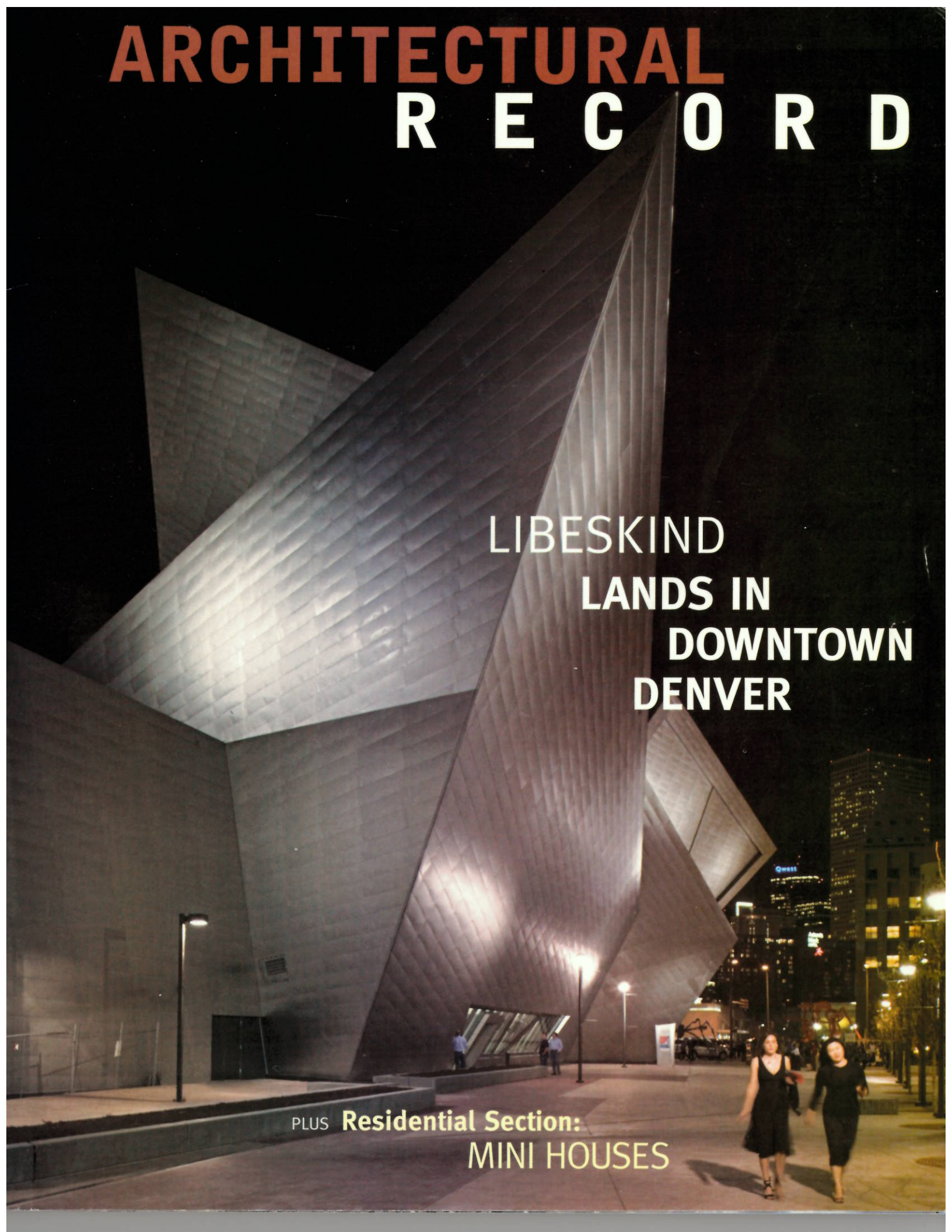


# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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# For and about the emerging architect

## archrecord2

DEPARTMENTS

What outside forces significantly affect the design aesthetics or practice philosophies of emerging firms? For **assembledge+**, it's location. These architects love the Southern California climate and lifestyle, and their design reflects it. For **Christian Wassmann**, it's people. Spending years working and watching architects he respects has turned him into a solo practitioner with influential mentors. Join our new forum and tell us what inspires you at [archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/](http://archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/).

### Design

#### **assembledge+:** To live and design in L.A.



For David Thompson and Kevin Southerland, principals of Los Angeles-based firm **assembledge+**, early influences have had a direct impact on the direction their nine-year-old, six-person firm is taking. Thompson, whose father is an architect, was raised in the heart of Hollywood, and Southerland grew up in suburban Southern California just as the sprawling valley was under development.

Both took architecture/model-making classes in their public high schools (lets hear it for California schools!), and have traveled enough to realize just what a stimulating place they are lucky enough to call home.

