

THE MAGAZINE OF ORANGE COUNTY

Orange Coast



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DINING

Reviews of Red O and
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ERASING PEREIRA



William Pereira's meticulous master plan for UC Irvine has not just been ignored—but undone. Our critic, architect *ALAN HESS*, calls for a return to Pereira's futuristic vision and philosophy.

1960S-EBA PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ANSEL ADAMS

WW

What do California's cultural institutions have against William Pereira?

The Chicago native, seeing Orange County transitioning awkwardly from orchards to housing tracts after World War II, tackled every design and building opportunity that came his way. Two of the architect's biggest plums: the master-planned city of Irvine and UC Irvine. When President Lyndon Johnson dedicated the university site in 1964, this new campus boldly pointed the way to the future. Pereira's work made him Orange County's Pierre L'Enfant, the planner of Washington, D.C.; Christopher Wren, the rebuildier of London after the Great Fire of 1666; and Daniel "Make No Little Plans" Burnham of Chicago, all rolled into one.

Pereira was not just celebrating the Golden State's newfound power and wealth. He already was predicting the coming need to increase urban density and reduce dependence on the car, to protect the rolling coastal landscape from muddled sprawl, and to conserve energy through passive design—all decades ahead of other thinkers.

Yet today, UC Irvine and LACMA are erasing Pereira's—and California's—midcentury legacy. The art museum is blindly plotting to bulldoze its original buildings for a large tar-colored concrete blob. And as its 50th anniversary celebrations get under way, the university is whittling away at the vision Pereira designed for it.

Like the works of other artists who were ahead of their time, Pereira's have been misunderstood, his iconic concepts unappreciated. Today, he finally is being rediscovered as a major Southern California architect. The first retrospective of his career was mounted last year at the Nevada Museum of Art. And while some of his buildings have been demolished, LAX's Theme Building

was meticulously restored, with widespread popular support, in 2010. But will enough of his buildings remain to be enjoyed?

PEREIRA (1909-1985) WAS A BIG-picture guy. He could build for industry and aerospace (campuses for Chrysler in Anaheim, and Rockwell Autonetics—now a federal building—in Laguna Niguel), jet ports (Eddie Martin Terminal), and modernist tourist venues (the

The modernist tunnel frames the textured facade of Krieger Hall.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSSEL ADAMS. UC/IRVINE ARCHITECTURAL MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEY/IRVINE RUSSEL ADAMS P&T COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

as carefully as pieces on a chessboard—toward Aldrich Park. From here, we gaze into the heart of the campus. The mature urban forest spreading before us is astonishing, considering that this was all a treeless cattle pasture in 1965.

We move easily down the wide steps from one orderly, formal terrace to the next, but we're about to cross a boundary into open meadows and groves of trees. The smooth, straight trunks of the eucalyptus seem to be a model for the tall slender fins we saw on the Langson Library. Actually, landscape architects Robert Herrick Carter, C. Jacques Hahn, J. Charles Hoffman, and Frederick Lang worked closely with Pereira to make the park's irregular appearance look natural.

It's also important to notice what's not here: an imposing

administration building. Pereira left the center of the campus open—just like another famous American architect did at the University of Virginia. Just as Thomas Jefferson wanted his “academical village” to live in balance with nature, so did Pereira.

Let's walk back through the gateway plaza and turn left along the Outer Ring Road that circles Aldrich Park. It links each of the major academic buildings. On school days, the broad road is crowded with pedestrians. Cars and trucks have always been prohibited; in the '60s, dividing cars and people was a daring urban planning idea. Just after we pass the **STUDENT CENTER** on the right, we cross an earthen bridge. Walk to one side and notice the elegantly arched tunnel carved through the berm below. This is part of a separate

POST-PEREIRA 'IMPROVEMENTS'

Three examples of how UC Irvine strayed



STEINHAUS HALL

Designed by Pereira, it suffered the saddest abuse since his death. Remodeled by MVE Institutional in 2010, the building's deteriorating textured skin was stripped off and replaced with a flat glass-and-stone surface. Skinny metal trellises—more decorative than functional—were tacked on. The university decided that replacing the original sunscreens wasn't worth the cost. Oddly, the architects kept the exuberant Space Age pylons on the penthouse. Grafting conventional business park architecture onto such vivid forms makes the whole structure look cheap.



