

HISTORY OF THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE
ARCH-X 472.6A

JOHN FERRARO BUILDING AND PLAZA



STUDENT - BRENNAN GROH
INSTRUCTOR - JC MILLER



Photo: Archeyes.com



Photo: Archeyes.com

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The John Ferraro Building, originally known as the General Office Building and more popularly known as the LADWP (Los Angeles Department of Water and Power) headquarters, along with the site it sits on was completed in 1965 on the western end of Bunker Hill. The site sits across an axial view, looking out across the Music Center and down Grand Park to City Hall. Albert C. Martin and Associates designed the building while Cornell, Bridgers, Troller designed the original surrounding landscape. Together, the building and site are undoubtedly Modernist masterpieces worthy of its Historic-Cultural Monument status granted in 2012.

MODERNISM IN LOS ANGELES

This Modernist building looked to the future, embraced innovation, and utilized materials connected to the International-style of architecture. Its frame is made of vertical steel beams which appear to suspend concrete floor slabs in space. These concrete slabs extend 12' beyond a curtain wall of smoke-colored glass. While it is aesthetically Modernist to this day, the architects set out to focus on much more than appearance.



PUTTING THE 'WP' IN LADWP

The building was high-concept for its time, going beyond Modernist aesthetics. The architects wanted to make a statement with both the conceptual design and function of the building and site. If Corbusier referred to his houses as 'Machines for Living', then the John Ferraro Building is a 'Machine for Working'.

The building sits on a pedestal surrounded by an expansive 2 million gallon moat of water that appears to float above a subterranean parking garage. This feature not only makes for an impressive entrance, highlighting one of the resources LADWP provides to the area, but is also meant to help minimize the building's air conditioning load by up to 1/3 through circulation in the HVAC system.

The horizontal concrete floor slabs mentioned above also play a functional role. The cantilevered shapes help to shade the windows from direct sunlight, helping to keep the building cooler during the day.

At night time, the lights come on and illuminate the whole building from within. The concrete floor slabs help to reflect the light outward. Some people have referred to the building and its glowing appearance as a 'lantern on the hill'. Again, this was not just a visual metaphor that the architect was trying to communicate regarding the power that LADWP supplies to the region; the lights played an additional role. By keeping the lights on at night, the building absorbed heat and eliminated the need for additional heating at the time. All of these features were considered to be sustainable practices ahead of their time in 1965.





Photo: dtlaexplorer.com



Photo: dtlaexplorer.com

THE SITE TODAY

The site continues to evolve as an example of sustainability for Los Angeles. The vast moat and fountains have run dry. In my research, one source cited repairs while others mentioned the drought and more responsible water use practices. The landscaping also evolved with the ongoing drought. In 2016, the city unveiled two 'demonstration gardens' at the front of the site as an example of more responsible, drought-friendly landscaping practices. Additionally, a field of solar panels was installed over much of the surface parking area. A site that once boasted the resources of water and electricity is now focused on conservation and leading by example for its citizens. While I would argue that the city could do even more to address climate change, these actions all speak back to the design's Modernist roots.

