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CLAREMONT VISIONARIES TURN CITY'S LAST-REMAINING CITRUS PACKING HOUSE INTO A CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL HUB

Claremont, CA (March 27, 2007)—Along the train tracks of downtown Claremont sits a striking industrial building with corrugated metal walls, huge skylights, and a saw-tooth roof. The structure is the largest historic building in downtown and, until recently, was slated for demolition. Thanks to visionary community members, however, it will instead open to the public in April 2007 as a mixed-use building with upstairs lofts and ground-floor restaurants, shops, a jazz club, a non-profit used bookstore, and the long-awaited Claremont Museum of Art.

The building is the College Heights Lemon Packing House, which was built in 1922 and is one of four citrus packing houses erected in Claremont. The only one still standing, it is one of the last remaining monuments to the city's pioneering role in the citrus industry during the first half of the 20th century, a role that dwindled by the late sixties when tract housing development became more lucrative.

The building ceased operation as a packing house in 1972, and over the years that followed, it housed an eclectic variety of tenants, including a food co-op, comic book shop, art supply store, storage facility, and studio space for artists and musicians. "Every generation in the city remembers different things about the building," said Mark von Wodtke, architect and long-time Claremont resident. "Older generations remember it as a citrus packing house, younger ones as a place for band practice. The various stories connected to the building are an important part of the community's history."

Von Wodtke has been intimately involved with the Packing House since 1974, when the then-owner requested a study for its adaptive reuse potential. However, the owner – and the one following – lacked the capital for adequate retrofitting and renovations, so the idea didn't leave the concept stage.

Von Wodtke became closely involved with the building again in 2001 when the new owner, the City of Claremont, determined it should be torn down. Working with Claremont Heritage and other community members, von Wodtke initiated a media campaign to save the building. He organized an exhibit that explored potential reuse ideas, and he toured Claremont leaders through a lemon packing house at the University of La Verne, which his architecture firm, Claremont Environmental Design Group (CEDG) renovated.

In 2002, CEDG introduced its "Packing House Park" idea to the community, which suggested renovating the structure into a mixed-use building with live/work lofts, an art school or museum, a bookstore, and other amenities.

"The Packing House was saved because the community rallied to save it," von Wodtke said. "It is an empowering story. It reminds people they're not helpless in determining the future of their community."

The Packing House redevelopment is part of the five-phase, multi-block Village Expansion Project, which includes housing, a Laemmle Theatre, an upscale boutique hotel, and dozens of stores, including American Apparel. The housing is completed, and the other components will open by late 2007.

Green Design at the Packing House

The Packing House renovation effort includes a notable number of ‘green’ features that collectively reduce energy use, water consumption, and construction waste. This is central to CEDG’s design practice and is also a priority for Developer Jerry Tessier of Arteco Partners.

Arteco is a blend of the words “art” and “ecology” and convey the company’s interest in creative and environmentally thoughtful ventures. With a niche in the adaptive reuse of historic buildings, Tessier and his family are responsible for the turnaround of Ontario’s Emporia Arts District and a dozen historic buildings in the Pomona Arts Colony. The Tessier’s also develop new construction on brownfield sites.

CEDG has practiced sustainable and regenerative design since its inception in 1978. The firm’s multidisciplinary approach combines architecture, landscape architecture, and planning, and its role in the Packing House includes working closely with Arteco on the conceptual design, obtaining architectural approvals for building permits, and designing the site development. In addition, von Wodtke and his associate David Robinson are donating their time for the design and construction management of the Museum and the non-profit Claremont Forum, which runs the used bookstore.

The most noticeable environmental feature of the Packing House is the significant daylighting that pours into the building, reducing the need for lights and keeping the building warmer during the winter. The many operating windows provide natural ventilation, which cools the building in the summer. The saw-tooth roof is ideal for the solar electric panels that will be installed later this year by von Wodtke’s company Energy Harvester. Elements like low-flush toilets, an energy-efficient central boiler, and energy-efficient insulation further contribute to resource savings. “And, of course, the building itself was recycled,” von Wodtke said. “Just in terms of conservation and ecology, if you can recycle an entire building, that’s pretty significant.”

By reusing building materials – such as the hardwood floors, windows, structural timbers, metal trusses, metal fire doors, and the corrugated metal ceiling and siding – an immense amount of energy was saved by not requiring the old materials to be shipped off to landfills and new materials to be manufactured and shipped to the site. Other old materials were given new, creative uses; such as the old steel rod structural ties that were reborn as guardrails.

Tessier said, “The original 1922 wood floors and timber columns, the amazing skylights, the soaring iron trusses – it’s a re-developer’s dream to save and renovate a space like this. By doing things like turning the 300-foot-long loading dock into a boardwalk, we’re creating a one-of-a-kind environment that honors Claremont’s history in a new, vibrant way.”

The site’s environmental features extend to the CEDG-designed landscaping, comprised of mostly drought-tolerant plants, some of which are natives to the area. Permeable pavement was used in a few areas of the site to reduce water pollution by absorbing toxins instead of allowing them to seep into the groundwater.

The building’s location is also sustainable. Centrally positioned in the Village and within walking distance from the colleges, the Packing House is easily accessible by foot, bike, and train. “It’s just two blocks from the train depot,” von Wodtke said. “I hope visitors from Downtown L.A. and other locations will make use of the convenient Metrolink trains.”

The Claremont Museum of Art

With 7,400 square feet of exhibition space, a store, sculpture garden, offices, and storage space, the Claremont Museum of Art will occupy part of the west end of the Packing House.

Museum Executive Director William Moreno said the Museum's location within the Packing House is exciting. "The building is not only a significant part of the community, it's also a wonderful building design-wise. The industrial architecture is ideal for a museum. The open space, exposed ceilings and industrial details are a perfect compliment to art exhibitions."

The Museum will be a regional museum of international significance, exhibiting art connected to Claremont as well as art from around the world. In addition to a diverse slate of exhibits, the museum will feature a sizeable gift shop that will include arts and crafts from local artists. A comprehensive slate of educational programming and events will be offered for all ages. The Museum is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization.

"The Claremont Museum of Art at the Packing House is not only a celebration of art, it is a celebration of this place and its history," said von Wodtke, a founding board member of the Museum. "The Packing House was started by families supporting the citrus industry. Now that the Packing House is being renovated, the community is coming together again – this time to support art. It is very rewarding to see the community come together to make this happen."

The inaugural exhibit, *A Conversation with Color: Karl Benjamin, Paintings 1953-1995*, will feature 46 paintings spanning 42 years that trace Karl Benjamin's career, from his early experiments with cubism to works that represent his role as one of the founders of abstract classicism. The permanent collection, *Building a Legacy: Founding a Museum, Building a Collection*, will occupy the smaller of the two museum galleries with works exhibited by notable local artists on a rotating basis.

The Museum's April 15 public opening will take place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event will include free admission, live music, a street painter, and family art activities.

Museum hours are Wednesday through Monday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed on Tuesday. The museum store is open seven days a week from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. The museum and store are open until 8 p.m. the first Friday of every month and are closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

Admission to the Museum is free through May. Beginning June 1, admission is \$3.00 for adults and free for those under 18.

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