

City of angles

An eccentrically angled grey box with two transparent corners emerges from the roof of a bland warehouse; a stair tower of steel and acrylic bursts, *Alien*-like, from the corner of another blank container. Developer Frederick Smith and architect Eric Owen Moss are at it again, transforming abandoned industrial buildings into workplaces for cutting-edge companies, and putting Culver City on the map.

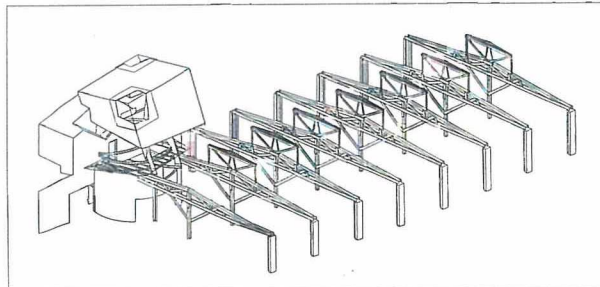
It's an improbable location for the most provocative old/new buildings in greater Los Angeles. In the days when the MGM lion roared, its pictures ended with the line "Made in Hollywood, USA"; no one wanted to know they were produced in Culver City. It's been described as "the city time forgot": a sinuous enclave of frame houses, vintage commerce, blighted factories and meandering streets. Eight years ago, Smith bought a fifteen-acre tract from his father and announced that he and his wife/partner, Laurie, would "use architecture as a catalyst to build a creative community, and as a generator that would make the city more livable and productive".

The project, now achieving critical mass, is named "Conjunctive Points" (defined in physics as "the point at which energy in sub-particle space emerges

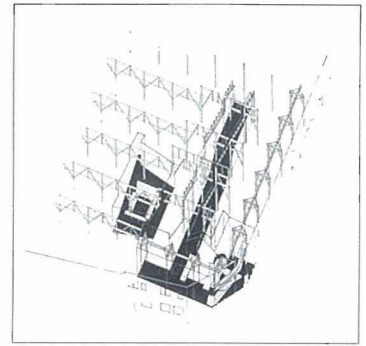
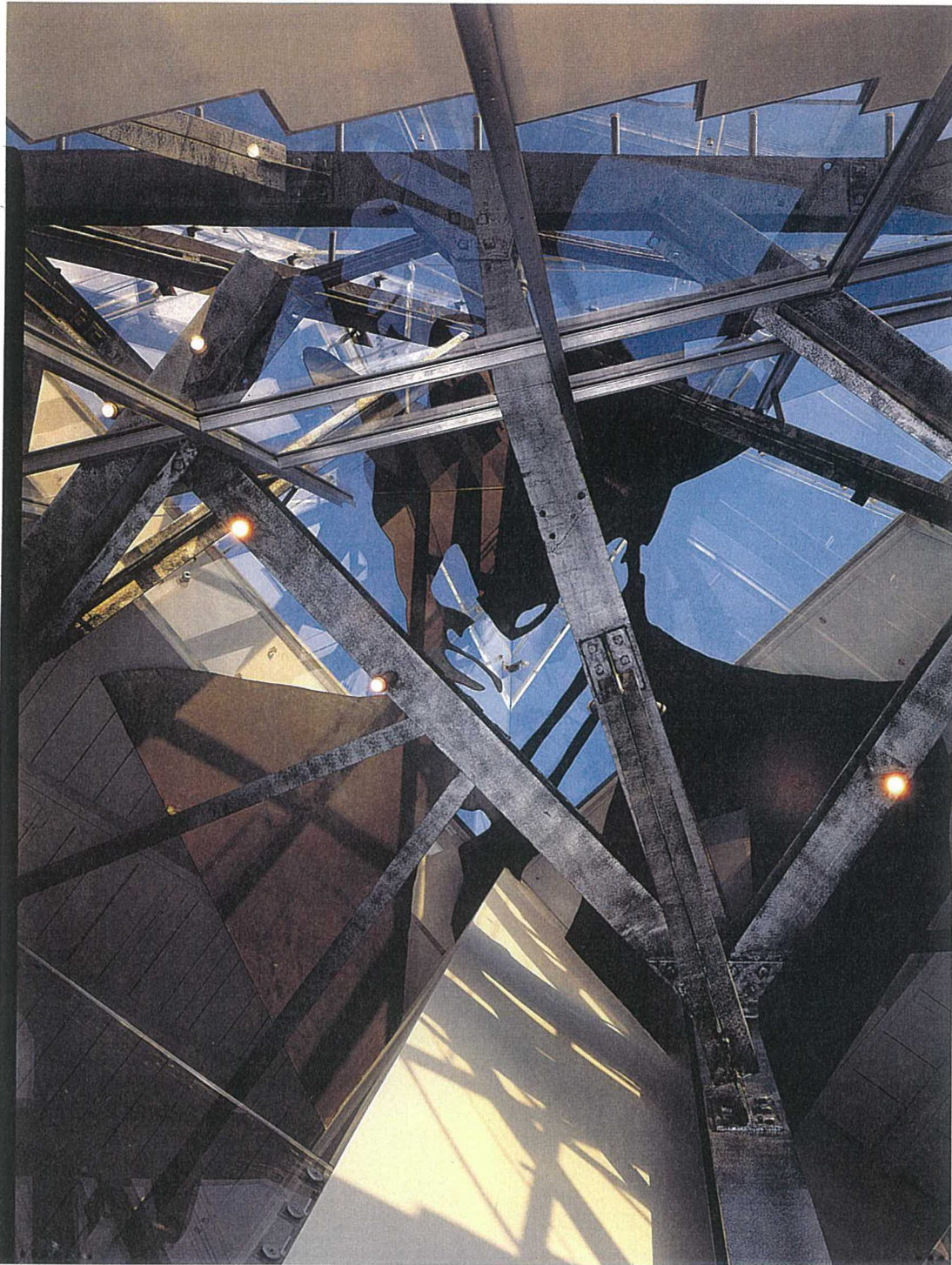
A ONCE BLIGHTED INDUSTRIAL ZONE IN GREATER LOS ANGELES HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A HABITABLE CREATIVE HUB. MICHAEL WEBB LOOKS AT ERIC MOSS'S LATEST WORK AT CULVER CITY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM BONNER

