

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

Jean Nouvel designs a green machine for Century City

The architect's condo plan calls for gardens and energy conservation in a slim, livable package. Can his self-named 'green blade' thrive?

By Christopher Hawthorne, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Jean Nouvel wants to add a hybrid to the Century City skyline.

The French architect's proposal for a \$400-million, 45-story luxury condo tower at 10000 Santa Monica Blvd., unveiled Friday, is born of two species of architectural thinking that have long been in opposition.

As a looming object in the cityscape, the design -- not only Nouvel's first Los Angeles commission but also his first project west of Minneapolis, where his remarkable, brooding Guthrie Theater opened two years ago -- is an ode to architecture's Modernist heroes. A tall, monolithic and almost impossibly thin slab, it resembles nothing so much as the 39-story United Nations tower, a 1953 building designed by an international team of architects, including the French master Le Corbusier.

In that sense, it recalls a period when architecture sought to be the antithesis of nature and organic design -- and used landscape, if at all, only as a dramatic foil. In 1923, as the Modern movement was ascendant, Le Corbusier famously defined a house as "a machine for living in." Nouvel's Century City tower, designed to hold 177 residential units, is a machine for a few hundred people to live in. With condos ranging from 3,400 to 9,500 square feet apiece, they will presumably pay richly for the privilege.

At the same time, however, the unusually narrow profile of Nouvel's design -- think of a BlackBerry or a deck of cards propped on one end -- is also a sign of things to come. The very same shape that connects the building to classic Modernism may also link it with the green-design movement, allowing it to operate with a remarkable degree of energy efficiency.

That's why other recent small- and mid-rise towers that have trumpeted their green credentials -- including Thom Mayne's Federal Building in San Francisco, which opened last year, and the Broad Art Center at UCLA by Michael Palladino and Richard Meier -- share almost exactly the same profile. So will many new towers in the planning stages in cities across the world.

The building's dimensions -- it will be 600

feet tall, 325 feet wide and just 50 feet deep -- will allow sunlight to reach deep into each unit, so residents can keep their lights off during most of the day. Those dimensions may also allow natural ventilation, lowering air-conditioning use.

Nouvel's client, SunCal Cos., says it is aiming for mid-level certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). According to the developer, the project will win LEED points from the council because its residents will be able to take advantage of Century City on foot, leaving their cars in the underground garage and walking to restaurants and theaters in this increasingly dense patch of Los Angeles.

Century City, with its broad boulevards and wide-open, moonscape urbanism, as a pedestrian paradise? That will be news to many of those who live and work there already. But we can hope, at least, that the neighborhood keeps evolving in that direction. And it's certainly true that high-rise living, if accompanied by transit and other shared services at ground level, can be green living.

It's more than hoped-for efficiency, however, that makes Nouvel's building such a marked blend of old-fashioned Modernism and green design. It is also the way that he has envisioned landscaping creeping around, up and even through the building.

Working with the L.A. firm Rios Clementi Hale Studios, Nouvel has designed the tower to rise from a lush, 40,000-square-foot garden. Because the building is pushed to the extreme edge of its site, right where it meets Santa Monica Boulevard, the garden will unfurl at its feet like a carpet.

On the floors above, each unit will include both northern and southern exposure, with end units wrapped in glass on three sides. Additional landscaping -- using a special hydroponic system to avoid cluttering the tower's streamlined shape with planters or dirt -- will be added by the design team to terraces on each floor. Units will also have private gardens.

The knock on spare, undecorated towers

built in the Corbusian tradition is that they are entirely placeless, alienating residents from their immediate surroundings and any sense of regional connection. Nouvel sees the building's landscaping and the other ways that it takes advantage of the climate as a way to soften that reputation, knitting the tower directly into its location. He has dubbed the tower "the green blade."

It's essentially the same approach that has guided Frank Gehry and his pair of landscape architects, first Laurie Olin and now Nancy Goslee Power, on their designs for the Grand Avenue project downtown, which also tries to take a lush setting at street level and extend it vertically.

As Nouvel puts it, "Twenty-first century contemporary architecture must express the art of living in a particular place at a particular time."

That sort of contextual logic was anathema to architecture's Modernist pioneers. And it's far too early to buy completely into the rhetoric in this case, as appealing as it sounds. If the plants on each terrace fail to grow in as densely as planned, it's easy to imagine the building as just another oversized, overheated glass box, if a bit more elegantly shaped than most. Nouvel's L.A. debut is, by his standards, rather straightforward, less compellingly odd and off-kilter than much of his recent high-rise work in New York and Europe; shorn of all of that greenery, it would lose much of its architectural appeal. But if the landscaping in the final product manages to match these initial renderings, the tower may qualify as a curious coup: a machine for living with a verdant, Southern California twist.