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# Los Angeles Design Center

## Los Angeles, California

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**JOHN FRIEDMAN ALICE KIMM ARCHITECTS BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO A WAREHOUSE COMPLEX FOR A THRIVING FURNITURE BUSINESS.**

By Joseph Giovannini

**Architect:** John Friedman Alice Kimm Architects—John Friedman, AIA, principal in charge; Dan Brunn, project architect

**Client:** Cisco Brothers Corporation

**Engineers:** Mackintosh & Mackintosh Structural Engineers (building); Franceschi Engineering (wood siding, fence, gates); William K. Koh & Associates Structural Engineer (sign)

**Consultants:** Orange Street Studio (landscape); Fire Ltd. (lighting); Garza Group Communications (graphic design)

**Contractor:** Brunswick Builders (general contractor)

**Size:** 80,000 square feet

**Cost:** \$1.2 million

### Sources

**Metal/glass curtain wall:** Polygal

**Cement-board siding:** Maxi Plank

**Entrance canopy:** Copperworks

**Fabric canopy:** Shade Sails

**Concrete floors and sign:** Creative Masonry

**Skylights:** Bristolite

**Paints and stains:** Benjamin Moore

**Plumbing fixtures:** Kohler

**Stainless-steel doors and hardware:** The Welding Junction

**Acrylic door panels:** Acrylic Specialties

In the spirit of moving beyond collective trauma and civic stigma, South Central Los Angeles—the scene of the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots—has been renamed South Los Angeles and designated an economic empowerment zone. But the few projects that have been erected over the past decade in this manifestly unbeautiful part of Los Angeles are generally festooned with Spanoid facades, the city's overused, all-purpose stage set. Without substance, these veneers of style are the architectural equivalent of the cheap fast food often sold just behind the stucco: Let them eat cliché.

A couple of blocks south of Western and Slauson Streets, however, an ensemble of reinvented 1920s-era warehouses, each as unexpected as an apparition, breaks the rampant urban anomaly. Welcome to the Los Angeles Design Center, a new furniture showroom designed by John Friedman Alice Kimm Architects.

### Program

Francisco Pinedo, owner of furniture manufacturer Cisco Brothers, founded his company in a garage 15 years ago. His enterprise has since blossomed into a \$15-million-a-year business. The company occupied a number of warehouses in an area of South Los Angeles that has become the heart of the city's nascent furniture industry. Pinedo needed a



showroom, and he thought other manufacturers could benefit from a local presence outside the Westside's high-rent design district. He asked the architects to design the core of what might grow into a much larger development (one warehouse is completed; the other is still under renovation).

If the project's budget was frugal, its design potential ran high. The

firm had the benefit of working with a found object with high ceilings, good light, and substantive materials—brick walls, wood floors, and steel beams. The architects' strategy was to utilize these givens, transforming a workaday structure through a process of layering.

