

# Tavo Olmos *Memory Space*

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
October 24 through December 9, 2011

An exhibition of photographs

Miller Hall, University of La Verne

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## FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHER...

For years I have wanted to share images of the buildings I've come to know. But how to create interest in pictures of places that have reached the end of their useful life? The gloss has worn, the occupants long gone, and for many a certain sadness settles in.

In my experience photographing historic architecture, it's a whole different story. These structures are alive; the light, the shapes, the sounds all carry something special giving each a distinct personality.

To work in this field is to be fully present - to know the relationship between time and space. To have an opportunity to photograph these special places is an honor. That the resulting images can convey a hint of their storied past is the goal and the pleasure.

To quote modernist master Richard Neutra, "A building can be designed to satisfy 'by the month' with the regularity of a provider. Or it can give satisfaction in a very different way, 'by the moment', the fraction of a second, with the thrill of a lover."

## ABOUT TAVO OLMOS...

I had the good fortune to grow up in South Pasadena, an idyllic community graced by mature trees, rolling hills and Southern California's classic early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture.

In 1980 I began my career in photography. Two years later I opened my own shop in Pasadena offering custom black-and-white lab services. By the early nineties I ventured out as a freelance photographer specializing in the documentation of historic structures.

I shoot primarily large format, 4x5 black-and-white film (Ilford FP4) processed and printed to Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) archival standards. The inkjet prints in this exhibition were produced from scans of original HABS project negatives.

-Tavo Olmos, October 24, 2011

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My work in the Carlson Gallery is dedicated to the memory of friend and colleague, Anthony Cobb. Tony assisted me on many of the projects in this show. His companionship and creative spirit is dearly missed.

Finally, I offer special thanks to photographer George Katzenberger for his generous assistance and support in preparation for this exhibition.

Reflections on Tavo Olmos' *Memory Space*

By David Flaten, Professor of Theatre Arts

Architecture celebrates relationship and creates context. It is “an expectancy, breathing life into the drama” held within, to paraphrase the great stage designer Robert Edmund Jones. Architecture can give us an experience that connects all our senses in the interplay and dance of light and form, pattern and image, material and movement. As a stage designer who trained in architecture, I am acutely aware of the processes of realizing images and ideas in buildings and structures. Designing for the theatre has made me especially aware of the transience of constructions, as most of what I have dreamed was built to stand and define space for only a few hours or days and then be erased to make way for other possibilities. So it is in architecture as well. I appreciate Tavo Olmos exhibit's celebration of spaces we can now only experience in memory and in his carefully constructed evocative images, perhaps never seen by many who used the spaces, as our culture is unconditioned to “feel” architectural expressiveness.

In the La Verne College gym, Olmos has captured the qualities of luminous space expressed through light and structure. One can feel the process that held it together, seeing thought, really, in the practical engineering solutions that created the space. It is the “aesthetic emphasis of a structural necessity” as my architecture history teacher would have expressed it! The internal expression of structure evokes the structure of wooden sailing ships or the style of the medieval “stave churches” in Norway. The clerestory windows created constantly changing patterns of light and shadow. The photo is of the empty space, yet evokes memories, smells, sounds, potential events as well as the loss of more than just a useful, practical place to house public events. This was a space of integrity, simplicity and complexity. Its form and function were one. Light and shadow, empty and full, these possibilities have been erased, unavailable to another generation that will only know sports pavilions and artificial turf.

Is this expression of loss only an act of nostalgia? The gym was surely a maintenance nightmare, unacceptable to upgrade to all the newest reams of regulations and safety requirements, yet in essence, irreplaceable. We are problem-solving pragmatists who will hardly notice that beds of yesterday's pansies have been replaced with today's begonias – and why should we care? It's all only decoration anyway. The main event must be happening somewhere else today. We are perhaps a culture that has lost its sensitivity to space, to light, to materials, and certainly to nuance. Our challenge is to create visions and forms to embody and express a new spirit that we can construct with as much integrity and simplicity as was evident in the memories held in that old gym.

Olmos' images in these architectural photos celebrate optimism. The buildings have contexts, – even a kind of pride in “knowing” that what they are doing, they're doing very well! These are not sad images of buildings that have grown old and decayed, demanding replacement. They still hold some of the ambition and vigorous vision that brought them into realization. The images celebrate a “groundedness,” a sense of pride and a sense of place. Thank you for bringing them to our awareness!

Modernism Is As Modernism Does

By Kenneth H. Marcus, Professor of History

How modern are we? What is modernism, and what is its purpose? Southern California was vital to the American modernist movement, and several of Olmos's photographs recall the role that the region had in that movement. Modernism excites because it rebels. It reflects the youthful power of the here and now, the sheer joy of presence.

We see the clean lines of the Robinsons-May Building, which stands bracing the skyline like an ocean liner, as a river of cars moves down Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. There is effortlessness, smoothness, with rounded corners and columns. There is also a certain self-confidence here—the knowledge that comes with a city in the 1950s that was so sure of itself. Come shop and belong to the future, it seems to say.

That smoothness belongs to the Lincoln Place Apartments, which reflect the modernist ideal that form is function. Black architect Ralph Vaughn designed this Venice housing complex. Like the Robinsons-May Building, there are no embellishments. The intimacy of the courtyard—the use of outdoor space as much as indoor space—is a hallmark of Southern California modernism. Simplicity is best. The sun bounces off the white walls, the palm tree sways in the breeze—Southern California icons that wrap around the courtyard.

