

SWISSPEARL ARCHITECTURE #21

CUSTOM MADE

USA
LETTERS TO THE SUN

Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Beverly Hills, California (CA)

ADDRESS: 9390 Santa Monica Blvd. CLIENT: Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

ARCHITECTS: SPF:architects, Culver City, CA BUILDING PERIOD: 2011–2013

FAÇADE CONSTRUCTION: The Raymond Group, Orange, CA

FAÇADE MATERIALS: Swisspearl® LARGO, REFLEX Autumn Leaves 9270

MATERIAL INTERIOR: Swisspearl® LARGO, REFLEX Champagne 9290-09



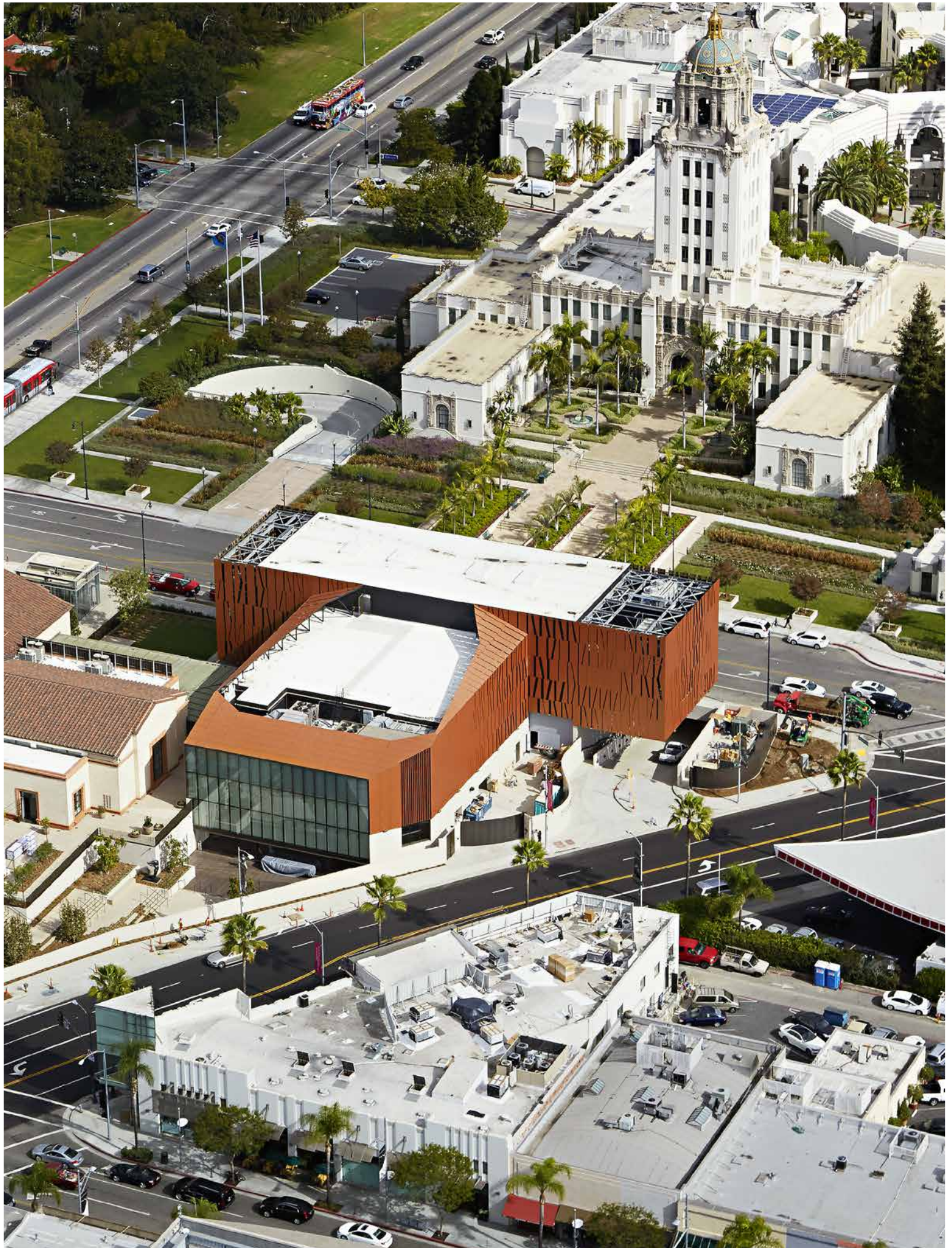


WALLIS ANNENBERG
CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

DC



EMERGENCY
EXIT ONLY



SPF:architects have transformed a dormant city block in the heart of Beverly Hills into a vibrant center for the performing arts. Combining the landmarked Beverly Hills Post Office building from the 1930s with a state-of-the-art, 21st-century theater, the builders created a unique ensemble, in which the two structures mutually highlight the elegance and uniqueness of each other.

