

## Making waves with West Coast style

Ball-Nogues Studio's L.A.-centric fusion of art and computers brings home New York's Young Architects prize.

By STEFFIE NELSON  
*Special to The Times*

**“O** HHHH! Aahhh!” went the chorus round the P.S.1 meeting room when Ball-Nogues Studio unveiled the model of “Liquid Sky,” its winning entry in this year's Young Architects Program competition at the Museum of Modern Art affiliate in Queens, N.Y. With showmanship befitting a project inspired by spectacle, psychedelia and the circus, Echo Park architects Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues and their engineer, Paul Endres, had kept the 3-D model of an installation for the P.S.1 courtyard under wraps until the last moment, when they revealed their vision of a translucent orange Mylar canopy strung from tall utility poles, with shaded hammocks beneath.

The jury's over-the-top reaction was partly poking fun at the team's flair for drama (the three had also dressed in orange to match the piece), but clearly the jurors were genuinely wowed by the canopy's jewel-like petals and the kaleidoscopic swirls of color projected onto the ground by a single spotlight mimicking the sun.

Ball-Nogues did, after all, take home the prize.

In the less than three years since they founded their company, these two former Frank Gehry employees and alumni of the Southern California Institute of Architecture have built a reputation that extends from universities to luxury retailers to art museums and back to the Echo Park block where they work out of a three-car garage painted by local graffiti artists.

“Everybody in the ‘hood knew that we had won the P.S.1 commission,” Nogues, 39, said the other day with a smile as he bummed a cigarette from a neighbor while walking to the Rodeo Grill, a Mexican lunch spot on Sunset Boulevard.

There's virtually nothing in Nogues' laid-back manner, vintage Ts and tattoos or in Ball's floppy blond hair and indie geek glasses that matches the stereotype of the architect. Maybe that's because they've created a hybrid discipline that fuses architecture's intellectual rigor with art's creative spark and the toolbox practicality of set design, which Ball also did for many years. They're barely cracking minimum wage, but with a higher profile comes a higher price tag — and there's something to be said for a job that feels “so much like playing it kind of spooks me,” said Nogues.

Brooke Hodge, curator of architecture and design at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art — who hired Ball-Nogues to design a grand textile centerpiece for the opening of “Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture” last November and who nominated the pair for the P.S.1 competition — agrees that their work falls in both the art and architecture camps. Even more distinctive among their computer-trained generation, she noted, “is that they also know how to execute the designs. A lot of architects know how to make these amazing things in a 3-D model or on the computer, but they don't know how to execute them.”

Ball, 38, the more computer-savvy of the two, said they are “interested in digital technologies insofar as they enable us to build something and expand the vocabulary that we have of building.” Thanks to Southern California's film and aerospace industries, experimentally minded architects also have access to alternative technologies and manufacturing techniques.

For the team's celebrated

“Maximilian's Schell,” a golden Mylar vortex installed in 2005 in the courtyard of Materials & Applications, a center for exploratory architecture in Silver Lake, a computer helped them devise a system to cut each piece of Mylar, a material normally used for racing and windsurfing sails. But, said Nogues, “I didn't need a computer to imagine it.”

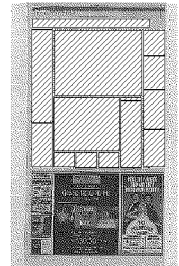
### Built on lessons learned

**W**ITH every project, they strive to improve on what they've done before, pushing techniques and materials further. “Liquid Sky,” named after a cult movie from 1982, is “standing on the shoulders” of the M&A project, Ball says, just as “Rip Curl Canyon,” an installation commissioned by Rice University in Houston last fall, built upon an event-scape they had created for the launch of Gehry's line of jewelry for Tiffany & Co. the previous spring.

Inspired by Gehry's corrugated cardboard furniture, for the latter they covered a closed-off section of Rodeo Drive with undulating, layered cardboard walls, lounge chairs and provocative displays where nude models wearing the jewelry could be seen through peep-show-like windows. For the Rice project, which filled the university gallery with rolling waves of cardboard ripe for climbing, the idea, said Ball, was to “take it further and make it strong enough so that you could walk on it.”

In all their work is a spirit of play, but nowhere more so than in “Liquid Sky,” on view June 21 through Labor Day, which aims to turn P.S.1's courtyard into a daytime nightclub setting for weekly dance parties. In a separate area, revelers can find relief from the summer heat under “drench buckets.”

