

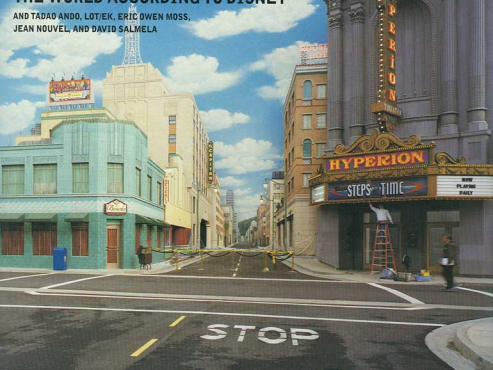
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TOTALIZING ENVIRONMENTS:

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO DISNEY

AND TADAO ANDO, LOT/EK, ERIC OWEN MOSS,
JEAN NOUVEL, AND DAVID SALMELA





The Steath, 2001

The Steath Annex, 2000

ERIC IN

WITH THE COMPLETION OF THE WEDGEWOOD HOLLY
COMPLEX, ERIC OWEN MOSS'S FANTASTIC
URBAN VISION FOR CULVER CITY FINALLY TAKES FORM.
BY JOSEPH GIOVANNINI

PHOTOGRAPHER: David Joseph



Backlash, 2000

WONDERLAND

...There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been....

T.S. ELIOT, "EAST COKER," *FOUR QUARTETS*



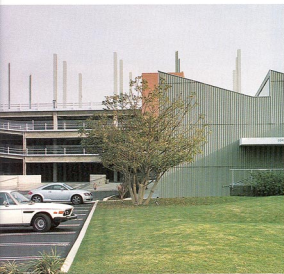
Slash, 2000

Back in 1988, when Fred Smith walked into Eric Owen Moss's Culver City, California, office to collect the rent, neither could have foreseen that the meeting that ensued, which led to a dialogue about T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, would jump-start Moss's practice and eventually lead to the creation of a Los Angeles version of SoHo. But Smith was a developer with the germ of an idea—architectural complexity—and Moss, a free radical still in search of his voice, was open to discussion.

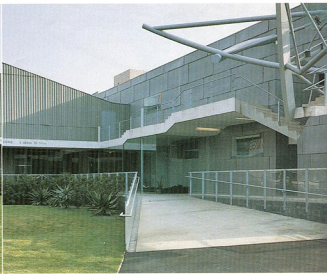
In the 1960s, Smith had developed buildings in Northern California for the new computer industry, and he nursed notions about developing structures that represented the architectural corollaries of its new math. Capable of imaging complexity, the computer had opened up science to nonlinear phenomena and chaos theory that in turn, Smith reasoned, might open up architecture to a nonlinear kind of design that would

appeal to the shock troops of the emerging digital economy. Smith also either acquired or had access to a group of warehouses owned by his family in Culver City's Hayden Tract, a failing industrial zone with a motley array of low-rise structures. For his part, Moss had started a formal exploration of complexity with an administrative building for the University of California at Irvine. The project was diagrammatic but promising; the geometrically boisterous design strategy needed the support of nurturing commissions.

The collaboration between Moss, Smith, and Smith's wife and partner Laurie, started small, with a structurally fragile one-story factory on the wrong side of the Santa Monica Freeway, at 8522 National Boulevard in the Hayden Tract. After stripping off decades of accretions and taking the building down to its timber bones and saw-toothed roof, Moss wove a sec-



Office/garage, under construction



The Umbrella, 1999

ondary steel structural system through the old bowstring trusses. Tectonic clarity blurred in a hybrid structure that, as at Irvine, generated complex, idiosyncratic spaces. Moss was not suppressing differences and exceptions into a homogenous whole but cultivating heterogeneity. His strategy was to use new elements to acknowledge existing conditions and catalyze unexpected and unpredictable formal directions.

Once devoted to serial production, in Moss's hands the renovated factory became a testing ground of post-industrial thinking, its uniqueness a magnet for Los Angeles' cooler-than-corporate media intelligentsia. "The Smiths used architecture to market to these people," says Moss. The first project led to others in the Hayden Tract, as the Smiths and Moss bonded in a close and ongoing professional and personal relationship. "We were undertaking a large urban development, and it was

advantageous to have one creative mind, to have an overall vision of the work," says Laurie Smith. "Eric is sensitive to all the pieces when he adds another. There's a fit, and he doesn't want to jar it." Samitaur Constructs, the Smiths' development company, works on many projects in the Hayden Tract at any one time, each at a different phase in its development, from concept to construction. Fred Smith credits the architecture for the success of the projects, but adds, "They were well planned on every level—the legal, the security, the financing, the accounting, and the community planning." Or, as Moss puts it, "This work has all the usual institutional constraints, and a penurious owner."

