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NEWS

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## FEATURE > BUDDING RELATIONSHIP

The merger of landscape and architecture is creating fertile new approaches to building



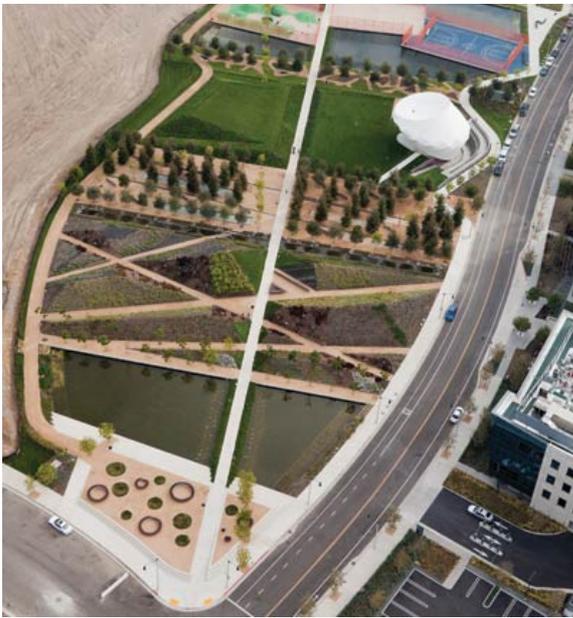
MICHAEL MALTZAN AND JAMES BURNETT USED ARCHITECTURAL FORMS TO ORGANIZE AND ENLIVEN PLAYA VISTA PARK. IWAN BAAN

In case you didn't notice, the architecture world is embracing all things green with an enthusiasm not seen since the 1970s. But this time around, the movement has expanded far beyond the grass-roots level to a broader merging of architecture and landscape. This soil-meets-steel trend, precipitated largely by our limited space resources, by the crossover in design fields, and by our desire to return to our roots, has forced architects and landscape architects to collaborate more closely, and occasionally, even to reverse roles.

"The boundary between landscape and architecture barely exists anymore," said architect Michael Maltzan, who this summer opened the Playa Vista park on LA's West Side, a composition broken up into a series of "urban rooms," as the architect calls them, including floating recreation areas, large angular planted mounds, carved granite bridges, and a tensile fabric band shell. Combining valuable techniques learned from landscape architect James Burnett with his own architectural expertise, Maltzan used materials to reinforce the separation of space and employed shapes and textures to lead people through the park. In the end, the park is as much architecture as it is landscape.

"The concerns and investigations are the same," said Maltzan. "If you





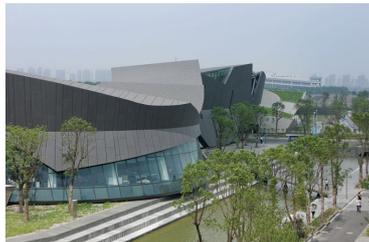
ARCHITECTURAL FORMS ARE EMPHASIZED AT PLAYA VISTA PARK.

remove the traditional distinctions between what disciplines are supposed to be doing and imagine what needs to be done, then you can create real innovation,” he added. Several of Maltzan’s upcoming projects merge architecture and the land, including the Cornfields Park in LA, the Piggyback Yard near the LA River, and the Art Park, next to the Geffen Contemporary in Downtown LA.

And Maltzan’s work is no aberration. Building green and stretching creative boundaries are just two reasons that “earth-itecture” is taking off. As we run out of buildable land, and as our sprawling lifestyle stretches our resources, it seems inevitable that we must learn how to better overlap architecture and green space in smart ways.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: MORPHOSIS AND SWA COORDINATED TO MAKE GIANT INTERACTIVE GROUP’S GREENSCAPE MERGE SEAMLESSLY WITH THE ANGULAR BUILDING.



“It’s about adding public space in a tight environment,” said Curtis Fentress, whose firm is designing the San Diego convention center expansion, which will provide five acres of green park space on top of the convention center’s roof. Such projects are more than standard green roofs, which often overflow with plants but are not intended for people as with Renzo Piano’s instantly iconic green roof on top of the California Academy of Sciences.

In more extreme examples, the difference between architecture and landscape is almost impossible to discern. One struggles to tell landscape and structure apart when looking at Hagy Belzberg’s Museum of the Holocaust in LA’s Pan Pacific Park. Here, sharp, undulating, planted forms are built into the park’s existing sloped hillside. In this case, building underground had the added ability to create a powerful architectural experience inside counterbalanced by a lighter experience outside.

