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ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

A raw kind of beauty

Art Center's new South Campus in Pasadena transforms a site of industrial desolation into a metaphor for our times.

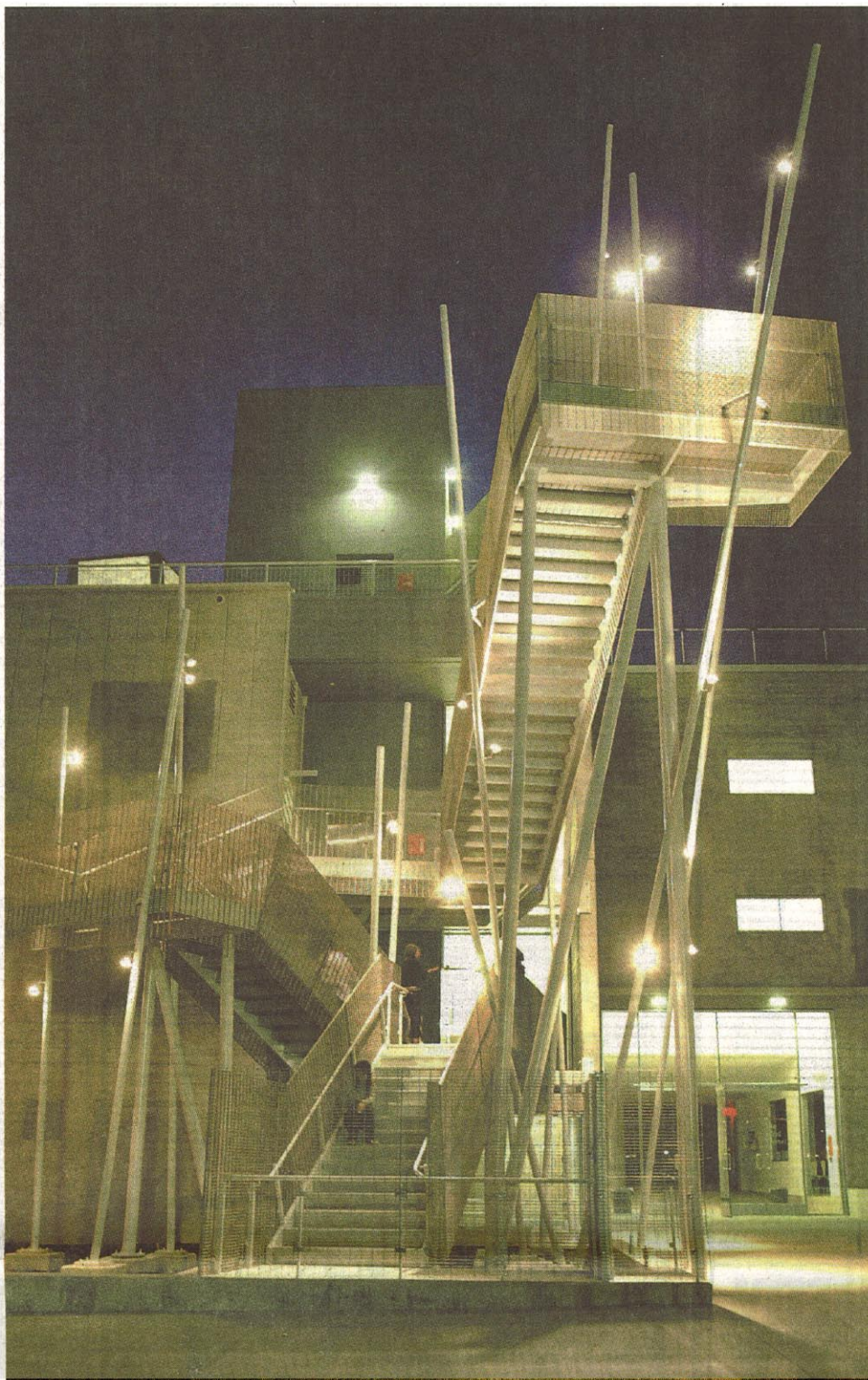
By **NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF**
Times Staff Writer

THE new South Campus at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena is a radical departure for a school that has languished for decades in a peaceful suburban slumber.

