



BIG, VAST, POWERFUL, AND CONTEMPORARY: PICTURING EDUCATION IN LA

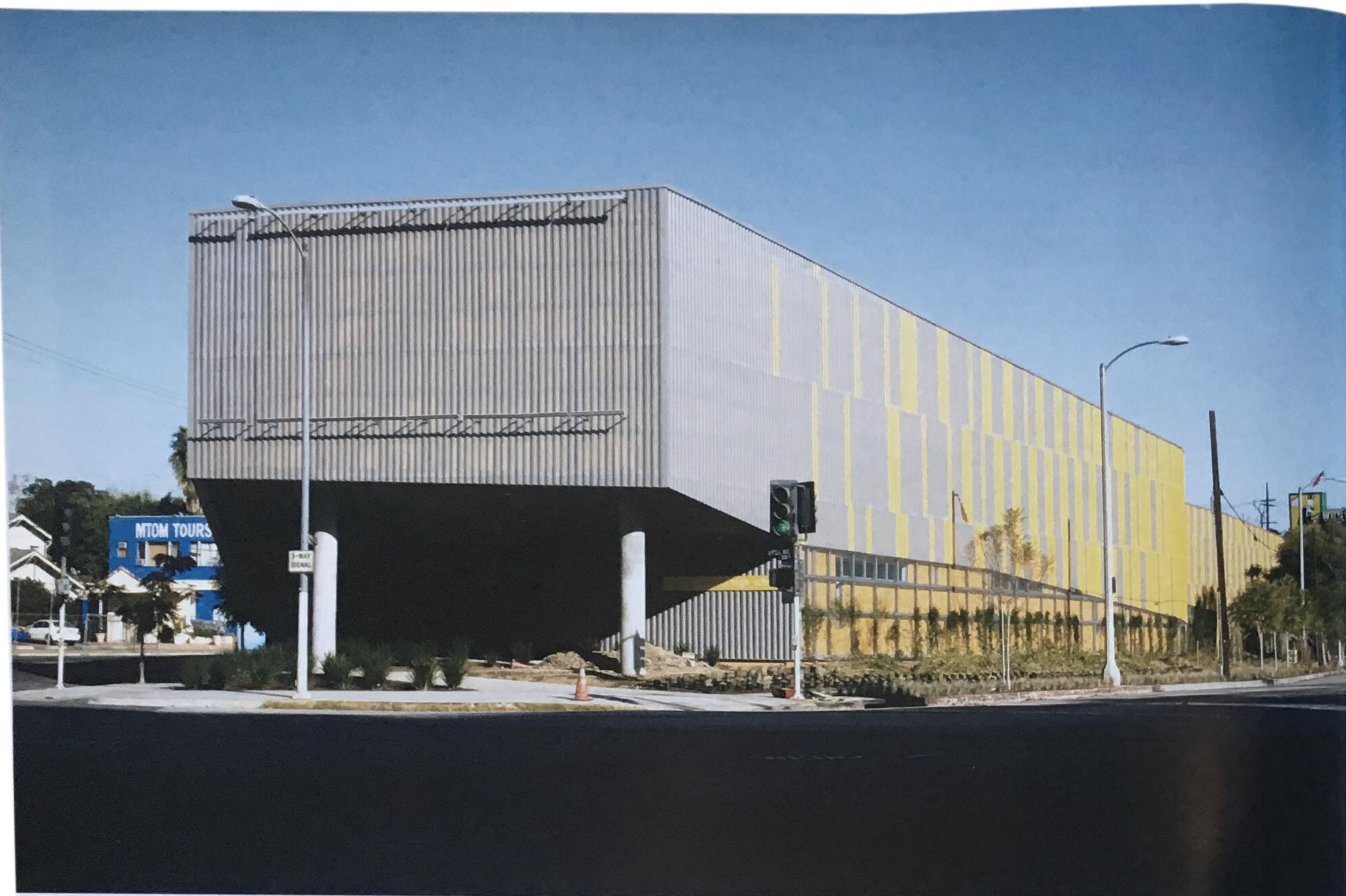
Photos by Monica Nouwens
Words by Stephen Phillips

"Isn't it the task of the photographer...to reveal the guilty and to point out the guilty in his pictures?"

-Walter Benjamin

To photograph architecture as the designer envisions is an outmoded practice. An architect's attempt to resist or guide criticism by presenting their work devoid of the complexity of everyday life is no longer convincing. The work of Monica Nouwens inspires new direction for architectural photography. Her photographs provide critical edge, without the kitsch of a designer's staging or rhetoric; her contemporary flare reveals an optical unconscious through stunning images that provoke understanding of the relationships between real buildings, people, and their urban atmosphere.

In the metropolitan flâneur with distance from her subjects, Nouwens casts architecture in a most compelling light. As German literary critic Walter Benjamin well understood, the city is like a crime scene in need of profane illumination through photography. Nouwen's photographic research in Los Angeles, challenges the traditional school revitalization projects have had on the everyday lives of its residents. Nouwen's images reveal schools that create a training ground for the generation through big, vast, powerful and contemporary building structures.



Arising from decades of bleakness however, Los Angeles - one of the biggest, most exciting, and troubled communities in the state - generated a bold new initiative to construct a wealth of new primary and secondary schools. A building frenzy emerged to include some of the most prestigious names in architecture. Coop Himmelblau, Steven Ehrlich, and Daly Genik, to mention only a few, have been honoured with bold commissions to revitalize Los Angeles' ailing school system.

