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Up Front



A new flavor – birthday cake – is taking a slice of the market.

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News & Analysis



How Richard Rosenblatt plans to split Demand Media in two. **PAGE 5**

People



Why Architect Brenda Levin rehabs so many landmarks, such as Dodger Stadium. **PAGE 15**

MAIL TO:

TOXIC PROP



Targeted: Coffee Table Bistro owner Brett Schoenhals at his Eagle Rock eatery, which received a letter warning him of Proposition 65 fines.

Businesses seek 'shakedown' relief

By **HOWARD FINE** Staff Reporter

THE certified letter that came to **Brett Schoenhals'** Eagle Rock restaurant just before Christmas sent him into a near panic.

The four-page letter delivered to Schoenhals' **Coffee Table Bistro** from a local attorney's office warned that within 60 days he would be sued for violating California's Proposition 65 toxic chemical notification law and that he was liable for fines of \$2,500 a day going back one full year – or more than \$900,000. The notice invited him to call the attorney's office. The implication: He could pay the lawyer money to

settle the matter.

Schoenhals' crime? Allegedly failing to post adequate signs saying that the alcohol he serves could cause cancer when consumed and could cause birth defects in unborn children.

"I had a sign posted in the bar, but not at each entrance and not in every room," Schoenhals said. "And for this I could be fined nearly \$1 million and have to fight a lengthy legal case? That would put me out of business."

Schoenhals is one of scores of restaurant owners and operators in Los Angeles County and

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Lawyers reap Prop. 65's rewards

By **ALFRED LEE** Staff Reporter

RUBEN Yeroushalmi wakes up about 5 a.m. each day and spends the next 15 hours on a mission that enrages businesses: threatening to sue manufacturers for not warning of toxic substances in their products.

At his Beverly Hills office, he sorts through findings from a team of investigators who try to identify lead and phthalate in household products such as baby sandals and headphones. He has the results confirmed at an independent lab, then, because the product was not emblazoned with a warning label, he fires off a legal notice to the offending product's manufacturer. The business



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Active: Prop. 65 lawyer Yeroushalmi.

Hoteliers Find Rooms in L.A.

HOSPITALITY: Developers check into projects amid recovery.

By **JACQUELYN RYAN** Staff Reporter

After years with few if any new hotel developments, at least eight hotels totaling 1,855 rooms are under construction across Los Angeles County.

Those rooms represent a 116 percent increase from the number of rooms under construction last year, when postrecession hotel expansion resumed. They will add about 4 percent to the inventory of nearly 50,000 midrange to upscale hotels rooms in the county.

But it doesn't stop there. At least 11 more projects totaling 1,544 rooms are planned for the coming two years, according to the **Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board**.

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'Dude, Where's My Airplane?'

AVIATION: ILFC sues insurer over loss of aircraft in Russia.

By **RYAN FAUGHNDER** Staff Reporter

Every business has its risks. But most businesses don't risk getting an airplane seized by a foreign country.

That's what happened to **International Lease Finance Corp.** The Century City company lost a Boeing 757 to Russian customs officials after the airline that leased the plane ceased operations. Because of what it claims was a customs paperwork error, ILFC can't get its jetliner back.

Research suggests that used 757s sell for about \$10 million, although ILFC is battling its insurance company for \$21 million.

The episode is an example of the danger busi-

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SPECIAL REPORT

20 in Their 20s



After successfully selling T-shirts from his USC dorm, **DALTON GERLACH** decided to start an apparel-making firm. Meet Gerlach, 23, and other Angelenos in their 20s who have started their own business.

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NONPROFIT
&
Corporate Citizenship
AWARDS

Tell us: **How do you give back?**

Nomination Deadline: Friday, May 17, 2013

For more
information,
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RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

Blue Sky: Brenda A. Levin at Dodger Stadium, where she oversaw a \$100 million renovation that included creating more plazas and spaces outside the venue.

Home Field

Architect Brenda A. Levin has helped shape local history while renovating L.A. landmarks such as Dodger Stadium.

By **HOWARD FINE** Staff Reporter

LOOK at many of L.A.'s best-known landmarks and there's a good chance that Brenda A. Levin designed their rehabs. Levin, who has owned her own architecture firm since 1980, has made her reputation renovating and restoring many iconic buildings in and around Los Angeles: the Bradbury and Oviatt buildings, the Grand Central Market, Los Angeles City Hall, Griffith Observatory and the Huntington Library/Art Galleries. She has just wrapped up work on a \$100 million renovation of Dodger Stadium, is nearing the end of four years of work restoring Wilshire Boulevard Temple and is starting update work on the Ford Amphitheatre. Levin, 66, came to L.A. with her husband in the late 1970s after several years in Boston. She was born in Teaneck, N.J., the daughter of a real estate developer. Levin recently sat down with the *Business Journal* to talk about her work on grand old buildings, sharing office space with her husband for more than 30 years and her status as one of the few prominent local women architects.

Question: When did you decide you wanted to be an architect?