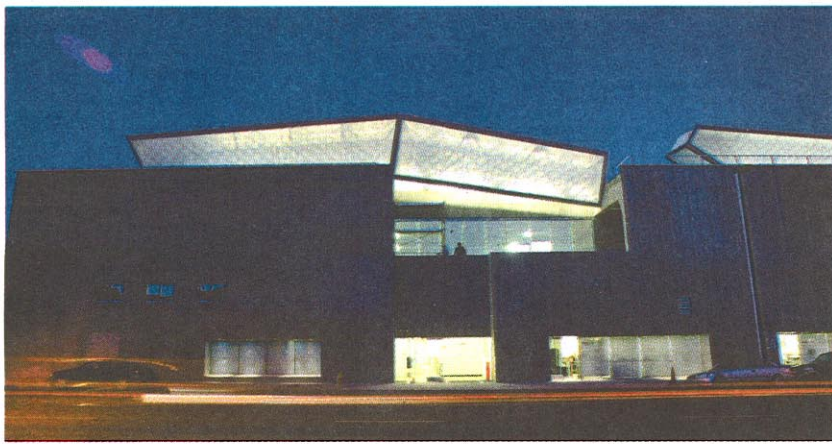
Surrounded by lush rolling hills, the school's old campus would make a perfect site for a monastery. Its central building — which will continue to house the school's undergraduate programs — is a 1970s-era landmark designed by Craig Ellwood, a pillar of California Modernism.

By comparison, the new \$15-million South Campus, designed by Daly Genik Inc., conjures images of industrial desolation. Housed in a former aircraft testing facility near downtown Pasadena, it was designed to accommodate Art Center's public programs, including continuing education, graduate fine arts, Archetype press, printmaking lab and 16,000-square-foot exhibition hall. The enormous steel drums of an abandoned power plant rise a block away. An electric supply station is just across the street.

The design proves that desolation and decay can be virtues. A subtle balance of grit and elegance, the building draws on the wonderful moodiness of its setting.

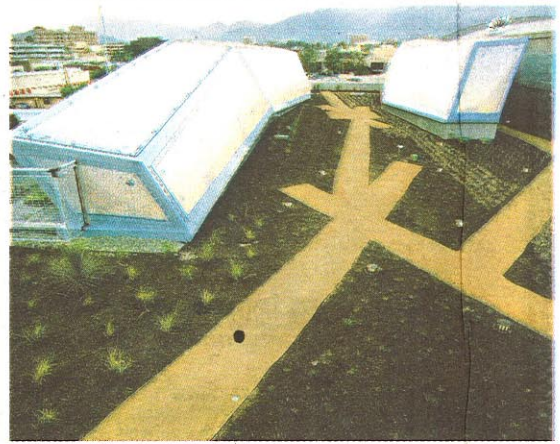


LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times
NO ORDINARY ENTRY: At the building's south end, a sculptural stairway propped on a cluster of steel columns evokes a giant praying mantis. It has become a popular gathering spot for students.



Photographs by LAWRENCE K. HO *Los Angeles Times*

AGLOW: Art Center College of Design's South Campus, as seen from Raymond Avenue in Pasadena. It occupies a former aircraft testing facility across the street from an abandoned power plant.



MAGIC LANTERNS: Skylight panels installed on the roof of the building can be manipulated to adjust light levels inside.

School's industrial inspiration

Old forms are carved up with surgical precision; new forms are imbued with palpable energy. The result is a building that is both emotionally raw and marvelously unpretentious.

Seen from the street, the 100,000-square-foot structure's stark concrete form seems inhabited by ghosts. In a sense, it is. The main building was built in the mid-1940s, when American industrial might was at its pinnacle and optimism in the future seemed boundless. Architects, too, bought into this myth. The sprawling developments that have become a symbol of post-war Los Angeles were largely fueled by the region's booming aerospace industry.

But sensibilities change. Much of the best architecture today has risen out of an effort to come to terms with that failed vision. And the vast industrial wastelands that are a residue of that era have become a principal battleground of architectural thought, as architects struggle to inject them with new meaning.

Daly Genik's approach was to retain the building's original shell, then carve it up to fit its new function. A series of large openings — like storefront windows — are cut out of the main facade along the street. Just above the main entry, a larger section is cut away to reveal a long, narrow terrace.

These incisions are combined with sculptural forms that seem

to spill out of the building from all sides. A sculpted steel stair, for example, plugs into the building's south end, marking the main entry from the parking lot. The stair's twisting form — propped up by a cluster of steel columns — evokes a gigantic praying mantis that has affixed itself to the building's porous concrete skin.

