LACMA

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST: PETER ZUMTHOR RECONSIDERS LACMA DIDACTICS

Evolution of LACMA's East Campus

The story begins with the La Brea Tar Pits in Hancock Park, one of the world's richest and most renowned sources of late Ice Age fossils, which became a public park in 1924. Although the international scientific community was concerned about preserving the site, Los Angeles County received permission to build its first art museum there in the late 1950s. Since then, despite many attempts, the relationship between what would become the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and its site has never been successfully resolved. This exhibition provides an opportunity to explore the museum's history and the half-century-old quest for unity between its buildings and their surroundings.

When LACMA opened its original three buildings in 1965, the city celebrated this symbol of its cultural evolution. No longer merely one of three divisions of the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art in Exposition Park (now the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County), where it had resided since 1913, the museum was seen by the *Los Angeles Times* as a "noble contribution to the world of art." Disenchantment with the buildings themselves quickly set in, however, and there were complaints about the stinginess of the gallery space, the quality of the architecture, and the lack of engagement with Wilshire Boulevard.

Although some people continued to embrace LACMA's new structures, they were in the minority. The addition of a building for modern and contemporary art in 1986, one for Japanese art two years later, and the alterations to the 1965 structures over the decades did little to subdue the general discontent. From William L. Pereira's original scheme of the early 1960s to Rem Koolhaas's groundbreaking proposals of 2001 and Renzo Piano's vision of unity outlined in 2006, the history of LACMA's campus is a study of how financial restrictions, political compromises,

and unrealized plans have impacted the museum's architecture and the public's art-viewing experience.

Rancho La Brea

The Rancho La Brea fossil deposits are an unparalleled resource of international scientific importance. Decades of excavation and research at the site, led by scientists at the Page Museum and administered by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, have shaped understanding of the late Pleistocene Ice Age in North America. Although the geologist William Denton recognized as early as 1875 that the unusual bones frequently found there were those of prehistoric animals, other scientists did not pay attention to this monumental discovery until the early twentieth century. The work of the paleontologists John C. Merriam and Chester Stock set important precedents for documenting excavations, and their publications remain landmarks in the field. Merriam also wrote for popular magazines like *Sunset*, captivating the public imagination with images of long-extinct ground sloths and saber-toothed cats struggling in the viscous "death trap." George Allan Hancock formally gifted the land to the county in 1924, with the intention that a museum housing the invaluable findings from the site would eventually be built, surrounded by a landscape of sculpted animals and period plantings.

The Art of Scientific Accuracy: John L. Ridgway

The remarkably well preserved bones excavated from the Rancho La Brea tar pits in the early twentieth century provided scientists with a unique archive of prehistoric life. John C. Merriam, who taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and later headed the Carnegie Institution of Washington, was among the first scholars to work with these fossils. His protégé Chester Stock, a professor at the California Institute of Technology, dedicated his career to studying the site.

In 1925 Stock published a landmark study of the region's extinct ground sloths. Merriam and Stock's 1932 collaboration *The Felidae of Rancho La Brea* documented the famed saber-toothed cats and other ancient felines. Both included drawings by the celebrated scientific illustrator John L. Ridgway, who, beginning around 1920, maintained a studio at the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art in order to focus

exclusively on these projects. His meticulous renderings employed carefully plotted shadows to capture the details of each unique specimen. As Stock observed, Ridgway “labored to combine beauty with scientific accuracy in the delineation of fact.”

The Development of Miracle Mile

Los Angeles’s population boom in the 1920s coincided with the rise of the automobile, forever shaping the layout of the city. Rather than building upward in the original downtown, developers pushed westward along major boulevards such as Wilshire, creating far-flung neighborhoods that could now be reached in minutes. Within a decade, the area surrounding the tar pits had been transformed from a remote outpost sparsely dotted with oil fields and airstrips (including one owned by the legendary Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille) into a flourishing retail corridor. Beginning in 1923, the visionary developer A. W. Ross assembled property between La Brea and Fairfax, aiming to attract branches of major downtown shops. Promoting the new district, which he eventually named Miracle Mile, he argued that Los Angeles’s evolution into a “completely motorized town” would alter shoppers’ perceptions of distance and convenience. The streamlined towers that arose along the strip were often located blocks away from traffic-heavy intersections and further privileged car-bound customers over pedestrians with main entrances that faced spacious parking lots rather than the street.

