

A WIN - WIN CASE: SAMITAUR PROJECT IN CULVER CITY

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Culver City is a city in Western Los Angeles County. According to the 2010 census it had a population of around 38,900, slightly higher than in 2000.

A first attempt to establish a city on the grounds of several ranches and past army camps, was made by Harry Culver in 1913 and the city was finally established on September 1917. Its population grew fast, from 503 inhabitants in 1920, to 5700 in 1930, 8900 in 1940, 19,700 in 1950, 32,150 in 1960, 38,140 in 1970 and since then, very slow growth in the following 49 years.

Culver City became a center for film studios which were the main employers. The first studio was built by Thomas Ince in 1918, followed by Hal Roach and Metro Goldwin Mayer, in the 1920's.

Movies produced in Culver city include The Wizard of Oz, Gone with the Wind, Citizen Kane, Rebecca, Tarzan series, original King Kong and hundreds more. Recent movies and TV shows produced in Culver city studios include: Grease, Raging Bull, E.T., Airforce One, Mad about You, Batman, The Andy Griffith Show and others. General decline of the city, of the socio-economic level of its inhabitants and of property values started already in the late 1960's. Many of the studios moved out and their premises demolished. Loss of jobs and high level of unemployment became chronic problem and had big impact on the tangible environment.

Riots broke in Culver City In 1992, as a result of Police violence against an Africa- American community member. The riots spread over other areas and towns of Los Angeles' poorer parts. A vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty, tension, bad reputation, loss of socio economically inhabitants, weaker schools etc. made Culver City an unattractive location for investors and communities.

One land owner , owning a large piece of property in Culver City, with a number of partly abandoned industrial structures, decided to change the situation. He believed that a happy community, a better tangible environment and mainly - creation of sustainable jobs will make the big change. He took the risk doing it through rehabilitation of the existing buildings, partial

conservation of much of the historic property and by introducing high quality modern architecture. None of his existing industrial buildings would have been considered for any listing or conservation. He was free to demolish them and build everything from scratch. Retaining much of the old tissue became part of the ideology, which was primarily of social character. People have to feel comfortable in their environment - well maintained old buildings, as well as ability to recognize remains from the past have a great impact on the comfort feeling. It was not a known theory and much was done and directed by intuition. The very obvious and leading idea was to create jobs. In order for jobs to be created employers had to be attracted to the place. For the employers to be attracted the facilities themselves had to be attractive, infrastructure had to be modern and the whole environment appealing to employers, clients and society in general.

This was done through hiring of an avant-garde architect and through deep involvement of the developer in the thinking and in providing ideological direction to the projects. Readiness to invest in almost experimental architecture and elements, often without even a clear vision of immediate return on the investment, is still a leading component in the on going activities on site. In addition, deep involvement in community needs and in special educational facilities, such as ballet studio, is another important component of the project –idea. The old buildings were not pulled down, nor preserved in an orthodox way. In some cases they were partly kept and new components and sections added. In some, the wooden structure of the roofs were cleaned and exposed, contributing to a special aesthetic – partly industrial, but at the same time of high and sophisticated quality. In certain structures, built originally to serve industry, and too large for offices, new, independent structures, were built inside the old ones.

In other cases new volumes, made of modern materials, were penetrate the old the old spaces' through the original exterior walls, creating unusually interesting new combinations of old and new.

The success was not immediate, but is finally incredible and without any doubt. The cycle of decline broke.

High tech and art production businesses moved to the buildings, being proud of having space in architecture which won prizes and high reputation. Some of this architecture was recognized by the proper authorities as works of art. It might have been recognized as such in other places and combinations as well – but the specially attractive and interesting element (as well as challenging) is the combination of the old and the new. The old alone, in this case, would have never been recognized as having any cultural or artistic value. It is the blend which makes it – and not new architecture among old one – it is rather the new inside the old which makes the big difference.

Economic and commercial success is measurable, while social success is more difficult to assess and measure. Since the happy and healthy community are part of the ideology and objectives of the developers, they had to be evaluated. The indicators for such evaluation were not set ahead of time – but some of them became clear and obvious. Very little gentrification while at the same time incredible raise of property values in the whole are – not just the rehabilitated one are one combination indicating community satisfaction. People could sell their modest houses, which until ten years ago had no buyers, for very high prices.

They could move to places with better reputation – but they do not want to.

