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# THE RADAR DESIGN

BY LIZBETH SCORDO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELENA DORFMAN



**BAND OF INSIDERS** From left: Gaston Nogues, Benjamin Ball, Eric Owen Moss, Jennifer Siegal, Robin Donaldson and Nick Seierup at SCI-Arc's downtown campus.

## FORM MEETS FACTION *Catch a rising starchitect: SCI-Arc's avant-garde alumni reach critical mass*

When Ray Kappe resigned his post as chair of architecture at Cal Poly Pomona in 1972 to open his own school in a Santa Monica warehouse with his wife and five friends, the country's most esteemed design programs weren't exactly quaking. But in the last 36 years the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), launched as a collaborative laboratory and radical alternative to the academic establishment, has done more than hold its own against formidable forebears like Yale and the Cooper Union. From its at-the-edges current campus in a converted rail depot in a downtown industrial zone adjacent to the L.A. River, the school is churning out a new breed of bold young architects who are revolutionizing their discipline and leaving an unmistakable physical mark on the city.

Try as some might, it's nearly impossible to sweep the SCI-Arc set into one confining category, as graduates' projects and processes are as widely varied as the individuals themselves. Venice heavyweight David Hertz's glass-erific Panel House is made of industrial refrigeration panels and automatically collects leftover window-washing run-off for use in watering the yard, while partners Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues once employed 20,000 layers of corrugated cardboard to create an undulating backdrop for a Rodeo Drive gala celebrating a Tiffany's jewelry collaboration with Frank Gehry. Current SCI-Arc chief Eric

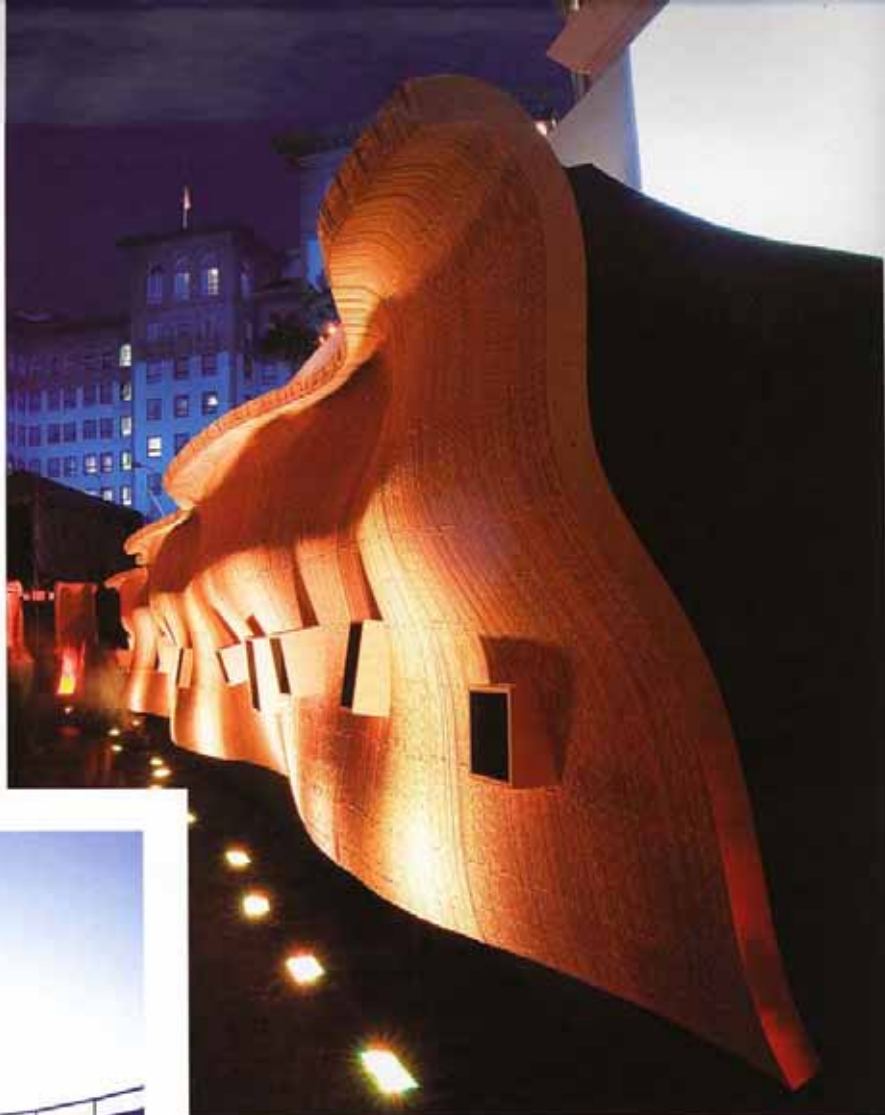
Owen Moss' experimentalist commercial buildings in Culver City are world-renowned, Hsin-Ming Fung, graduate programs director, revamped the old Linda Lea theater near Little Tokyo last year, transforming it into the white-on-white, ImaginAsian Center, and the still-enterprising Kappe himself made headlines again a short while back when a solar-powered residence he designed in Santa Monica for prefab developer LivingHomes was assembled in just eight hours. Plus, in perhaps one of the most ironic twists in SCI-Arc's anti-establishment history, alum Hitoshi Abe recently became the chair of UCLA's establishment-as-it-gets Department of Architecture and Urban Design.