In contrast to the other two structures, Schoenberg Hall soars up like a church. That fits, because it is a temple to the arts. Yet the building stands alone, surrounded (and hidden) by trees. Although built in the 1970s, it remains curiously an anomaly on the USC campus, where composer Arnold Schoenberg taught there long ago (1934-36), bringing a different form of modernism to an otherwise rigorously traditional campus. The Hall's flat cement walls—another modernist innovation first explored in Los Angeles in the 1920s when Schoenberg was beginning to explore twelve-tone music in Vienna—shape and form the space around it. In other words, it is a paean to modernist ideals. Modernism is as modernism does.

And then...our eyes turn to the Rockhold House. Like Schoenberg Hall, it stands alone, but for the opposite reason: a remnant of the past, shut off from the more modern structures around it. It is self-contained, solid, yet somehow sad, almost shabby. Benjamin Rockhold, a nineteenth-century migrant and city leader, has left us this memento from an earlier era. What was not moved, razed or paved over tells us of a vastly different time. It is like a bookend, built just before the modernist movement began. So we see before and after, and the photographs are windows into Southern California's past and its present.

East wall, north end, first panel



Rockhold House: 2004 HABS documentation, Riverside

*Surrounded by development, commercial interests finally spelled the fate of this lone residential structure.*



Highland Reservoir: 2009 HAER documentation, Yorba Linda



Highland Reservoir: 2009 HAER documentation, Yorba Linda

*After serving the Southland for decades, the water shed was demolished to make way for a modern replacement.*

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East wall, second panel



Robinsons-May Department Store: 2011 HABS documentation, Beverly Hills

*Still standing, but not for long. Since 1952, the venerable landmark has occupied one of the busiest intersections on the planet, and was seared in the memories of millions of Southland commuters.*



Robinsons-May Department Store: 2011 HABS documentation, Beverly Hills



Trader Vic's: HABS documentation, Beverly Hills

*Like its neighbor, Robinsons-May, Trader Vic's was one of the most recognizable landmarks in the City, located on one of the busiest intersections in the world.*



Lincoln Place Apartments: 2005 HABS documentation, Venice



Lincoln Place Apartments: 2005 HABS documentation, Venice

*When development threatened this unique apartment complex, preservationists fought a bold battle but still lost a quarter of the structures to demolition.*

East wall, third panel



Schoenberg Hall, USC School of Music: HABS documentation, Los Angeles

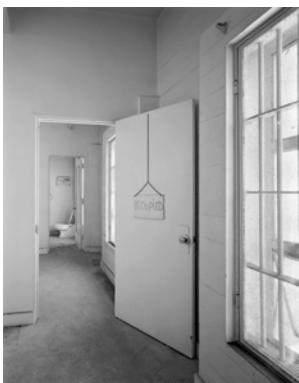


Schoenberg Hall, USC School of Music: HABS documentation, Los Angeles

*Inspired by the legendary composer, this exceptional structure took the shape of a grand piano. It was lost to expansion of the adjacent film school building -- but not forgotten.*



Santa Monica City Jail: 2010 HABS documentation, Santa Monica



Santa Monica City Jail: 2010 HABS documentation, Santa Monica

*A new police station rendered the original jail obsolete, prompting a redesign to accommodate additional office space in City Hall. In homage to its past, one lone cell was preserved as a permanent exhibit.*

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East wall, fourth panel



Beverly Hills Post Office: 2010 HABS documentation, Beverly Hills

West wall, south end, first panel



Beverly Hills Post Office: 2010 HABS documentation, Beverly Hills

*These images depict the darkened hallways featuring viewing slits where Post Office supervisors would secretly observe the work force -- the equivalent to modern day video surveillance systems.*

West wall, second panel



ULV Gymnasium: 2007 HABS documentation, La Verne

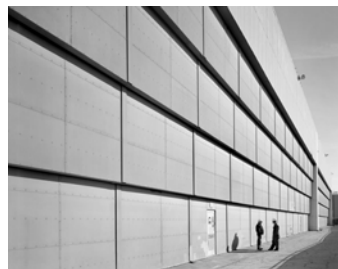


ULV Gymnasium: 2007 HABS documentation, La Verne

*The gymnasium celebration event was unlike anything I had seen. The outpouring of support confirmed the beloved structures place in the memory of the community.*



Boeing C-1 Aircraft production Facility: 2002 HABS documentation, Long Beach



Boeing C-1 Aircraft production Facility: 2002 HABS documentation, Long Beach

*The home to “Rosie the Riveter” and a workforce of nearly 40,000 during WWII, these immense structures reverberated energy nearly 60 years later.*



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West wall, third panel



Disney Studios Gas Station: 1995 HABS documentation, Burbank

*For decades this humble landmark greeted all who entered the Disney Studios Lot in Burbank.*

West wall, fourth panel



Second Baptist Church: 2006 HABS documentation, Los Angeles

*An icon of South Central Los Angeles, modern codes required the church to install a handicap access elevator, permanently affecting this portion of the historic structure.*

West wall, fifth panel



Claremont McKenna College: 2008 HABS documentation, Claremont



Claremont McKenna College: 2008 HABS documentation, Claremont

*Pastoral, open space, and much different than it is today -- an imposing new structure is located on what was the grand front lawn and Pitzer Hall in the center of the frame is now history.*