

Teaching an Old Design College New Tricks

By CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE

PASADENA, Calif.

WHEN the first Art Center Design Conference convenes here today with a high-wattage lineup of speakers, including Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, Bruce Mau and Hella Jongerius, nobody is likely to confuse the setting with other picturesque stops on the Western design conference circuit.

The main sessions will take place inside a cavernous former supersonic wind tunnel, whose renovation, by the Santa Monica firm Daly, Genik Architects, won't be complete for a few weeks. The neighborhood, in what used to be the industrial part of Pasadena, is pleasingly gritty or nondescript, depending on your point of view.

In other words, this is decidedly not the Aspen Design Conference, which meets each summer near the top of the Rocky Mountains, nor the exclusive TED Conference in Monterey, Calif.

And that is just fine with officials at the 74-year-old Art Center College of Design, which is the host of the gathering. The conference and the building renovation are both part of an aggressive effort, led by the school's president, Richard Koshalek, to bury Art Center's reputation as a secluded hilltop idyll.

"We feel we're at a turning point, a crossroads," said Mr. Koshalek, 62, who is known for his fund-raising skills and bouts of rhetorical zeal. "Even more than other kinds of educational institutions, a design school risks being irrelevant if it's isolated from the world."

The conference is meant to be anything but a retreat, said Erica Clark, a senior vice president at Art Center, who planned the event with Chee Pearlman, a New York-based consultant and design writer, who contributes to The New York Times. "We're bringing people someplace urban, and that's a very deliberate move," Ms. Clark said.

The school, with an enrollment of about 1,500, has long been contained within a single building in the Pasadena hills: a long, thin Miesian box designed by Craig Ellwood in 1976. Mr. Koshalek has an ambitious expansion plan that calls for more buildings on the original campus and a new south campus, of which the wind tunnel is the start.

Mr. Gehry will contribute a design at each site: a library, adjacent to the Ellwood building, and a renovation to a power plant, opposite the wind tunnel, to serve as exhibition space.

Thanks to the publicity that has greeted Mr. Koshalek's building plans, "there is a new awareness of Art Center," said Kevin Daly, a partner in Daly, Genik. "Before, people imagined it as this monastic place tucked up on the hill by the Rose Bowl."

When Mr. Koshalek became Art Center's president, after nearly 20 years of running the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, it was known as a place where students perfected bankable technical skills, with little time for discussions of theory. While its alumni include some of the world's most famous designers of cars and logos, it never matched the national prominence of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan or the Rhode Island School of Design.

"It had a reputation as a school that was solid but never provocative," said Lorcan O'Herlihy, an architect based in Culver City, who has taught at the nearby Southern California Institute of Architecture.

Soon after Mr. Koshalek's arrival, he began looking for ways to expand the school's public programs — and its physical presence — as a way to end its seclusion. He also sought to do away with lingering trade-school associations by promoting a new emphasis on interdisciplinary and theoretical studies, looking to models like the Bauhaus. There are obstacles to Mr. Koshalek's vision, to be sure. Some faculty and staff members have balked at his priorities, sug-



HIGHER LEARNING The Art Center College of Design, above, under its president, Richard Koshalek, left, is creating a new campus from industrial buildings, including a wind tunnel, right, renovated by Daly, Genik. Matt Hollingsworth, at center below, will show his "Roosting Bench" in Milan next month. On the first page of this section: Ana Franco with her "Dino" chaise.



Steven A. Heller

gesting that expensive building plans are racing ahead of more fundamental discussions about the curriculum.

There are also risks inherent in hiring high-profile architects. Alvaro Siza, of Portugal, was enlisted to build his first United States building for the hilltop campus, a technical center that was to include facilities for prototyping and materials science. But he pulled out after butting heads with Mr. Gehry, said Patricia Oliver, who oversees the school's architectural projects.

Mr. Siza's first plans were right on the mark, Ms. Oliver said. But then they became more grandiose, and "you could see that he was trying to compete with Frank."

Ana Franco, a graduate student in industrial design, said Mr. Koshalek's initiatives "are already generating buzz, which can only be good for us as graduates."