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INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR VIEWS OF FREELAND BUCK'S PLANT-SURROUNDED HUNTERS STAND CABIN IN MAINE.  
COURTESY FREELAND BUCK



Another project in which landscape and building are often indistinguishable is Morphosis' and SWA's new headquarters for Giant Interactive Group outside Shanghai, which is completely covered in green; a "prairie blend" of 15 plants that undulates and twists at extreme angles, and slopes down to the surrounding waterscape. While all green roofs provide thermal protection, this project is an entire eco-system, filtering water for the nearby canal and feeding several life forms. The green space has become an attraction for workers and locals alike.



BELZBERG ARCHITECTS' HILL-LIKE MUSEUM OF THE HOLOCAUST IN LOS ANGELES.

COURTESY BELZBERG ARCHITECTS

"We're all interested in the same things these days," said SWA principal Ying Yu Hung. "Energy efficiency, natural materials, the healing power of nature." Of course, making landscapes fit into the schemes of an adventurous architecture firm was often challenging. In some places, the building slopes as much as 53 degrees, forcing the firm to come up with inventive measures to keep the soil clinging to the surface. "We were like, 'Are you sure?'" said Hung.

Hung's LA office has two architects to complement its 13 landscape architects, an increasingly common admixture. With "earth-itecture" becoming so common, it makes sense for an architecture firm to have landscape expertise on board. San Francisco firm Interstice Architects' principles are Andrew Dunbar, an architect, and Zoe Astrakhan, a licensed landscape architect who studied landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. Several of their projects combine the disciplines, including the upcoming Center For Science and Innovation at the University of San Francisco. That project includes a new green plaza made of native plants built on top of an expansion to the school's Harney

Hall. In order to provide more light inside, the firm included benches that double as skylights and a side-facing "storefront window wall" that cuts into the earth. They worked to constantly communicate with the architects, NBBJ, and the project engineers to make sure that "all the players were in the room and decisions were not relegated to one discipline," said Astrakhan. That meant that meetings addressed storm water, mechanical decisions, interfaces, ventilation ducts, and so on. "It was a constant give and take," added Astrakhan. "When you begin documenting things, the lines are difficult to draw. There was definitely a lot of time spent figuring out what made sense; figuring out what was architecture and what was landscape. It wasn't always that clear to us."

Small LA firm Freeland Buck includes an architect, David Freeland, and a landscape architect, Brennan Buck, who studied landscape architecture at Cornell. Their proposed Hunters Stand Cabin in Maine wedges itself into a hillside, lifting out of the ground plane, clad with shingled wood planks and cut with sharp windows. The earth has proven an inspiration for the firm in several ways: the bottom of the house is fitted with a soil medium so plants and trees can grow in the middle of the house; the coloring of the rooms change in response to the changing landscape; and triangulated spaces are carved out of the earth to maximize light and landscape interaction. Floors are partially above grade and partially below, emphasizing this divide, and giving the house an "embedded quality," explained Freeland. A thin green roof on top gives the building a feeling of "immateriality," adds Freeland. "Landscape gives you a variety of readings and experiences and feelings. That's why it's interesting to us," he said.



LMN'S VANCOUVER CONVENTION CENTER ROOF IS A NATURAL HABITAT FOR SEVERAL SPECIES. IT MEASURES SIX ACRES, MAKING IT THE LARGEST GREEN ROOF IN CANADA (TOP) AND TWO VIEWS OF FENTRESS ARCHITECTS' SAN DIEGO CONVENTION CENTER EXPANSION INCLUDES A SLOPING FIVE-ACRE GREEN SPACE ON ITS ROOF THAT WILL SERVE AS A MAJOR RECREATIONAL AREA.

NIC LEHOUX AND FENTRESS ARCHITECTS RESPECTIVELY

Of course, the ways that landscape is being incorporated into architecture are not all new. San Diego architect Kevin Defreitas recently completed the St. Bartholomew Chapel, a Catholic church on the Rincon Indian reservation outside of San Diego. The rammed earth project incorporated 120 tons of local soil to form the building's walls, and also used natural elements like a Live Oak Tree, which was harvested for the altar, and a three-ton boulder which was turned into the building's baptismal font.



In this case, the use of natural materials—the rammed earth walls are several feet thick—help prevent the building from burning down in a wildfire, as its predecessor did a few years ago. And its incorporation of local materials was vital for the Indian tribe, which considers land on its reservation sacrosanct. Defreitas found working with the local soil a transformative experience, and hopes to continue, despite San Diego's insistence on not classifying rammed earth as a usable building material. "It's just dirt, but it's an incredible material," said Defreitas. "It's hard to go wrong with natural materials. They seem to age in a way that others don't. And there's an honesty to the material; you immediately understand what it is. It's as renewable as you can get, and when the building is done, it can go back to where it came from. It's like they say: when God created Adam, he made him out of mud." For some, the back-to-roots movement can be quite literal.

**Sam Lubell**

**Sam Lubell is the West Coast Editor of *The Architect's Newspaper*.**

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