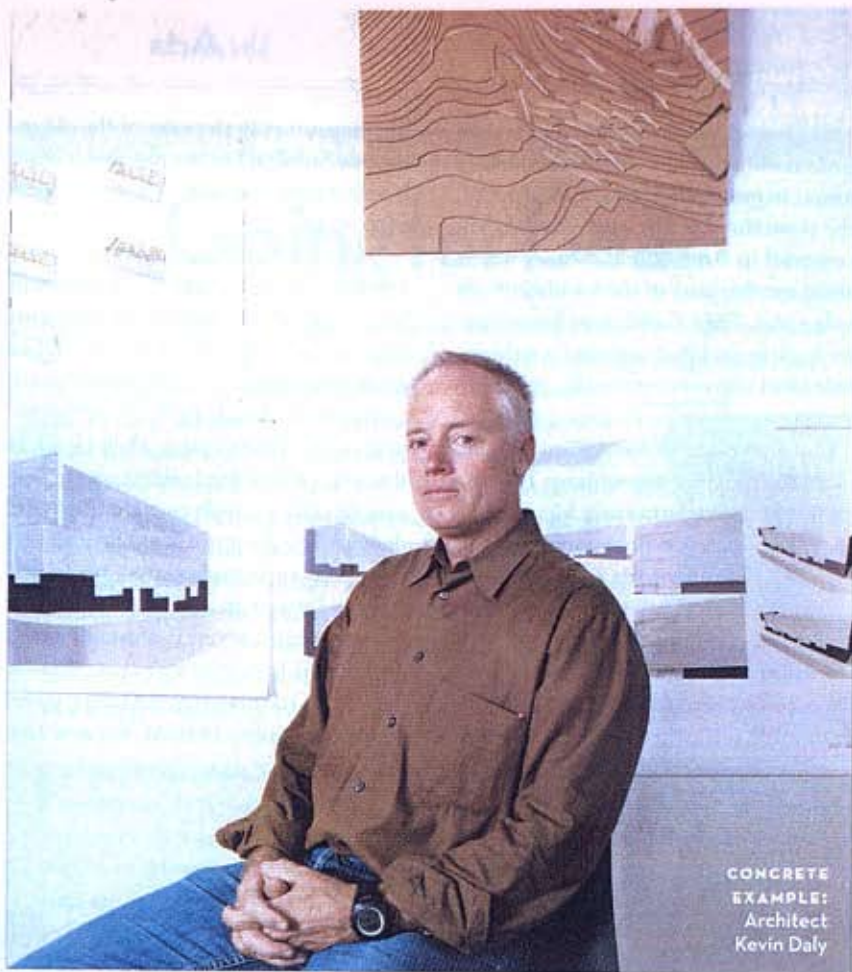


might involve. In *Top Gun* and *Cocktail*, Cruise so successfully embodied the '80s—a decade that raised narcissism to an ethic—that now the depth of tragedy that intuitively informs most great acting eludes him; in his genuine yearning to find real gravity in the last ten years, he's also lost the joy of the early films. The goofy abandon of Cruise's dance around the pool table to "Werewolves of London" in *The Color of Money* has given way to *The Last Samurai's* stately Kabuki and what is now Cruise's trademark ferocity of focus.

Edward Zwick is an honorable filmmaker, not even remotely a hack, whose movies are clearly labors of love. But there's no craziness in his soul; at best his films win your respect but never transport you. Uma Thurman aside, there may not be another movie star of Cruise's generation who could persuasively pull off *The Last Samurai's* most heroic moments, as when he single-handedly dispatches three or four enemies in the streets of Tokyo. Once you've taught yourself to blow a solitary bubble out of a solitary nostril, a thousand years of samurai tradition is pretty much a snap. Less convincing is the desperate death wish that drives Cruise's character and motivates *The Last Samurai*. The self-defilement that characterizes Nathan Algren remains either beyond Cruise's reach or, more likely, his will to reach, not in terms of his command of actorly technique but some inner leap of the psyche that can't be translated by choreography or craft. Tellingly, the most affecting performance in the film finally isn't Cruise's but Ken Watanabe's as samurai lord Katsumoto. To Tom Cruise's credit, over the last ten years he's taken a lot of chances: People forget how bold and controversial it was when he accepted the role of the homoerotic Lestat in *Interview with the Vampire*. But sooner or later the mark of every great artist is that he risks making a fool of himself, which isn't the same as playing characters who make fools of themselves. An inner chasm divides Cruise's admirable gambling instinct from the dangerous rapture of an actor willing to go someplace from which he can never come back. Cruise is always an actor with a way back, with compasses for eyes and a map in lieu of faith.

