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# Los Angeles



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Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, as viewed from Temple Street

# School Reform

Amid a historic building boom, the **LAUSD** has missed an opportunity to rethink campus design

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**Nearly anywhere** you drive nowadays you can cruise past a public school that's recently been opened. You can't miss them, from the High School of Visual and Performing Arts' erector-set tower looming above the 101 freeway downtown to the six-story concrete-and-glass hulk of the Helen Bernstein High School at Sunset and Wilton to one of those purple or green or yellow or orange buildings that occupy prominent intersections in Pacoima, San Pedro, Huntington Park, and beyond. The schools are not just splashily spray-painted; they're in-your-face urban. Often two or three stories high, they're shoved right to the sidewalk, the opposite of the utopian, reassuringly spread-

out archetypes of the 1950s and '60s and the stately, graceful ones of the '20s and '30s. The crop of budget-conscious contemporary architecture attempts to fashion metal and glass and stucco into gritty evidence that public investment is paying off in the form of a good public school education.

Three decades of neglect preceded the Los Angeles Unified School District's current building boom. Enrollment climbed while schools declined. Broken windows, locked bathrooms, leaky roofs, shattered furniture, and shuttered libraries weren't uncommon, nor were overcrowded classrooms. The district pleaded poverty and its critics cried foul, but the reality remained



unchanged until 1997, when voters passed the first of nine local and statewide ballot measures to put up billions of dollars to construct new schools and revive old ones. The money is bankrolling the nation's largest public works project, dubbed "Roy Romer's Assembly Line" for the former district superintendent who initiated the vast undertaking. By the end of last year, 76 schools and 59 expansions had been completed to accommodate the district's 900,000 students. By 2013, LAUSD will have spent \$20.1 billion to christen 131 schools and 64 additions. These are big numbers. For that kind of money LAUSD could have built 73 Disney Concert Halls.

Not that the LAUSD has created comparable landmarks. Public school districts don't have unlimited budgets, let alone the latitude of private developers to relentlessly push the boundaries of design—or anything else, for that matter. At LAUSD, architecture has had to fight for its existence and often has lost. The district's campaign for new campuses has certainly led to its share of lousy results and many more that are, in the words of one prominent architect sitting on the district's Design Advisory Council, just mediocre. What's surprising is that in a school district perpetually uncertain of how children learn or what we ought to teach them and plagued by catastrophic budget shortages, a few good-looking schools have emerged.

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**Until the early** 1960s, school design was well codified. At the beginning of the last century, before the explosion of suburbia, schools were broad-shouldered, two-story buildings with floor-to-ceiling double-hung windows. Hallways were wide and classrooms ample and light filled. The structures were set back from the street by generous front lawns, and the facades, whether Renaissance revival or collegiate Gothic or streamline moderne, were odes to an inherited sense of beauty, culture, and history. The schools radiated civic pride. The more or less modernist schools of the '50s and early '60s, like Richard Neutra's Kester Avenue Elementary, in Sherman Oaks, and Sumner Spaulding and John Rex's Westchester High (now Wright Middle School), north of LAX, projected a similar spirit. Roofed promenades replaced interior hallways, flat-top breezeways and canopies imparted an unadorned aesthetic, and classroom walls made primarily of glass conjured freedom and ambition. Then came the 1970s, when public schools were besieged by white flight, escalating enrollments, and a major earthquake, and LAUSD was erecting



**TOUCH OF CLASS:** New Open World Academy in Koreatown

schools that looked like Piranesi's idea of a 20th-century penitentiary. To cram in more students, the district parked "temporary" bungalows on playgrounds. This was the era of cells and bells.

Today the district hopes to deliver something else: "schools that promote the full development of the child [while enhancing] neighborhoods through design and programming as centers of community..." according to the School Construction Bond Citizens' Oversight Committee, LAUSD's own watchdog. A pair of schools that opened last fall in Koreatown show how lofty—and vague—these goals can be. Arquitectonica, the Miami-based firm known for turning surfaces into textile-like compositions, designed Young Oak Kim Academy, a middle school, on Shatto Place behind the Red Line subway station at Wilshire and Vermont. Gonzalez Goodale Architects, a Pasadena firm that specializes in school design, conceived New Open World Academy and UCLA Community School, two grammar schools sharing one building, on the 8th Street side of the huge educational complex that rises from the grounds of the old Ambassador Hotel. Both campuses, in other words, are in dense urban settings: Land is at a premium, and the architects had to use the structures as buffers against the battering congestion of the streets.

