

A new neighborhood ambassador

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ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Like a kindergarten teacher kneeling down to meet her 3-foot-tall charges at eye level, the new elementary school at the Ambassador Hotel site, set to open today, is impeccably attuned to the importance of a first impression.

Designed by the Pasadena firm Gonzalez Goodale Architects, the school extends a friendly, crisply proportioned façade along 8th Street, on the southern edge of the sprawling 76-acre site over which the hotel long presided. Inside, the two-story school wraps 46 classrooms around a pair of generously sized courtyards. It accents its combination of zinc panels and expanses of glass with a number of walls painted Creamsicle orange.

Once that gregarious wel-
[See School, Page D9]



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IN SESSION: An elementary school, part of LAUSD, opens today on the site of the Ambassador Hotel. It and the coming rest of the campus are by Gonzalez Goodale Architects.

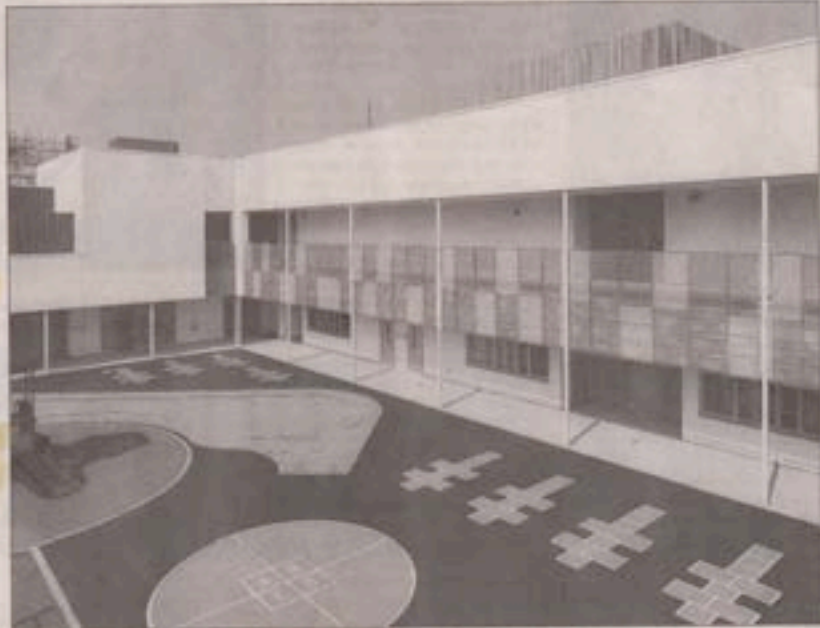
A school's lessons in L.A.

[School, from Page D1] come wears off, though, the feeling that the school engenders is mostly an unshakable ambivalence. Its very existence, after all, means that Myron Hunt's 1921 Ambassador building is gone for good, which is in turn a reminder of the Los Angeles Unified School District's unwillingness to consider, in any but a perfunctory way, adapting the hotel for use as a school.

Beyond that, the architects' attempts to ground the school firmly in its urban context have also succeeded in blunting, at least to a degree, its sense of aesthetic ambition. If the Gonzales Goodale design is propelled by any boldness, it lies in the decision to regrade the sloping southern end of the old hotel site so the elementary school could meet 8th Street at sidewalk level. But that move, though complicated and expensive to execute, is essentially invisible now that the school is complete.

A full assessment of the Ambassador campus, of course, will have to wait until an adjacent middle school and high school — also designed by Gonzales Goodale — open next fall, wrapping up a \$450-million makeover of the hotel site, where a half-dozen early Academy Awards ceremonies were held and where Robert F. Kennedy was fatally shot after winning the California primary in June of 1968. Together the three schools, known as Central Los Angeles New Learning Center No. 1, will enroll nearly 4,500 students.