(L.A.)



CONCRETE
EXAMPLE:
Architect
Kevin Daly



ARCHITECTURE

Park Place

Daly Genik's small buildings in Santa Monica imbue bleak public spaces with quiet beauty by **Greg Goldin**

THE JUST-COMPLETED REST ROOMS, concession stands, announcer's booth, and storage sheds at Memorial Park and Los Amigos Park, designed by Daly Genik Architects, are proof that good buildings don't necessarily have to be great buildings. Architecture can be discreet and small and still be inspiring.

The structures, built for \$1.5 million, are located in two of Santa Monica's least inviting, though heavily used, parks. Memorial, on Olympic between 16th and 14th, is surrounded by industrial and commercial buildings. Los Amigos, between 6th and 5th off Ocean Park, is pressed into a long city block crowded with apartments and cars. This is tricky turf. The parks are modest, blandly functional. Because the structures are similarly modest, the ambitions of the architecture had to be carefully calibrated. The parks' small buildings must be durable yet aesthetically pleasing, noticeable without becoming the focus of attention.

Done right, as they are here, inexpensive buildings like these can be a refreshing

tonic in a region that of late has had an insatiable appetite for architecture meant to propitiate the rich, the famous, the powerful. For the cost of a kitchen remodel in Brentwood, social needs along another part of the bandwidth are being met. Daly Genik uses innovative technology to bend seemingly unbendable steel and concrete walls, subtly reshaping an otherwise invisible landscape. The sculpted and deformed surfaces are more than engineering whimsy. They are a way of imbuing otherwise bleak public spaces with a quiet, unannounced beauty. The encounter with the architects' playful forms and undulating textures offers anyone a respite, free of charge, from the daily grind. Consciously or not, these little structures are a nod to Frederick Law Olmsted's 19th-century faith in

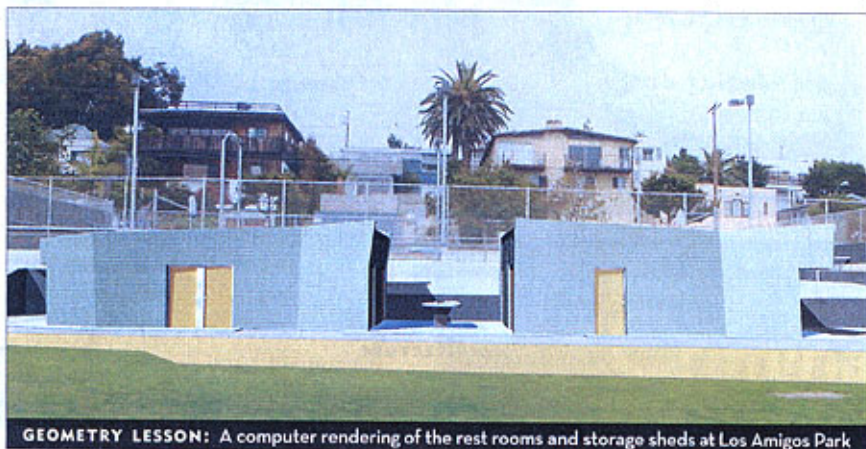
piercing not only the sides of the old industrial building but the top, Daly Genik is opening the complex to the randomness of street life.