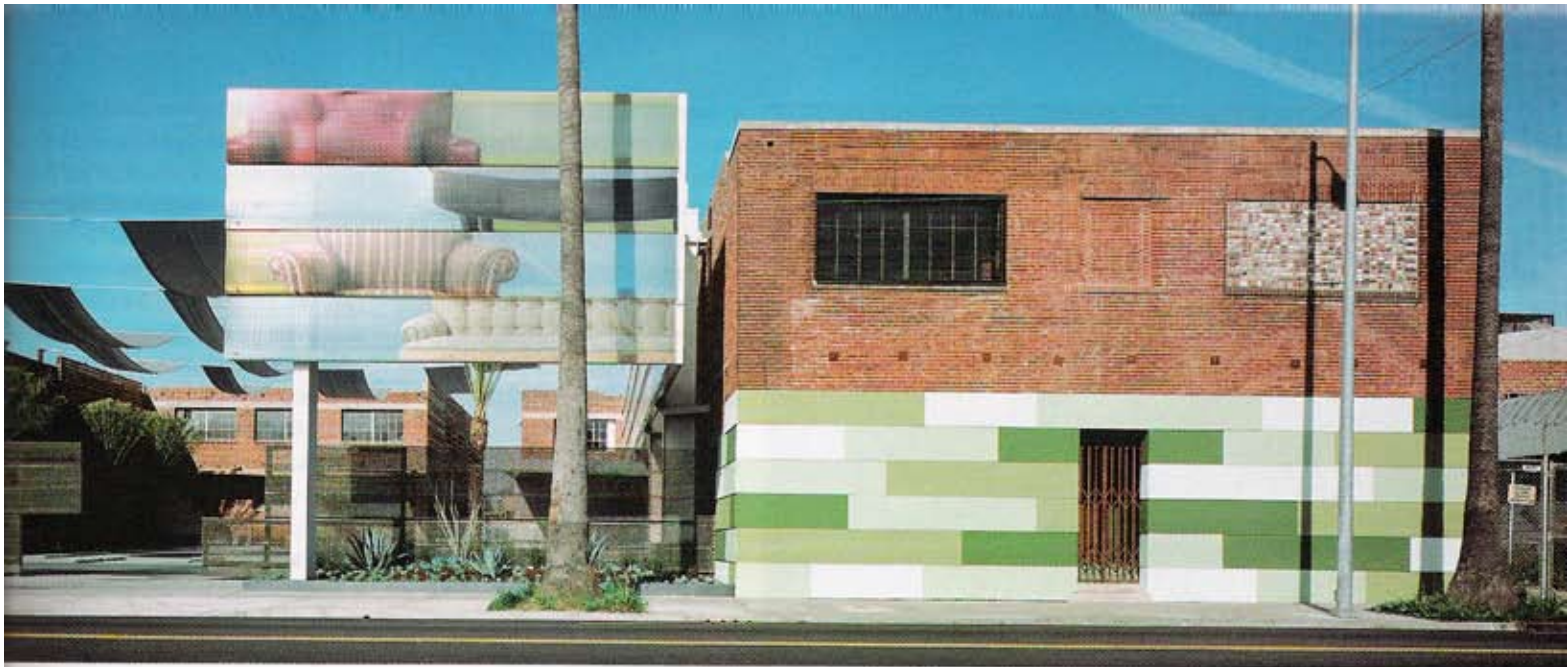
### Solution

The building itself offered clues

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Colored polycarbonate panels and signage (opposite and above) announce the design center with a lively street presence. Tarps suspended over the parking lot (below) define this space as a public plaza and a gateway to what will one day be a larger development.





about how to proceed. The steel columns, retrofitted on the outside, suggested a scaffolding for what became a new facade of translucent polycarbonate panels, applied like shingles along the length of the facade that faces the parking lot. The architects turned the facade at the front so that it ran parallel to the street, giving the parking lot more closure and the front facade more presence. With this billboard structure, the architects absorbed the notion of visual street language in their design.

A variegated appliqué of horizontal, greenish concrete panels,

scaled to be glimpsed obliquely from cars sailing past, signals a refined design sensibility that offers not just cautious reinvestment in the neighborhood, but also authenticity, even joy. The panels wrap portions of the two, two-story brick warehouses and share facade space with what appears to be a billboard partially spanning the parking lot between the two primary structures. Suspended tarps sail above the parking lot like magic carpets, just beyond a fence of punched steel.

Inside, Freidman, the principal in charge, sited a few strategic interventions. Removing a section of the

A new staircase (above) rises from an inserted first-floor landing used for furniture displays. Brick walls and wood ceilings (below) were sandblasted for a cleaned-up finish.





first floor, he placed a hardwood landing, large enough for furniture displays, from which a staircase with transparent siding leads to the second floor. He terraced a section of the second floor (raised to accommodate a loading dock below) to take advantage of the level change. The north side of the terrace was walled off with another layer of shingled polycarbonate panels. All the moves were large, to the point of being environmental.

The most transformative insight was turning the parking lot into a public space. At the Design Center, the lot comprises a watering hole, piazza, and party space with a couple of deft, inexpensive moves. The polycarbonate facades add softness and shimmer to the space; the overhead tarps contain it by defining its height; and concrete parking pads in different shades of gray, separated by planted strips that follow construction lines drawn from the surrounding structures, create a lively patchwork quilt underfoot. Eventually, the parking lot will serve as a point of origin for a path leading to other buildings in the expanded project.

The modest budget was spent on gesture rather than detail. Working with subcontractors in what was effectively a design-build process, the firm saved unique moments in their design from the heavy hand of value engineering.

### Commentary

Freidman and Kimm did not pander by designing down to the neighborhood with historical pabulum. Instead, they radicalized the space and achieved intensity simply by layering complementary materials in an unexpected spatial collage. By revealing the original, cleaned-up structure and building on its strengths, the architects have revitalized and refreshed familiar monuments of the local landscape that, after the renovation, remain trusted. This is an act of psychic reinvestment in the community, affirmation rather than gentrification. The buildings remain old neighbors fallen on good times. ■



1. Parking lot/  
event space
2. Entrance
3. Showroom
4. Office
5. Future showroom
6. Overflow parking

The showrooms are brightened by natural light; polished floors and sleek materials contrast with brick and wood (top and middle). The multilevel display areas in the showroom are divided just enough to encourage visitors to explore (bottom).