In its eager-to-please competence, the elementary school is something of a mirror image of the new visual and performing arts high school on Grand Avenue, by Wolf Prix and the Austrian firm Coop Himmelblau, which also opens Wednesday. That school is an enigmatic marvel formally and deeply conflicted in nearly every other way, particularly when it comes to the relation-



ROOM TO GROW: The two-story elementary school wraps 46 classrooms around two generously sized courtyards. Still to come at the campus: middle and high schools.

ship between architecture and school-district politics. The one at the Ambassador site, while thoughtful about the role it plays in the neighborhood, struggles to rise above a serviceable, if brightly colored, aesthetic.

The real disappointment, then, is that during its gargantuan building campaign the LAUSD, even at high-profile locations, has been so consistently unable to find an architectural middle ground between high-design pyrotechnics and well-behaved practicality.

To be fair to Gonzales Goodale, its notion of treating the three schools as a city-within-a-city holds tremendous potential. The elementary portion may gain fresh complexity when seen in relation to those bigger campuses, which appear

posed to deliver a dramatic sense of scale.

And perhaps ambivalence about the results was built into this architectural process from the start.

Replacing the hotel with a group of public schools was always a tough idea to oppose, even for those of us who valued the Ambassador as an architectural landmark and for its cultural significance. This was hardly a traditional preservation battle pitting a greedy developer against neighborhood activists.

Of course, all the hand wringing about Myron Hunt and his legacy, and how Los Angeles treats its aging architecture, will mean nothing to the children who begin school on the campus this morning. (Two separate schools, actually, will share the elementary

building: UCLA Community School and the New Open World Academy.) Those students will enter the school through a pair of generously sized entryways that the architects refer to as "portals." A library behind mostly glass walls anchors the architectural composition at the southwest corner, and includes a door to the street that will allow the space to be used for community events in the evenings and when the school is not in session.

Once inside, students will move along shaded, open-air hallways on both levels, some topped with large circular skylights and others offering views of the middle school and high school sites, with the Hollywood Hills rising in the distance. At the same time, the elementary grounds are marked

sociopolitics



Photographs by TIM STREET-PORTER

CLOSED YET OPEN: Students will move along shaded, open-air hallways, some with large circular skylights.

by an enveloping, protective feel. Keeping the elementary students' space enclosed while also offering them glimpses of the campuses they'll attend later on is the school's most effective architectural gesture.

Seen in a certain light, the design for the campus as a whole is a marker for civic maturation. To be sure, that is how architect David Goodale sees it: During a tour of the elementary school a few weeks ago, he told me that the architecture and location of the school "responds to a fundamental shift in Los Angeles as it becomes more urban. We're no longer just a suburb of Hollywood. Immigration has made this a city."

The implications buried in that statement, when you stop to think about them, are powerful. Goodale is certainly right

about the role that immigration has played in transforming the mid-Wilshire area: What was once a district associated with leisure and business has grown increasingly residential. Looking out from the elementary school's front doors, you see many more signs in Korean and Spanish than in English.

It used to be that a central challenge for architects in Los Angeles was to create designs for non-places: for sites along dime-a-dozen commercial strips, for lonely parcels in the hills. Sometimes they responded with designs that mimicked the urban scale of older cities, producing ornately decorated, broad-shouldered buildings that often floundered in all that open space.

By the 1970s and '80s, however, the city's leading firms were known around the world for houses and public buildings that celebrated, rather than

tried to hide, L.A.'s unmoored quality. Not all of their designs were buoyantly carefree — plenty were hard-edged or teenage-boy sullen. But they helped extend a powerful civic illusion: That Los Angeles was a city writing only first drafts, creating a cityscape and a skyline one improvisatory riff at a time.

If there is a single recent building project to shatter that illusion once and for all, it is the elementary school at the Ambassador site. The struggle to get it built has been anything but a young city's struggle, and its site is hardly one anybody — not even when the Ambassador was young, and certainly not now — could confuse with a non-place.

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