For Barry Bergdoll, MoMA's chief curator of architecture and design, “the word that immediately came to mind was the French word ‘ludique,’ which



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translates as a sense of fun — one can immediately imagine the spirit of playfulness that it will unleash.”

Indeed, the Ball-Nogues team watched Fellini’s “8½” and the film “Black Orpheus,” set during Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, “to get in step,” said Ball, “with the carnivalesque.” They identified with the fantastical nature of Carnival, but also, he said, with the idea of members of the public coming together temporarily for pleasure.

Said Nogues, “Even with the logistics of making this thing, we thought, ‘Well, how did people in the circus put things up so quickly?’”

## Utility meets glitz

**T**HE telephone pole tripods from which the “marmalade rust” canopy will be suspended are nothing more complicated than tent structures, and while the choice of materials is practical — the poles are strong and relatively inexpensive — the team was also interested in recontextualizing this icon of urban life.

“A utility pole’s background is always the sky,” said Nogues. By bringing the Mylar petals to the edge of the site, “In essence we were trying to get rid of the horizon line and create our own sky.”

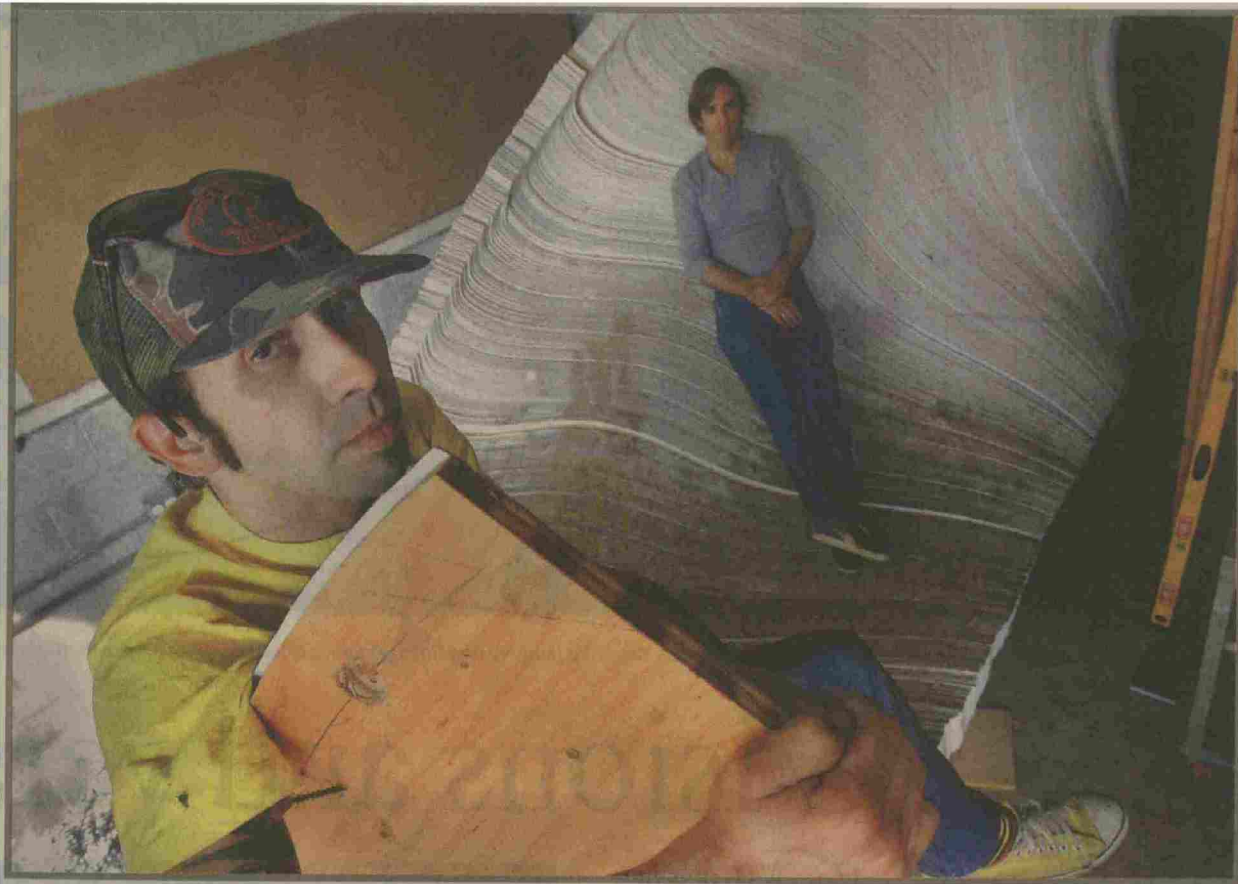
Any reference to the Beatles’ “marmalade skies,” they insisted, was “pure coincidence.”