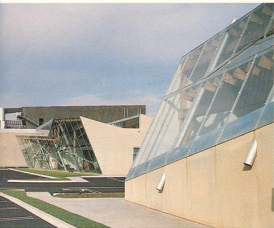
Unlike Frank Gehry, who sculpts buildings largely from the outside in, Moss worked substantially in plan, planting one system, often structural, against another, setting the interiors into play. This strategy did not at first



yield strong and iconic formal results on the exterior, but with Moss's sixth project, Samitaur, a warehouse renovation and addition that won a PJA award in 1992 (and was finally completed in 1997), circumstances permitted a figural, hourglass staircase to erupt through the existing volume. Other iconic breakout geometries followed on other buildings—with descriptive nicknames like the Beehive, the Umbrella, and the Box. One by one, over more than a decade, the buildings began to add up to a community of a dozen architectural non sequiturs. Conceived in contradistinction to one another, the pieces shared an attitude, acting as semaphores signaling uniqueness and even mystery. The Hayden Tract emerged economically renewed at the same time that downtown Culver City, with an infusion of public funds, was being revitalized in the New Urbanist after-image of Main Street, U.S.A. Within blocks, two paradigms of urban renovation were being developed.

The Smiths were not urban planners wielding governmental powers and annual budgets, but developers dealing with discrete, scattered properties and conventional bank loans. They owned buildings that hopscotched the tract, and like skin cut in an expanded web to graft over a damaged area, the renovations have started a healing regrowth in the unhealthy zones in between. The buildings have caused other developers to rehab warehouses in the Hayden Tract, but none share in the mystique that draws people into the orbit of Moss's buildings.

Most of the old warehouses are located in a roughly 57-acre area along the streets of a conventional grid, but during the last several years, Moss and the Smiths have pursued a Janus principle of development in a block bounded by Hayden and National. The warehouses here (in a complex known as Wedgewood Holly) extend deeply into the middle of the sprawl-



Backslash and Slash, 2000



The Stealth, 2001



Office/garage, rendering, under construction

ing block, where the collaborators carved a plaza from the continuous building mass spread across the site. Parking covers finger into the warehouses, creating building peninsulas, each with a façade and a separate identity; meanwhile, along the street, they present a consistent architectural character—their “public” side. Two “new” buildings carved out by Wedgewood Holly’s internal plaza are called Slash and Backslash, with façades tilting forward and back. A third structure erupts in a corner of contoured glass, the Umbrella, (originally intended as a stage for outdoor concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic (March 2000, page 104). At the far east end of the plaza, a four-story parking structure has been erected that will eventually double as the podium for another office building, conceived as a set of prisms that tumble down through the garage’s upper floors.

At the west end of the plaza, a façade with leaning planes of glass forms part of a fifth building that is contiguous with a long, angular, streetside structure Moss calls the Stealth. Its dark, shadowy form, interrupted by an underpass, acts as the streetside façade for the west side of Wedgewood Holly, a gateway to the plaza, and the start of an almost ceremonial vehicular processional into and through the plaza to the parking garage. The Stealth is one of the few ground-up structures built by Moss in his nearly 30-year career: A series of folded surfaces wraps the three-story, open-loft building, which is split down the middle by an open-air service core. At the north end, a vast galvanized sheet-metal wall folds back to reveal a stage that faces a depressed lawn intended for outdoor audiences.

The strategy of creating two-sided buildings doubles the architecture and the urbanism for the price of the same land and buildings. The five



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|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1 Gateway Project, unbuilt | 5 8583 Warner Drive Theater and Offices, unbuilt | 9 8522 National Boulevard, 1990 | 13 Backlash, 2000 | 17 The Bridge #1, unbuilt |
| 2 Pittard Sullivan, 1997 | 6 The Stealth, 2001 | 10 The Beehive, under construction | 14 Slash, 2000 | 18 Jefferson Boulevard High-Rise Tower |
| 3 10 Towers, unbuilt | 7 3524 Hayden Avenue, 1998 | 11 The Box, 1997 | 15 Office/garage, under construction | 19 Samitaur I, 1997 |
| 4 Eric Owen Moss Architects offices | 8 3520 Hayden Avenue, under construction | 20 The Stealth Annex, 2000 | 16 The Umbrella, 1999 | 21 Samitaur II, unbuilt |

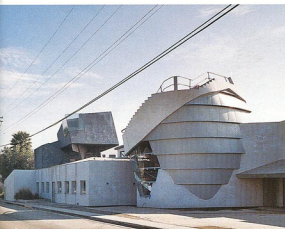
Site plan 190' Δ

structures in Wedgewood Holly have just begun to come on-line, finally giving the Hayden Tract a spatial anchor and a sense of critical mass missing in the tract when the warehouses were simply oriented to the street and parking lots. Carving the hole from the solid, as in a Nolli map of Rome, generates a second urban pattern within the existing grid, and the synergy of these copacetic systems has stoked the sense of community. At the same time, recognizing that urbanism in Los Angeles depends on the physics of driving, Moss's placement of the parking structure guarantees pedestrian traffic across the plaza between the garage and the working lofts.