ANOTHER LOOK: IF IT'S NOT BAROQUE, DON'T FIX IT

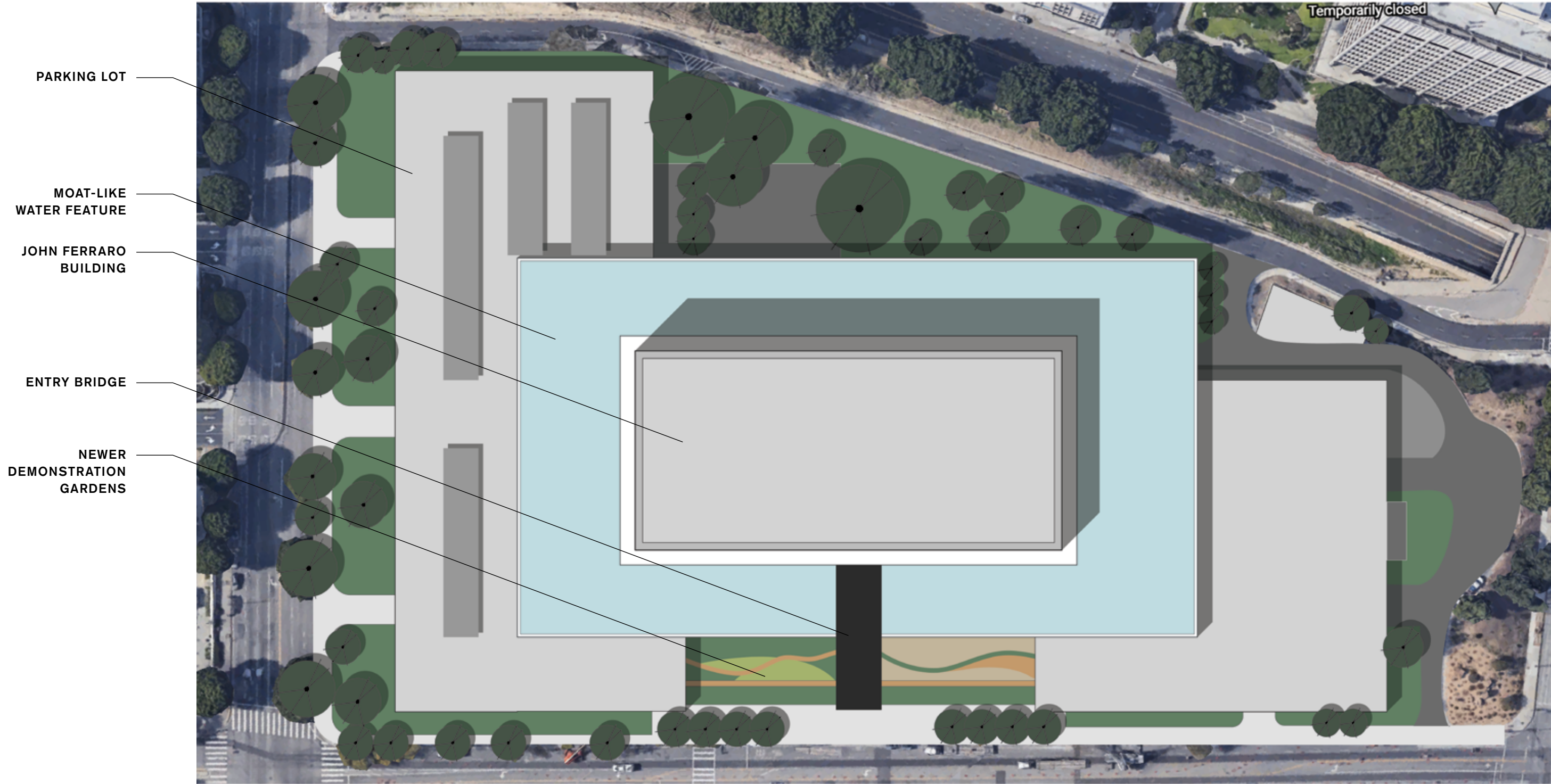
Hear me out. I'm by no means saying that the John Ferraro LADWP building and site were directly inspired by Baroque/Renaissance gardens. However, there is a conceptual tie that I wanted to explore.

Baroque gardens were constructed as a show of power and wealth; they were meant to be a direct reflection on the people they were created for and a political statement of sorts. A dominant theme was the demonstration of control over nature. It highlighted man's superiority to the natural world. For instance, in some cases rivers were diverted to fill canals and help operate grand water features on these wealthy estates.

While the original intentions for the massive water feature and light display at the John Ferraro building were meant to be experiments in sustainability, it's hard to look past the boastful display of resources and the power/control LADWP has on the area. The scale of water on the site and the moated layout are evocative of work by Le Notre at Vaux-le-Vicomte. Additionally, Is there a demonstration of man's control over nature in the area better than controlling the flow of water into a Southern California city like Los Angeles?



