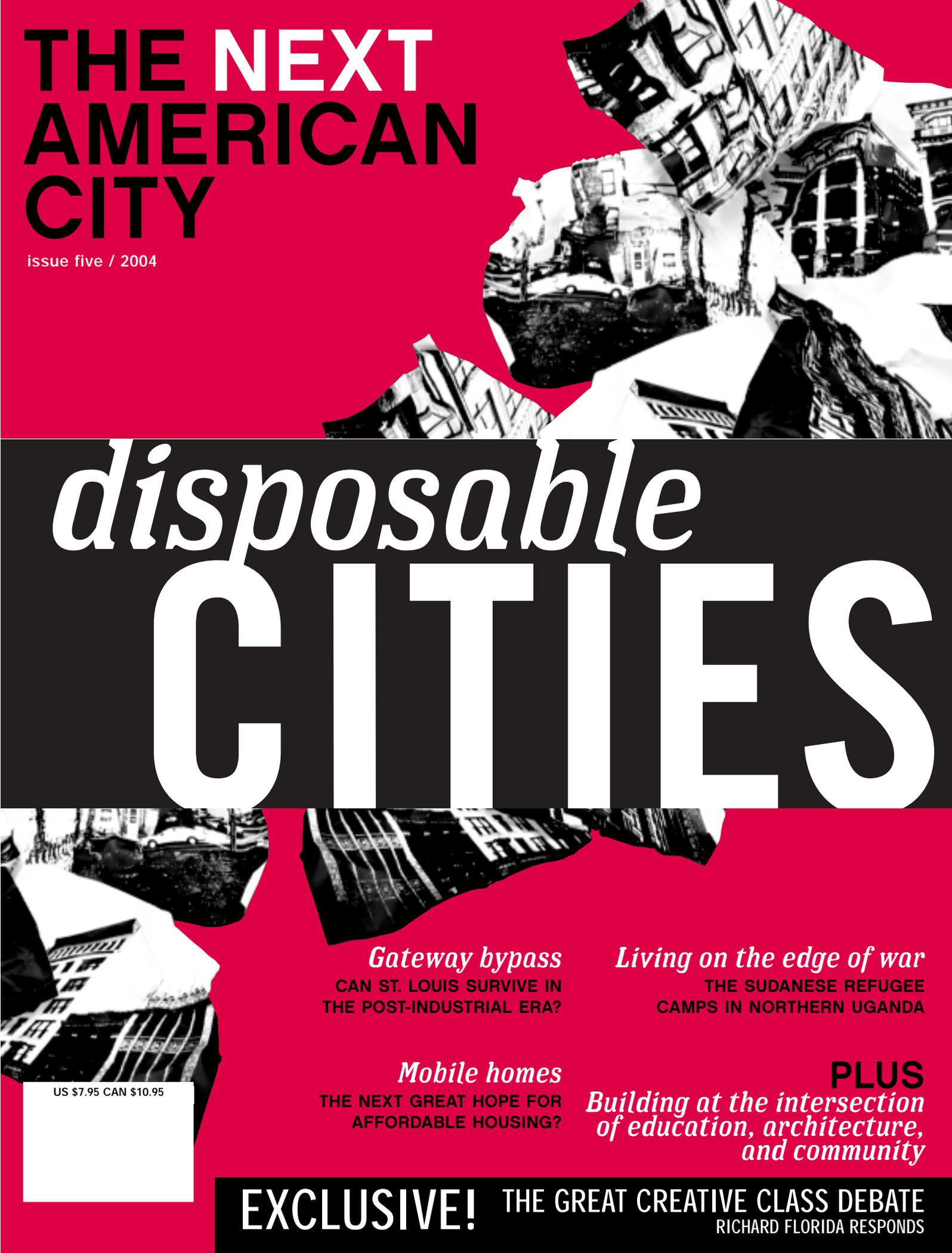


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THE STAR-STUDDED OPENING OF AMERICA'S GREENEST BUILDING: NRDC HEADQUARTERS BY HILARY KAPLAN

Laurie David admitted it took some time for her to get on board with the project and pour her activist heart into the construction of a building. Environmentalists like David (whose husband is Larry David of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and "Seinfeld" fame) usually fight buildings, not build them. But on a sunny January morning, standing on the grayish green rooftop of the Natural Resources Defense Council's new Santa Monica offices, David praised the building as "a powerful symbol for a new way of doing business."

A look at the roof on which David, fellow celebrity-activist Leonardo DiCaprio, and the other celebrants were standing gave no clue that its solid terrace pavers were actually porous. Rain falls right through the deck to be collected in cisterns below, then filters through an in-house water purification system, and is pumped back into the pipes to flush toilets, wash hands, and take showers (an incentive for those arriving to work on "human-powered vehicles").

That's just one of the subtly integrated, environmentally friendly features of what's been called America's greenest building.

