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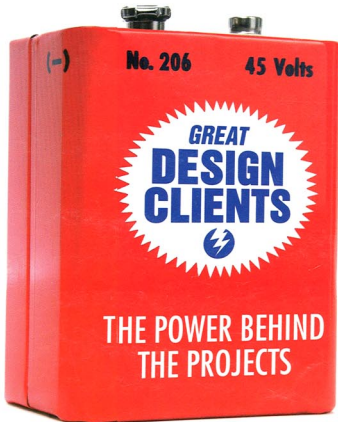
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THE SAMITOUR-SMITHS
DEVELOPERS

COLLABORATOR:
ERIC OWEN MOSS

CULVER CITY RENAISSANCE



By Jonathan Ringen

FREDERICK AND LAURIE SAMITAUR-SMITH ARE TRANSFORMING A DRIED-UP INDUSTRIAL WASTELAND INTO AN ARCHITECTURAL WONDERLAND.

Ten years ago there was no reason to visit Culver City, a dried-up industrial section of Los Angeles that surely challenged Gertrude Stein's Oakland for lack of a "there." As Architect Eric Owen Moss says, "There's that old joke about L.A.: you get off the freeway at the wrong place or you get off at the right place, and it doesn't make any goddamn difference." But something remarkable has happened to this community in the interim. A line of idiosyncratic buildings—mostly radical reconfigurations of existing warehouses, but recently entirely new large-scale structures—has grown along a diagonal strip that cuts through the neighborhood. Property values in the immediate area have soared 500 percent; every spring and summer thousands of design students come from all over the world to study it.

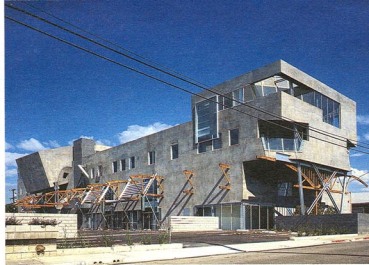
The buildings, which now number more than a dozen and extend beyond the Culver City limits into Los Angeles proper, are all designed by a single architect: Moss. These projects have made him one of only three working L.A. architects with a global reputation (along with Frank Gehry and Thom Mayne). But even he would hesitate to claim authorship of the overall scheme. That credit goes to his clients, the husband-and-wife team of Frederick and Laurie Samitaur-Smith. A former journalist and a scriptwriter, Frederick got his start in development in the early 1970s when the trees died on a prune farm he owned in Northern California (in what would later become part of Silicon Valley). He used the land to put up offices for the nascent computer industry. "He was building gigantic boxes and realized when he'd visit the tenants that

they were working with a new kind of math that didn't apply at all to the linear spaces he was building," his wife says. "He felt that if we did buildings that were based on the geometries that this new industry was utilizing all day long, they would have a natural—if not conscious, at least subconscious—attraction to this architecture."



THE UMBRELLA

PITTARD SULLIVAN



Opposite, left to right: Frederick Samitaur-Smith, Laurie Samitaur-Smith, and Eric Owen Moss. Part of a commercial complex the Umbrella building (1999; top) was designed for outdoor performances. The Pittard Sullivan building (1997; above) reuses the bowstring trusses of the warehouse that once stood on the site.



THE SMITHS BEGAN SEARCHING FOR AN ARCHITECT WHO COULD UNDERSTAND THEIR VISION OF A COMPLEX ARCHITECTURE MIRRORING THE NONLINEAR MATHEMATICS OF COMPUTER-CHIP DESIGN. THEY WERE TURNED DOWN BY EVERY NOTABLE DESIGNER IN TOWN.



The Kodak building (1995) sits on steel legs (above) atop an access road. This courtyard (top), which has a fountain and outdoor seating for employees, hangs over the entrance ramp to the road.

They decided to locate their experiment in Culver City, where Frederick had purchased a few industrial buildings from his father. The tenants they envisioned would come from the computer side of the increasingly high-tech entertainment industry. "We came up with the idea that we wanted to take a section of the city and rebuild it," Frederick says. "But I didn't have enough money to do it the traditional way—to just go in and buy a whole part of a city, and bulldoze it and rebuild it." Instead the Smiths acquired land at various points along a line through the 57-acre area they were interested in—assuming that when developed these plots would serve as the seeds of the neighborhood's revitalization.

