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## L.A.'S ALLIANCE OF ART AND DESIGN

*Ann Martens*

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### LOS ANGELES

One could hardly predict that the L.A. Pacific Design Center, even with its satellite Museum of Contemporary Art space, would become the city's latest cultural hotspot. Certainly not for a dozen or so emerging and established galleries and a new contemporary art fair that have taken up residence there.



The Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles. External view.

Up until recently, the PDC's tinted glass exterior seemed to function like a pair of designer sunglasses, reflecting the curious gazes of passersbys. Despite the main building's resemblance to a high-end shopping mall, few Angelinos set foot in it, because its prime function is to serve the luxury interior design trade. The complex of two (soon to be three) buildings designed by architect Cesar Pelli are operated by the Cohen Design Centers, a corporation that oversees three other U.S. properties. The main building contains at least 130 showrooms for wholesalers, with glass windows facing interior walkways, cavernous main spaces and labyrinths of additional rooms.

A revised, art-friendly corporate mission statement and the global recession have transformed the PDC within the last year. The plan to host art events is not entirely surprising, because founder and CEO Charles S. Cohen is a MOCA trustee. As he has said: "design and art are natural partners." But the decision has also been fortuitous, because as the showroom vacancy rate increased due to the housing market fallout, arts organizations were invited to utilize space. By late September, a contemporary art program directed by independent curator Helen Varola was launched under the moniker Design Loves Art. A temporary arrangement was made with arts groups in which free rent is exchanged for 10 percent of art sales. Galleries recently facing permanent closure have been revitalized, and established galleries have taken the opportunity to experiment with satellite spaces. Artists, independent curators and non-profit collectives moved in to exhibit their various projects. Aside from two wellattended openings in which the plush-carpeted upper floors got some wear, the building remains quiet. But the physical juxtaposition between art and commerce appears intriguingly surreal. In keeping with the spirit and makeup of those art groups that have temporarily taken up residence, the new annual arts fair will offer a blend of up to fifty blue chip and emerging galleries, mostly from Los Angeles. This month, the current art tenants move upstairs while Art Los Angeles Contemporary: The International Contemporary Art Fair takes place January 28 to 31. Organized by the newly formed Fair Grounds Associates, director Tim Fleming hopes the fair will last. Like the Design Loves Art Program, it's experimental, and as he says, "really just begun." "Audacity" is a word that might best describe the action of any art gallery or fair that dares to emerge during an economic downturn. But like anything being birthed, it's also something that just happens, and quite often thrives, in spite of itself.

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