Nine Santa Monica parks are being updated; Memorial and Los Amigos will be completed between January and March. The city chose Daly Genik because the firm believed it could create cookie-cutter buildings that wouldn't appear to be cookie-cutter. Daly Genik is devising a repeatable building system, but one flexible enough to yield different designs. The objective is to find a way to mass-produce individual structures (much the way Detroit and Stuttgart hope to do with the next generation of automobiles) and avoid building concrete-block bunkers of the kind that dot public parks across the nation. In short, the new rest

in Culver City, where stanchions must first be installed and the deformed skin applied—Metal Stud Crete involves prefab assembly. Think of mass-produced, injection-molded plastic, not papier-mâché. You can pour the sides of the buildings off-site, allowing, in this case, the parks to remain open during construction; you can color the concrete skin, add textures, and make patterns; and you can distort each section from top to bottom and end to end, producing warped surfaces. Once cast, the buildings go up in a day or two, the sides lifted into place with a crane.

The buildings at Memorial and Los Amigos can be read differently at different times of day, and from different perspectives—close up or far away—inside or outside the parks. If one peers, for instance, through the chain-link fence that lines the western edge of Los Amigos Park, toward the new rest rooms, one will see a pair of greenish, vaguely trapezoidal buildings with a houndstooth check embossed in their concrete surfaces. Several paces closer, and the surface lines become less legible as a specific form and appear crumpled. The buildings look as if they are made of a soft, woven material. No pattern is easily discernible, even though the walls consist of four repeated patterns. At this level of detail the building can seem to shimmer. It almost never leaves the same visual impression, especially as the sun moves in its arc across the sky. The rippling voids and flats cast their own shadows, like swells on the ocean. On still closer inspection, the scale is reduced to the tactile: The concrete skin is made of long, thin ridges and valleys that invite touching.

The buildings at Memorial and Los Amigos also morph at another, larger scale. The walls themselves are twisted. Imagine holding a sheet of paper at two diagonal corners and pulling it tight. Even though all four edges of the paper will remain straight, the middle will seem to curve in or out. Daly Genik did something akin to this with Metal Stud Crete. The studs stay straight along the same plane, but by tilting them out as they near one corner, they appear to bend. The tilting walls are in a sense another version of the textured surfaces. They break the monotony of the gridiron-flat parks. The effect



GEOMETRY LESSON: A computer rendering of the rest rooms and storage sheds at Los Amigos Park

parks as the linchpin of urban democracy.

The new work advances Daly Genik's reputation for buildings that acknowledge the grittier details of the urban context without pandering to gentrification. At Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, in an abandoned minimall near MacArthur Park, the firm recycled a disposable building into a series of enclosed spaces that gave children a sense of being cared for without being hemmed in. Latticework screens divided the Burlington Street commercial plot into arenas of play and learning in a neighborhood where both are imperiled. In the decommissioned Caltech wind tunnel, next to the Gold Line and the Pasadena Power Plant, the firm is designing an exhibition space, studios, and classrooms that will unite students, teachers, and gallery crawlers under one roof. By

rooms, concession stands, and storage buildings had to be unique even if they were from the same mold.

TWO YEARS AGO, partner Kevin Daly saw an ad in a trade publication that seemed to answer the firm's aims. It said, "The next time you consider an a.m./p.m. minimart, consider Metal Stud Crete." The system, invented by a Pasadena construction firm, consists of a thin cast-concrete skin on a steel frame. Simple and elegant, the two materials act in unison to provide greater strength at a quarter of the weight of less malleable concrete block. Surface, structure, and form are integrated into one precast piece. Rather than with layered construction—such as Frank Gehry's Disney Hall or Eric Owen Moss's Pterodactyl

is of an outcropping on a high desert floor—unexpected but not out of place.

"We were driven by the realization," says Kevin Daly, who oversaw the project, "of how small-scale these buildings were. They might end up looking so static, so banal. By changing the geometry and the surface area and the nature of the surface, we give an essentially identical building a different fingerprint."