At the Ambassador, Gonzalez Goodale has achieved what few others have: It used a busy commercial thoroughfare to its advantage. The tiered front is shaded by a zinc-clad canopy

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that runs the length of the building. At the school's main entrance the canopy extends toward the sidewalk, then at the building's corner bends down to meet the pavement, framing a two-story glass wall of the library. The zinc, in slender strips with pronounced seams, wraps around the corner and stretches across the upper half of the library. Zinc is a warm, almost soft material that grabs the sunlight and constantly changes hue. It is sedate yet alive, and you notice the richness and vitality. The school adds to the life of the street.

Several blocks away Young Oak Kim Academy takes a different approach to the streets it inhabits. It sits on land cleared to make way for the Wilshire and Vermont Metro station. What's left of this neighborhood in the shadow of the art deco masterpiece that once housed Bullocks Wilshire are several fine examples of midcentury understatement. Young Oak Kim ignores these surroundings. The three-story schoolhouse springs from the sidewalk as if milled from a billet of Styrofoam. Lines incised at regular intervals and visors placed across the windows are intended to ease the impos-





**BEHIND BARS:** Young Oak Kim Academy in Koreatown

ing mass of this surface. A wire mesh trellis, draped from the front facade, spreads across wide areas on all four sides of the building. The squat doorway, on Shatto, looks as if it was devised by the Transportation Security Administration, while the most prominent real estate the school occupies, at 6th and Vermont, is a forlorn garden sandwiched between a chain-link fence, a cement block wall, and bollards protecting utility cabinets from wayward cars. The building is singularly defensive, right down to the metal roll-up doors confronting the otherwise defenseless offices across Shatto Place.

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**As different as** the exteriors of the two schools are, they're remarkably similar inside: boxy classrooms with dropped ceilings, fluorescent lighting, desks and chairs in neat rows, blackboard and teacher placed squarely at the head of the class. The layout makes you wonder whether in education anything has changed in a hundred years. Designers who've worked for LAUSD complain that they're handed a ream of rules about "meeting square footages, right-sized classrooms, and keeping it cheap, defensible, and secure," as Alex Ward, who designed South Regional High School No. 2, a huge LAUSD campus near Gage and Central avenues, puts it. "We felt we were being pushed to build machines for processing students." Of course, schools are costly because things

such as seismic standards and the decades-long life spans they were intended to have mean that most of the money goes into vandalism proofing, heavier foundations, thicker roofs and pipes, and redundant wiring—features you can't see.

At Camino Nuevo Charter Academy High School, however, Santa Monica architects Daly Genik used these constraints and a palette of prosaic materials to craft a community landmark—inside and out. The LAUSD-sanctioned school, completed in 2005, is on a seemingly unusable wedge-shaped spit of land where Beverly Boulevard, Temple Street, Silver Lake Boulevard, and Virgil Avenue crisscross. The architects designed a pair of two-story buildings that form a prow aimed at the nexus of traffic. A corrugated metal screen, shot through with holes to dampen sound and diffuse sunlight, is painted in a patchwork of yellow and gray, like a tartan for a 21st-century clan. The long classroom structure snakes down Silver Lake Boulevard; the shorter administration building traces part of Temple, forming an unobstructed pedestrian entrance. The buildings line the perimeter of a free-flowing courtyard that doubles as the school's only corridor.

Floor-to-ceiling windows face this space, allowing natural northern light to stream in (classroom lights are frequently left off) and making a strong visual connection between the action outdoors and the activity in the classes. Windows on the street side, mean-

while, are barely 16 inches off the floor, bringing cars and passersby into view. The large volume, along with the fact that a pedestrian strolling by is, even if momentarily, included in the curriculum, encourages an expansiveness rarely seen elsewhere in LAUSD schools. The immediacy of the outdoors transforms the classroom. All that movement makes learning less of a lecture and more of a dialogue. The 14-foot ceilings have exposed metal trusses and metal decking—which normally would be shrouded—lending the rooms a rawness one associates with lofts. It feels as if a weight has been lifted.

None of this is fancy or expensive: Striking, but strikingly simple, colors and materials project the school beyond the property line while drawing what's beyond into the school. Neither the classrooms nor the school itself is sealed off.

