrel vault on stilts. It is sheathed mainly in warm, rust-colored sandstone quarried in India and finished in Japan. There are contrasting walls of green paneling that look unsettlingly like quilted leatherette. Hushed and understated as it is, the little building is by no means cowed by immense corporate behemoths towering nearby. It is rather dignified and witty in a way that almost doesn't compute in surroundings more accustomed to grandiose impressiveness than exquisitely calculated quality.

Once racked with wrangles over funding and design, the project is now ahead of schedule and within budget. (Museum director Richard Koshalek ascribes this modern miracle to the ministrations of MOCA trustee Fred Nicholas, an attorney and developer who bird-dogs the project for the museum. The staff plans to move in this fall and fling open the doors late in 1986.)

Koshalek, Nicholas and administrator Sherri Geldin allowed the first journalistic peek at the interior the other day. Everybody looked appropriately silly wearing hardhats and tripping regularly over malevolent electrical conduits.

In the unfinished auditorium the irrepressibly upbeat Koshalek spoke of visions of the future, such as a film festival in collaboration with the Whitney Museum and a play he hopes to do with Kennedy Center Wunderkind Peter Sellars.

Nicholas, avuncular and soft-spoken, pointed with practical pride to an immense freight elevator, unusual glass brick windows and architectural concrete vault walls that had only been made right after much trouble. "At first Isozaki hated them but we worked on them until he was satisfied," said Nicholas. "Feel that concrete. Smooth as a baby's bottom."

Even after tramping the building thoroughly, it is impossible to make a more than a provisional estimate of how well it will serve art. It is clear, however, that the 100,000 square foot showplace is bigger than it looks because, built on several levels, it is physically deeper. (Let us hope it attains a similarly profound intellectual depth.)

It also leaves an impression of being calculated to its task with the utmost care. Unfinished galleries totaling about 30,000 square feet are calmly proportioned, capacious enough for oversize works, flexible enough to subdivide into more intimate spaces. If we wind up disappointed with this museum it will be on grounds that are not yet apparent. Potentially it looks a near-perfect balance of intrinsic architectural distinction and self-effacing dramatization of art.

Crucial as the museum is, however, it is but the crowning jewel of a larger vision of art downtown, an idea that is itself a little smaller than a grander concept of the Arts Downtown in all their varied permutations as architecture, dance, theater, music and sibling muses. All this is finally mantled in the real-world motive behind it-the resuscitation of the closest thing Los Angeles has ever had to a Central City. Behind all this lurk many forces, commercial and political, benign and greedy. Among the most important for the arts is certainly the L.A. Community Redevelopment Agency, which requires builders to put 1% of their project cost into works of art.

In all likelihood, MOCA, and much else that has happened in downtown art, would not exist were it not for the 1% rule. If one puny point doesn't seem like much, let us keep in mind that the \$20 million paying for MOCA's structure is just 1% of the cost of the California Plaza development on Bunker Hill.

A good idea on the face of it, the rule is evidently about to become an even bigger boon for downtown culture. The CRA recently proposed modifications that will raise more money, spread it more liberally and create a trust fund for the general benefit of the area.

The idea drew praise during a recent public forum-from Councilman Joel Wachs to a businessman who enthused about culture because it helps merchants "Make the big bucks."

Minor grousing from a couple of artists and a worried citizen was allayed by CRA head Edward Helfeld and the new downtown public arts program was soon being praised as "enlightened and revolutionary."

All of which seems to augur nothing but better in a situation already rosy with dreams made flesh. Nothing to do but take a nice nap and let it all come true.

Why do we not rest easy? No one else seems bothered by the constantly echoing suggestion that art is good because it leads businessmen to big bucks. On the other hand, nobody seems particularly disturbed by the slow attrition of pioneering downtown commercial galleries who first saw the Downtown Dream.

Pish, it's probably nothing. Too much pickles and ice cream before bedtime. Go to sleep and we'll talk about it soon.

### **[Illustration]**

PHOTO: Right, the view south on the plaza level at one of the Museum of Contemporary Art's pyramidal skylights. Below, a model of the completed museum. Construction in the South Gallery. Lobby area on upper level of MOCA features specially made glass brick window. The view north from the skylighted roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art, which is taking distinctive form on Grand Avenue, as part of the California Plaza project. / MARSHA TRAEGER / Los Angeles Times Lee Carlson caulks sandstone exterior. / IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

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