Thompson began his career working with prominent L.A. firms such as Lorcan O'Herlihy Architects and Syndesis, and Southerland worked for Frank O. Gehry Architects, Neil Denari Architects, Gensler, and then also O'Herlihy. Inspired by entrepreneurs like David Hertz, principal of Syndesis, Thompson began building furniture. "I thought furniture would be my calling," he says, "but it led me to start **assembledge+** and move to New York City for three years before coming back to L.A." O'Herlihy's firm was growing rapidly, and he asked Thompson to work for him on a contract basis. Thompson credits O'Herlihy's generous business practices for giving **assembledge+** momentum, and when he and Southerland decided they wanted to take the firm a step further, and off the beaten track, by going into development, they had O'Herlihy's blessing. "Development seemed a natural evolution of our interests," says Southerland. "David and I are so intrigued by the potential of buildings and neighborhoods. We thought if we could develop and design the spaces, we could really differentiate our firm from other practices."

They were right. While other emerging firms rely on additions and renovations, and spend time submitting for competitions, **assembledge+** takes another tack. "I'd rather buy a piece of dirt and make something happen with it than spend time pursuing competitions," says Southerland. "More than anything in the world,



#### **Gramercy 7 Lofts, Los Angeles, 2008**

*This seven-unit loft condominium has open-plan lofts with 16-foot ceilings. Located in an eclectic L.A. neighborhood, each unit has a private roof deck.*



#### **Office 8476, Downey, Calif., 2008**

*Located on a major suburban thoroughfare, this real estate office will be set on a thin concrete plinth 18-inches above the site.*





I want to build stuff," Thompson agrees. "We always come back to the way materials are put together," he says. And they're committed to putting them together with a conscience. Southerland, who headed the sustainability design committee at Gensler, says assembledge+ prescribes to what he calls "subversive sustainable design," explaining, "If a client needs to choose from five carpet tiles, show them five that are made from recycled materials."

And while sustainable principles are just part of the everyday at assembledge+, so is a love of the urban fabric of L.A. The team's Gramercy 7 Lofts, a seven-unit condominium that broke ground in late 2006, promises to demonstrate their Modernist aesthetic, reveal their love of craft, and help to bring much-needed mid-density housing to its neighborhood. Not least, each unit will have a private roof deck with 360-degree views. "This lifestyle and climate informs a huge part of our design process," says Thompson. "Walls of glass, blurring of indoors and out, views of the sky and surrounding landscapes—we are so psyched to get up in the morning knowing we get to do this kind of work." *Ingrid Spencer*

For more photos and projects by assembledge+, visit [archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/](http://archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/).



**Ridgewood House, Los Angeles, 2006**  
*This 2,400-square-foot home is designed for indoor/outdoor living, with a porch, decks, open planned living areas, and floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors.*



**Sunset Plaza Residence, Los Angeles, 2007**  
*Above the Sunset Strip, this 5,000-square-foot house opens up to the landscape. Simple forms and a warm material palette evoke a clean, Modernist aesthetic.*

## Work

### Mentors and guts keep a young architect flying solo

Christian Wassmann is wondering whether or not to sign a new lease. In Manhattan, with its breathtaking rents, this is no small decision. While getting the extra office space would give him more room (Wassmann and his project-basis employees are used to working in an office carved out of his apartment), it could also force him to take on some work he'd otherwise have the luxury of passing up. If this is the first growing pain for a young architect who has seamlessly transitioned from project architect for Steven Holl to principal of his own practice, it's not so bad. Only 32 years old, Wassmann has a pedigree that explains his success. After moving to the United States from Switzerland, he began working for Steven Holl because Holl was (and still is) his favorite architect. He has also worked on side projects with another master of American design, artist Robert Wilson, for 10 years.



It seems that the mentorship Holl and Wilson have provided—from their influential aesthetics to their willingness to work with Wassmann outside of a standard full-time position—has made all the difference in his career. About leaving Holl's firm, Wassmann says, "He understood [my decision to leave his office], and encourages me to this day." While Wassmann left the firm in May 2005, he continued freelancing with Holl to finish a hotel in Austria, then the following winter he co-taught an architecture class with him at Columbia University.

This sort of support lessened the anxiety when Wassmann left Holl's firm without projects in hand. He quickly picked up a diverse group of projects,



including a renovation of a radio station and several exhibition designs for the Vitra showroom in Manhattan. While Wassmann relishes the brief time it takes to produce exhibitions ("they're like architectural one-night stands"), he has a number of longer-term projects on the boards, including a renovation of a 1930s house in Miami, Florida. Much like his other mentor, Wilson, whose work has touched nearly every art form, Wassmann says he wants "to contin-

*Wassmann (left, in white shirt, and above, at right), Robert Wilson (left, at far right, and above, at left), and the team planning the Noguchi exhibition in 1999 at the Watermill Center on Long Island.*

ue to do everything from books to exhibition design to writing and teaching, building houses, furniture, theatrical productions, film, and art projects—the full scale of design."

Wassmann's strategy for accomplishing his work has already been fruitful, which may explain his hesitation to opt for the new office and the changes it might bring. He still sometimes attends pin-ups at Holl's office because they can be stimu-

lating, but now that he is no longer part of the structured life of an office, he prefers his own less-orthodox method of getting his work done. "The best ideas," he says, "come late at night dancing and are then sketched on a piece of paper." *Diana Lind*

For more information on Christian Wassmann and his work, visit [archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/](http://archrecord.construction.com/archrecord2/).