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LAW WEEKLY

SEPTEMBER 10 - 16, 2010 / VOL. 32 / NO. 42 laweekly.com

Let's Get This Art Party Started! Our guide to the fall season

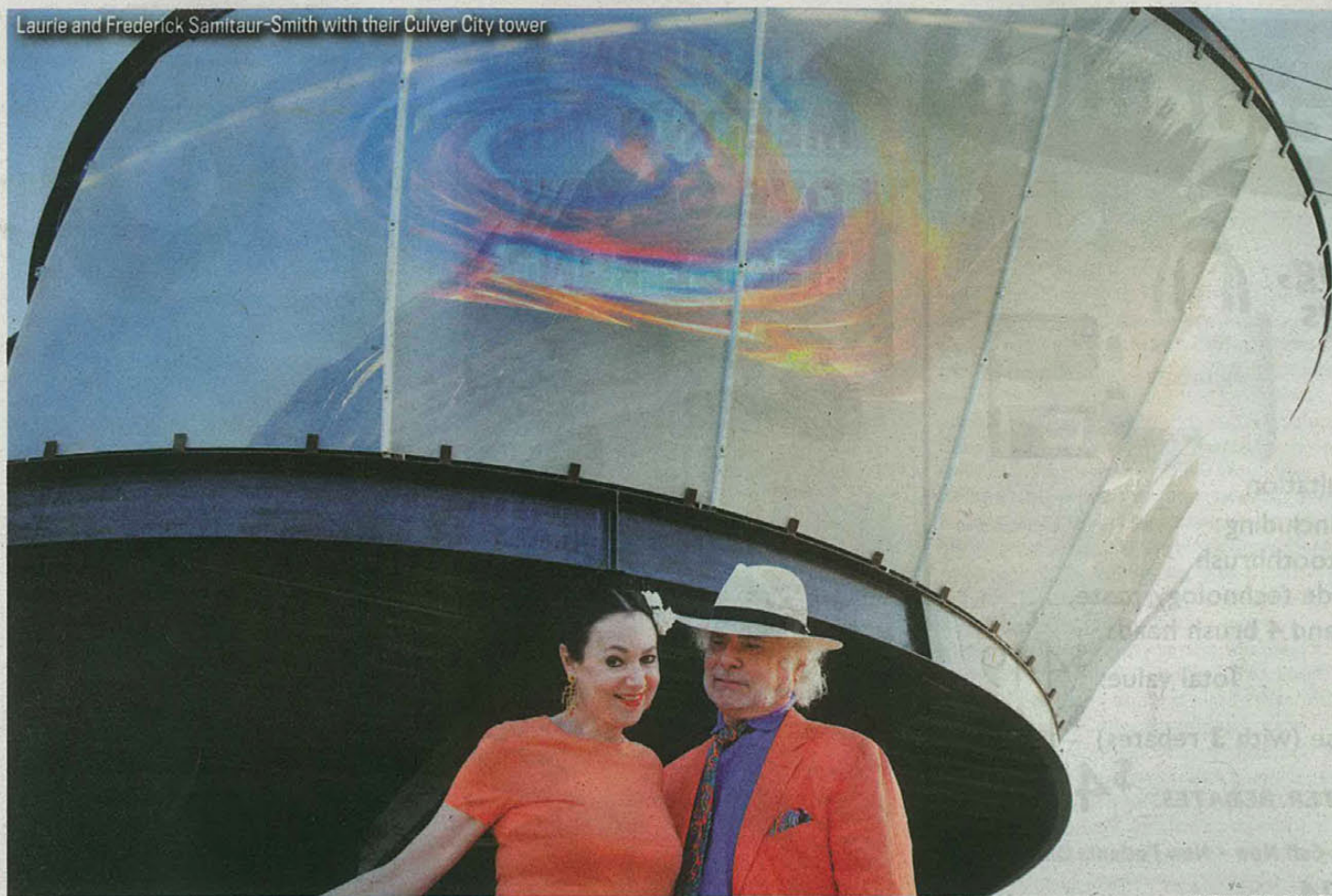
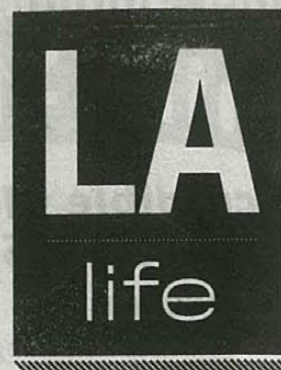


PHOTO BY JENNIE WARREN



TOWER OF POWER

COUPLE HOPE THEIR ART STRUCTURE WILL HELP SOCIETY

CandyLand
by Gendy Alimurung

Land-development power couple Frederick and Laurie Samitaur-Smith have a big dream. It is 72 feet tall, to be specific — a tower made of rusted metal that spirals upward like a giant curl of shaved chocolate, or like one of those precarious, airy, antigravitational sugar sculptures you see on the Food Network.

