

## St. Vibiana Cathedral: Collision of Past and Present Culture

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*St. Vibiana Cathedral, Los Angeles CA*

In September 1996, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles proclaimed its intent to abandon the historic Cathedral of St. Vibiana and construct a new cathedral complex at Temple and Hill Streets in Downtown. Much excitement pervaded the City of Angels as the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo was selected to design the new building. The new cathedral is the social and spiritual re-embodiment of the historic cathedral of St. Vibiana.

Simultaneously, much debate arose over the future of the historic building, the extent of its damage from the Northridge Earthquake, and the cost of its repair. The cathedral now resembles a ruin. It stands today as an embalmed artifact in Downtown, inaccessible to one who may pause outside its walls to recall its significance in Los Angeles history. The initial siting of this first Mother Church was proposed on Main Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets, but its distance from the population center led to its eventual groundbreaking on Second and Main Streets, where it stands today. Built in 1876, an imposing edifice of brick and wood construction, it

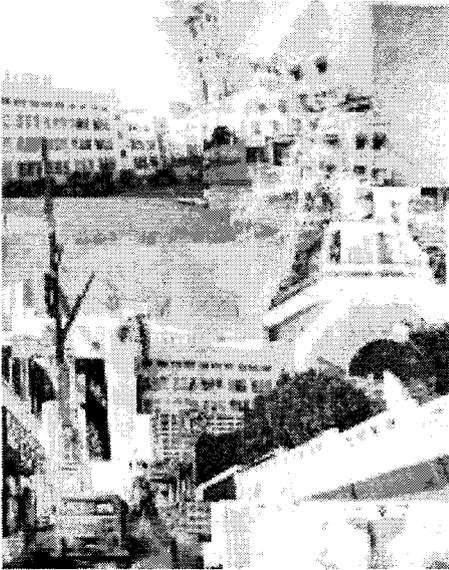
was modeled on the Church of the Puerto de San Miguel in Barcelona, with a basilica plan of a nave and aisles. Its tower, tripartite in organization, was designed by Ezra Kyzor, considered Los Angeles' first professional architect. It was first altered in 1922 by the prominent Los Angeles architect John C. Austin, when the ceilings were changed, the north and south exterior side walls plastered, new art glass panels placed in the windows, the original brick façade replaced with Indiana limestone, and the front portion extended to the sidewalk with an adjoining baptistery. The complex suffered damage in the 1994 Northridge Earthquake and was finally abandoned in 1996.



*St. Vibiana Cathedral, Main Street*

The abandoning of this site raises significant questions about the values society attributes to historic places. To some, it may represent a human creation erected for a specific commemorative purpose. But to others it may have taken a new guise through the journey to its desolation. No longer measured

by the rhythms of its commemorative uses, its peeling plaster and slow crumbling walls may make it less like a special edifice and more like a sculpture of sacred shapes and forms. It may be an abstract object that mysteriously carries the weight of the city's history, delivering a skewed message from a bygone era.



*Student Collage: Hybrid Los Angeles*

### FRAMING THE DESIGN PROBLEM

Los Angeles is a place where everyday encounters of cultures, values, traditions and technology, are witnessed in the streets of the multi-ethnic city. In these urban collisions we find a present grappling with its traditions through preservation and desecration. Everyday in this hybrid urbanity our generation is challenged with the reality of extinction at every level of human existence, including that of the natural world, and of tradition and culture. Histories of these accounts are told through buildings' everyday production and erasure. In cities like Los Angeles, where the social make up, urban histories, and experimental avant-garde are of extreme diversity, architectural education faces a composite challenge to deepen the understanding of aesthetic achievement, programmatic resolution and structural soundness. In this context, the study of the historical artifact's past and present context becomes crucial to the architectural profession as we develop structured methods that inform our value judgment in designing the future

use and physical treatment of the past.

In the design studio, the case of St. Vibiana, its past, present and future role in the city, can provide an opportunity for the advanced architecture student to explore the many aspects of design that make for a vivid built environment; one shaped by tradition, of present relevance, and of future innovation. Seeing the educational potential of the challenge, we embarked on the close range study of the architectural micro-level and urban macro in an architectural topic studio of fourth year, fifth year, and second year graduate students. The intent of the collaboration was to engage in an exploration with students in the controversies of the threatened existence of this sacred space through the impact of architectural and urban design interventions. Close attention was paid to developing an architectural discourse that explored issues of the multi-ethnic city: ethnic histories, changing ideologies and value systems, and a vision of the future in respect to the past.

Since 1996, the cathedral has been in the middle of an urban controversy after its abandonment for the new Cathedral designed by Rafael Moneo. Because the controversy encompasses the larger question of the significance of past structures to our growing history and because St. Vibiana is one of the oldest remaining structures giving rise to the city of Los Angeles, the urban issues generated make St. Vibiana an excellent case to bring into the design studio.