SOCIAL SCIENCES PLAZA

The worst example of derailing the original campus concept is the hulking 1996 plaza complex by architect Anderson DeBartolo Pan. The buildings slam gracelessly into the ground. Square windows are simply punched through the bland beige brick walls. The strange arches on the roof parapet are both weak as forms against the sky, and without purpose. Lawrence Halprin, the dean of the nation's landscape architects, designed Schonfeld fountain for the courtyard formed by the buildings' box-canyon walls, but his trademark naturalistic geometries are barely recognizable, squandered in the middle of a gray concrete wasteland.



HUMANITIES INSTRUCTIONAL BUILDING

The pseudo-Baroque design of A.C. Martin & Associates' 1997 building stands in stark contrast to Pereira's futurism. Its three-story columns fashion a grand entry facing onto a plaza on the ring road, but then the design pulls the rug out from underneath this grandeur: Instead of a single welcoming entry, it presents a maze of stairways and doors to the visitor, each one looking like the rear door to the building.

circulation system that allows service vehicles to reach buildings inside the ring without crossing the pedestrian road.

Arriving at ④ **KRIEGER HALL** on the left, we cross one of the radial pathways that extend outward from Aldrich Park like the spokes of a wheel. This is how Pereira planned for rational growth; looking to the right we can see the pedestrian bridge that connects the cluster of ⑤ **HUMANITIES BUILDINGS** and the ⑥ **CLAIRE TREVOR SCHOOL OF THE ARTS**, which Pereira designed in the '70s.

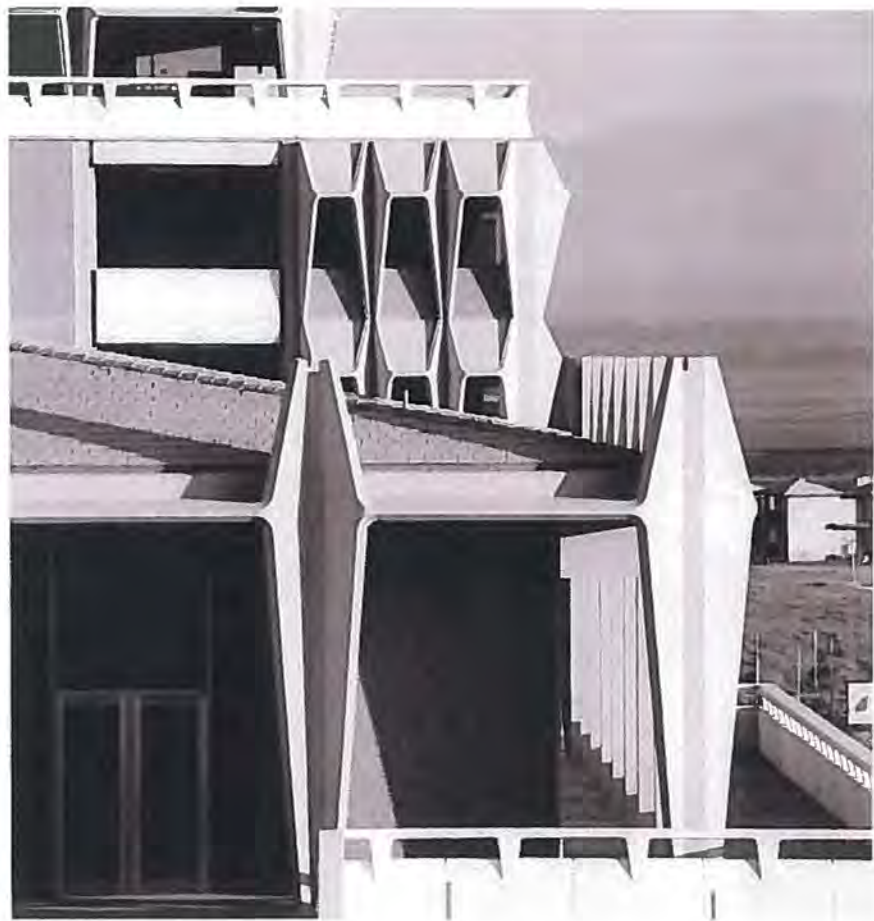
But right now, let's explore ⑦ **HUMANITIES** and Krieger halls, and the steps and terraces between them that lead back down to Aldrich Park. This is another example of how Pereira balanced nature and architecture.

