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Renowned architect touches down in San Ramon



Last week, Italy's most famous architect spent three days in New York checking in at his new campus he's designing for Columbia University. The next stop was Los Angeles, where his motion picture museum is under construction.

Then, early Saturday, he flew to the Bay Area to focus on what may be the most unusual project in the current portfolio of Renzo Piano Building Workshop — a shopping center in suburban San Ramon.

"I have two rules. Never draw anything without first being in the place, and always visit to see how your design is being built," said Piano, 80, best known in the Bay Area for his transformation of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. "If you ignore either rule, you betray the profession."

The five hours that Piano spent in San Ramon, a prosperous young city of 75,000 on the southern edge of Contra Costa County, offered a snapshot into the work habits of the top breed of international brand-name architects, and how they're always on the move. It also suggested, thankfully, that not all of them are content with churning out high-profile cultural buildings and towers.

Piano knows the marquee projects well: his high-rise roster includes a 37-story mix of hotel and condominiums that should **break ground in San Francisco next spring**, and the Academy of

Sciences, one of a long list of cultural facilities on four continents. But despite several honors that include a lifetime appointment to the Italian Senate, Piano isn't afraid to try something because it's something new.

So he was receptive in 2012 to feelers from the owners of the land in San Ramon where City Center Bishop Ranch is now taking shape. The overtures came from the Mehran family, whose Sunset Development Co. has spent the past 35 years turning the former Bishop Ranch into the embodiment of a successful suburban office park.

A full 585 acres near Interstate 680 contain 50 light-toned buildings of five stories or fewer, all of them cloaked in trees and accompanied by tranquil fountains. The tenant list includes such blue-chip names as General Electric, IBM and AT&T. Parking is abundant, of course.

The one thing that's missing is the hint of the unexpected. Put another way, it lacks a cosmopolitan twist to the convenient norm.



“The first time we met I said, ‘Why do you call us?’” Piano said. “They said, ‘We want to create a place for people to meet.’” That’s what intrigued Piano. It’s the notion of what he calls a “territorial project,” the chance to be, he said, “the energizer of all these areas.”

“The suburbs I know (in Europe), they’re often not positive things,” Piano said. “This is a challenge.” Before the plans for the shopping center were unveiled in 2014, Piano and Antonio Belvedere, one of the partners in his firm, caught a flight to San Ramon. They toured Bishop Ranch with Alexander Mehran Sr. and his son — Alex Jr. — and played with ideas.

“You have to mentally record the place, put it in the back part of your brain, a hologram in your

mind,” said Piano, never at a loss for words even in his third or fourth language. “Then you can be in an airplane. You can be in your office drinking a good grappa. You have that memory” and design work can begin.

City Center Bishop Ranch in concept is simple. It’s envisioned as two tall levels of retail space in two buildings that together form a hollowed-out rectangle with a one-acre “piazza” at its heart. The storefronts will be clad in ultra-clear glass. The upper floor facing the surrounding streets will be sheathed by corrugated stainless steel. Second-story walkways above the piazza will include awnings to deflect rain in the winter and heat in the summer.



The bones are in place, the concrete and steel columns and frames. The only hint of the future skin is a full-scale mockup in a nearby parking lot. For Piano’s visit, the piazza’s landscaping was indicated by orange traffic cones for trees, and a traced rectangle in the middle where grass someday will grow.

This far along, there’s only so much an architect can do, no matter how internationally renowned one might be. Still, there were decisions to be made about the banners that will be stripped atop the corrugated metal, announcing tenants or events. About the texture of the piazza’s paving. Should the exposed concrete columns be polished?

Standing within the central space, Piano looked genuinely pleased.

“The scale is right for this environment, not gigantic,” he said. “Public space of this sort must be strong enough, but not intimidating or monumental.”

The final product, which still is at least a year away, will reveal if Piano and his firm have found a way to thread urbanity into the 'burbs — or if his “city center” and “piazza” are just an updated mall with an open-air food court. The taut clarity for which Piano is known, like the lean cables that will brace

the frames for the banners, may not register with affluent locals in search of festive food before Hollywood's latest.

But here's what I like. We get to see how the experiment plays out.

"The perspective we have, controlling the amount of land that we have, is to try and create a new suburban model," said Alex Mehran Sr., whose father first turned Bishop Ranch from an orchard into a business address. That's why the family reached out to Piano, he said. "We would rather overreach than underreach."

As for Piano, he just laughed when asked how he plans to slow down now that he has entered his ninth decade.

"Why ever should I slow down?" he said. "This is the only thing I can do. It's a joy."