"When I started there, the programs were not accredited, so it was a huge leap of faith to invest your time and money and a portion of your life into it," says Nick Seierup, who graduated in 1979 and now serves as a design director for Perkins + Will, where he creates bold plans for a local sector that has, traditionally, paid relatively little mind to architecture: government. In the '60s, bunker-like civic structures cut themselves off from the outside world, but Seierup is part of a new generation of designers reversing that antiquated approach. "Now these buildings are all about opening themselves up and making transparent the relationship between what goes on inside the building and the population outside." Seierup's latest design—the flash- CONTINUED...





**SPACES, CRAFTED** *Clockwise from top right:* Ball-Nogues' installation on Rodeo Drive for a Tiffany & Co.'s event celebrating Frank Gehry's jewelry collection; Nick Seierup's House Ear Institute west of downtown; Eric Owen Moss' Beehive office building in Culver City; Jennifer Siegal's SwellHouse in Venice.



...CONTINUED forward Harbor Police Station that's wedged between a freeway and a shipping yard in a rough-and-tumble tract of San Pedro—boasts a double-height lobby covered with skylights and an open floor plan, augmented by public plazas and gardens, that's meant to encourage communication among the officers and the community.

Once SCI-Arc got its accreditation, aspiring architects, who found themselves bored by traditional classroom lessons taught by tenured academics in brick buildings, jumped onboard. Over the next several decades, the school attracted young talent who wanted to learn more than just how to draw buildings and theorize about them. Annie Chu and Rick Gooding turned their attention to interiors and have since decked out the L.A. Philharmonic Association's offices at the Walt Disney Concert Hall with cork flooring and a seafoam-green, plastic-laminated receptionist desk, while alum Jason Payne designed a sexually suggestive lobby for the raunchy TV production outfit No Good TV, featuring a black-rubber-studded bar lined with red fur. SCI-Arc couldn't be prouder.

"The Ivy Leagues didn't even compare in terms of buzz," says Benjamin Ball, who left the University of Colorado for SCI-Arc in the late '80s. "The type of people who go here, the type of people who teach here, and the mission of the school creates an environment where experimentation and unorthodox methods of design are nurtured, and that carries over into the real world." In 2004, Ball partnered with former classmate Gaston Nogues to open their design and fabrication practice, Ball-Nogues, which is best known for its offbeat installations, including Maximilian's Schell, a vortex-shaped outdoor canopy, displayed at Silver Lake's Materials & Applications gallery in 2005, that's composed of 504 pieces of tinted Mylar meant to mimic the transparency and reflectivity of stained glass. The physical presence of Ball-Nogues' work may often be fleeting—they've created ephemeral pieces for MOCA's *Skin+Bones* opening party, and even a set for a Janet Jackson video—but its perpetually conceptual nature allows for plenty of envelope-pushing, which is what brought them to SCI-Arc in the first place. "You get to be more experimental," says Nogues. "We test a lot of ideas on temporary structures, and the knowledge we gain can then be applied to permanent structures."

