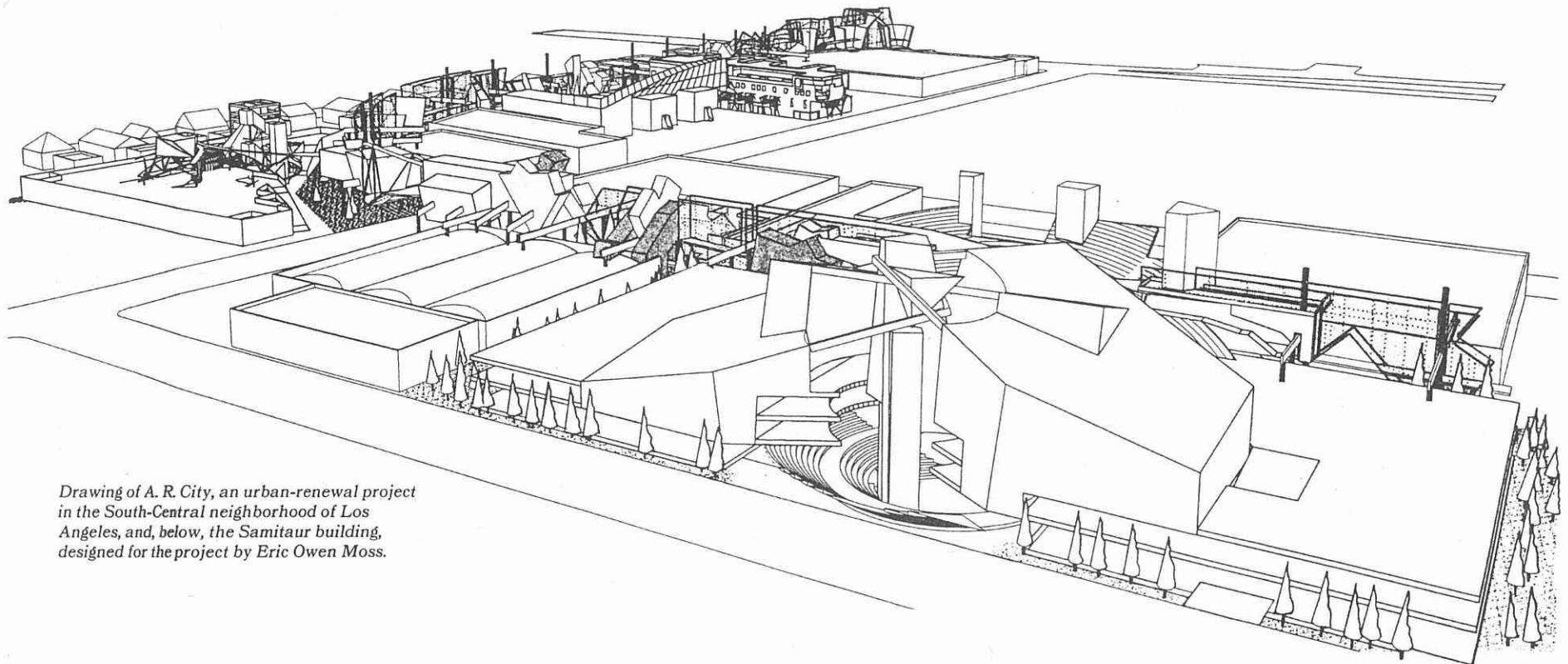


ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITECTURE VIEW / Herbert Muschamp

Lifting the Sights of a Neighborhood Tired and Low



Drawing of A. R. City, an urban-renewal project in the South-Central neighborhood of Los Angeles, and, below, the Samitaur building, designed for the project by Eric Owen Moss.

LOS ANGELES

WHEN IT COMES TO MEDIA coverage of Los Angeles, the rule seems to be: if you bash it, they will come; if you build it, they'll stay away in droves. Stage an earthquake, ignite a riot, and it will make the cover of Time magazine. But where are the helicopters, the television cameras, the real-time, live-action coverage that in a less topsy-turvy world would allow us to watch the completion of a new building by Eric Owen Moss?

From the roof of the Samitaur Building, the most recent project by this brilliant 52-year-old Los Angeles architect, you can spot Fedco and other stores in the South-Central section that were looted during the 1992 riots after the verdict in the Rodney King beating. Then, plumes of smoke curled toward the sky as dusk crept over the city, and across the country, people were glued to their television screens trying to figure out what was going on.

Today, at the corner of Corbett Street and Jefferson Boulevard, it's clear that at least three things are going on. Samitaur is a football-field-length office building dramatically raised 21 feet off the ground by a long row of round steel columns. Beyond that, the building is a vote of confidence by Frederick Smith, the developer, in a part of town that has become synonymous with urban unrest. And not least, it's a prototype for an ambitious idea that Moss and Smith have been promoting for several years: a half-mile urban-renewal project designed to boost the civic profile of South-Central.