The Samitaur-Smiths built it at the corner of National and Hayden streets in Culver City, and they plan to use it to bring art to the masses.

In the physical world, the Samitaur Tower — or “art tower,” as husband and wife Frederick and Laurie call it — can have a number of purposes. It can house a restaurant and a small sculpture garden, and provide space simultaneously for two lectures with audiences of 200 people each. There is room for readings, film screenings and festivals for a crowd of thousands on the surrounding lawn. It definitely grabs your attention as you drive by.

But to the Samitaur-Smiths, the tower has a bigger presence in the metaphysical world.

“It’s a concept about culture,” Laurie says. “It’s like the pencil in your hand. You want to tell a story. The pencil is your tool. For us, the tower is the tool.”

“The emphasis is not on the structure,” Frederick says. “It’s more about the idea. It’s an intrigue, a way to get people reinvested in the beauty of art. It would be like gravity or a planet to pull together people in the ether.”

The tower will expose people to the arts in the most literal sense. Huge, translucent white screens wrap around the outside of the building. Conceivably, the Samitaur-Smiths could project videos onto the screens, or static images of masterworks by Renoir or Picasso or Pollock or Warhol. “No, we’re not going to be flashing images of the 50 most famous paintings or something ridiculous like that,” Laurie says.

“Let me finish my point, darling,” Frederick interrupts. “It’s not going to light up your front yard. It’s not a light pollutant.” A spirited discussion ensues about the difference between their screens and commercial billboards. The Samitaur Tower’s screens use rear projection, so the light is subtle.

“The LEDs in billboards are a different physics of light,” Laurie says. “This is our answer to billboards.”

“There may be some people who find our screens offensive,” Frederick says reasonably. “But I ask them to accord it the same patience as I do when I see TV screens in Mexican restaurants.”

“I don’t agree,” Laurie says with an indignant little sniff. “I don’t think anyone will find

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these screens offensive. If they do, they can just turn their heads.”

The Samitaur-Smiths certainly turned heads in the mid-1990s when they delved into real estate in Culver City, then a forgotten industrial zone. People might have thought they were nuts, buying up a bunch of abandoned warehouses and remodeling them into funky, geometric, Escheresque entities that looked more like sculptures than buildings. But the area soon underwent a renaissance. Galleries moved in. So did design companies, chic little boutiques, bistros and cafés.

Today the Samitaur-Smiths own a million square feet in Culver City. They populated their office park with a mix of tenants — small

companies side by side with large ones; famous with obscure; megacorporate with teeny independent. It was a productive strategy. Kodak’s original digital division started there, for instance.

“It’s not just an office park, it’s a community,” Laurie says.

“That’s the key,” Frederick says.

The tower also will have its own Web site. “May I talk about the cell phones?” Laurie asks.

Frederick frowns. “No. I think it’s too much information.”

“The point I wanted to make is that everyone has a cell phone,” she continues. “They can download whatever is on the tower Web site onto their phone. The tower is the externalization of the Web site.”

Though they’ve invested millions of dollars of their own money in it, Frederick is determined to make the tower financially self-sustaining. No nonprofit tower for him. He won’t allow products to be advertised on it, but will let sponsoring companies unobtrusively “signature” it in some way.

“I know this sounds sort of ludicrous, but we want to build more than one tower, too,” he says. He runs his hand affectionately along the rusted metal walls. He wanted the walls to rust. “Yeah, no marble. No fancy stuff,” he adds.

Laurie is OK with fanciness. She imagines actors waving colorful streamers from the railings. She imagines the tower resembles a living thing, an animal, a life force. “It’s gotta rrrrrrhar,” she growls. “You can’t not see me.”

The tower and screens were designed by the Samitaur-Smiths’ longtime collaborator, architect Eric Owen Moss.

Frederick estimates that on a clear day, the screens can be seen as far away as downtown. People driving on the Santa Monica Freeway will see them, and people on the train, and local residents.

One screen points toward South Central Los Angeles. “This is not just for the privileged few. We’re aiming to hit millions,” Laurie declares. “We want people who are on the verge of suicide or taking a massive dose of drugs, people lost and desperate, we want them to come to the tower. We want to have a big pot of soup and French bread.”

“We’re not just looking for lost people,” Frederick says.

Once upon a time, Laurie was an actress. Frederick was a writer. They shared a drive to improve the human condition, a need to make the world a better place, and the capacity to say this kind of stuff in full sincerity, without irony. The tower is the worldly manifestation of their hopes.

There has been no grand opening yet. But they’ve done private tests of the screens at night for friends, inasmuch as a 72-foot-tall tower can be private.

“We have built it,” Laurie says. “It’s there. There’s no turning back now.” ■