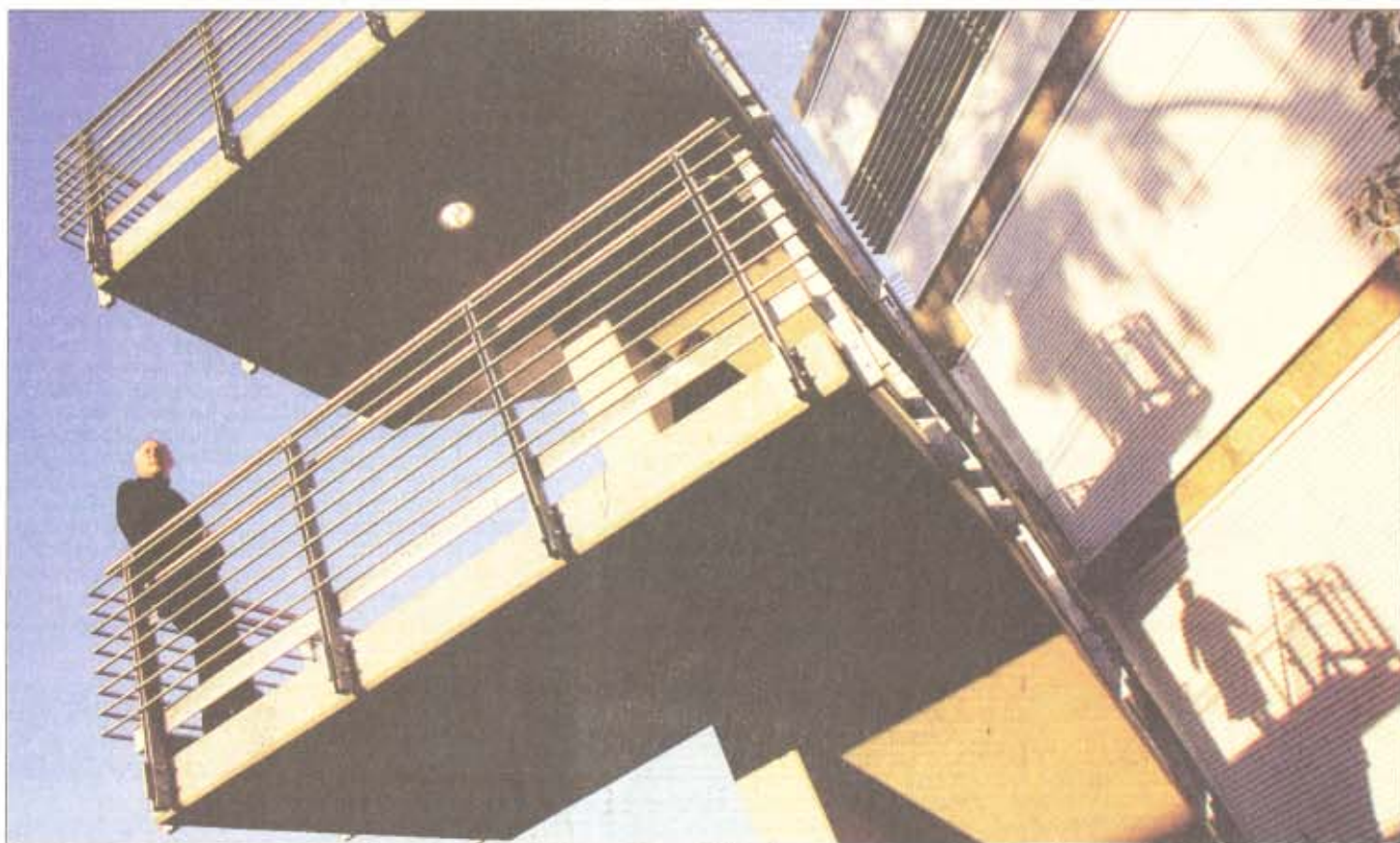


ACCENT

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ARCHITECT STEVEN EHRlich stands on the staircase to Orange Coast College's new art center • Photo: Michael Goulding / The Register

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Orange Coast College has a bold
new building, designed by
architect Steven Ehrlich.

BY VALERIE TAKAHAMA
The Orange County Register

On nice days, Ted Baker liked to send his art students at Orange Coast College outside with their drawing pads for a lesson in perspective. He'd have them sit on the grass and tell them to sketch the flat-roofed brick buildings designed by the great mid-century modernist architect Richard Neutra.