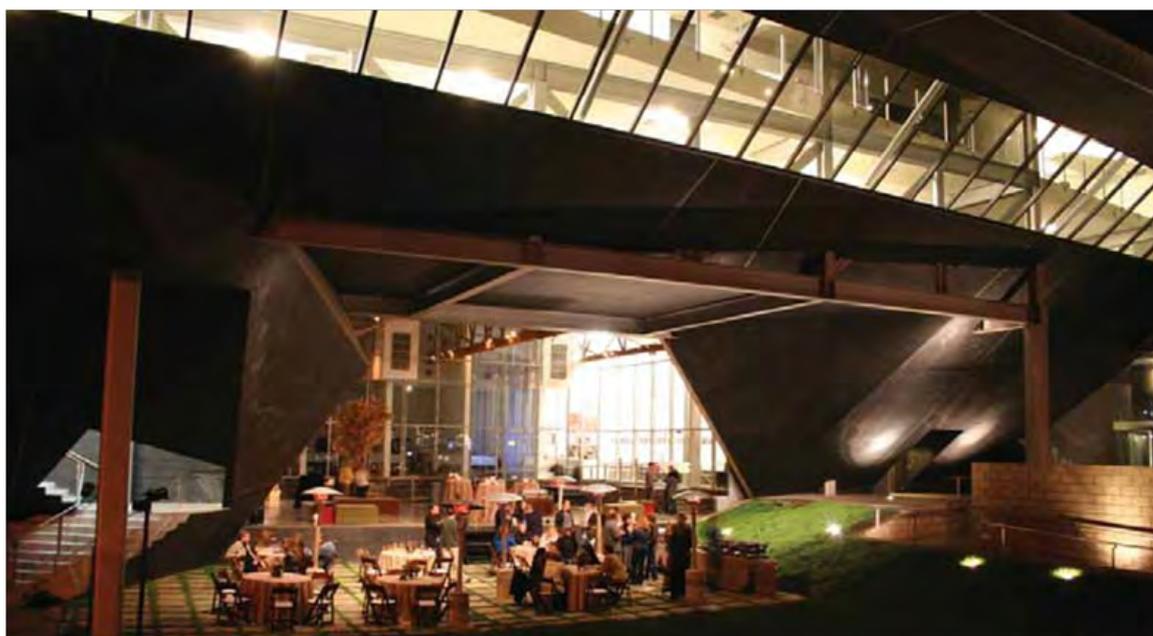
People love their neighborhood, education levels went up to be considered some of best schools in the region. Other developers and businesses followed, including the

re-establishment of movie studios (Sony, the follower of MGM). Low rate of unemployment followed as well as art studios all around. A success story out of a place and community with no hope. It is not the conservation alone, which was not even an objective in this activity – it is a holistic approach, combining the old with the new and with high quality, and it is attention to the community and its needs. A real win-win situation.

And to conclude, a story of an unexpected 'success indicator'. Parents are standing in line to have their children registered to a ballet studio, in an area which 15 years ago was still considered as unsafe for kids as well as for their parents. They come from distance, not only from the close neighborhood, to dance in one of the old industrial buildings, restored and converted. But not only the children and their parents come – their dance teachers are some of the best in the US and in Russia.

From a sad case, typical to so many socially deprived and neglected quarters all over the world things changed dramatically, thanks to vision, courage, love for a community and understanding that the old buildings, when restored and properly used, will contribute to the great success.

In this specific neighborhood, the vision and dedication of Laurie and Frederick Smith, combined with the visionary architecture by Eric Owen Moss made the difference for all and should be analyzed, studied and repeated elsewhere.



New public space in the old building, Culver City, photo: Dror Solar

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A meeting room within the old structure, Culver City, photo: Dror Solar

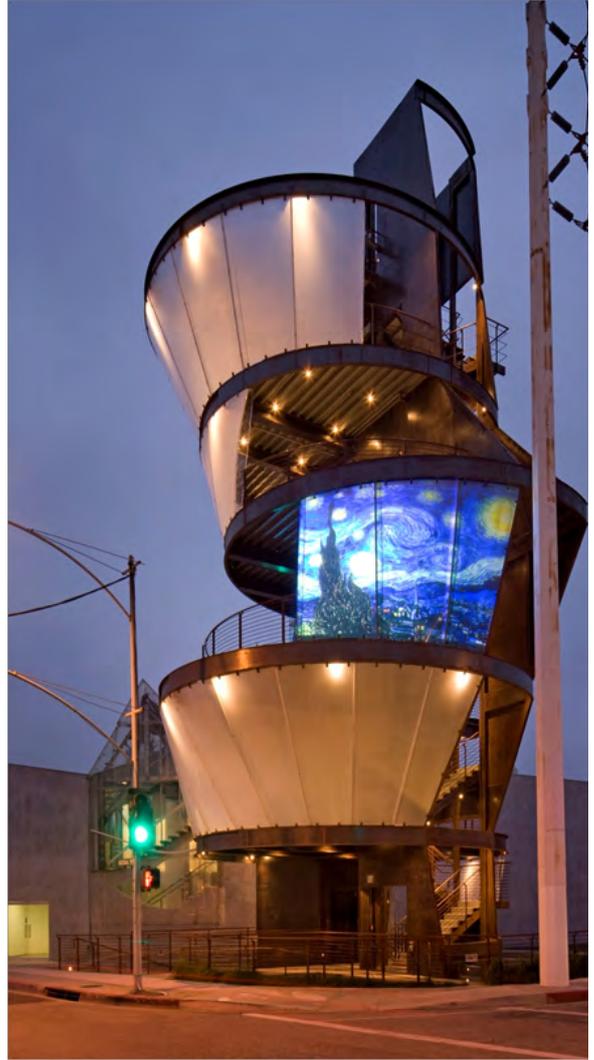


Old building, parcial new facades, Culver City, photo: Dror Solar

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Architecture and Art -Special elements – not always just functional, Culver City, photo: Dror Solar



The tower of art, Culver City, photo: Dror Solar