### THE CONTEXT OF ARCHITECTURE

A case like St. Vibiana, sited in the rich context of the city of Los Angeles is bound to teach architectural lessons of historic preservation, social responsibility, aesthetic innovation, and sensible integration of technological innovation. Students were asked to study the historic civic area of downtown which houses a diverse range of transient populations scattered throughout the district and displaying themselves in the public space of civic necessity and of cultural exchange. The immediate area of the cathedral houses the Los Angeles City Hall, County and Federal Court Houses, the Hall of Justice and the Cal Trans' headquarters. To the north the old Pueblo de Los Angeles at Olvera Street, marks the Spanish-Mexican origin of the city through a historic street lined with traditional Mexican market stalls. Architecturally, the street

composed of traditional adobe buildings with tile roofs is anchored by a traditional Spanish Plaza and kiosk; it is deemed a cultural landmark.<sup>1</sup> East of the cathedral Little Tokyo, defined primarily as a two-storey outdoor mini-mall, the Japanese American Museum, designed Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, and the Geffen Temporary Contemporary Museum designed by architect Frank Gehry,<sup>2</sup> make the secondary hub of cultural activity. The west end revolves around the Disney Concert Hall, designed by Architect Frank Gehry; and the south struggles as the dilapidated skid row. Scattered throughout the area are commercial hubs, primarily food establishments, serving the transient working populations of the district.

### **IDEOLOGICAL INTENT AND DESIGN METHODOLOGIES**

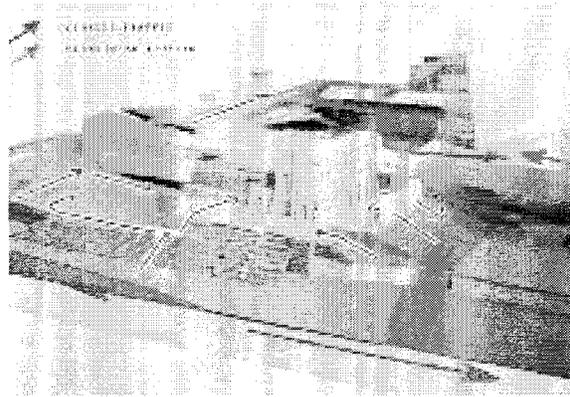
Regardless of the individual cultural and personal prejudices of the team members in the studio, the discussion was tri-fold; to articulate an urban objective acknowledging St. Vibiana as an urban marker of historical relevance, to develop informed program proposals for the cathedral future use, and to develop an architectural approach for the physical intervention proposed. In the first part of the semester students each focused on developing an urban strategy embodying their intended urban role for St. Vibiana in the city. The second phase involved the architectural design intervention of the cathedral itself.

The ideological design intents developed in the studio embodied four architectural approaches to the historical building: Sacred Adaptation, Pragmatic Revision, Vestigial Artifact, and Hybrid Transformation

#### *Sacred Transformations*

The exploration of the sacred stimulates a controversial conversation recognizing a present of historical variety leading to the re-evaluation of the sacred and the cherished values in today's society. The challenge of "reconciling" the historic sacred past with the sacred present recognizes the parallels of cultural museum activity in the east-west direction, and the historical north-south axis of El Pueblo de Los Angeles and St. Vibiana.

By developing an idea of cultural pilgrimage, students mapped the area's points of interest established within a 20 minute walking radius emanating



*Student Design: Public Plazas*

from St. Vibiana. Strategic interventions along the main arteries lead pedestrians through the cultural pilgrimage of history in the north-south path, and of high culture in the east-west direction. An experiential approach articulated the space of social collision by providing in-fill programs of the everyday in which the white collar, the blue collar, and the tourist meet. Architecturally, one line of thinking chooses the restoration of the cathedral to its original state with proposed sacred programs. The other assigns programs of entertainment in the form of theaters as defined by the current trends for revered values of a space of entertainment and leisure.

#### *Pragmatic Revisions*

The methodology of re-using a structure on a pragmatic functional level, acknowledges the importance of the artifact as a historical landmark but claims that the sacred value of a building remains only as a symbol since the building is desecrated by the removal of the sacred relic—St. Vibiana's remains. The scheme acknowledges the historical value by proposing reuse of the cathedral with programs associated with today's Latino populations, which have been reshaped from history by the cultural experience in the heterogeneous city. Schemes founded on this second approach, propose the relocations of programs such as the Office Immigration and Naturalization Services, the Mexican Consulate, and the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA). Urbanistically, the scheme acknowledged the need and potential of these programs for the creation of public space through the study of the traditional courtyard, church type, and urban plaza. The result was the development of contemporary hybrid public plazas for street vending, congressional gathering in the form of outdoor performance, and in the prag-

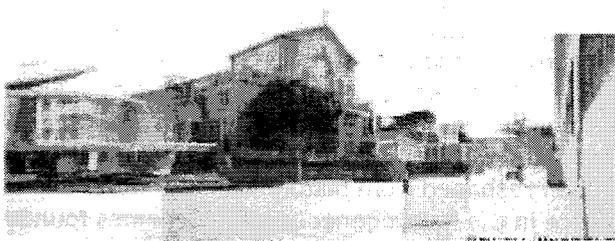
matic act of waiting—as would happen in the use of the cathedral as Immigration and Naturalization Office, and of the Mexican Consulate.