A painter himself, Baker knew the walls held a secret. If students looked closely enough, they'd see that some of them slanted ever so slightly outward. Probably it was intended to reduce the reflection of the sun on the windows. But the tilt was so subtle that it usually wasn't apparent to the untrained eye.

"Drawing is all about hand-eye coordination," says Baker, who retired in 1999 as dean of the fine arts division. "You'd be drawing and suddenly you'd think, what's going on there? It was a moment of discovery for the students."

These days, art students and faculty at the community college in Costa Mesa are ex-

periencing a moment of discovery of a different sort with their new \$15 million Arts Center.

More than a dozen years in the planning, the three-story, 60,000-square-foot structure was not only designed to house classrooms and studios for disciplines ranging from ceramics to computer art, but "to amplify the importance of the arts to the whole campus," according to its architect, Steven Ehrlich.

And with its sheer size, its bold, glass-fronted entrance and dramatic flying stairways, the building is attracting both praise and criticism precisely because it succeeds so brilliantly at standing out.

"I think it's totally gorgeous. At night, with all the lights on, it's just spectacular," says Sylvia Impert, current fine arts dean. "The other thing that's amazing is that you have all these walkways and an expanse of lawn, and it's a focal point of the campus. It's very impressive."

But Jordan Schmidt, an art student from Huntington Beach, is not so impressed.

"It doesn't really go with the rest of the school; it's a big contrast," says Schmidt, 20, who expresses an opinion common among faculty and students.

"It's like a lot of corporate buildings. To me, it looks like a big air-conditioning unit."

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To understand the strength of the reactions, it's helpful to trace the building's history.

As Baker recalls, faculty and administration began discussing plans for a new art center in the mid '80s after a period of booming enrollment in arts classes. At that time, classes were taught in a cluster of simple, low-slung buildings sheltered by mature eucalyptus trees, which gave the area "a nice bucolic atmosphere," as Baker puts it.

The buildings were part of the original campus designed by Neutra and architect Robert Alexander in the late '40s and early '50s, but some had



THE ART CENTER employs Ehrlich's bold design that's somewhat of a departure for the rest of the campus. Richard Neutra designed some of the older buildings • Photo: Adrian Velicescu

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been added on to. They were also run down and expensive to maintain - especially after the company that manufactured their louvered windows went out of business and replacements had to be fashioned by hand.

Baker had favored saving the Neutra buildings.

"I thought they're really a keep-sake, but that just wasn't possible considering the finances of the state," he says. "I was told it was not economically prudent."

So the plan was to demolish the complex of brick structures, and consolidate the disciplines into a single large building to save land.

When it came time to launch a search for an architect, the college shot for the moon. Among the candidates were such famous names as Richard Meier, who has gone on to garner worldwide acclaim for the Getty Center; Michael Graves, now noted for spreading the doctrine of good design through his work for Target; and Renzo Piano, who won the Pritzker Prize in 1998, widely regarded as architecture's highest honor.

But it was the dark horse Ehrlich who won the commission in June 1990.

"Each of them was impressive and gave us a big dog-and-pony show," says Baker, who served on the search committee. "We knew they were impressive already, but Steven Ehrlich was the only person who listened to us."

Wayne Tennant, an art professor who served alongside Baker on the committee, recalls: "He said, 'This is a building for you. I want to make sure it serves your needs.'"

In Ehrlich, committee members also saw an architect whose aesthetic was sympathetic to Neutra's. He has done work on two Neutra homes, a renovation and addition to a 1938 beach house conceived as a high-tech homage to Neutra, and a free-standing studio/guesthouse noted for its spare design and its use of 14-foot-high, steel-sash factory windows that flood the place with sunlight.

The Los Angeles architect has won awards for his designs for the Sony Music Entertainment headquarters in Santa Monica, with its nod to the city's heritage of "streamline moderne" architecture, and a five-building campus in Burbank for DreamWorks Animation Studios.

But back then, at age 44, much of that work was still ahead of him. At the time, he said he had won the job because "I'm at the stage in my career where I'll pour my guts out over this project."

Says Tennant: "His work is kind of

avant-garde, and we didn't want anything ordinary. It's an arts building after all."

But they would have to wait to see his finished work. And wait.

Funding from the state was approved in the early '90s, and the art center was placed on a list of proposed projects. Just as it reached the top of the list a few years later, the recession hit California. It wasn't until August 2000 that ground breaking was held.

Late one afternoon recently, an amiable and upbeat Ehrlich visited his eye-catching art center.

