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SQUARE FEET

Long Isolated Behind a Freeway, Santa Monica's Civic Center Rejoins Its City

By TERRY PRISTIN

SANTA MONICA, Calif. In contrast to many other places in the Los Angeles area, this small city along the Pacific Ocean has long been easy for pedestrians to navigate — except when it comes to its Civic Center. City Hall, the courthouse and the Civic Auditorium are isolated from the city's vibrant and walkable downtown, separated by the Santa Monica Freeway, overly wide streets and a dreary expanse of parking lots.

A 2005 city planning document concluded that much of the Civic Center reflected "the malaise of urban America today."

Finally, after many years of workshops and hearings, significant steps are being taken to better integrate this section with downtown. Two major construction projects are well under way, including the first new residential development on Ocean Avenue in many years. (Ocean Avenue is actually one street away from the steep bluff overlooking the water.)

On a three-acre site stretching from Ocean Avenue to Main Street, the Related Companies and its partners are building a \$350 million residential complex that will include 158 condominiums, 160 income-restricted rental apartments and 20,000 square feet of retail space. The new development, called the Village at Santa Monica, is bounded on the north by an extension of Olympic Boulevard called Olympic Drive.

Many of the condos, being developed in partnership with the Resmark Companies, a private equity company in Los Angeles, will overlook the second project, which is across Olympic Drive. There, the city has molded six flat acres of parking lots into a \$47 million publicly financed park with hills and fountains as well as two steel-ribbed shell-shaped observation decks for gazing at the ocean and the Santa Monica Pier.

The park, to be known as Tongva Park after the area's first settlers, was designed by James Corner Field Operations, one of the creators of the High Line park on the



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A residential complex referred to as the Village and a new city park are under construction next to the Santa Monica City Hall and Civic Center. A slide show on the development is at nytimes.com/realestate.

West Side of Manhattan. Though Santa Monica, which has a population of about 90,000, offers striking ocean and mountain views, officials say the city is short on open space for playgrounds and picnic areas.

Both the housing complex and the park are being built on land the city bought in 2000 for \$53 million from the RAND Corporation, the research and public policy group with headquarters in Santa Monica. RAND began buying up land near the ocean in the 1950s and accumulated 15 acres by the 1970s.

The research company had sought for years to replace its outdated, sprawling building with money obtained through a land sale or a development deal but confronted fierce resistance from the community, which feared being overrun by commercial construction. The stalemate

was broken when a city manager persuaded the City Council to buy the land. RAND retained 3.7 acres and in November 2004 completed a new 309,000-square-foot elliptical-shaped building on that site.

Now, nearly a decade later, RAND's headquarters building is getting some new neighbors.

Though many residential developments in California face inward and are cut off from their surroundings by security gates, William A. Witte, chief executive of Related California, said a deliberate effort was made to make the new development "porous." Separating the market-rate condos and the rental apartments is a walkway that will be accessible to the public. Building heights will vary from six stories to 10. "By breaking up the mass, it made it more interesting," Mr. Witte said.

Although Related has not begun marketing the condos, which are expected to be completed by the end of the year, Mr. Witte said he expected prices to start at \$700,000 for one-bedrooms. Getting construction financing was challenging, he said, both because of the economy and because the development sits on city-owned land. Financing was ultimately provided by Wells Fargo and HSBC.

Buyers are likely to include people in the technology and entertainment industries who work nearby, in an area that Mr. Witte said was sometimes referred to as “Silicon Beach.” Some inquiries have also come from second-home buyers.

To win the right to develop the condos, Related agreed to prepay its 99-year, \$20 million ground lease — money that was used to help defray the cost of the income-restricted units. Related’s partner in the apartment development is the Community Corporation of Santa Monica, a non-profit organization. It is the largest single development of affordable units that the city has ever been involved in, said Andy Agle, director of housing and economic development. Residents will be selected by lottery, with preference given to people who live or work in Santa Monica.

Mr. Agle said the need for such apartments in Santa Monica, one of the costliest places to live in Southern California,

had risen sharply. In the dozen years after the 1999 enactment of a law that allowed rents to rise to market rate as apartments became vacant, some 60 percent of regulated units were removed from the system, he said. “There was a strong community consensus that we wanted this to be a mixed-income area,” he said, referring to the Civic Center.

Public input was also important in creating the park, which is intended to link the Civic Center, the pier, the Palisades Park along the bluffs, and downtown Santa Monica, officials said. “When we looked at old photographs, we saw that this used to be an arroyo, where rivers washed down to the bluffs to the water,” said Lisa Tziona Switkin, an associate partner at James Corner Field Operations. “The sweeps and curves were inspired by the Southern California landscape.”

The designers created four hills, each with separate functions. One will feature horticultural displays, and another will accommodate picnicking or informal gatherings; a third has a playground, with shiny purple and yellow play forts, and the fourth is meant for enjoying panoramic views. Expected to be finished by the fall, the park is likely to draw visitors from other parts of Los Angeles, with some potentially arriving by public transportation. A new light-rail line that now

goes from Los Angeles to Culver City is in the process of being extended to Colorado Boulevard and Fourth Street, a block away from the park.

James Corner’s firm has also redesigned the one-acre park in front of city’s low-slung white “Deco Moderne” City Hall on Main Street. The building was completed in 1939 as a Public Works Administration project. The new Ken Genser Square, named for a popular former mayor and city councilman, will serve as a more formal civic space than Tongva Park, Ms. Switkin said.

More remains to be done to fulfill Santa Monica’s longstanding goal of improving its Civic Center. The city hopes eventually to renovate and update City Hall, but no money is available to do that now, said Miriam Mulder, the city architect.

And the dissolution of the state’s redevelopment agencies, a cost-cutting measure, meant that a \$50 million plan to update the city’s 1958 Civic Auditorium, between Fourth and Main Streets, also had to be shelved. The city is seeking alternative ways to finance that project, officials said.

Still, said Karen Ginsburg, the city’s director of community and cultural services, the residential complex and the new Tongva Park will go a long way toward realizing the city’s vision.