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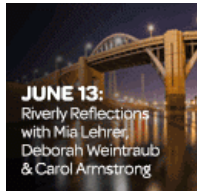
Gensler takes the workplace outside in its renovation of a 1960s office park.



THE FIRM HAS CREATED A NEW ENTRY AND CONGREGATING AREA ON THE SITE OF A ONCE DARK AND ENCLOSED ATRIUM. FOTOWORKS

Playa Vista is finally taking off as a new community midway between Marina del Rey and LAX, with a flurry of offices and apartments on land formerly owned by the Howard Hughes Corporation. The hangars where the Spruce Goose was constructed have become the centerpiece of the Hercules Campus, and the area is being dubbed Silicon Beach for its concentration of techies. On the north side of Jefferson Boulevard across from the Runway retail center, a generic low-rise office park opened in the 1960s has been given a new identity as Playa Jefferson. Formerly occupied by Citibank, it was hidden from view behind dense plantings. Now, the campus has been opened up and given a colorful new look.

Li Wen led the Gensler team that transformed this eight-acre site for the owner, Vantage Property Investors. As president and co-founder Stuart Gulland explains, "few people knew it was there, so the priority was to connect it to the street and everything that's happening all around. The buildings function well for the media, advertising, and technology companies that are moving to this area." The plantings have gone and the broad wedge of parking in front puts all the buildings on show. Each of the four concrete blocks is identified with a brightly colored, super-scaled letter, A through D, which glow like beacons at night. Vibrant entry pavilions with outdoor stairs have been added to A and C. The facade of B has been re-skinned with wood boards. Arup was already installed in block D, but the other three are being leased to a diversified collection of creative companies and start-ups.

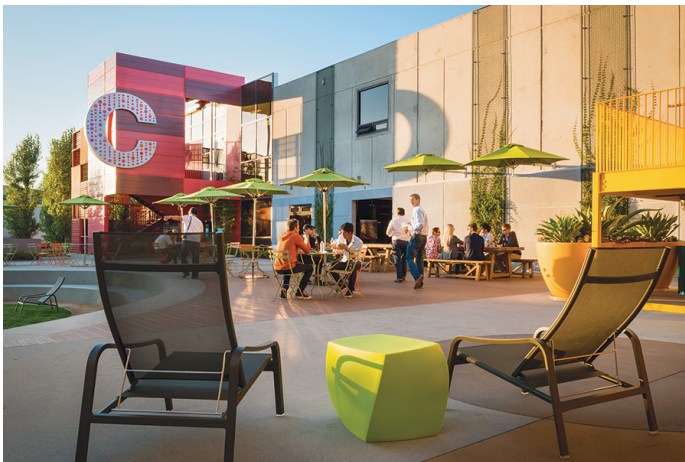


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The big move was to open up the dark glass atrium that obscured the 90,000 square feet of two and three-story offices and gave the complex a hermetic quality. Gensler removed the glazing but retained the lofty space-frame roof to shade the open-sided concourse. This outdoor living room is furnished with rattan sofas and Gehry cubes in lollipop colors. Giant planters and suspended light fittings act as scaling devices. Foosball tables are set up on a circle of Astroturf and it should prove a popular party space when the buildings are fully leased, spilling onto a landscaped rear yard. Already food trucks pull up at lunchtime and at after-hours events.



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With these modest changes, Gensler has transformed fully enclosed offices into an indoor-outdoor complex that blurs the division between work and play. “We wanted to give it a sense of place and of fun,” said Wen, who was inspired by corporate hospitality pavilions, progressive office interiors, and the Malibu Country Mart. It is a return to an approach that was first explored in LA. Long before SOMA became a hub of inventive design, local advertising and entertainment firms were creating offices that would make bright 20-somethings feel at home. Jay Chiat commissioned an interior village from Frank Gehry when he relocated his agency from downtown to Santa Monica, and Franklin Israel remodeled warehouses for Propaganda Films, Tisch/Avnet Productions, and Virgin Records. More recently, Clive Wilkinson has created a string of exuberant interiors for TBWA/Chiat/Day, FIDM, and Foote Cone & Belding in southern California, plus major clients around the world.

Gensler has borrowed from the LA tradition of eye-catching designs and eccentric street architecture to make Playa Jefferson stand out from its bland neighbors. And they have taken the idea of an interior village outside, infusing the blank spaces around the buildings with a slightly surreal exuberance that is usually reserved for its occupants. Working on a tight budget, the firm has created an urban experience everyone can share—play-it-safe developers should take note.

Michael Webb

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