

Softening



The Greening Century City plan envisions a pedestrian plaza and subway portal—with a rail connection to downtown Los Angeles.

the Edge

By Josh Stephens

In a confluence of tragedy and irony, the two most famous works of the late architect Minoru Yamasaki are known less for their design than for their demise. The first to go was his Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, demolished by the St. Louis Housing Authority in 1972. Twenty-nine years later, New York City's World Trade Center fell victim to terrorist attacks.

Yamasaki's most prominent remaining work is a pair of 44-story triangular, aluminum-clad towers that mark the skyline of Century City, on Los Angeles's western flank.

"From afar, the two silver towers are beautiful, if you're looking at the horizon and see how they reflect the sun," says Stephanie Pincetl, professor of urban planning at nearby UCLA. Today, however, the Century Plaza Towers, which were completed in 1975, stand watch over a world markedly different from the one in which they and the rest of Century City first arose.

In a city consumed by traffic and newly dedicated to fostering street life, the aesthetic pleasures of Century City's skyline amount only to an abstract "architectural notion," according to Pincetl. "It doesn't have anything to do with how people actually navigate places. It's not a human place; it's a modernist aesthetic."

Nevertheless, roughly 6,500 residents live in Century City, and another 50,000 arrive there for work every day. Century City conforms to the criteria of the quintessential edge city as defined by journalist Joel Garreau in his 1991 book, *Edge City*. Garreau argued that the economic life of cities had shifted to necklaces of new quasi-urban commercial centers that were, both individually and collectively, outshining traditional downtowns.

Although not all edge cities were master planned, most were built on greenfield sites adjacent to highways at a time when grand visions were very much in vogue. Century City was laid out in the 1960s

Modernism may get an update in Los Angeles's Century City.

Plans are in the works to modernize Century City, the 1960s-era commercial and residential development on the western edge of Los Angeles. In the background are the 44-story Century Plaza Towers.



Doug Jamieson, courtesy Rios Clement Hale Studios



Rios Clement Hale Studios

on 176 mostly vacant acres of the Twentieth Century Fox Studios back lot, surrounded by residential neighborhoods and golf courses. It gave lead architect and planner Welton Becket a remarkable opportunity to unleash the modernist imagination.

The result: broad boulevards, single-use buildings, blank walls, abundant curb cuts, immense parking garages, and a huge shopping mall.

“The urban design of Century City is very mid-century: huge grassy lawns, gigantic setbacks, high-rise office buildings in opposition to the street life that could occur,” says Emily Gabel Luddy, codirector of the Los Angeles planning department’s Urban Design Studio. “That plan was never intended to change. Circumstances changed around it.”

Less edge, more city

A coalition of developers, public officials, and planners has now converged on the barren sidewalks of Century City to see if contemporary planning principles can commingle with modernism. The proposed solution is “Greening of Century City,” a constellation of upgrades, tweaks, and perceptual shifts that amounts to the planning equivalent of dropping a hybrid engine under the hood of a GTO.

“It’s a very interesting and, in a way, prototypical, issue,” says lead architect and planner Bob Hale, of the Los Angeles planning, architecture, and landscape architecture firm Rios Clementi Hale Studios. “There are more and more of these kinds of places that were built essentially as office parks in the ’60s and ’70s and are becoming not necessarily obsolete, but encountering a second wave of growth and buildings needing repair and updating.”

L.A. city council member Jack Weiss, who commissioned the plan, says that it was necessary because several of Century City’s major landowners have simultaneously embarked on plans to overhaul their holdings as property values in West L.A. have soared and notions of urbanism have changed nationwide.

“Despite the density, Century City never made you want to walk, and there are few transit opportunities,” says Weiss.

While trading on the cachet of environmentalism, the plan proposes five categories of goals: a better pedestrian environment, enhanced connectivity between pedestrians and transit, a more beautiful public realm, an updated identity, and a more sustainable built environment.

“We’re going to be looking at ways to reinvent the streetscape and urban design of Century City in a way that serves the pedestrians of the future,” says Luddy.

Although several new towers—expected to

include Los Angeles’s most expensive condominiums—are under way, Century City is so vast that any meaningful upgrade must transcend single buildings. The greening plan therefore focuses on small, ground-level catalysts among Century City’s 14 million square feet of existing commercial space. The plan calls for new shops and eateries, some no bigger than 1,000 square feet, strategically placed to make Century City’s 1,000-foot-long blocks less imposing.

Hale says the plan focuses on elements like “cafes, little retail, and pedestrian amenities that address the entrances to the buildings and create more open space in healthy ways as opposed to up on podiums that nobody ever uses.”

“Just because we can have cars doesn’t mean we want to abandon being a pedestrian too.”