Jonathan Emmett, who graduated with a master's in 1997 and is now the lead designer on a hush-hush downtown highrise adjacent to L.A. Live, began interning at a commercial firm while still in school—which, he says, some peers equated to joining the establishment. In his view, though, being part of a giant practice lets him pursue SCI-Arc's distinctive design philosophy. "It's not just architecture. It's urban planning, master planning, interiors, environmental planning. It's a diverse range," he says of global firm RTKL, where he now works. "It's

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...THE RADAR DESIGN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 90 something I felt was a benefit at SCI-Arc as well, promoting that idea of total design."

As SCI-Arc alumni continue to redefine everything from shelter to schools, the chicken-or-the-egg question beckons: Does SCI-Arc teach its aspiring architects to create these exploratory and progressive designs, or does it attract students with those kinds of ideas in the first place? "I think it's a combination," says mid-'80s alumn Robin Donaldson, cofounder of Shubin + Donaldson Architects. "Though it does attract people who are less concerned with conventionality and established hierarchies—more adventurous types." In recent years, Donaldson's firm has gained attention for projects like ad agency Ogilvy's futuristic L.A. offices, a space highlighted with plate-glass walls and a dramatic, 44-foot, perforated-metal tunnel entry, but has also worked on less fanfare-generating projects, including a Newport Boats dealership in Corona.

It's difficult to have a discussion about architecture today—especially around the SCI-Arc crowd—without touching on that Zeitgeist-iest of buzzwords: green. Not surprisingly, many designers who came out of the school (including the LEED-loving Hertz) became interested in the movement long before it gathered its current momentum. Jennifer Siegal, who received her master's from SCI-Arc, opened her practice dedicated to designing modern prefab homes a decade ago—an endeavor that she admits could have very well failed. "I was just naïve," she says. "It's not like I had a business plan. There were no business classes at SCI-Arc."

Luckily, she figured out the world of bookkeeping and benefits and has since garnered a slew of awards and even more press coverage as she's brought prefabricated design out of the dark ages by making it look, well, not so prefabricated. There's Siegal's two-story, contemporary house with exposed steel beams, carved-out balconies and expansive sliding glass doors looking right at home in the architectural hotbed of Venice, as well as her expansion of a Valley Village middle school, to which she added three leafy-green buildings assembled from prefabricated steel-frame modules, chock-full of bamboo floors and surrounded by a frog pond and veggie garden. Her prefab designs are made with sustainable materials—from recycled steel and radiant heating systems to solar power elements, depending on the project—and are created in factories, producing a third less waste than site-built projects, thanks to the opportunity to reuse and share materials. "When I started this work, it wasn't popular, and there were a lot of people who would question if this was even architecture," says Siegal, who, in true SCI-Arc spirit, expanded her own Venice home five years ago by fusing a \$1,500 moving-truck trailer to the back of it.

If UCLA's Abe—originally immersed in Japan's more formalized traditions—had been concerned about what was popular, or at least proper, in the architectural world, he'd never have ended up halfway around the world at SCI-Arc. In his new leadership position, Abe (who designed Sendai, Japan's 50,000-seat Miyagi Stadium, in a surreal crescent shape) hopes to promote an increasingly crosscultural exchange, and, perhaps most notably, he remains committed to running his Japan-based architecture firm, making him an academic leader simultaneously still immersed in his own practice, à la Kappe and now Moss. It's challenging, however, for him to compare the school he attended to the one he runs. "They're just so different," he says. "I can say if I wasn't at SCI-Arc, I wouldn't have gained the independent mentality to get me here."

Fittingly, current SCI-Arc director Eric Owen Moss, who started teaching at the school in the early '70s, says the school community could have its greatest impact beyond L.A.'s borders as an ever-larger audience continues to take note of its ideas. "[The institution] began with people who absolutely belonged to Los Angeles. The new group of people at SCI-Arc are from everywhere, and the discussion is now, clearly, an international one." ■