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AN EXPERIMENT IN DISJUN

Samitaur Tower Eric Owen Moss Architects

Photography by Tom Bonner



by Paola Giaconia

Samitaur Tower is the most recent in the impressive series of buildings designed by Eric Owen Moss Architects in Culver City, California. It is part of the architect's ongoing urban-scale collaboration with developers Frederick and Laurie Samitaur Smith; a 20-year-long odyssey of patient and inventive experimentation to revitalise an area of previously dilapidated industrial and warehouse buildings.

Thanks to the visionary patronage of the business couple, Eric Moss has over the years been able to initiate a process of urban transformation in an area that, in the 1980s, was abandoned by industries and denigrated as a backwater on the Los Angeles Westside. His audacious yet precise incursions gave rise to an interesting urban reform plan conceived as an entity undergoing constant modification and redefinition; an effervescent work in progress. Conjointive Points is the name of the urban plan, which benefits from a global vision, though it moves forward in little increments without following *a priori* planning or building regulations. The plan itself has come a long way since Samitaur Smith commissioned Moss for the first project in 1987. The small one-storey building at 8522 National Boulevard was followed by such masterpieces as Pittard Sullivan (1997), The Umbrella (1999), and Stealth (2002).

"What we are realising here," says Moss, "is an urban fabric in free form which evolves in an unpredictable manner, progressively growing through

single operations... The design strategy must be extremely flexible: underlying everything is the ability to improvise and a willingness to change direction, if necessary. This is an urban situation in which some things must be replaced, others must remain, and still others may be partially removed."

Samitaur Tower is located at the primary entry point to this redeveloped zone of Culver City, a prominent corner of the Hayden Tract, which is an ambitiously reconverted ex-manufacturing district, now populated with post-production studios, Internet-related firms and other creative companies. The tower was spurred by the nearby new, elevated light-rail Expo Line, currently under construction and conceived to run from downtown Los Angeles through Culver City and on to Santa Monica. Indeed, it is the infrastructure surrounding the tower – the freeway, the Balboa creek, La Cienega and Jefferson boulevards, and the new light-rail – that allows it to exist so successfully.

"This tower has the capability of being something that is not incidental to a trip, like a billboard on the freeway, for example," says Moss, "but more a trip you would make to see it. So it is possible that it will become part of the entertainment infrastructure of the city, too." All the buildings in the immediate area are governed by a 56-foot height limit. The Samitaur Tower, though, was exempted from the local height rule. Measured from grade, it is 72-foot-high, and includes an open-air, excavated, concrete seating and staging space at its base that begins at minus 12 feet.

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"It's okay to ask whether or not it's a building," Moss says of the Samitaur Tower, adding, "One of the things that's interesting about the project — and which is actually one of the problems with the project — is that it still has not been figured out what programme it will run." This ambiguity, made possible by the open-mindedness of the clients, is a strength of the project. And, of course, Moss feels very comfortable working on an assignment that seems to require an additional explanation and which already seems to enjoy success.

The tower avoids a fixed, predictable and ultimately redundant reading. It is not a conventional sequence of "tower" spaces — with a beginning, middle, and destination — but more a kinetic overlapping of both vertical and horizontal space. The design of the steel, the intentionally precarious support system, the metal decks, the cantilevers and the shifting volumes change laterally as the space extends vertically. As a whole the 'tipsy-looking' tower consists of five circular steel rings, each approximately 30 feet in diameter, stacked vertically at 12-foot floor-to-floor intervals. It is fabricated from standard structural steel sections (wide-flange beams, columns and channels) with panelled walls made of half-inch-thick weathered steel plate. All the shapes and components were shop-fabricated and delivered to the site for construction. The platforms, wrapped in a translucent acrylic material that serves as a projection screen, are connected via an outdoor staircase and an internal elevator. As the tower rises, the rings are staggered in plan, back-and-forth and in two different directions, in order to establish proximity and viewing angles for various levels at various heights.

With its glazed elevator in an enclosed glass shaft and its open stairway to the top, the tower will be used as a viewing platform to overlook the city. Its primary objective, however, will be to distribute art and other related content to the local and in-transit





audiences passing by. "Because of the relative openness of the structure," says Moss, "one can almost always see where one has been and where one is heading as one ascends or descends the stair or the elevator. So, again, the experience is less a chronology of spatial events, and more a continuous spatial event that forms and re-forms as you move through it."

The structure has several target audiences, which accounts for the positioning of its five projection screens. Four of them are to be seen from cars on surrounding surface streets, from freeways, by passengers at train stops, from onboard the moving trains (the Expo Line is expected to carry 30,000 passengers every day), and from the pedestrian areas at a variety of key walking and viewing points. One screen, just above grade, unlike the other four, faces the redevelopment site. It will be used by local audiences, seated on the terraced concrete bleachers that step down to the below-grade portion of the project where a stage for speakers and performers is provided.

Other adjacent structures in the works are also a response to the Expo Line, Moss explains. One project his office is working on is a high-rise at the corner of Jefferson and La Cienega, which, though dormant for several years, was recently resurrected and is now being engineered.

From the top of Samitaur Tower one can behold several of Eric Owen Moss' built works. There is a splendid view over "the urban 'pinballing' of Culver City design events". One wonders, with awe, what visionary strategies its future might involve.