#### *Vestigial Artifact*

This methodology defines the deteriorating cathedral as a ruin's valuable dilapidated existence as an archeological artifact. Within these parameters, the cathedral does not rely on its reuse to be deemed worthy, but rather frames the cathedral as an object of display. Urbanistically, the scheme becomes a cultural museum whose form is free to physically compete with the adjacent contemporary forms in both height and architectural contemporary language. One physical solution is embodied as a building inside of a building; that is, a structure for the housing of the relic.

#### *Hybrid Transformation*

This methodology proposes the most controversial avant-garde approach which establishes the need for mutation of the building as it encounters the technology of the present and future world. Historically, the structure is seen as an artistic piece of the city in constant transformation responding to the physical and social forces around, such as new neighboring structures, and the changing social demographics. Physically, the cathedral structure may be deconstructed and reconstructed through the technological advancement and programmatic freedom.



*Student Design: Hybrid Transformations*

## **ARCHETYPES**

### *Ethnic Histories: Homogeneous Traditions and the Heterogeneous Threat*

The traditional building threat of time and changing ideologies is a peculiar one that differs from many other cities of the world. In an equally extreme scenario of social and historical encounters, the

Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City's main square, *el Zocalo*, sits side by side to the partially excavated Aztec City of *Tenochtitlan*. This grand statement of historical narration through the preservation of the sacred, tells the story of an urban center embodying the marriage of the indigenous and Spanish tradition; a statement of the historical origins of a city. One may ponder upon the parallel of the traditional building as preserved to great extent in Mexico City, to the value system that questions the validity of preserving the historical beginnings of the city of Los Angeles. There is an obvious difference in the value system that deems history worthy of preservation in Mexico City, the question is why?

The Latino population flourishes in Los Angeles, particularly in the old historic core of downtown with its Spanish-Mexican roots and its proximity to the Eastern areas of the city that house prominent Mexican populations.<sup>3</sup> However, the Latino presence that activates the streets and public life occurs in a reality much different than that of the Spanish-Mexican tradition that founded the city and that predates U.S. acquisition of this formerly Mexican land.<sup>4</sup>

Both examples embody ethnic histories and demarcate the physical and cultural beginnings of two cities. However, St. Vibiana no longer exists in a physically traditional landscape dominated by a Catholic Church resonating its calling to mass of a homogeneous population, but rather in a bricolage of spiritual value systems. The homogenous population in Mexico makes for a shared value system where the history being preserved is that of the people. In the hybrid city of Los Angeles, diversity and lack of common values threaten the preservation of any kind of history as we face the question: whose history should be preserved?

A consequent method of recognizing ethnic histories, is that which acknowledges the fundamental foundation of the city but that seeks to tell the history of the hybrid by venturing onto the complex search of what it means to be of Mexican-Spanish tradition in the United States, more specifically in the City of Los Angeles, the multiethnic city.

### *The Spiritual Shift: Encounters of Value Systems*

In the traditional city, the spiritual sacred brings people together under a common belief that materializes itself in the grand space of the cathedral;

the symbol of family and union. In the hybrid city of Los Angeles, the factor leading to the spiritual shift away from the sacred is the multi-cultural composition, and consequent multiplicity of ideals. Consequently, the many different possible combinations of encounters makes for the attractive experimental nature of the city. The architectural drawback is that in the freedom of experimentation, an accepted disregard for the past develops as we make way for the future. Experimentation becomes an acceptable excuse to designing for the interests of any individual at all.

What are then the newly created values of the hybrid culture that lead to the construction of the grand architecture of our time? In the American ideal where spiritual completeness is attained by self worth, the sacred materializes into the public show of success. The sacred space, no longer based on religious beliefs, leads to more leisurely lives that find spiritual completeness in the luxurious space of individuality and entertainment.