To appreciate this radical design, remember that it was common practice in Southern California in the 1950s and '60s for developers to bulldoze hills into large, flat building pads—obliterating the natural topography. Pereira had a different idea: He kept the natural contours of the land intact and let the buildings “float” above the rolling terrain. But just how do you make large concrete-and-steel structures appear weightless?

First, the buildings never seem to touch the earth. Pereira accomplishes this illusion beautifully by setting the ground floors of each building back slightly, and circling them with wide terrace balconies, so the ground floor is hidden in shadows. You don't really see how the buildings connect with the earth. Meanwhile, the main parts rise into the sunshine above the floating terraces. The buildings look as if they're dancing with the undulating landscape.

For the university's first dozen years, Pereira's plan inspired other notable architects to build in the same spirit. For example, from Krieger Hall you can just glimpse off in the distance the six-story ⑧ **ENGINEERING TOWER** by Kistner, Wright and Wright. Like an Olympic weightlifter, it stands on sinewy, muscular legs, pressing its upper floors high into the air.

Even the smaller-scale student housing units reflect Pereira's forward-looking vision. Across the bridge and on the other side of the Arts Plaza, ⑨ **MESA COURT HOUSING** by Pereira and Grilias Savage Alves—the architects of Dana Point Harbor—has cantilevered concrete in its commons building. Beyond the Engineering Tower, the dormitories in ⑩ **MIDDLE EARTH** rely on cleanly cut geometrical forms, allowing clerestories for balanced light within, but avoiding the boredom of Bauhaus boxes.



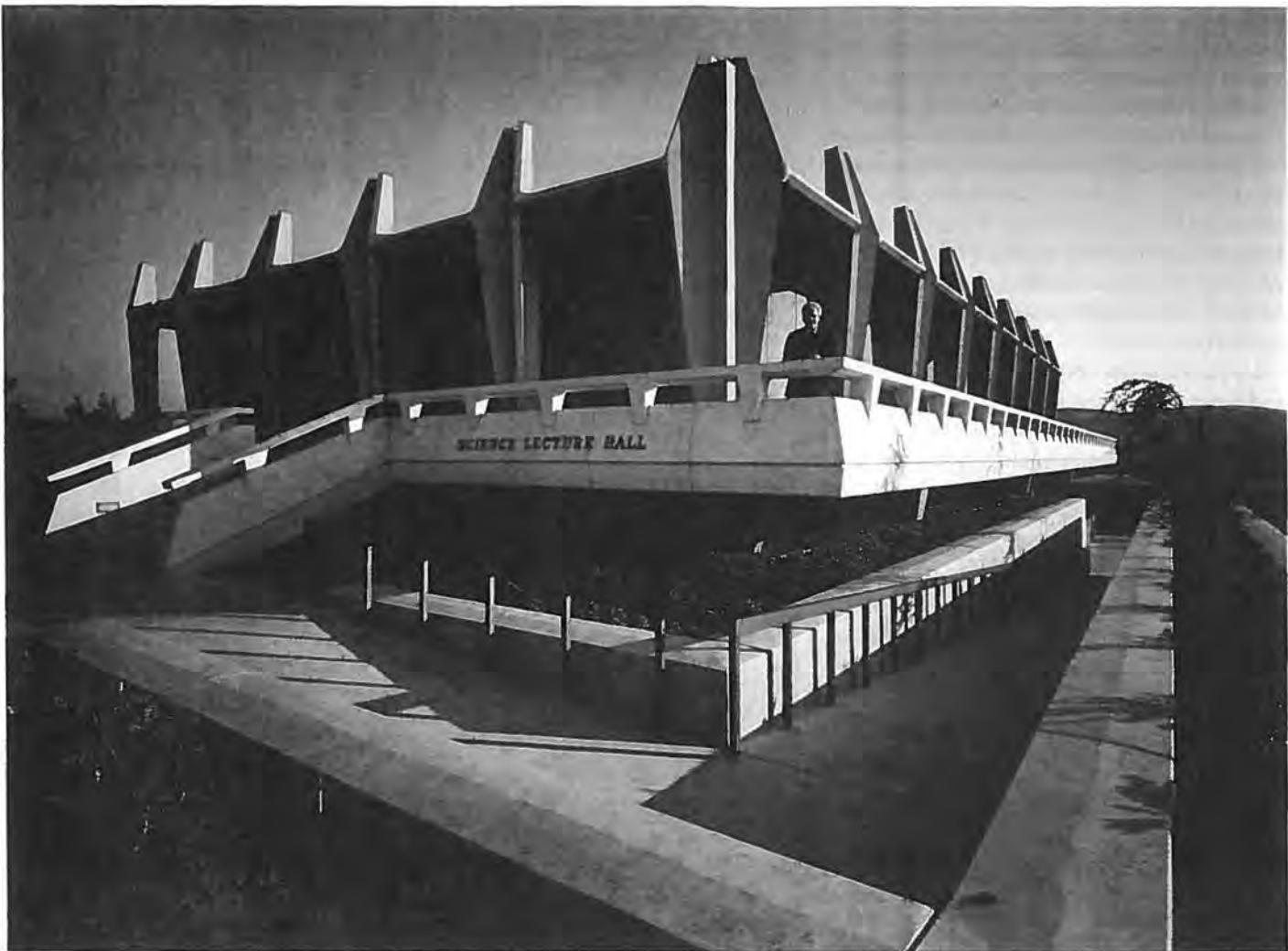
The concrete sunscreens of Steinhaus Hall, rear, echo the columns of Schneiderman Hall, foreground.