LACMA Begins: The Choice of an Architect

In 1958, after the county approved a separate building for a museum of art and a new location in Hancock Park, an intensive search for the right architect began. The ambitious and adventurous chief curator of art, Richard “Ric” Brown, who would become director in 1961, was a passionate advocate of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Noting that Mies was “considered to be the greatest living architect,” Brown cited eminent critics such as Lewis Mumford, who called him “*The* old master.” At an important meeting of the Museum Associates board in 1959, Brown presented other choices in order of preference: Philip Johnson, Gordon Bunschaft, Eero Saarinen, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and William L. Pereira, who is thought to have been included only because of pressure to consider a local candidate. Brown was able to convince the board that Mies would give the project an

“international eminence” much sought by community leaders eager to dispel the notion that Los Angeles was a cultural backwater.

Top donor Howard Ahmanson had successfully negotiated for the power of veto in the selection process, however, and he objected to Mies. His own first choice was the New York architect Edward Durell Stone. Since Pereira was also acceptable to Ahmanson and, although last choice, not anathema to Brown, a compromise was struck. As Edward Carter, the board chairman, told the *Los Angeles Times* in a 1979 interview: “We all decided Pereira would be a satisfactory second choice.” Pereira’s firm was given the commission in March 1960, and the always controversial plan was begun.

LACMA Begins: The Pereira Buildings

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened in March 1965, amid an outpouring of civic pride and a spectacle of fireworks. Designed in a modern classicist style by the local firm William L. Pereira and Associates, the new museum consisted of three pavilions: the Ahmanson Gallery of Art, which housed the permanent collections; the Lytton (now Hammer) Gallery, for temporary exhibitions; and the Leo S. Bing Center, which included the theater, library, and education spaces.

The decision to have multiple structures had been political, with the board adhering to the wishes of the largest donors. These separate structures did, however, allow the architects to take advantage of the region’s year-round benign climate. Their different functions laid out the active public program that defined modern museums, which would make them, in the words of the critic Ada Louise Huxtable, “no longer passive picture galleries.”

The complex appeared to float over biomorphic pools punctuated by fountains. Pereira hoped the setting would elevate the experience, writing, “The visitor feels he has arrived at a different and distinctive place; a place where ordinary daily concerns fade and one has time for reflection and aesthetic enjoyment.” This goal, however, meant that the buildings would be divorced from, not integrated with, the city and landscape. Furthermore, the rapid seepage of black tar into the pools necessitated their infill, becoming a symbol of the flawed planning that would challenge museum administrators for decades.

Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates Addition

By the 1980s the collection had drastically outgrown its footprint, and LACMA's director, Earl A. "Rusty" Powell III, led an effort to enlarge the institution. The need for a building dedicated to twentieth-century art was clearly recognized by both the director and the trustees. The Robert O. Anderson Building (completed in 1986 and now called the Art of the Americas Building) was designed by the New York firm Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates. In an effort to resolve the frustrating circulation patterns that had plagued the original design—as Norman Pfeiffer quipped, "The public never had a sense of where the front door was"—the architects joined the existing buildings with a central courtyard and reoriented the museum toward Wilshire Boulevard with an oversize facade referencing the Moderne style of classic Hollywood. Plans to unify the campus, such as recladding the original 1965 buildings to match the new construction and joining the buildings with pedestrian walkways at all corresponding levels, were never completed. Although the galleries, laid out in a traditional Beaux-Arts enfilade, were praised, the new building was seen as contributing to the aesthetic discord. The critic Robert Hughes's comment that the Anderson Building "obliterated the old museum like the giant foot in Monty Python" was typical. Once more, alterations and additions to the campus, like the original structures themselves, became a paradigm for a compromised dream of unity not only among the buildings themselves but also between LACMA and its incomparable site.

