



The Magic Hour

In Los Angeles, a parking garage is transformed into a theatrical playground

BY LEONORA DESAR

Photos: Jeremy Green

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A sculpture hangs suspended in the air, bathed in a silvery white glow. Behind it, a larger than life illuminated screen ripples with rich, saturated color—reds and yellows, purples and magentas, deep indigos and cyans. As the sun sets, the sculpture grows brighter and brighter. It sparkles against the screen's vivid backdrop, reminding one of starlight.

No, this is not a new theater or art museum exhibit, but an installation for The Vermont apartments, a luxury high-rise in Los Angeles's Koreatown community. The \$1.6 million installation, designed by artist Cliff Garten, is called "Los Angeles Opens Its Heart of Compassion." The project covers the façade of the structure's parking garage and is illuminated by Lightswitch, which created a dramatic, theatrical scene using 56 LED wash fixtures and 10 LED image projectors.

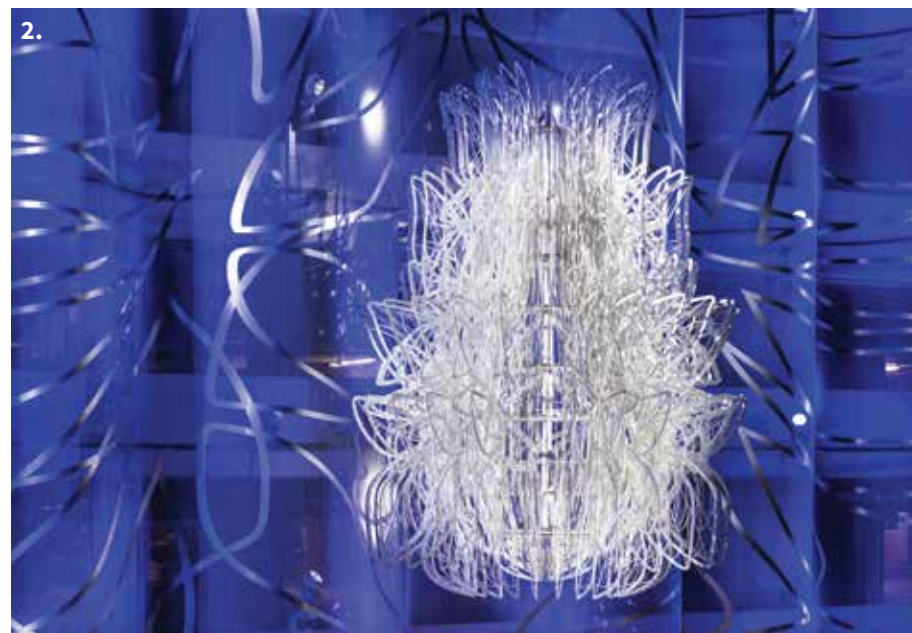
"This artwork really became a big showpiece for the area," says Norm Schwab, principal of Lightswitch San Francisco. "I think that helps the owners offer this place as something you want to be near because it feels right aesthetically—it feels hip because it's different and cooler than just hanging out in a building courtyard. You're really hanging out within an art gallery, or within a work of art."

URBAN REVIVAL

The installation is part of a larger trend of neighborhood revitalization in America, Schwab says. Developers are luring residents away from



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1. A color-changing illuminated screen casts an enchanting backdrop.

2. The silvery white glow of the sculpture stands in contrast to the vivid hues of the screen.

3. The 75-ft by 45-ft screen dazzles with an array of color combinations, such as purples and lavenders.

the suburbs with the allure of mixed-use spaces—areas where one can live, work and shop, minus the commute time. The Vermont is one of the first modern high-rises in Koreatown, where revitalization is going strong. "They're really trying to attract a younger, upscale crowd to both live and play here," Schwab says. "You want to have something that people talk about and share on their social media. People then go, 'I know that place, I saw it on your Facebook, I'm going to share it with someone else on my social media page.' People want to do that based on things that are cool and of visual interest."

Visual interest begins with the laser-cut aluminum sculpture, which is roughly 20-ft high and resembles a chandelier floating in space. To obtain a precise, almost surgical focus on the sculpture, the team fit all-white LED fixtures with a template that mimicked the shape of the sculpture and formed light exactly to its contours. "Once we projected it onto the sculpture it gave it almost a glow, and there weren't loose edges," Schwab says.

The sculpture is bathed in a color temperature of 6500K, which is almost bluer than daylight. Its crisp, clean illumination acts as a foil to the intense hues of the illuminated screen. "[Garten] loves silver lighting, and the higher color temperature white light is as close to what you might perceive as a cool crisp silver," Schwab says. "It really helped separate it from the screen than if we lit it warmer."

Keeping the sculpture and screen visually distinct was one of the major challenges of the project. To accomplish this, Schwab and his team chose angles where the lighting for the sculpture and screen didn't spill on to one another. Light rakes across the 75-ft by 45-ft screen from the side, giving it a sense of movement and depth. Four wash LED fixtures emit light from behind the screen, separating it from the sculpture with backlight. "Backlight is generally used in both theater and TV," Schwab says. "It really helps you to pull out things from the background."

The installation conjures the experience of being within a work of art.



METAMORPHOSIS

An hour before sunset, the screen begins to transform. Color-changing LED fixtures illuminate it in an arresting display of light. Every 10 minutes the colors shift into new combinations, heightening the drama.

Then, as the sun begins to set, we enter the magic hour. “Magic hour is a film term,” Schwab says. “It’s that time just as the sun’s setting to the time the sun actually goes down on the horizon, but you still have the gorgeousness of the sky. It’s a really dramatic transition.” At night, the natural daylight which had been lighting the screen fades and the vivid illumination takes over. At the same time, the sculpture becomes the visual star of the piece with its diamond-colored light.

The daytime and nighttime look of the project is “the difference between an art gallery and a nightclub,” Schwab says. “Daytime is the art gallery version— it’s very pure and white and has a simple aesthetic. At night the piece comes alive.”

The team used one line of all-LED fixtures from Martin to light the project, attracted in part by the light engine and versatility of the different fixtures. “We could put in different lensing and use the same light engine to do many different things,” Schwab says. “Every light we needed was in the family, which made the installation easier.”

The use of previews and mock-ups also helped

make the installation more seamless. The team created a three-dimensional model of the lights using software, replicating the materials of the screen and sculpture. “It allows you to understand how the light reacts after it hits surfaces,” Schwab says. “In other words how it bounces, how it spreads, how it reflects, how it does all these things like it would do in real life.” Martin then performed a mock-up onsite, which closely matched how the previews predicted the installation would look. “It gave everybody the confidence that we were doing the right thing and that it would work,” Schwab says. “We also met with the integrators who saw our previews model and the work we had done, and it helped them to do the installation and give an accurate price that they didn’t deviate from. We came in on budget.”

Overall, the result is a theatrical display that elevates a parking garage into a performance. “I think public art is seeing a resurgence,” Schwab says. “It’s really affecting the lighting world. It may look beautiful during the day, but at night it becomes almost a show.” □

FAST FACTS

- The sculpture is approximately 20-ft high. It is set against the backdrop of a 75-ft by 45-ft screen of coiled wire fabric.
- As the sun sets, a light show transforms the screen. Color combinations change every 10 minutes.
- The project uses only LED fixtures.

THE DESIGNER



Norm Schwab, Member IES (2001), is principal of Lightswitch San Francisco.