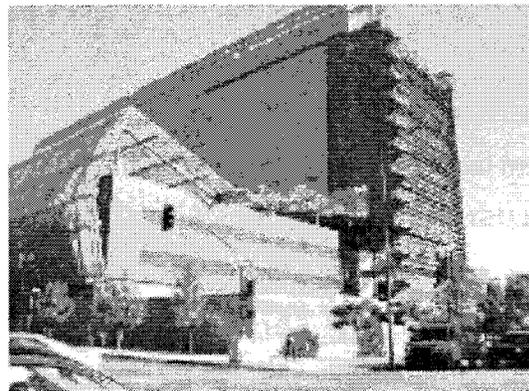
Los Angeles architecture of amusement and diversity is seen in the completion of the grand architectural statements of our time, The Disney Concert Hall by Frank Gehry and the Getty Center by Richard Meier. Ironically, the multiplicity of values that threatens tradition in the first place, spearheads the spiritual shift to an architectural building typology for the display of culture, both nonetheless embodied in an extravagant gesture of success.

#### *Encounters with the Future*

Much of the architecture we deem worthy of attention today is discussed within a limited contextual framework. Each of the examples above has faced criticism as an architecture that in one way or another demeans or ignores the existing fabric. Undoubtedly the beautiful oasis of the Getty functions by its highly praised and criticized isolation from the city. As the museum that places Los Angeles on the map of high culture by comparing to the grand museums of the Louvre in Paris, or the Uffizi in Florence; it fails unlike its counterparts, to make the diversities of its contents readily available to the people. The Disney concert hall, a building receiving high architectural praise, raises the temperature of adjacent buildings with its shiny stainless steel reflective cladding, causing resident complaints. In December 2004, Gehry Architects and Associates announced that they will

sandblast selected areas of the concert hall to reduce the heat and glare.

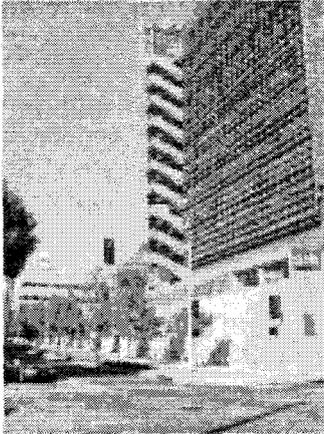
The failure of an architecture that deals with context is one that haunts many of the venerated grand architecture of our time. In the case of St. Vibiana, the importance of context is highlighted by its historical nature, which adds to its physical and functional vulnerability.



*CalTrans Building, Los Angeles CA*

On September 27, 2004, the new Caltrans District 7 Headquarters, designed by Morphosis Architects, opened just across the street from St. Vibiana. Despite its innovative design which comprises the integration of an exterior skin with operable aluminum panels protecting the east and west facades from direct sunlight, and its photovoltaic cells on the south wall which contribute to the building's overall sustainability, the 13-story structure towering over the entire civic center area, contributes to the dwarfing of the cathedral in a high rise downtown scene.

Unquestionably this building is a public display of technology at its best as exemplified by its sustainable nature and structural advancements.<sup>5</sup> Architecturally, it sets a high standard making it representative of the future. Urbanistically however, the building is an overpowering high-rise consuming an entire city block in the heart of the Civic Center. Sitting north of the cathedral, it now cuts off St. Vibiana from achieving any potential ties to the old historic core to the north. Furthermore, the Cal Trans building further disengages the cathedral from the fabric of the city by turning its back to the



*CalTrans Building, Los Angeles CA*

southern façade facing St. Vibiana.

### **CONCLUSION**

The dialogue surrounding St. Vibiana is rich with cultural and ideological dilemmas. Amidst them, with the new cathedral complete, and the old edifice awaiting transformation, Los Angeles enters a new phase in its urbanity. For students of architecture, the lessons of urban controversies such as this one, will create a generation of architects and designers employing conscientious and studied approaches to an architecture of urban and social relevance.

Today the site has been sold to a leading Los Angeles developer, state funds have been secured for the project, and its rejuvenation as a performing arts complex is underway. The historic edifice will not be forsaken for long. It will be brought alive through a new use, retaining its historic form.

### **NOTES**

1. Although Olvera Street is a historical landmark of the city City of Los Angeles, its current authenticity remains more at the level of a cultural tourist attraction with a controlled environment catering to a primarily tourist population. Nonetheless, the historic value attributed to the street by the location and status as original core of the Pueblo de Los Angeles, makes this historical landmark a mecca for traditional Mexican festivals and national events throughout the year. Ironically, though the more authentic flavor of Mexico's presence in the modern day Los Angeles, is all around the city by the prominent Mexican population.
2. The Geffen Contemporary is a branch of MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art locate on Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles.
3. The Latino presence formulates 44.6 % of the total population of Los Angeles County. 2000 U.S. Census Bureau
4. In 1848, after the United States won the Mexican American War against Mexico, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed by the two countries. In the treaty Mexico seceded 55% of its territory to the United States for the amount of 15 million dollars. The Mexican territory seceded is composed of present day Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Colorado, Nevada, and Utah.
5. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Program (LEED) has given the Cal Trans Building a Silver rating.