Building in public parks today requires hard-nosed optimism. The fiscal crisis of the state and its cities coincides, sadly, with the decline of the idea of the public park. Parks are busy year-round, but within their boundaries is a shrinking sense of community. Memorial and Los Amigos are more like pitches than commons. The edges of Memorial, for instance, are home to the city's despised and ubiquitous homeless, the ragged-trousered vagabonds who use the nearby free showers and bed down beneath the occasional tree or shrub, while the park itself is a field for well-equipped softball teams. Yet both the ballplayers and the homeless are transients. It is hard to imagine Memorial or Los Amigos pulling the neighbors together for a town hall assembly or a political rally. Strolling, as in Central Park or the Jardin du Luxembourg, is unimaginable.

Daly Genik has been forced to design around the abiding fact that our public spaces are needed but not loved. The architects have been commissioned to build rest rooms and concession stands—buildings destined for "rowdy use," as Daly says, but not much in the way of a use that will promote common cause. The choice of materials was dictated by ill use and hard use. It would have been easy to succumb to the public's generally neglectful attitude and build bunkers. Instead Daly Genik added beauty and visual complexity to a drab environment. The work has larger implications as well. The devotion to innovation and detail demonstrates that a generous spirit can help keep alive even the smallest of our public institutions. The pursuit of the extraordinary amid the ordinary ought to convince us, in these straitened and unenlightened times, that our shared heritage is worth resurrecting.

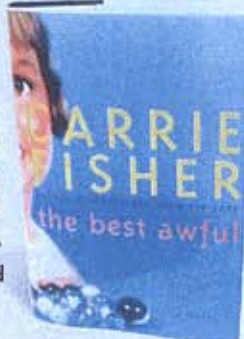
LA

KATHLEEN CLARK

NONFICTION / FICTION

Going for Bear

THE DEPRESSING truth about rehab novels is that all the fun stuff happens at the beginning. After the wild parties and three-day binges and mad-cap adventures, what's left? Pain, healing, forgiveness, the shakes. All the rehabilitative moments that are good for mind and body seldom make for great reading. Carrie Fisher's *The Best Awful* (Simon & Schuster, 288 pages, \$24) is the exception, a rehab novel that sustains its humor and manic energy. The long-awaited sequel to her 1987 *Postcards from the Edge*—Fisher's best-selling roman à clef about Hollywood, Percodan, and celebrity family life—brings back her acerbic heroine Suzanne, a bit older, none the wiser, and as quick-witted and sharp-tongued as ever.



IN THE 1800s, there were tens of thousands of grizzlies in California, feasting on salmon, foraging for berries, and occasionally scaring the bejesus out of the locals (full-grown, the bears could weigh half a ton). By 1924, the beasts had been driven to extinction, their end so quick and so complete that scientists struggled to find a whole specimen. *Bear in Mind: The California Grizzly*, edited by Susan Snyder (Heyday Books, 244 pages, \$60), is full of fantastical tales and rarely seen images from this period—including more than 150 paintings, photos, and ephemera culled from UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Miwok creation myths and travelers' accounts run alongside newspaper articles, with little editorial effort spent trying to separate fact from breathless fiction. One guesses this would have been a futile task. As one writer notes, "Every bear story gets about 400 pounds heavier in the telling."



PUBLISHED a year before September 11, Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback* was both praised and attacked for its scathing left-wing critique of U.S. foreign policy and its prediction that American actions overseas would have horrible, unforeseeable consequences. In *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (Metropolitan Books, 320 pages, \$25), Johnson, a professor emeritus in political science at UC San Diego, examines the growing anti-U.S. sentiment in a post-9/11 world. To many, he argues, America has become the evil empire, expanding its power and influence under the guise of "humanitarian intervention." Some of his examples are overstated: The military has certainly pushed Hollywood to create prowar movies, but did anyone actually enlist after seeing *Pearl Harbor*? Still, many of Johnson's points are persuasive, in particular the effects of this country's vast web of army and navy bases—more than 700 and counting—encircling the globe. —Robert Ito