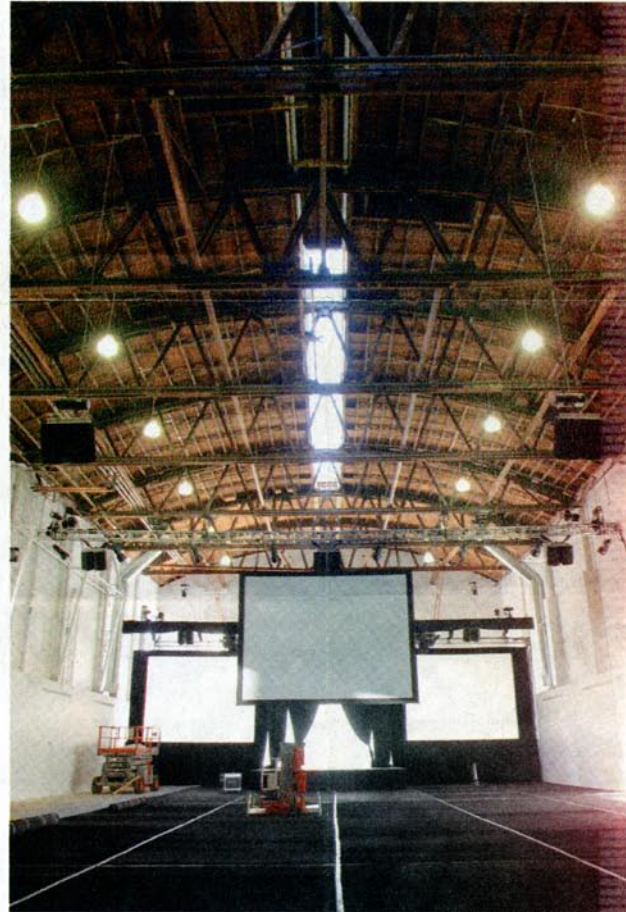
Yet, said Matthew Hollingsworth, a fourth-year student in the product design program — who, like Ms. Franco, will be showing his furniture design next month at the Salone del Mobile in Milan — the benefits have yet to trickle down to the student body. "If anything, we've kind of been stuck

in the transition," he said.

The school's efforts to recast the curriculum drew praise from Sheryl Garrett, a manager of creative resources at General Motors. "When we're thinking about, say, fabrics for our car interiors, we pay attention to stitching on handbags in Paris, or colors or textiles that designers are using in completely different fields," she said. "Art Center is reacting very aggressively to these new realities."

Aaron Stapley, a creative director at the design firm PrimoAngeli: Fitch in San Francisco, said that there had been a noticeable drop-off in the quality of the portfolios he sees from the school. "I haven't been impressed," he said. "We've not been doing any hiring lately from the Art Center, and we used to do so regularly."

Whatever one makes of Mr. Koshalek's plans, it is not surprising that he has seized on bold architecture to advance them, nor that he has taken Mr. Gehry along for the ride. As a museum director, he shepherded his institution through an expansion with buildings by Mr. Gehry and Arata Isozaki. He was also chairman of the committee that



Photographs by Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Big names and a gritty new campus update Art Center.

chose Mr. Gehry to design the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles.

"I believe strongly that great architecture can inspire creativity," Mr. Koshalek said.

When those attending the design conference arrive this afternoon, they will discover that the old wind tunnel building's renovation is still a work in progress, with a rooftop garden and cafe among many features yet to be finished. "I don't think we'll have to require hard hats on opening night," Ms. Pearlman said, only half joking.

Daly, Genik's plans for the structure, which was built in the 1940's to test airplane aerodynamics, have mostly to do with preserving the huge hangarlike main hall and slicing skylights into the roof. The architects have also added storefrontlike windows facing the street. They have carved out a pair of courtyards and have hung a huge new steel staircase from the southern end. The result is a building that has gained glass and a few contemporary appendages but has not lost its broad-shouldered industrial profile.

"It will be a public space, a convener of different points of view," Mr. Koshalek said.

It will hold Art Center's public education programs and art studios for graduate students, offices for a printmaker and temporary art and design exhibitions.

He added, "We're trying to go back and capture the spirit of the historical role that it played. As a wind tunnel, it was a place for research and development and for unusual collaborations among engineers, designers, corporations and so on. We want to make it an experimental space."

Organizers say a similar attitude guided the selection of speakers for the design conference, a disparate group that also includes David Baltimore, the president of the California Institute of Technology, Art Center's neighbor in Pasadena; and Ricky Jay, the magician, writer and sometime actor. Still, design-conference veterans will recognize some of the speakers. As of Wednesday, Ms. Pearlman said she expected about 700 people to attend, including about 100 Art Center students.

Ms. Clark and Ms. Pearlman both said they hoped the conference would provide a setting for informal discussions and networking beyond the official program. They will undoubtedly be helped by the difference in setting between this gathering and design conferences like the one in Aspen, where attendance sometimes drops off over the course of the day as visiting designers go off for a hike or fly-fishing.

In the case of Art Center's conference, held in a building surrounded by chain link instead of wildflowers, that seems unlikely to be much of a problem.