Camino Nuevo has 420 students and 18 classrooms shoehorned into a tiny lot. West Adams Preparatory High, at Washington and Vermont, has 3,000 students and 89 classrooms, a full-size track and field, two gyms, a swimming pool, a film school, science labs, and a theater that seats 1,200—comfortably

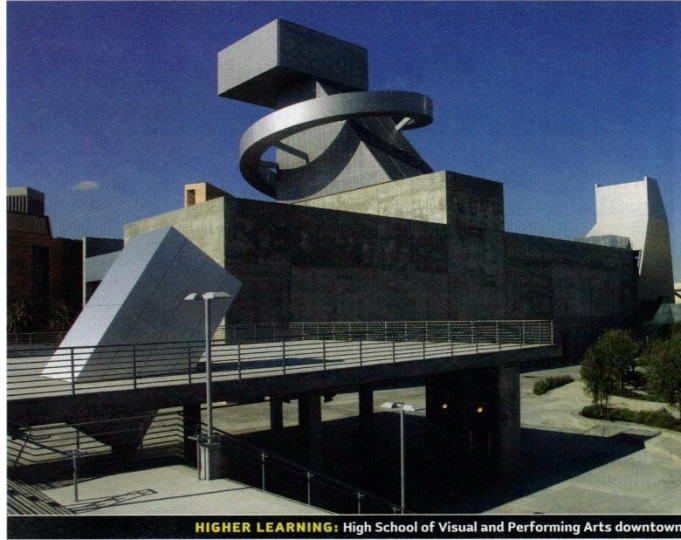
**The district's new campaign for new campuses has certainly led to its share of lousy results and many more that are, in the words of one prominent architect, just mediocre.**

situated on a 14.6-acre parcel. West Adams is a conventional-size high school, one that gets tagged nearly every night. Designed by Robert Mangurian and Mary-Ann Ray of downtown's Studio Works, West Adams is also deceptively good. Standing outside the campus, you sense the fortress bulk bearing down. Behind the walls, however, the school is literally cracked apart.

Like Camino Nuevo, the classroom buildings resemble two canyon walls emanating from a single point. Between them lies a torqued concrete courtyard. Bridges connect one side of the yard to another, staircases spill from unexpected angles, corridors empty onto vistas of the span below. The design, an intrusion into monotony, buttresses the ideals upon which the school was founded: The classroom is collaborative; no one is allowed to proceed along a rutted continuum.

Working against inviolable building code regulations, the husband-and-wife architects bumped up ceiling heights (by leaving air-conditioning ductwork uncovered), slipped in transom windows, and in the ground-floor classrooms installed gas station roll-up glass doors. Such discreet changes help lift the





**HIGHER LEARNING:** High School of Visual and Performing Arts downtown

classrooms from the ordinary. But it's in the courtyard, with its hint of Jeffersonian philosophy, that the design hits its stride. The space is permissive enough for individuals to flourish, yet the balconies and bridges and upstairs patios put everyone on display. This is the faith of the commons: public and private in balance.

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**Where Studio Works** relies on honesty and humility to provide an eloquent building, the High School of Visual and Performing Arts, designed by Wolf Prix, of the Viennese firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, resorts to bombast. An early no-frills plan for a no-frills school on Grand Avenue was hijacked by Eli Broad, who wanted a signature campus for the city's signature arts academy. Prix delivered a \$232 million geometry lesson: a teepee-like library covered in bead-blasted stainless steel tiles; four classroom academies, simple boxes punched with enormous portholes that are completely out of scale; a cafeteria with capering light shafts that pierce the thick roof and mimic Le Corbusier's "light cannons" at La Tourette, the monastery in Éveux, France; and the infamous helix ramp to nowhere that climbs 140 feet above a 1,000-seat theater.

This is architecture unleashed. As the finishing touches were being put on the campus, which looks out over the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Prix defiantly declared that "we designed an icon for an art school without referring to Gehry's hall, or Isozaki's museum, or Moneo's cathedral. It is just an-

other icon which you could say is seemingly senseless. But what is art?" Iconic buildings will inspire students, Prix announced, "as opposed to Paris 1968, where students burned the schools and public spaces because they were anonymous." The rhetoric is more powerful than the reality. As designed, the winding ramp was supposed to connect to a public meeting room that would have had panoramic views. School officials, however, objected, and all that remains of Prix's scheme is a latticework of steel beams and struts so dense that walking up the ramp would have been impossible. It is a big, expensive wisecrack.

Too much of the design's energy is devoted to these maneuvers. When you get inside, the spaces are prosaic, sometimes barracks-like. Despite gigantic windows, the classrooms feel confined and airless, and the cafeteria, although punctuated with the skylights, is cold and cavernous. The out-of-orbit exterior soaked up so much of the architect's attention that the interiors suffer from the restrictive blankness that Prix himself decries.

Schools are not meant to be monuments of the kind Prix has in mind, no more than they should be CVS pharmacies or jobbers' warehouses. The tension exists over the abiding uncertainty of how to resurrect the standing that public schools once held in our civic life. Schools retain their symbolic presence, even if educating children seems more of a burden than a solemn promise of a fair stake in an equitable society. Perhaps the best-designed schools will embody that promise. We can only hope that the worst-designed won't betray it. ■