Yet despite being a notorious "dis-urban city", as renowned architectural critic Reyner Banham described it in his 1970s portrayal of Los Angeles' urban ecology, the city's amalgamation of dispersed urban fabric and endless suburban

sprawl provides virtually no affordable land to build upon. This seems ironic in a city that extends uninterrupted from mountain to ocean for miles north to south along monotonous grid-iron streets, with unceasing numbers of low-lying wood frame stucco boxes, boring low ranch style pitch roofs, insipid flat built-up parapet structures, sprawling parking lots, and sprinkled lawns. Despite the media's staged depiction of this ideal palm tree-lined, pool-ridden, beatific coastal city, some consider LA effectively a "tear down", or at least ready for significant renovation. Proposed use of eminent domain policies with Hausmannian fervor have come to mind, but for the most part these megalomaniacal propositions only prove too expensive, uninformed, and impractical for serious application.

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Instead, to achieve their goal, Los Angeles has resorted to purchasing large infill areas in some rather inhospitable locations. Schools have been built adjacent to smog-choked freeways, industrial wastelands, and on occasion medical marijuana distribution centers and liquor marts. Essentially anywhere large plots of land can be found has been considered acceptable to mass the crowded swarms of young urbanites being educated to inherit this great city.

Studies and conferences by local architects seem curiously optimistic that by adding green parks on top of undulating topographic roof forms, they will be able to resolve the problems associated with building in such harsh urban landscapes. Yet, unless all these undulating roof parks are designed to cool and shade without lawns and lots of trees, such a solution will put pressure on the already outrageous consumptive requirements and water wars that have plagued the city, county, and state for generations. Some instead suggest that the city grow taller, and revive Le Corbusier's fantasy of a Vertical Garden City: towers amidst green grass and parking lots. This vision however, is the decentralized urban myth that got LA into this difficult situation in the first place. Should LA upgrade to Rem Koolhaas' 1980s suggestion to just go with the flow so to speak - and build "a culture of congestion"? Perhaps, but maybe LA offers its own solution.

Architect Steven Ehrlich for example, envisioned his school project as a "watermelon", hard on the outside, "juicy" in the middle. Although a cactus fruit might prove a better fit for the climate, there is something to be said about researching the natural vegetation and how it survives and grows in a harsh desert or urban climate. Many contemporary architects have turned to biological, if not botanical, inspirations for their work, and the most contemporary LA architecture appears in this light. Buildings with cool, sturdy, semi-permeable exoskeleton layers that protect inhabitants from everyday harsh urban realities are becoming more common. Although built-up asphalt roofs, concrete grounds, and metal surfaces are not a solution to global warming, dynamic contemporary buildings using technological surfaces that modulate to ever-changing patterns in the environment have serious potential.

Yet despite prominent inclination to humanize school buildings in banal campus courtyard schemes, the sheer size, scale, and intensity of these new campuses have a unique affect on student life. Locked-up behind grid-wired fences in enormous angular concrete, glass, and metal corporate school parks, young students somehow learn to adapt to their surroundings. They adjust to feeling insignificant and small in this oversized city as they learn to tune-out the harsh realities of urbanity and find ways to enjoy their lives.

Architects employ new media effects to ease the everyday student experience. Pattern effects and material effects are the equivalent of modern Bauhaus visual effects that entice viewer's eyes to dream beyond the windowless walled-in surfaces of contemporary control societies. LA is the centre of movie culture, and these new schools have some of the best multimedia facilities available. Media has served architecture well since 1920s early utopian ideas of expanded cinematic environments that erase traces and disperse architectural boundaries. Architecture gives the illusion of enticing, gleaming, glittery hipster habitats, animated to seam over the foreboding presence of harsh everyday reality. As the next generation adapts to ever more invasive societies of surveillance and control, where best to grow-up then in oversized multimedia black-box gaming centers, living out a virtual life in safe educational training camps. Contemporary architecture provides the illusion. It creates animate effects of phenomenal intoxication that cover up and delude us from the serious consequences of mass solutions. LA schools do have performance value; the architecture invokes students to stay cool, while they all learn to behave the same.

Building new schools is a fantastic and necessary step toward improving Los Angeles' educational infrastructure, and the unspoken hero in new school design is Los Angeles architect, Tom Mayne of Morphosis. Mayne's exceptional Diamond Ranch High School set the precedent for rethinking schools in Los

Angeles since the 1990s. With its interior urban street that functions as one of the hippest and coolest staging grounds for training LA's youth, one cannot help but dream to be filmed here. Although the classrooms are not as well considered as the glamorous, glitzy, and fashionable exterior public spaces, the architecture is intoxicating. It motivates students to go and stay in school. It provides a performance space-an event space to situate students as they learn to act under the watchful eye of an invasive LA media culture.

To be in LA is to be cool and edgy, living at the center of a robust urban network that drives media to the farthest extremes. How does the next generation learn to live in this new world structure? Students are raised not to notice. LA's schools are big to help students adjust to feeling small. Spaces are vast to contain the population. Environments are powerful to impress the students to behave. The architecture is cool and edgy; it accustoms students to their harsh urban surroundings, as they learn to act-right, hang-out, and just fit-in.

Stephen Phillips

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LA SCHOOLS

California constructed its educational infrastructure to be outstanding. Schools throughout the state were built to provide top quality education for its youth. California created an exceptional educational matrix available to all interested and committed students, regardless of their background or financial status. The infrastructure not only created space for the brightest and best students and teachers, but built remarkable buildings designed by - arguably - California's best architects: Richard Neutra, Bernard Maybeck, Joseph Esherick, and Julia Morgan, among others.

In time however, numerous leaders in the state, with public support through highly controversial propositions and initiatives effectively voted to undermine the state educational system. Overcrowding, aging facilities, mismanagement, corruption, student delinquency, and the difficulty of employing teachers to work more for less, put pressure on a system now in jeopardy of collapse.