A.R. City (for Air Rights City), as the plan is called, would make use of the space (air rights) above an abandoned spur of the Southern Pacific Railroad that loops through Culver City along the edge of South-Central. The spur was originally built to pick up freight from manufacturers once clustered in this district of low-rise industrial sheds. Now, the spur serves mainly as a reminder that industry has dispersed, much of it gone overseas in search of cheap labor. And the rail cut itself stands as a symbol of the economic disparities that divide this city.

Moss's A.R. City plan is designed to mend the tear in the urban fabric and also to re-



Paul Groh

verse the area's economic decline. The rail cut would be converted into a linear park with trees, seating, pedestrian walkways and recreational areas. The strip would be punctuated by buildings raised over it on steel trusses. These would house theaters and other cultural organizations as well as commercial tenants. Combining elements of the traditional urban park with the suburban industrial park, A.R. City would be, in effect, a post-industrial park for a forward-looking city.

The Samitaur (named after his development company) could be a prototype for the kinds of buildings Mr. Smith envisions. Situated a few blocks from the rail spur, it hovers over a driveway that runs between a warehouse with corrugated metal walls and a squat brick building that once housed machine shops. It was designed to foster the co-existence of light industry with upscale enterprises — design studios, small movie-production companies — that have gravitat-

ed to Culver City in recent years. In theory, the purpose of raising the building was to let trucks continue to service the industrial tenants. But these tenants have gone and given the present economy, it is likely that offices will eventually be housed in the building's ground-floor spaces.

MOSS'S MAIN GOAL, HOWEVER, in raising the building was to provide visual excitement. Many of his most important projects are interior renovations. While stunningly inventive, they are often invisible from the street. At Samitaur, Moss lifts his architecture emphatically into the public domain. And the building's muscular upward push is part of the message Moss wants to share.

The long, bar-shaped building, connected at one end to a renovated industrial shed, has stucco walls the color of weathered copper. A grid of thin steel strips divides the

stucco into square panels, enlivening the flat surface with glints of silvery light. Square, punched-out windows echo the grid.

On the street side of the building, an outdoor staircase is molded into a flamboyant whirl of plastic form; Moss calls it "the pumpkin." The teethlike cut of the stairs, the empty window sockets, evoke a jack-o'-lantern visage. The top of the pumpkin is carved into a bowl shape with a rim that frames a disk of southern California sky. When a plane flies overhead, bisecting the disk, it's a reminder that this is a legendary city of people who came hoping to find things looking up.

Halfway down the building's length, there's another boldly articulated stair. Here, water will splash down from the roof into a pool, while an opening in the wall reveals an urban panorama surprisingly like a seascape: the rounded roofs of the disheveled old factories appear to roll toward the Samitaur like waves of rust.

The Samitaur will make an excellent landmark; but a half-mile-long loop of city laid out by Eric Owen Moss? Isn't that just another architect's wild utopian dream? Is it even desirable? Like it or not, the dream isn't that farfetched. Smith and Moss have already remade a number of old factory sheds along National Boulevard in Culver City. Besides reversing a declining part of the city, their efforts have produced some of the most vigorous architecture of our time.

But does it portend anything affirmative for the residents of South-Central? Or would the invasion of upscale businesses into impoverished, predominantly black neighborhoods simply further displace an already marginalized population? I confess that Eric Moss's work inspires me with a sense of optimism that I can't justify by empirical

It may not make the news, but a post-industrial office park could help the South-Central part of Los Angeles rebound.

evidence. Cleaner streets, a lower crime rate, a higher standard of living: there's no proof that design per se can improve an urban environment in material terms.

But are these the only, the best, standards with which to measure a building's impact? In his book "Emotional Intelligence," Daniel Goleman argues that optimism produces measurable rewards. It improves performance; it is contagious; it can make the difference between win or lose. Moss gives form to similar ideas. His optimism isn't naive.

The Samitaur does not turn away from its depressed surroundings. On the contrary, the design's emphasis on providing views of the city gives you a clear sense of where you are. And A.R. City depicts no serenely humming modern Utopia. The plan's fragmented, incrementally pieced-together cityscape doesn't exclude uncertainty, or even doubt. But it pushes past ambivalence. It suggests that a picture of hope may be harder to construct than an image of despair, but that the ingredients for both are in sight.

Goleman hopes that one day schools will offer courses in emotional intelligence. Moss's projects strike me as such a form of education. The knowing spontaneity of his forms, the hands-on approach implicit in their strong, sculptural contours, the relationship they describe between a city's vitality and the creative potential of its individuals: these coalesce into tangible lessons about how a city should face its future. □