Unlike Downtown Culver City, where a traditional linear wall of existing buildings defines the street as the public zone, Moss and the Smiths are dealing in fragments of the city, and remarkably, their buildings cohere as a community even when they're separated from each other: The mind

links them, if the eye doesn't. Rather than sharing a continuous cornice line or a treescape, the buildings' singular forms share in a uniqueness that calls across a common datum of sprawling warehouse spaces and bland plaster façades. As an urban lesson, Moss's work in the Hayden Tract offers an architecture-driven approach to city building that challenges the assumptions of classic European place-making, where well-behaved background buildings shape public space. Moss's foregrounded moments—such post-Newtonian singularities as the Beehive and Umbrella—establish a visual public sphere that coheres through the tension of their differences.

Moss believes, as he says, in "using pieces of the city to constitute its next chapter," a principle applicable outside Culver City. He has exported this localizing vision of building on pieces of the existing city to unbuilt projects in Vienna, Oslo, Havana, and Ibiza, Spain, and the specificity of the



The Box, 1997, and the Beehive, under construction



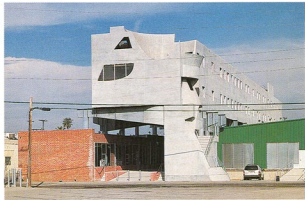
Pittard Sullivan, 1997



3524 Hayden Avenue, 1998



3520 Hayden Avenue, under construction



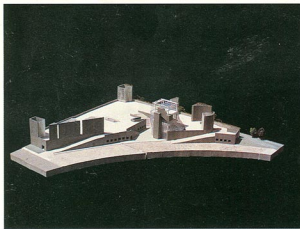
Samitaur I, 1997

designs constitutes a critique of homogenizing globalization. On Ibiza, Moss has proposed a 1,500-meter-long townscape that runs from a mountaintop to the sea—a riotously mixed-use zone with housing, fisheries, stores, and a post office. In Vienna, he recommended inserting a theater and a large component of public space intended for rock concerts, among other uses, in a huge former natural-gas tank, or gasometer, otherwise devoted to housing.

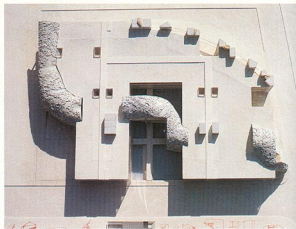
The influence of Moss's foreign projects has rebounded on Culver City, bringing an emphasis on the public realm. "What's missing here is a fundamental public purpose," says Moss of what is effectively a development of private and internalized offices. Therefore, just as the architect nested one structure within another, and the plaza within the grid, he and the Smiths are inserting cultural programs within the loft-office complexes, expanding their hours and purpose. In addition to the flex the-

ater in the belly of the Stealth, a dance studio occupies one of their warehouses, and the developers have staged exhibitions, lectures, and concerts in various open spaces, building up the development's momentum as a cultural venue. The Smiths are now planning a theater and other public spaces in room-wide, worm-like tubes twisting through a new building now being designed opposite Stealth.

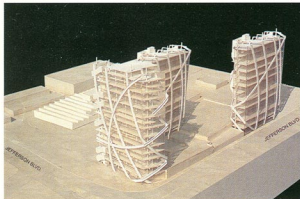
"It wasn't as though the Smiths were playing Haussman or Sixtus V," notes Moss, about the genesis of the incremental urbanism. "It started more innocently, and not as a grand narrative. As clients, they gave room for what the architecture, and then a city, could be. The whole project grew to understand that it could have urban consequences." (In 1990 Moss prepared a master plan of sorts, never implemented, that called for the creation of a tramway through the Hayden Tract, along an old railroad right-of-way.)



10 Towers, unbuilt



Gateway Project, unbuilt



Jefferson Boulevard High-Rise Tower, unbuilt

Moss's warehouse projects to date range from \$5 to \$10 million, but his designs are now jumping the edge of Culver City over Balona Creek into South Central Los Angeles, and to a much bigger scale: The architect and the Smiths have made initial plans for a \$40 million high-rise complex in a superbloc along Jefferson and La Cienega. The towers represent an evolution in Moss's architectural thinking at a larger scale, and would help support the economy of a redlined area where the 1992 Los Angeles riots took place.

A major reason for the success of the buildings in the Hayden Tract—the Smiths have completed more than 1.2 million square feet, and have another 2 million in the pipeline—is that they run against the commercial and corporate grain; the Smith's design-driven vision defies the value-engineered, widest-common-denominator blandness of most new development, such as the New Urbanism elsewhere in Culver City, where

every good intention in the book—street furniture, saturation landscaping, banners—has been invoked and applied. Moss's spaces, by contrast, are not formulaic; nor are they not smothered in expensive materials; their appeal rests on the sense of wonder they impart. The Hayden Tract is not a theme park and not even an architecture park, but a working environment in which the architecture establishes a climate of discovery.

Alice had to go to Wonderland, and Wendy to Neverland, to live the otherworldly delights of pure imagination. Returning meant reentering the flatland of everyday experience. The Smiths and Moss have brought the apparently polarized worlds together in environments that spur Los Angeles professionals who live by, for, and with their imagination.

In their longstanding discussion, they have brought Elliot's *Four Quartets* off the shelf into a space people can occupy. ■