Bergdoll found particular resonance in the idea of a liquid sky “that brings joy without rain” — an L.A. concept if there ever was one. Alanna Heiss, the direc-

tor of P.S.1, praised the piece as “a gift from the wilderness of California dreams” and was taken to task by Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne for her “New York provincialism.”

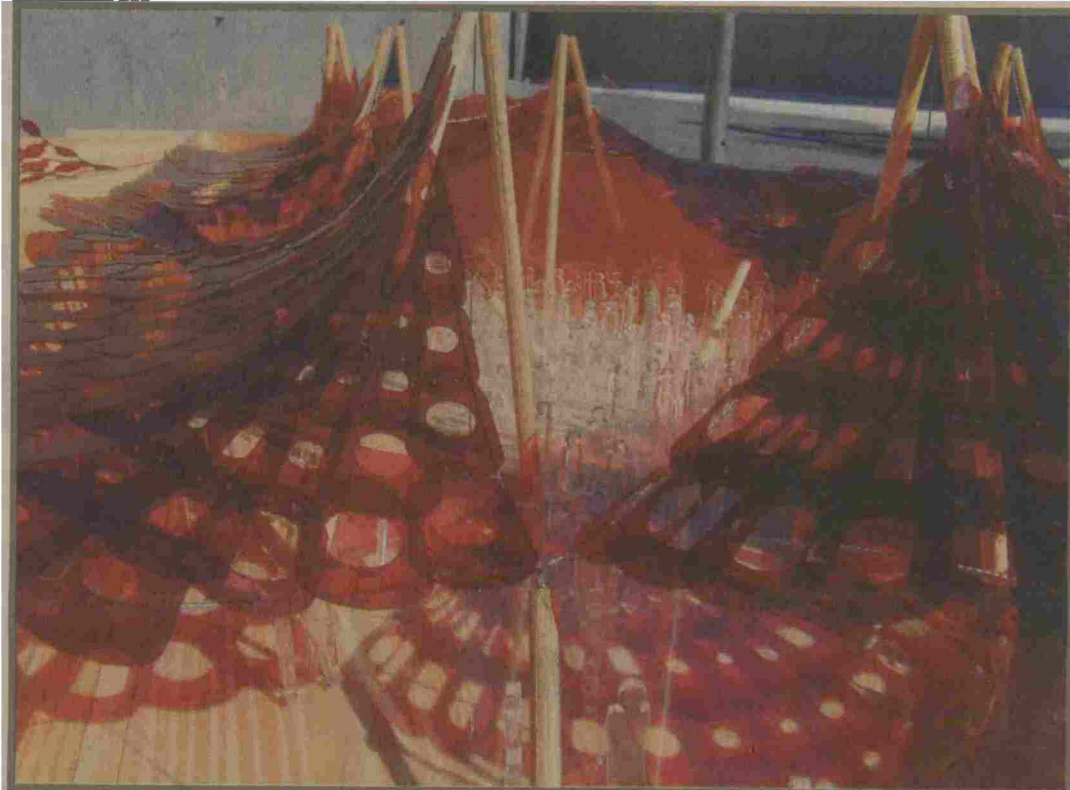
Said Bergdoll in her defense, “If anything, it should be called a kind of longing for that spirit of uninhibited experimentation which has long been associated with the studios and garages of Venice or the warehouses of Culver City.”

Ball and Nogues have no beef with the California free-spirit tag or with the New York architecture community — now that they’ve won the P.S.1 competition, that is. Said Nogues with utter seriousness, “We just really didn’t want to get beaten by somebody from the East Coast.”



KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times

**THEIR OWN TWIST:** Frank Gehry protégés Gaston Nogues, left, and Benjamin Ball heighten common materials in uncommon ways.



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**WINNING WAYS:** A mock-up of "Liquid Sky," a pavilion slated for the courtyard at P.S.1 in Queens, N.Y., reveals the team's use of Mylar and phone poles to create a vibrant, light-filled space.