MIRKO BEETSCHEN “These are the types of projects that an architect lives for”, says Zoltan E. Pali enthusiastically. “To transform a sleepy site and bring it back to life again is an exhilarating experience.” Zoltan E. Pali is one of the two founding members of multi-award-winning Studio Pali Fekete architects (SPF:architects), the other being Judit Méda Fekete. Several years ago the responsible committee approached the studio directly about the project to transform an attractive, but disused site in the heart of Beverly Hills into a cultural center. The Culver-City-based office was selected for its reputation for historic preservation and its widely proven design sensibilities.

The starting point was the abandoned Beverly Hills Post Office. The history of the site goes back to the early twentieth century, when Beverly Hills was one of the fast expanding communities on the West Coast. With the growing populace, the need for a mail facility became more and more urgent, until, in 1933, the Beverly Hills Post Office was constructed on the site of the former Pacific Electric Railway station. The building in Renaissance Revival style became a prominent landmark and was only given up in 1993, when postal operations moved to a new facility. As it had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1985, the city grasped the opportunity, bought the building and started looking for a new, cultural use. Twenty years later, in October 2013, the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts – simply called “The Wallis” – officially opened its doors to the public.

The crucial coup

The original plan was to turn the former post building into a theater, adding an annexe for classrooms, rehearsal facilities, and offices. When Zoltan E. Pali came on board, the first thing he did was reverse the program. He located the smaller components within the existing three-story building, thereby preserving the original structure and making room for a new state-of-the-art theater. “The new building is a new building”, says the architect about the design of the theater. “It absolutely has its own language and doesn’t reference the historic architecture.” What shapes the new building instead is the site itself. Like the existing structure, the new theater’s layout is that of a “T”.

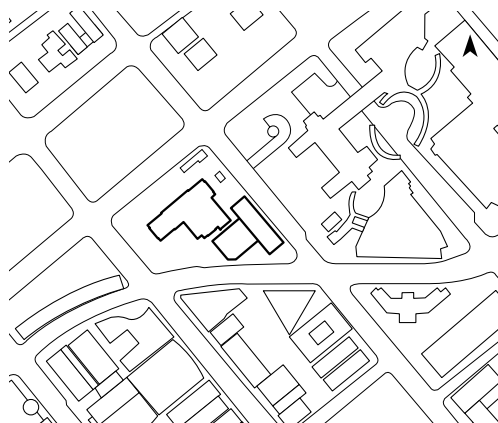
The architects thus not only make optimal use of the plot, the dynamic layout also allows for a stimulating interplay between the buildings, forms a series of gardens and courtyards and even creates a pathway from the neighboring city hall through the site to the shopping areas on the other side. Each interior space of the complex has a corresponding exterior plaza or garden that extends the space into the public and takes advantage of the warm climate.

Posting letters

To design a fitting façade the architects started thinking about what used to happen on this site and all the letters that went through the old post office. “What if all this mail actually came back home?” Zoltan E. Pali asked himself. “What if it actually started to clad the building?” So the skin of the new Goldsmith Theater was to become an image of the millions of letters and envelopes that had gone through this site. “We wanted to recreate a human experience”, Pali explains. “Who hasn’t waited for a college acceptance, a love letter or a birthday card? There was so much to getting a letter before emails and text messaging. These abstract letters aren’t just a poetic move, but a way of talking to the community.” Having worked with Swisspearl before, the architects decided to use a copper-colored version of the cement composite to create the “envelopes”. There are different kinds of letter-shaped sheets on the finished façade; some are closed, some open, some show their front, others their backside.

The result is a beautiful building skin with an abstract pattern, its copper color seeming to soak up the southern-Californian sun and reflect it into the neighborhood. The cement composite mantle follows the old building as well as the surrounding street grid. It hides construction details and mechanical equipment and creates a cohesive body of the theater’s different elements.

The new Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts – named after heiress and philanthropist Wallis Annenberg, who donated 25 million dollars for the project – today houses the Goldsmith Theater in the new part, while the spaces that were once used for mail sorting and postage purchases are home to the 150-seat Lovelace Studio Theater, a theater school for young people, a café as well as a gift shop.