The Art as Client: Goff's Pavilion

A disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright and an advocate of organic architecture, the Oklahoma-based architect Bruce Goff gained international recognition for the elaborate geometries of his residences, each shaped by the desires of its intended owner. Discussing the Pavilion for Japanese Art (completed in 1988), Joe Price, Goff's patron and the original commissioner of the project, explained: "We…designated a new type of client—the art itself." Designed to house Price's world-class collection of Edo period scroll and screen paintings, the gallery space evoked the way the works would have been seen in traditional Japanese homes. A multistory spiral ramp led visitors on a defined path through the gallery. This design drew many comparisons with Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1959), but unlike his predecessor, Goff punctuated the path with horizontal viewing platforms. Placed at a protective distance from the artworks, these petal-

shaped platforms permitted the museum to forgo glass enclosures that might interfere with the direct experience of the art. Instead of grouping paintings on walls, Goff created tokonoma (alcoves) that promote individual encounters with each artwork. The suspended roof enabled the paneled walls to be made of Kalwall, a translucent plastic meant, as Goff's collaborator Bart Prince explained, "to allow the natural light to filter through in a similar fashion as shoji screens."

From "Exhausting" to "Exhaustive": The Koolhaas Plan

In 2001 LACMA's board of trustees and the museum's director, Andrea Rich, organized a competition, commissioning five internationally recognized architects to address what the museum admitted was "a disconnected and disorienting" campus experience. While four of the finalists—Steven Holl, Daniel Libeskind, Thom Mayne, and Jean Nouvel—adhered to the brief of renovation and an addition to the existing structures, the iconoclastic Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas captivated the committee with his radical proposal to demolish most of the existing campus, leaving only Goff's Pavilion for Japanese Art and LACMA West, the landmark 1939 May Company department store, which the museum had acquired in 1994. In its place, he planned to erect a holistic museum under a single undulating Mylar-fiber roof. He hoped that his plan to elevate the structure over an expanded plaza on a series of concrete columns would finally integrate the site by allowing people to move freely between building, park, and city. Though the arts community largely rallied around this solution—a *Los Angeles Times* story was headlined "LACMA Raze Met with Praise"—the plan failed to garner the necessary financial support. Koolhaas's assertion that much of the east campus should not be preserved was nevertheless a lasting legacy. Given the great cost of seismic retrofitting and the logistic and aesthetic deficiencies of the structures, his plan convinced many that it was prudent for LACMA to start anew.

The Classical Axis: Piano's Master Plan

After economic issues prevented the implementation of Koolhaas's plan, LACMA's board of trustees sought an alternative resolution to the museum's architectural challenges. Trustee Eli Broad, with the support of the other board members, originally approached the Italian architect Renzo Piano to design a single freestanding building, which would be called the Broad

Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM). Piano accepted the commission under the condition that his firm would “redo everything on the LACMA campus,” stating, “We have to find a solution for the whole thing.” His master plan proposed clarifying the museum’s notoriously flawed circulation pattern with a classical axis system of two pedestrian paths. What he called the “sacred” axis led visitors between the art galleries, flowing from LACMA West alongside the new structure (BCAM would be completed in 2008), through the Ahmanson building (which would be reconfigured to permit visitors to walk east and west), up to the central courtyard and, ideally, past the tar pits. Arguing that the “park is part of the experience,” Piano saw the entire campus as encompassing both artistic and scientific discovery. A perpendicular “profane” axis connected the shop and restaurant, moving people through a light-filled entry pavilion (a nod to the city’s famously airy post–World War II Case Study Houses) to an outdoor plaza. In 2006 Piano refined the plan with new director Michael Govan, converting the entry into an open-air space and ultimately designing a second building, the Resnick Pavilion, which opened in 2010.

