

Suisman Has Pulse of Public Spaces

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Photos courtesy of Suisman Urban Design

Developers spawn projects, architects draw plans, governments provide infrastructure, but urban designers create successful public space: the elements that humanize the experience, that take into account the public's need to navigate, to locate a specific place, to drink water, to rest, or simply to watch the world go by.

Palisadian Doug Suisman's urban design work focuses on these interstices, the all-important aesthetic, look, logic and ease of the plan.

For the Third Street Promenade, Suisman was called upon to upgrade and reconceive the street infrastructure and furnishings, which over the last quarter century had become dated and frayed. He also addressed an ongoing challenge for shoppers: finding what they were looking for at the outdoor mall that comprises three identical blocks with no distinguishable landmarks. The solution was to add tall pylons that signal the name of cross streets and are visible from a distance. New detailed maps were enclosed in larger, more visible cases. The teal color scheme of the mall, popular when it opened in 1989, was toned down, furnishings were painted in a soft gray and new lighting was added to highlight the trees.

Suisman, 60, is an internationally recognized award-winning urban designer and architect who believes that he and his fellow professionals must take in the wider context when considering a project.

"From the largest-scale planning projects to the smallest renovation, the architect has the unique capacity to satisfy all technical and economic claims and still reinforce the free and open nature of public space," he



Palisadian Doug Suisman founded Suisman Urban Design in 1990.



Doug Suisman worked with Downtown Santa Monica to bring the Third Street Promenade up-to-date, improve wayfinding and freshen up the hardscape.

eloquently wrote in his book on the evolution of major streets, *Los Angeles Boulevard: Eight X-Rays of the Body Politic*, reissued in 2014.

His firm has developed master plans for cities, transit districts, university campuses and even a scheme for an eventual Palestinian state envisioning an integrated interurban rail and infrastructure line linking the West Bank and Gaza.

Suisman's goal is always to enhance the comfort and movability in a public space, which then promotes a sense of ownership and belonging to a community.

It's often the small projects that are most satisfying, Suisman says. "The nature of this work must take into consideration starts and stops, phased-in completion, politics and budget."

He is proud of his collaboration on two projects in his own community, admitting his personal interest. Suisman and his wife Moye and children live in Santa Monica Canyon.

First, he collaborated on a project at Canyon Charter School when his children were enrolled, and now that his daughter Claire (and next year, son Teddy) is enrolled at Palisades High, he is assisting in a three-phase renovation of the campus.

At Canyon, Suisman conceived a new image for the facility that included a vibrant

paint scheme, graphics that highlight the coastal canyon setting, and historic photos that depict the history of the 121-year-old school, bringing its past and present together.

At PaliHi, where the challenges are going beyond cosmetic improvements, his involvement began at his first Booster Club meeting. President Dick Held was looking for somebody to help place the bronze

dolphin (PaliHi's mascot) at the school's entrance and suggest landscaping ideas. Suisman innocently raised his hand, averring that he knew a little bit about plants, and the job was his.

Following the same protocol he does with all projects, big and small, Suisman began by walking around the campus, tak-

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Suisman's goal at the elementary school was to bring a lively, colorful palette to the buildings and recognize the 121-year history of the school by displaying black and white photos from the early days.

Suisman

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ing in all perspectives, snapping photos.

“As I looked at the corner at Temescal and Bowdoin, I immediately saw that we had a major safety problem—a dangerous mix of fast traffic, crowds of students arriving and leaving, and the obstruction caused by an electronic billboard at the corner.”

He continued his research, reading the history of the campus, poring over historic photos provided by town historian Randy Young and studying blueprints. He documented all existing materials, brick, tile and the original color palette.

PaliHi is a mid-century modern complex of architectural importance. It was designed by Wilson Associates in 1961 and photographed by renowned architectural photographer Julius Shulman. Even *Time* magazine did a story when the school opened.

Suisman applied his principles for establishing a community at Pali by striving to make the campus more aesthetically pleasing and welcoming, and creating a home-away-from-home the students and faculty could claim as theirs.

Banners and large-scale graphics now illustrate the history of the canyon, and California native plants more appropriate to the climate have replaced quick-grow bush-

es. The school’s fingerprint blue, neither sophisticated nor historic mid-century, was toned down, while other surfaces were painted in soft brown that is more compatible with the landscape. Lisa Onodera Spence directed all the landscape design and plant selection, including the upcoming landscaping at the Temescal corner.