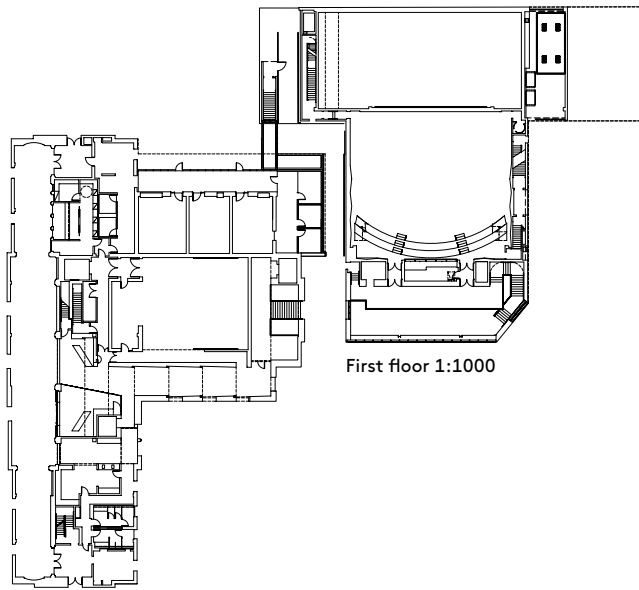


A skin of copper-toned Swisspearl panels in the shape of different letters envelops the new theater building, referencing the former use of the site as a post office.

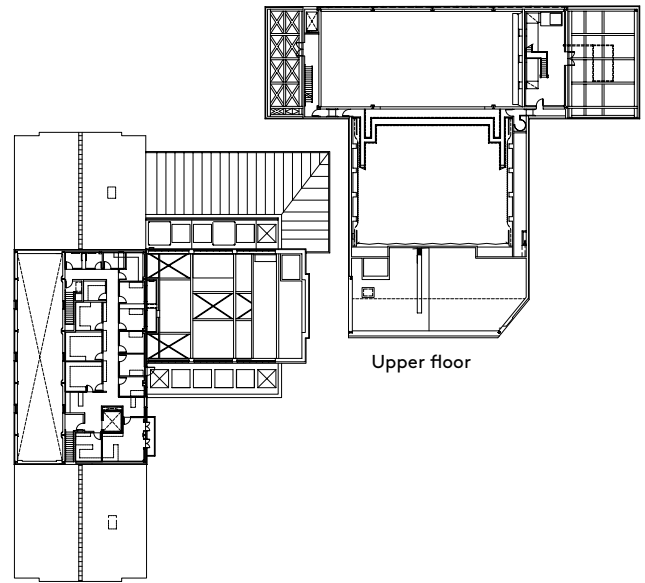


“Instead of historical elements of the old building, we referenced the actual use of the site.”

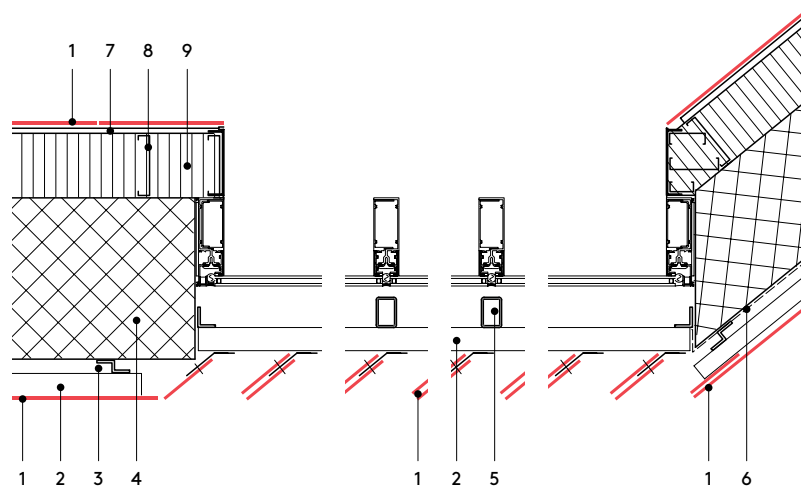
Zoltan E. Pali



First floor 1:1000



Upper floor



Horizontal section 1:20

- 1 Swisspearl® LARGO panel 8 mm
- 2 sub framing
- 3 ventilation cavity
- 4 concrete
- 5 steel tube
- 6 waterproofing
- 7 gypsum board
- 8 metal stud framing
- 9 thermal insulation

“What I was really striving to achieve on the building was a notion of tactility.”

Zoltan E. Pali

Horizontal section 1:20

- 1 Swisspearl® LARGO panel 8 mm
- 2 sub framing
- 3 steel beam
- 4 concrete
- 5 thermal insulation
- 6 structural steel
- 7 floor grating

