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Winged victory - Sunroad Centrum's success proves that style matters

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"Nothing short of right is right." – Reuben H. Fleet's motto, painted on his Consolidated Aircraft plant on Pacific Highway

Sunroad Centrum may be San Diego's most beautiful new office building, what with its strips of travertine and slate, greenish see-through glass, LED lighting that glows at night, and insets and cutouts on all four sides of the 11-story structure. Instead of a boring box that could be built anywhere, Sunroad Enterprises has put up a 275,000-square-foot, \$45 million jewel box that suits its site east of state Route 163 and south of state Route 52.

Architecturally, it sets a new standard of excellence, not only for Kearny Mesa but also for established high-rise office centers in downtown, Mission Valley, University City and North County. Yes, there have been some nice skyscrapers built in San Diego over the years, but most seemed derivative of designs in Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, wherever. Here we have a San Diego high-rise that belongs in its place and couldn't be plopped down anywhere else.

What's remarkable is that this gem survived a crude cut when officials ordered a 20-foot decapitation to comply with Federal Aviation Administration height limits related to nearby Montgomery Field.

Imagine buying a \$10,000 wedding ring, presenting it on bended knee to your fiancée and then being told that you have to remove half a carat so it fits her finger. Like a grumbling groom, architect Brian Paul and his team complied and saved us from what could have been a civic lobotomy.

"I'm very proud of the building and think the entire (architectural) office is proud of it," Paul said.

Said Buzz Gibbs, chairman of the Kearny Mesa Community Planning Group, "Most of the people in the community thought this was our first really Class A office building ... Basically, it's what we feel is the future of Kearny Mesa, as we transition from more of a manufacturing, research-and-development (focus) to higher-end office."

You have to know the site history to appreciate the outcome.

In 1958, General Dynamics-Convair opened up an Atlas missile plant on 250 acres, bought from the city for \$775,000.

For nearly 40 years, legions of engineers fought the space race and Cold War arms race from this remote location, even as defense orders continued at a plant next to Lindbergh Field, built in 1935 by Reuben H. Fleet and run round the clock during World War II.

With the arms and space races won, the Kearny Mesa use became obsolete, as did the Lindbergh facility, which is now an airport parking lot on Pacific Highway.

GenDyn's consultants developed a plan for "New Century Center" that was to include entertainment-retail and office and industrial uses, modeled on the Irvine Spectrum development in Orange County.

But after GenDyn sold the land to Lennar Corp. for \$79.5 million, enlightened leadership in City Hall planning circles prompted the addition of residential uses and the elimination of traffic-inducing entertainment-retail. The 2002 master plan calls for “San Diego Spectrum” to include 1,568 condos and apartments and just over 3 million square feet of industrial, commercial and institutional space.

KB Home, Greystone and Fairfield Properties built condos and apartments to the east. Sharp Health moved its administrative offices into the only GenDyn building remaining. Marriott Hotel, Toby Wells YMCA and the San Diego County Water Authority occupy new buildings. Other major users include National University, Northrop Grumman, Frito-Lay, Resmed and Computer Sciences Corp.

Sunroad Enterprises branded its 25 acres fronting Kearny Villa Road as “Sunroad Centrum” and plans two more office towers and 600 condos. The company, owned by Aaron Feldman as part of his Sunroad Holding Corporation includes car dealerships, office buildings, a marina on Harbor Island and the Maderas Golf Club in Poway.

Emotions are still raw at City Hall and in Sunroad's offices over the circumstances surrounding the first office building and how it managed to breach the 160-foot height limit. Officials on both sides are saving their fighting words for court in Sunroad's \$40 million lawsuit against the city.

Meanwhile, it's time to pass judgment on the architecture.

Speeding past the site daily these last two years, it was easy to miss the details of what the architect and developer believes is the county's “greenest” speculative office building. “The building is truly iconic 21st century,” said Sunroad vice president Dan Feldman, son of the owner. “There's nothing in the city like it.”

Upon close inspection, the politics fade into memory.

“We're touring the property once or twice a day right now and getting a lot of positive feedback,” said Cushman & Wakefield leasing agent Mark Wayne.

He said tenants, such as defense contractors, like the environmentally sustainable aspects of the building.

“Those companies are focused on image, not only for attracting contracts but also for recruiting and retaining employees,” Wayne said.

Bragging points include 50 percent diversion of construction waste from the landfill; low pollution-emitting paints and sealants; Forest Stewardship Council woods; two-speed flushing toilets to conserve water; lower-than-usual parking ratios to encourage carpooling and transit; and a highly reflective roof to cut down on heat gain.

Luckily, the hassle over height did not destroy the high concept – a modern building without modernistic monotony and with a nod to the past.

“An 11-story building is really a box,” architect Paul said. “The only way you can get verticality is to break up the box into vertical and horizontal pieces.”

Corners were cut out, sections of each face were sliced off, and stone, glass and metal were mixed together, resulting in equal parts of complexity and character.

“This is a finely articulated Modern building with a lot more detail,” said Paul's project architect, Darrel Fulbright. “It's glass but not reflective; there's a transparency to it . . . We're trying to make a statement about a sense of place it is in but still in a very modern way.”

The most interesting feature of the building is a pair of two wing-like overhangs, symbolizing the project's proximity to an airport. They were saved while the 12th floor was removed and a new roof added and then reattached to the new 11th floor top. They are 30 and 40 feet wide and 24 inches thick, tapering to a knife's edge like a plane's wing.

Next in interest is a cutout on the west face of the building that Fulbright likened to a water scoop. The building's perimeter steps back at various points, breaking up the box, and alternating bands of travertine, slate and glass define the top, middle and bottom. At night, green LED lighting and floodlights accent the building's sections.

Fulbright said Sunroad could have "hacked" the design into mediocrity during reconstruction to save costs. Swinerton Builders was the general contractor.

"By the fact that we were able to save the design, people who don't know about the history of the building in the future will think it was designed this way," he said. "I think the redesign came out as good, if not better, than the original."

But one major compromise was impossible to avoid. Originally, there were to be three buildings of 12, 14 and 16 stories. Now the maximum is 11.

"I would have rather seen more urbanity but it simply will have to have less urban," Paul said. Building 1's office users will park in an underground garage that will be expanded aboveground with shops and restaurants occupying the ground floor. A similar arrangement is planned for the second two office buildings.

A date-palm-lined water feature, designed by KTU+A planning and landscape architecture, surrounds Mexican artist Leonardo Nierman's 35-foot-high stainless steel abstract sculpture. (Too bad its elements don't move with the wind.)

Beech panels line the 30-foot-square lobby, and stretching across the 24-foot-high reflective ceiling are aluminum-clad beams that continue beyond the glass front door to support the entrance canopy outside.

Nierman paintings are located at the far end of the first-and second-floor elevator lobbies. Upper floors command spectacular views of Miramar Marine Corps Air Station to the north and east, Kearny Mesa to the west and south.

During happy hour on the top-floor balconies, tenants and their clients will naturally ponder the future of Kearny Mesa. Will this industrial zone tony up in the decades ahead?

Paul, 68, who set a higher tone for the University Towne Centre area 20 years ago with his Plaza at La Jolla Village design, sees high-density offices and residential developments supplanting low-rise, low-tech warehouses and light industrial uses.

"The days of San Diego as an industrial center, in my view, are numbered," Paul said.