Awaiting final approvals and sufficient budget, the third and most dramatic phase of the project reimagines the entrance to the school. It emphasizes safety, uncluttered comings and goings and a welcoming oasis under the Chinese elms at the corner of Bowdoin and Temescal Canyon Road.

“The school was designed for students to be dropped off in a convertible Corvette in front of the school,” Suisman says. “When you had half of today’s student population, you could do that. But right now, every day, 1,000 kids are funneled into a 3-1/2-ft. bottleneck between a fire hydrant and the corner. Our plan incorporates a lovely wood bridge, that will become the way kids enter. This bridge, 15 to 20 ft. wide, will be the main axis right-of-way.”

A gateway garden will allow students to sit on a serpentine wall, which will offer a beautiful view of the mountains and a slice of the sea.

“We also wanted to emphasize transit,” Suisman says, “so we incorporated an enhanced bus stop and waiting area into the



Suisman’s master plan for the La Brea Tar Pits Museum included improving signage and wayfinding outside and transforming the 1970s interior into a bright, contemporary setting for the Ice Age bones housed within the buildings.

design for the kids who take the bus to school. Part of the idea is to dignify bus transit. Kids who take public transit are environmental heroes. They deserve a nice place to wait.”

Sustainability, walkability, honoring history: These are tenets that guide Suisman’s design.

A project of considerably larger scope and area that will keep Suisman busy for years involves five Hancock Park museums—a mas-

ter plan that will attempt to bring coherence to a campus that includes not only LACMA and the La Brea Tar Pits Museum, but also the Petersen Automobile Museum, the Craft and Folk Museum and the soon-to-be-built Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

For the last 18 months, Suisman has been working on implementing the new master plan for the La Brea Tar Pits Museum (formerly the Page Museum).

“After the Natural History completed the renovation of its Exposition Park facility, then-president Jane Pisano wanted to do one more thing,” Suisman says. Admitting that NHM had let their “colony” slide, Pisano hired Suisman to envision the Tar Pits over the long term.

Again, Suisman followed his scheme, “walking, walking and photographing the site. I studied the history of the site, looked at old maps, photos and documents of the Rancho La Brea.”

Working with graphic designer Kim Baer, Suisman updated the whole site, which hadn’t been touched since George Page opened the facility in 1977. “We renovated two of the viewing pavilions, Pit 91 and the Observation Pit, and repainted the museum and polished the floors.

“It looks like a new space,” Suisman says. “It looks fresh, like somebody cares. The museum is transformed.”

Transformation, like change, can be disorienting, Suisman says, “but total continuity can be stagnant, blinding and narrow. What do we hold on to and where do we welcome transformation? That is the constant set of questions.”



The design proposes a more generous walkway for the hundreds of students who arrive and leave campus at peak hours at the corner of Temescal Canyon Road and Bowdoin. The proposed Senior Garden is intended to be a community space with a serpentine wall providing seating that captures views to the ocean and mountains.

Nominees Sought for Citizen of the Year, Sparkplug Awards

The Pacific Palisades Community Council (PPCC) is accepting nominations for the 2015 Citizen of the Year and Golden Sparkplug Awards, which will be presented at the PPCC annual holiday party on December 10 at Gladstones.

Nominations should be submitted to info@pacpalicc.org or to P.O. Box 1131, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272. The deadline is midnight, October 31.

The Citizen of the Year Award honors long-term,

steady and continuing outstanding volunteer service as well as a recent extraordinary accomplishment by an individual that resulted in a substantial benefit to the Palisades community. The recipient must be an adult resident of the Palisades.

The Golden Sparkplug Award honors those citizens who ignite ideas and projects into community action that benefit Palisadians throughout the community.

The project must have been initiated, in progress or

completed during the current or prior calendar year. Adults and youth are eligible, and must either own real property in, reside in or operate a business in Pacific Palisades at the time services were rendered.

In the case of both awards, the accomplishment must have been voluntary and not related to the nominee’s business or occupation. Visit: pacpalicc.org and click on tab for Citizen of the Year and Sparkplug Awards, or e-mail PPCC President Chris Spitz at info@pacpalicc.org.