Futuristic buildings, living lightly and respectfully on the earth, blending with nature: This is the core of Pereira's vision for UC Irvine, and for the future of the American city. But by the '80s, the university turned its back on this vision. Why? We'll pause our tour for a little background.

FASHIONS CHANGED. A NEW STYLE called postmodernism arrived, and it had to cut Pereira's brand of modernism down to size to succeed.

“In the view of many observers,” said *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Leon Whiteson in 1988, UC Irvine buildings were “overscaled and boringly detailed. Campus wags dubbed the modernist concrete boxes that enclose UCI's inner ring mall ‘a bunch of giant cheese graters.’”

Events such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill took the shine off the spirit of optimism inspired by technological advances. Opinions shifted quickly. By 1972, the same buildings that had been regarded as a grand, positive vision seven years earlier were deemed a fitting backdrop for the dystopian parable of the fourth Planet of the Apes movie, “Conquest of the Planet of the Apes,”



which was filmed at UC Irvine.

David J. Neuman succeeded Pereria as campus architect in 1977, and announced that “UCI is growing up. ... Its character is changing from a suburban college to an urbane campus with an ambition to be academically and architecturally first-rate.”

Changing course, Neuman brought in international architects, postmodern stars, each of whom went in a different direction, all headed away from Pereira’s holistic plan. Charles Moore, architect of the 1987 University Extension buildings, wrote that the campus “suffers now from the optimism of the 1960s. ... But as we all know, the ‘60s dream faltered.” Moore’s buildings, among the best of this period, evoked an imaginary Italian hill town’s church and city hall, not Pereira’s exuberant futurism. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s ❶ GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS is a handsome import from an Ivy League university, while Robert A. M. Stern’s ❷ STUDIO 4 is a full-blown knock-off from

The Science Lecture Hall (now Schneiderman Hall) is circled by sculpted balconies.

ancient Rome, complete with acroteria, those pointy ears at the corners of the roof.

LET’S CONTINUE UP THE HILL from Krieger Hall, where we’ll see two of these postmodern monuments, ❸ AYALA SCIENCE LIBRARY by James Stirling on the right, and ❹ MCGAUGH HALL by Arthur Erickson, on the left of the ring road.