Just to the left of the main entry along Raymond Avenue, the architects created a small courtyard that is punctuated by a series of steel shipping containers. The containers have been tipped up on end and embedded in the concrete surface — a witty reference to the kind of industrial debris that is a permanent feature of this landscape.

The building's most striking feature is a series of remarkable skylights that stretch out along the roof. Made of transparent Teflon-like panels, the skylights' faceted forms twist and bend at sharp angles. The panels can be manipulated to adjust light levels in the building. At one point, the skylights' translucent forms cut down through the structure's concrete facade to form a canopy over the terrace — a wonderful metaphor for the architects' vision.

That lyrical quality is re-

inforced by the way the forms change over time. During the day, the skylights have a strange, cloud-like feel, as if they were dissolving into the sky. But as night begins to fall, their edges become harder. Their glowing surfaces become more angular, like huge, faceted lanterns drifting in space.

Their beauty aside, the real power of such gestures lies in their social meaning. The stair has already become a popular place to loiter between classes. On most nights, scattered students smoke cigarettes or exchange gossip. Set amid the glowing skylights, a rooftop garden offers a sweeping view of the surrounding industrial buildings and the San Gabriel Mountains.

These spaces have a dual function. In part, their aim is to put the school's inner life on view, to imbue a desolate landscape with new vibrancy. But they also contain a subtle subversive quality. Unlike the vast plazas of late Modernism or the "social mixing chambers" envisioned by early Soviet architects, the roots of Daly Genik's communal vision lie in the loading docks, emergency stairs and abandoned rooftops of conventional buildings — the hidden corners where we sometimes go to escape the monotony of the workday. Their informal intimacy implies a world struggling to break free of normal conventions.

This theme continues inside. Dubbed the "Wind Tunnel," the school's main exhibition hall was once dominated by the enormous steel machines that engineers used to test their airplane designs. The machines were removed long ago, leaving a gaping, warehouse-like space that the architects have left raw. Rows of elegant wood bow trusses support the roof; the floors are bare concrete.

Only a few carefully placed incisions have altered the interior. A long, narrow slot is carved along the ridge line to create a skylight. A narrow, 35-foot-tall door is cut out of a back corner of the room. When the door is open, light washes over the room's back wall, drawing one deeper into the space.

The room is an obvious reference to Gordon Matta-Clark's "Day's End," a 1975 project in which the New York artist used a power saw to carve large openings in an abandoned warehouse on a Manhattan pier.

But the comparison is most telling as an example of the boundary that divides art and

architecture. Matta-Clark's project was conceived as an act of civil disobedience. In removing large sections of the building's corrugated metal skin and structural frame, Matta-Clark created a mesmerizing symbol of social instability. That notion was reinforced by the fact that the building, though abandoned, was public property. When city officials discovered what the artist had done, they padlocked the building and threatened to arrest him.

Most architects, of course, are unlikely to place themselves in such a position. Even the truly radical must eventually come to terms with seemingly mundane, practical issues such as zoning regulations, safety requirements and the wishes of clients, however bizarre they may be. As such, architects like Daly Genik must negotiate a delicate line between obedience to practical issues and the desire to expand cultural boundaries. The power of the Art Center project lies in its ability to express these conflicting values.

This tension becomes evident in the classroom areas. The studios wrap around two sides of the main exhibition hall, reinforcing the sense of a culture existing on the fringes of the mainstream. A long interior corridor links these spaces, its floor gently rising and falling as it connects the mismatched levels that once served as storage areas and loading docks.

There is more to come. Art Center is negotiating with developer Capstone West to build housing for 300 students just south of the new campus building. The development would rise on the site of the school's parking lot, blocking the view from the exterior stair to the power plant. In doing so, it could detract from the sense of openness that is an essential aspect of the project's character.

But whatever happens, it is clear that few Los Angeles architects since the late Frank Israel have such a subtle understanding of what makes this city's identity so unique. Over the last decade, Daly Genik has completed the design of two charter schools in an immigrant neighborhood near downtown as well as the Art Center building. In each of these projects, the firm seems less interested in making a radical break with the city's past than in mining it for new ideas. With this building, it has established itself as a major architectural force in the city's future.