In the mid-1990s the Smiths began searching for an architect who could understand their vision of a complex architecture mirroring the nonlinear mathematics of computer-chip design. They were turned down by every notable designer in town. Moss was a tenant in a building that Frederick was managing at the time. "One day Frederick went into this small space he'd rented to this unknown architect to get the rent check, and noticed his drawings on the wall and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* on his desk," Laurie says. "Let's be frank—this was desperation time. He walked into a tenant's office and thought, 'Why not try it on this guy?'—because no one else was responding."

From the first building—a relatively small warehouse conversion that was completed in 1990—the relationship has been remarkably collaborative. "They don't give you a project and say, 'This is the site, this is the height, this is the setback, this is the program: build it,'" Moss says. "The really preliminary conceptual analysis and discussion with lawyers, accountants, city-planning people, banks—all of the early conceptual issues are just batted back and forth, and the best idea wins. That's an expression of enormous trust and confidence. And then there are no excuses. You can't say the client did it, the building department did it, the bank did it, the budget did it. We're in there from the beginning. I think that's really the key to how this works."



THE STEALTH

The Smiths have an almost evangelical belief in both the transforming power of good design and the damaging potential of poor planning. "The L.A. riots were produced by bad architecture," Laurie asserts, referring to the dehumanizing effects of low-income housing. "We really do believe that architecture can have a serious negative influence for the people who exist within it, just as it can have a serious positive influence on people's lives."

The structures the Smiths and Moss have put up have grown progressively larger as they've demonstrated their marketplace viability. Although the

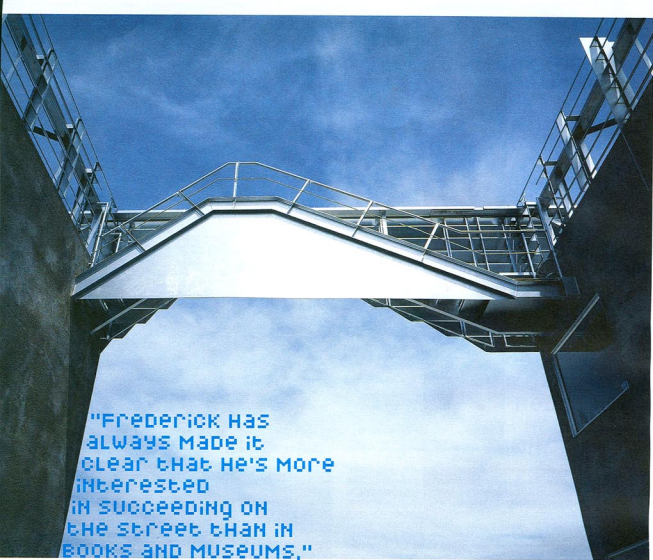
Built on a former industrial site, the Stealth building (2001) features a sunken courtyard (top) for outdoor performances. Because the form of the building changes from end to end, the interior spaces (middle and bottom) are highly varied.

Smiths have an undying passion for the aesthetic side of the equation, Moss maintains that their ability to maneuver within the worlds of bankers, city planning agencies, and corporate tenants like Kodak and Ogilvy & Mather is at least as important. "Frederick has always made it clear that he's more interested in succeeding on the street than in books and museums," he says. "And in that context the work has to be plausible to an audience who will sign leases."

Still Moss is encouraged to indulge in theoretical flights of fancy. A building called the Umbrella (1999) features an undulating laminated-glass canopy, a sophisticated piece of engineering akin to Gehry's Condé Nast cafeteria, but exposed to the elements. "That's an experiment for a much larger project we want to do in the future," Frederick says. When preliminary work was being done on the Stealth (2000), it was discovered that there was a toxic material on the site that had to be remediated. Rather than refilling the resulting hole, Moss created a submerged garden that also serves as a 600-seat auditorium.

The Smiths aren't finished by a long shot. "We will not stop expanding unless we have some cataclysm," Laurie says. Their biggest project to date—a pair of 230-foot-tall high-rise towers that will house only twelve stories, each with 25-foot ceilings—was recently approved by the Los Angeles city council. "We don't just have one building we're working on with this architect—we have a whole neighborhood," Laurie says. "Architects love to talk about all the great designs they did that will end up on a library shelf because nobody had the guts to build them. We're defying that. We're giving this particular architect the chance to build his wildest dreams." ■ www.metropolismag.com





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interested
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Eric Owen Moss.

Four bridges like this one run across
the north facade of Eric Owen Moss's
Pittard Sullivan building (1997).

Photograph by Tom Bonner