Though Stirling was one of the most original designers of his era, his stout British forms on Ayala Library did not translate well into California stucco. Only Erickson’s McGaugh Hall kept the faith of Pereira’s futurist technological optimism, but today its plastic green panels are fading.

Across from McGaugh Hall we see an even sadder sight: Pereira’s ❺ STEINHAUS HALL stripped of its signature facade. When its original 40-year-old sunscreens were replaced during an earthquake retrofit in 2008, there was little support within the administration to restore them;

the decades when Pereira's ideas were dismissed took their toll. The screens were replaced with a plain flat skin of stone and glass, a bland shadow of the original (see sidebar.)

This remodeling was partly due to campus officials incorrectly tagging Pereira's buildings with the least appealing term ever coined for an architectural style: brutalism.

Brutalism isn't quite as bad as it sounds. Its proponents used raw, unadorned concrete directly, just as earlier modernists had fashioned with raw steel. But UC Irvine's original buildings were never brutalist. Krieger Hall's smooth surfaces were sculpted and embedded with color, not roughly hewn. Where brutalist buildings settle solidly on the ground, the Gateway Study Center is lifted up on tapered, springing columns, accenting how it floats above the earth.

But, as I said, fashions keep changing. In the '80s, postmodernism was seen as the antidote to Pereira's modernism; today the university thinks postmodernism needs an antidote. It already has demolished a 1986 building by Frank Gehry, once Pereira's student at the USC School of Architecture. The intentionally raw forms of the now-destroyed Information and Computer Science/Engineering Research Facility had been an early milestone in Gehry's development as a world-class architect.

Since the early '90s, current campus architect Rebekah Gladson has led the campus in yet another direction. In the place of Gehry's building stands 16 DONALD BREN HALL by Esherick, Homsey, Dodge & Davis, from 2006. To see it, walk up the outer ring road from poor Steinhilber Hall, past 17 ROWLAND HALL (an original building by architect Kenneth Wing, following Pereira's lead, but now partly altered) on the left. Donald Bren Hall on the right is one of the more distinguished of the newer buildings, but unlike any of Pereira's designs. It sits heavily on the ground. Clustered closely together with 18 ENGINEERING HALL and the 19 CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, it's more like a traditional mid-rise from a crowded, dense city center than part of an open, futuristic campus in a forest. The dance with the landscape has ended. And so has our tour.

IT'S TRUE THAT UNIVERSITIES inevitably change over 50 years. New needs, new technology, even new academic fields reshape the way old buildings are used and new ones are designed. But it's just as true that if you have a

UC Irvine started in 1965 as a showcase of California's bright future, but since the '80s it has abdicated that future in favor of something much more mundane, like an ordinary business park.

good, strong design concept, you should stick with it even as you adapt to new times.

Pereira's work is not flawless. He pushed boundaries. His vision of corporate and university collaboration became controversial in the radical '60s. But today the biases that put Pereira's reputation into a tailspin in the '80s are themselves being questioned. As a grassroots fight brews over the demolition of Pereira's LACMA buildings, we can reassess his place in architectural history more easily. I, and others, think he is a major visionary.

Pereira dared to take new planning ideas further than most mainstream architects. At a time when Rachel Carson's 1962 expose, "Silent Spring," was beginning to awaken the nation to an awareness of ecology, Pereira advocated for preserving the natural environment by reducing dependence on the auto, defending natural wetlands and hillsides, using passive energy design to shape his buildings, and promoting a rational high-density, pedestrian-oriented town center (which was never built) at the heart of his master-planned university city.

So while cycles of fashions are sure to keep changing, they also are sure to circle back to recognize good ideas. Today Pereira's aesthetics are in step with the latest trends in architecture: The honeycomb geometry of Krieger Hall's sunscreens is strikingly similar to the screen facades of the Broad Museum now under construction on Los Angeles' Bunker Hill by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, one of today's most celebrated architects.

We expect a university to be efficient and up-to-date. But we also expect a university to preserve our heritage, even when it's not easy. UC Irvine started in 1965 as a showcase of California's bright future, but since the '80s it has abdicated that future in favor of something much more mundane, like an ordinary business park. 00



See how Pereira's Space Age design was an "Ape" movie backdrop, and more at orangeoast.com/wehexclusives.