Photo: CNTraveler.com



PARKING LOT

MOAT-LIKE
WATER FEATURE

JOHN FERRARO
BUILDING

ENTRY BRIDGE

NEWER
DEMONSTRATION
GARDENS

Temporarily closed



1"=50'-0"



PARKING LOT

SOLAR PANEL
ADDITION

MOAT-LIKE
WATER FEATURE

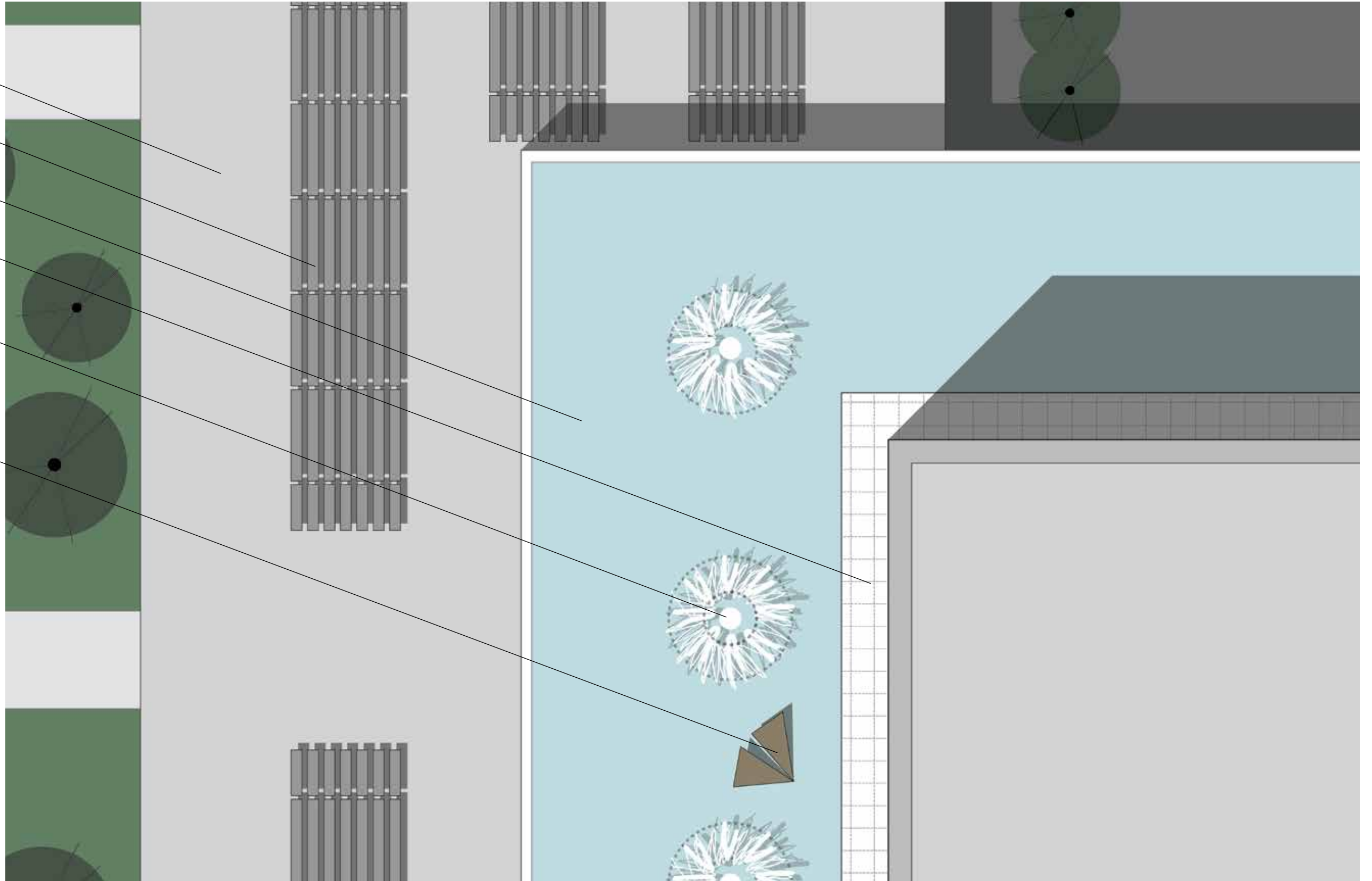
'PEDESTAL'
SURFACE

FOUNTAIN

MODERNIST
SCULPTURE



Photo: Archeyes.com



1" = 20'-0"



THANK YOU

SOURCES

laconservancy.org

sah-archipedia.org

aiacalifornia.org

waterandpower.org

kpsc.org

ladwpnews.com

architect.com

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