Just that day, as potter's wheels and other art equipment was being moved into the new building, the college had announced a \$1 million gift from the family of Frank M. Doyle, an Orange County developer of homes and shopping centers who built the first condos in Southern California. The money will go toward a new arts pavilion - a 8,500-square-foot structure with an art gallery, a children's gallery and a cafe - that Ehrlich will design adjacent to the Art Center.

The air is chilly, and Ehrlich is dressed in a black sport coat, black turtleneck and dark slacks - a visual contrast to the building's sparkling window-clad entrance, and its light concrete and pearl-colored metal surfaces.

"The campus doesn't only have red brick, and I felt that the building

had to be fresh and bright, and celebrate its contemporary edge," he says. "It's opening in the first part of the millennium, and I thought it needed to be fresh."

A startling array of subjects will be taught in the center - from digital media arts to life drawing. (Baker estimates that faculty members had some 40 meetings with Ehrlich and his staff to discuss their needs.)

The architect took it all in, and

from a design and a site-utilization point of view," he says. "I can tell you that I believe that this building does reflect some of the philosophy and the spirit of Neutra taken into the new millennium, with our own design philosophy as well."

"Part of my work is to take California modernism to a new place. I am not looking at things in a nostalgic, one-story way. It's not practical, and it's not necessary. I think that ar-

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organized the building into three parts: The two-story head, which contains the faculty and staff offices and a roof terrace accessible by the outdoor stairs; the long, three-story zigzagging body with classrooms and studios; and the tail, a single-story portion for use by sculpture and ceramic students and others who need to haul clay and other heavy materials in and out.

He's philosophical about comments about the building's scale in relation to its older neighbors, including the campus' most notable building by Neutra, the Robert B. Moore Theater, an unpretentious marvel of arcing lines and balanced proportions.

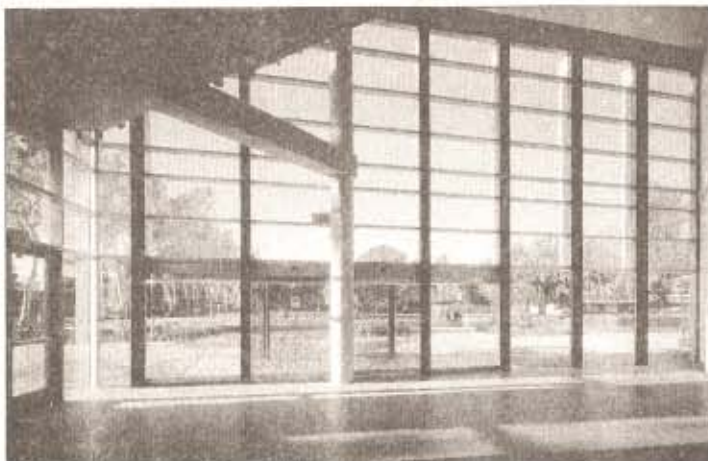
"People tend to be very conservative and not open to change often

chitecture has to take a step forward and not sideways and certainly not backwards."

And he's confident about the building's future.

"It certainly becomes a landmark for the southern part of the campus, and acts as both a magnet for the arts and an amplifier to what the arts can do and mean. When it becomes filled up with students and art, that's when it will really sing."

Students and faculty have begun to move into the first floor, and already the grumbling has started. People complain about the open atrium's acoustics, about the lack of lockers for students' art supplies and books, and about windows throughout that do not open, which is particularly troubling for artists who use



'IN THE COMMON AREAS, such as the atrium, that's a visual delight,' says retired fine arts division dean Ted Baker • Photo: Adrian Velicescu



IT WAS DESIGNED 'to amplify the importance of the arts to the whole campus,' Ehrlich said • Photo: Michael Goulding / The Register

spray solvents, paints and primers. Baker, for one, has heard it all.

"There are people who think it's a remarkable building. Some people don't like it," he says. "People think the scale is something scary. I think some of the surfaces aren't as rich as they would like. I think those people who wanted windows would have wanted more windows."

In the end, though, what counts is that "if you like to make things with your hands, it's an inspiration for that," he says.

"You walk in, and you think, I'm ready to work. It looks like a workplace. In the common areas, such as the atrium, that's a visual delight."

In fact, Baker can see a teacher sending students outside on a nice day to draw Ehrlich's new art center.

"It's very complicated in terms of perspective," he says, noting that the light "scoops" on the roof are positioned at interesting angles. "Those are real challenges to draw with multiple vanishing points. You have the stairwells that fly out and around and up, those will be great challenges for drawing students."

"It's a beautifully proportioned building, with great angles, an exquisite entrance. I think if you step back and look at what you've got and what it will become, I think it's an exceptionally beautiful building."

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