Other proposed improvements include abundant street trees, prominent bus stops and increased bus service to the rest of the city, internal transit routes, kiosks and newspaper stands, and paths explicitly designed and programmed to fill the dead spaces between buildings and coax office workers beyond the food court. At its most ambitious, the plan accommodates a portal for a long-hoped-for subway extension. Its “green” elements include xeriscaping, efficient lighting, solar power, permeable hardscape and stormwater capture, and a general de-emphasis on driving.

Hale maintains that, despite ideological differences between Welton Becket’s original plan and the current revision, the retouching that he has proposed for Century City is nothing radical. Instead, he says, the real innovation was to encourage collaboration among atomized landowners.

The greening plan may represent a chance for Century City’s six major landowners to cooperate for mutual benefit. Catherine Dickey, executive vice president of the mall developer, Westfield, calls the greening plan a “good investment.” Brad Cox, managing director of Trammell Crow, which owns the Century Towers, says that it “enhances the vibrant live-work-play-shop community, transforming Century City into the quintessential 21st century city.”

“Bringing together all these developers was really unusual and getting them to support these basic ideas was a trick, and we were able to pull it off,” says Hale. Weiss says that he and Hale’s team helped convince Century City’s landowners that the surrounding communities would be more likely to support redevelopment if it was in the context of a unified plan.

Garreau says that without this sort of collaboration, proposed improvements to edge cities are almost always bound to fail. “You get into all sorts of problems when you want to share anything,” says Garreau. “When you say that you’re sharing parking, it just gives everyone headaches.”

Many elements of the plan also require public approval. The L.A. Department of City Planning is currently drafting design guidelines and street standards that would be appended to the current Century City Specific Plan, pending public hearings and approval of the city planning commission and city council.

Construction has not yet begun, but the city of Los Angeles has already dedicated funds for modest pedestrian- and transit-related elements such as sidewalk improvements, decorative crosswalks, and bus shelters. Full build out, however, depends largely on the schemes of individual developers. The proposed landscaping, street work, and 50,000 square feet of pocket developments could, in fact, take longer to realize than did the original Century City plan of the 1960s, when the emptiness of Fox’s property matched the city’s inexorable drive towards growth.

Redesigning yesterday’s future

Optimism was evident in Century City’s original advertising, which celebrated the new development as a “modern Acropolis” and “an environment created today for the business of tomorrow,” as if Century City would be immutable and forever current.

Hale says that Becket was “clearly influenced” by Swiss architect and theorist Le Corbusier and his ideal of “the tower in the garden.” But his design fell short of offering the public green space that Le Corbusier considered essential for proletarian liberation.

“I think a lot of modernism was driven by the desire to do things better and a desire to

push forward new ideas,” says Hale. “It must have been a developer’s dream—to be able to come up with an unbuilt almost 200 acres in the middle of Los Angeles.”

“The original intent of the Century City forefathers was to make it a place of the future, where people would live, work, and shop in an area where they could walk,” says Susan Bursk, president of the Century City Chamber of Commerce. “Part of it was realized.”

Though Century City may not have lived up to its Athenian billing, Garreau says that the original plan should not be dismissed. “Nobody intentionally builds a dysfunctional, stupid place,” says Garreau, who acknowledges that many edge cities, including Century City, lack the “soul” of more mature cities. “The issue is adaptability, and circumstances change.”

Pincetl says that current planning trends have the potential to “turn modernism on its head,” and, indeed, Hale says he has no trouble contradicting the intended timelessness of modernism. The RCH plan suggests that, amid contemporary trends of smart growth, new urbanism, and other movements that leapfrog backward to a pre-modernist sensibility, modesty may be the new heroism.

“One of the reasons that [the property owners] were able to buy into it is we weren’t trying to reinvent things from scratch,” says Hale. Although modernist plans often called for the erasure of older neighborhoods, Hale’s has not proposed anything like the retaliatory demolition that felled Yamasaki’s Pruitt-Igoe. Instead, the greening plan rests on the prospect that modern form can be retrofitted to accommodate features that its ideology may have excluded.

“Just because we can have cars doesn’t mean we want to abandon being a pedestrian too,” says Hale. “A lot of modernism tried to draw lines of either-or in order to be clear and gather strength around a singularity of purpose or idea. I think it was a failing not recognizing or understanding the complexities.”

Although Garreau had called edge cities “the new frontier,” he says that he never expected them to remain static. Despite their rapid initial growth, he says edge cities are likely to evolve like any other city, according to market forces more than to any ideology or style.

“I can’t point to any [refurbished edge city] that I think is a home run, but, then again, it took Venice 500 years to turn into what it is,” says Garreau. “These places are only about a generation and a half old. We haven’t quite sorted it all out.”

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