With Pacific Standard Time, Getty finally climbs down from hilltop oasis it built 20 years ago

By Christopher
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The Getty Center, overlooking the 405 Freeway and the city beyond. The museum has reached new audiences through PST: LA/LA, the Getty-funded exhibitions exploring the artistic links, past and present, between Southern California and Latin America. (Los Angeles Times)

Last week in this space, to mark the 20th anniversary of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, I raised a series of questions about how life in Los Angeles might be different had Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown L.A., designed well before the museum, managed to avoid fundraising delays and open before it as well. Would the much-touted Bilbao Effect have been ours, a Bunker Hill Effect, instead?

A different set of questions might be asked about another major museum set to celebrate its 20th birthday this fall: Richard Meier's Getty Center.

To wit: What if the Getty, instead of hiring a New York firm to design a single billion-dollar museum complex on a hilltop overlooking the 405 Freeway, had instead built five $200-million campuses, each in a different (ground-level) section of the city and each by a different architect? Or 10 with a price tag of $100 million each? Or 100 at $10 million per? How might the cultural history of Los Angeles or contemporary architecture be different?

In the 1990s the Getty, of course, was looking to consolidate its various activities rather than distribute them, which makes the idea of a hydra-headed Getty Center ridiculous in purely practical terms. This was not an institution looking to radically redefine institution-building or museum architecture in that way. On top of that there have always been many visitors who treasure the Getty's very isolation, who appreciate the ways in which a trip to its galleries is also a trip outside the city.

But that doesn't mean the questions aren't worth asking. A Getty Center whose architectural personality matched the polycentric quality of Los Angeles rather than bucking it is a fascinating thing to contemplate — even simply as a thought exercise, a way to test our assumptions about cultural philanthropy and why the city and region look the way they do.

And it turns out that the Getty has discovered a way to climb down from its hilltop. It's just not a strategy that involves a famous architect or a building campaign.

With its Pacific Standard Time series — whose third iteration, focusing on the cultural traffic between Southern California and Latin America, is now in full swing — the Getty has managed to do what it so dramatically declined to do when it opened its new campus to the public on Dec. 16, 1997. By mounting its own exhibitions but even more powerfully by supporting shows, events and publications at other local museums and galleries — this time around to the tune of $16 million — it has threaded itself into the contemporary cultural life of Los Angeles and Southern California.

The Getty has not only paid for and otherwise supported important scholarship on the cultural history of Los Angeles, helping topple cliches and complicate over-simplified narratives about its art movements in the process. It has also used the PST effort to redefine itself.

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This fall, as the Getty has both rolled out the third PST and prepared to celebrate its 20th anniversary in Brentwood, the power and appeal of that redefinition have been thrown into clear relief. Any effort to revisit the history of the complex, to examine the process that led the Getty to settle first on the site and then on Meier as its architect, makes entirely clear just how differently the institution sees itself now — and just as important how differently it aspires to be seen by the city, other museums and the culture at large.

Take "Condemned to Be Modern," among the strongest of this year's PST offerings. The show, organized by the Los Angeles cultural affairs department and running through Jan. 28 at the Municipal Art Gallery, was supported with $310,000 in PST funding from the Getty Foundation. Organized by Clara Kim, former gallery director at REDCAT inside Disney Hall and now senior curator of international art at the Tate Modern in London, it features work by artists who grapple in a range of ways with the legacy of modernist architecture and city planning in Latin America.

Just as important, the show shines a light on L.A.'s own history. The Municipal Art Gallery is right next door to the 1921 house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Aline Barnsdall, known as Hollyhock House for its ornamental details featuring Barnsdall's favorite flower.

"Ch'u Mayaa," a short film in the exhibition by Clarissa Tossin featuring the choreographer Crystal Sepúlveda, is shot in and around the house and explores the pre-Columbian aspects of Wright's design. Sepúlveda's gestures in the film, mimicking poses found among other places in Maya pottery, clarify the debt the architect owed to pre-Hispanic cultures, the way in which he saw them — in both naive and sincere ways — as fodder for a new Southern California architecture that would bypass both the Spanish Colonial Revival and Bauhaus-style Modernism.

The relationship between the film and Wright's work gains layers of richness and power because the exhibition is being held next door to Hollyhock House. After you watch the film you can visit the house yourself, tracing with your own fingers the details of its pre-Columbian concrete frieze and abstracted hollyhocks.

That sense of adjacency between exhibition and city at large, each rubbing off on the other, is something Meier's Getty Center — alone on its hilltop, all but inaccessible for anybody without a car — has never been able to offer its

visitors. Or its curators, for that matter: Given its themes and preoccupations, Kim's show would be thinner and less persuasive if it were held at the Getty Center.

The museum's distance from the city below has become only harder to ignore — and easier to measure — as the Los Angeles Basin, the landscape Reyner Banham called the "Plains of Id," has grown denser, more urban and more vital. And as the cultural center of gravity in the city has moved steadily eastward, leaping the 405 in the process. It is as if the Getty's campus has extended in Seussian fashion higher and higher into the clouds, its details harder to make out from down below.

Yet the Getty, to its credit, has learned that exhibitions and other kinds of programming can begin to make up for that isolation. More to the point it has learned that PST can be more flexible and nimble than architecture, a way of at least attempting to reach across the broad gaps — of geography, race and class, to name just three — that continue to mark Los Angeles.

It can be a kind of software to the hardware of the Getty Center campus, with the ability to be quickly updated as conditions change. (The evolution of PST from its first two iterations to the current one, from an initiative the Getty controlled relatively tightly to one it is now willing to let sprawl, with perhaps more unevenness but also more curatorial surprises, is one example of this.) It can be, finally, an effective antidote to a sense of detachment that Meier's architectural ensemble, for two full decades now, has both symbolized and fostered.

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