Site Specific: Artists Respond to LACMA

Artists have played a critical role in shaping public perception of LACMA and its architecture, responding to the structures both as symbols of the status quo and as spaces for displaying art. In his painting *Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965–68), Edward Ruscha portrayed the newly constructed buildings engulfed in flames, a provocative gesture that signaled how rapidly Pereira’s classicist campus had come to represent the city’s art establishment. In the guerrilla performance *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972), the Chicano collective Asco tagged the museum’s outdoor railings, protesting the exclusion of artists of color from its galleries.

Sanctioned artworks have also engaged with unexpected locations throughout the museum. Early on, curators mounted exhibitions of sculptures by Peter Voulkos (1965) and John Mason (1966) on the plaza, signaling that the entire campus was open to art. Sol LeWitt’s monumental paintings for *Olympian Gestures* in 1984 took advantage of the vast Ahmanson atrium walls; Richard Jackson’s sculpture *The Big Idea 2* filled the entire cavernous space. Jackson’s work was part of curator Stephanie Barron’s innovative 1981 exhibition *The Museum as Site*, which challenged participating artists to create site-specific works on a campus frequently

seen, according to the exhibition catalogue, as an “architecturally awkward and unsympathetic space for contemporary art.”

Art and Architecture

Almost since the beginning of civilization, large-scale artworks—in concert with architecture and formally organized plazas and open spaces—have been made to engage people, establish civic and ceremonial centers, and project an identity for a society. Given Los Angeles’s benign climate and LACMA’s expansive, open parkland, commissioning such architectonic artworks for the site seemed a natural extension of the museum’s mission to be an artistic center and gathering place for the metropolis of Los Angeles.

Chris Burden’s collection of cast-iron street lamps, *Urban Light*; Robert Irwin’s garden of palm trees; Barbara Kruger’s monumental mural *Untitled (Shafted)* and Richard Serra’s *Band* (both in BCAM); Michael Heizer’s recent *Levitated Mass*; and Tony Smith’s sculpture *Smoke*, which in 1967 announced a new era of big museum art, all are intended to place great and influential art outdoors and at key entry points of LACMA’s campus and galleries. Many of these artworks are accessible even when the museum galleries are closed, most are by living artists from California, and all mark the importance of this time and this place.

“Black Flower”—A Proposed New Building for the East Campus

The proposed museum does not have a classical entrance. Rather, visitors begin their visit through an outdoor space—the existing plaza—which extends under the new building to reveal eight thematic cores that appear as independent volumes on the park level and rise into the exhibition level above. The ticket office is located in a freestanding space off the main plaza.

Each of the eight volumes on the park level provides a point of focus with a specific entrance (including foyer, stairs, and elevators) as well as an open-storage exhibition area, with many artworks visible day and night. These glazed “shop front” installations surround more intimate study centers within. Cores may also include archives, an auditorium, offices, art conservation, a museum shop, a coffee bar, a restaurant, and other

kinds of storage. Taking advantage of a sloping site, some cores contain a mezzanine to expand conservation and study areas.

Entering the museum through one of the thematic cores will offer visitors various starting points to the exhibition level. From the stairs or elevators, one arrives at the Veranda Gallery, which surrounds the whole exhibition level and looks out to the city. A visitor can stay within the chosen core, journeying inward to formal galleries; decide to walk beside the façade to find entrances to the other five collection areas; or go to the restaurant facing the plaza.

On the exhibition level, six gallery areas create their own quiet centers of gravity with key pieces from the collection. In contrast to the curvilinear Veranda Gallery along the exterior, the inner galleries offer orthogonal arrangements of walls, shifting in orientation from core to core. The diverse grids create unique settings for each collection installation and offer recognizable points of reference within the whole.

Encircling the entire building, the perimeter path—the Veranda Gallery—provides a rare and grand experience that connects everything: all the installations within the museum as well as the museum and the surrounding metropolis.