into three-dimensional space and becomes measurable"). Call it a new beginning. Smith has the autodidact's compulsion to wax erudite, but his vision and determination command respect. He has overcome the hostility of bureaucrats and banks to convert six buildings, totalling 140,000 square feet, and fill them with some of LA's brightest architects, designers, electronics gurus and craftspeople - even a ballet school that's affiliated to the Kirov. He's rejected affluent but inappropriate suitors, giving his project the cachet of an exclusive club. Two more buildings are under construction, but even bolder designs are still taking shape in Moss's studio. Asked when they may be built, Smith is non-committal, but two companies have expressed interest in moving in.

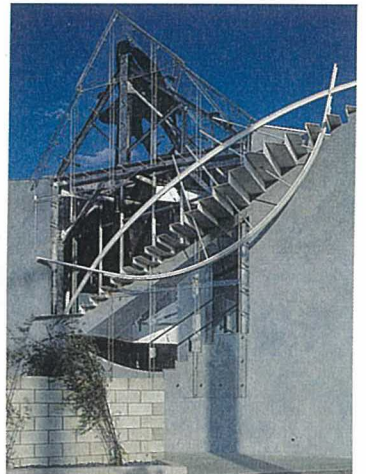
Moss can match his patron in mystification and some of his project descriptions are as inscrutable as computer manuals translated from Japanese. The buildings and models tell a different story. Philip Johnson called him the "jeweller of junk" and it's an apt reference to the earlier conversions, with their detailed Strandboard and steel, and intricate structures that intersect and transform found spaces. As a jeweller cuts a stone to reveal its brilliance, so did Moss expose and slice timber vaults to exploit →



The Box, left and above, is an as yet unoccupied building on National Boulevard - a hollowed out core of a 1930s warehouse with Moss's intervention of a 200 square foot box perched on top. The latter is intended as a conference room for 20 to 50 people, and an emblem of Culver City's artistic policy



3520 Hayden Avenue is the HQ of record and media company IRS Inc. The timber beams of the original building were exposed and additions made in steel to create a frenetic structure over the open-air atrium



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their coarse power, raise roofs to admit light, and punch through the envelope to reveal striking inner forms.

The Lawson-Westen house, his first major ground-up building, showed what he could do with a larger budget and a freer hand. The newer projects build on that achievement. Wolfgang Prix at Coop Himmelblau (Moss's neighbour) christened one of these "Stealth" for its resemblance to the sharply angled war-plane. It includes a two-storey range of offices that is lofted above a garden and parking, and projects from a massive

black wall. One end is square, the other triangular, and the building shifts from four-sided to three-sided along its length. The Ince Theatre comprises three interlocking bowls that enclose a 425-seat auditorium and support a rooftop amphitheatre with a free-standing projection screen. The Warner Theatre (named, like Ince, after the street it will be located on) has performance boxes, with two storeys of offices above, elegantly wrapped around a central tower.

The Culver City Council was so impressed by the commercial success of

Smith's projects and the awards they won, it conditionally approved his plea to waive the requirement that one per cent of the construction cost be set aside for art, in cases where the architecture was judged by a committee to be a work of art in itself. Artists, fearing a precedent would be set, hollered for continued access to the public trough, and the controversy is still on the boil. There has been no discussion of the fact that most architecture would never be considered art, or that most public art is uninspired, and as relevant to its site as a decal on a refrigerator.

The Smiths want it all: to fuse art and technology, lure entrepreneurs and provide them with stimulating workplaces, and improve the quality of life citywide. They've made a good start, but there's a long way to go and the obstacles are formidable. "If we're successful, others will emulate us," says Smith. "But there are no short cuts. It's a high-risk gamble and we've reinvested every penny to keep going."

Whether they succeed or fail, every American city needs a dozen Smiths to attempt the impossible, for conventional urban strategies have fallen short. ■