Sure, it's in Santa Monica, the epicenter of the Prius crowd, and the building is celebrity-studded like no other: it's named after Robert Redford, with the activism center sponsored by DiCaprio and another area named after the David family. But it's also on the cutting edge of green building technology, having scored 55 out of 69 possible points on LEED's Platinum II rating scale and "still going after some," says NRDC scientist Robert Watson, one of the brains behind both this building and the LEED standards.

And the location makes sense for NRDC's aims: the building is just a block from Santa Monica's popular Third Street Promenade, and across the street from one of the always-packed city parking structures—in other words, close to plenty of pedestrians who might drop into the NRDC store and

DiCaprio's "e-activism station." Building in a pedestrian-friendly city center was a priority of New Urbanist architect Elizabeth Moule, whose firm, Moule & Polyzoïdes, designed the space. She also chose the site in order to "take advantage of the ocean breeze" from the Pacific, just a few skips away from the building, which now helps regulate the building's ventilation and cooling systems, cutting down on the need for air conditioning.

After the speeches, while the crowd filed downstairs for a Leo photo op, Moule and Watson gave an enthusiastic tour of the structure. Rather than building from scratch, the NRDC redeveloped an existing shell, transforming a defunct acupuncture school into a light-filled work haven with a beach-house exterior. Moule's objective was to create an "approachable, non-intimidating, regional" exterior that would "honor classical vernacular styles" while recycling 98 percent of the new and the previous buildings' materials. The NRDC also wanted to build a structure generic enough to be reused by others later on without need to remodel. The design, said Moule, strove for permanence instead of "idiosyncratic buildings [that could become] woefully out of fashion."

Moule also sees the building as a "stand against global commercialism, which is an enemy of sustainability." In keeping with this ethic, the building emphasizes locally-produced materials ("local" meaning within 500 miles)—from the flashy Syndicrete front desk, inlaid with shiny bits saved from the landfill, to the choice pieces of furniture crafted from salvaged lumber by Santa Monica cabinetmaker Roy McMacon, to the rooftop terrace pavers.

About half of all materials produced in the world are for the construction and furnishing of buildings, according to the NRDC. To counter the waste, pollution, and energy consumption associated with this production, the builders sought out recycled carpets and ceiling tiles, and sustainably harvested, Forest Stewardship Council-certified poplar stairs. The walls surrounding the "light wells" (skylight areas) look like pretty wood panels, painted off-white like the rest of the light-filled interior. These same panels also cover the exterior and contribute to the building's beach feeling. But they're not wood at all. They're actually recycled concrete-and-sawdust siding. The material is surprisingly attractive and cost-effective, important in a building that costs more to build at the outset, but less than the typical building over time.

Yet the recycled materials alone do not make the NRDC building as green as it is. Attention to energy, people, and water round out the equation.

Though many people think of cars as the root of America's energy problems, the operation of buildings consumes two times the energy of pas-

senger cars and trucks, according to Watson. The new NRDC office uses 60 to 75 percent less energy than a typical office building, through a combination of clean power and energy-efficient design. Though the building receives energy from the city, photovoltaic cells produce approximately 20 percent of the building's electricity. "On summer days," Watson predicts, the solar energy "will run the meter backwards." The building's features aim to reduce the "heat island" effect (which results in \$100 million of extra energy costs in LA). More buildings like this in LA could lower the average temperature three to five degrees and reduce smog formation. And, says the NRDC, "If all commercial buildings in the U.S. were this efficient, the country would achieve 70 percent of its Kyoto Protocol obligation."

The building's attention to light is not just for energy efficiency's sake. "We are meant to be in relationship with nature," said Watson, emphasizing that most people spend 90 percent of their time indoors. Thus the NRDC building incorporates light wells, which serve as part of the ventilation system and bring a little bit of the outdoors to the people indoors. The whole interior emphasizes employee interaction, with a bias towards providing the best views and the most natural light in common areas and other well-populated spaces. Fresh air and natural light (and the ability to control one's supply of them) improve productivity, reduce absenteeism, and provide other benefits to employees, according to Watson.

The building's impressive water conservation system was best displayed during a tour of the bathroom, where Watson asked rhetorically, "In LA, why flush toilets with drinking water?" Hence, the urinals are waterless, and the water used for flushing toilets and washing hands comes from the building's own basement filtering system, which purifies graywater (that from showers and sinks) and storm water (collected from the roof).

When I asked the founders of Equaris, the company that built the graywater recycling system, if a similar system could ever be implemented on a municipal level, I was met with a quizzical look. "If it fails, everybody's screwed," the Equaris folks said. It's better to have your own, they cautioned, to protect against bioterrorism. The water system, like the eye-catching new blue Priuses lined up in the public parking lot across from the headquarters, seemed to appeal both to environmentalism and to individualism. As I drove away, I tried to imagine a city where every home had its own water cleansing system. ■