Answer: I always had an interest, ever since I was walking with my father through tract homes under construction in New Jersey back in the 1950s. I would go through houses that just had the frames up and I would imagine certain designs and interiors. Then, when I

got to see the finished homes, I was always slightly disappointed because they looked different than I had imagined. So that got me interested in design and architecture.

Architecture wasn't a typical career choice for women, was it?

My parents encouraged me and my sister to choose whatever career we wanted, to follow our passions, irrespective of gender. They enrolled me in art classes when I wanted. I went into university as an arts major and then graphic design. But I saw how male dominated the architecture field was as I once peered into an architecture class and saw only two women in a sea of something like 60 men. That made it seem quite inhospitable to me.

But you plunged ahead anyway.

Yes. After I moved to Boston, I decided to take classes at the Boston Architectural Center. I had some wonderful faculty members who helped get me into internships at some remarkable firms in Cambridge and Boston. One of those firms, Benjamin Thompson & Associates, did the Faneuil Marketplace, one of the first adaptive reuse projects in the country. I worked on the model for the Faneuil Marketplace and that's when I first realized the power of architecture in urban design.

Then what happened?

I decided to pursue postgraduate work in architecture and enrolled in Harvard

University's program. By that time, I had already met my husband, David, through a mutual friend. He had just finished Harvard Law School and passed the bar; he waited for me to finish my program at Harvard.

So how did the two of you end up in California?

David spent his high school and college years in California and really wanted to get back here. He perceived California as the place to establish roots and start a career. So he accepted a position to be the training director for the Coro Foundation. As soon as I graduated Harvard in 1976, we moved to Los Angeles.

How did you get your first job?

I went knocking on doors of local architectural firms. One day, I knocked on the doors of the Hollywood office of John Lautner. He had just started back to work on Bob Hope's house in Palm Springs; there had been a fire and some litigation. He needed someone to help build a model. So he hired me at the impressive fee of \$5 an hour to build that model.

That's the saucer-shaped house that made headlines recently when it was put on the market for \$50 million, right?

Yes, the very same. And it was an incredible experience because Lautner's architecture was a complete eye-opener for me – very organic, material based, huge forms, yet still full of detail. And, of course, doing the work for

such a celebrity client – talk about L.A.!

But you didn't go into residential architecture. Why?

Well, I spent a little over a year there and saw how much of a struggle it was, even for a star architect like Lautner. He was the Frank Gehry of that time and one of the most creative people I ever met. Yet he struggled with the clients, with having enough projects, with a desire to do more than residential work. All this made me realize I didn't want to do residential work. I was much more of an urbanist and I wanted to impact the city. So designing my own home in Los Feliz a few years later was the first and only piece of residential architecture I supervised.

What was that like? Do you still live there?

It was challenging. It was in the beginning of my career, so I was really testing my limits. And it made me truly understand the sense of deferred gratification involved in architecture. It took nearly five years from the time I started the design until completion. I was testing materials; it's all made out of plywood and sheet metal. Because of the location against a hillside, I used the outdoor space to basically double the size of the home. And yes, David and I still live there; I suspect we will continue to do so until we can no longer do the stairs.

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BRENDA A. LEVIN**Title:** Founder and Principal**Company:** Levin & Associates Architects**Born:** Teaneck, N.J.; 1946.**Education:** Bachelor's degree in graphic design, New York University; master's degree in architecture, Harvard University.**Career Turning Points:** Working on model for Faneuil Marketplace in Boston in early 1970s; knocking on door of John Lautner's architectural firm in Hollywood in 1977; opening own firm in 1980.**Most Influential People:** Commercial real estate developer Wayne Ratkovich; the late downtown L.A. developer Ira Yellin; the late architects John Lautner and Julia Morgan.**Personal:** Lives with husband, planning and policy expert David Abel, in house she designed in Los Feliz. Couple shares office space in downtown's Fine Arts Building. They have one grown son, who works on renewable energy projects at General Electric Co.**Activities:** Travel; hiking, especially in Griffith Park; swimming, especially at Los Angeles Athletic Club; various civic activities including work for the Downtown Women's Center, which provides housing and services for homeless women.*Continued from page 15***So how did you make the transition to the urban architecture you wanted to pursue?**

Back in 1978, the Coro Foundation, where my husband worked, was moving from the historic Bradbury Building to the nearby Oviatt Building, which developer Wayne Ratkovich had just purchased. I was brought in as Coro's architect for the tenant improvements. Through that project, I met Wayne and he referred me to the firm that he hired to do the tenant improvements for the whole building. I worked on that building for almost two years.

Then what happened?

I soon realized that this firm I was now working for specialized in tilt-up concrete and industrial buildings, especially in the Inland Empire and desert communities. That didn't fit with what I wanted to do as an urbanist remarking cityscapes, so I felt the time was right to open up my own firm. So I opened the doors of Levin & Associates in 1980. I really wanted to have more control over my own life and pursue projects I thought would make a difference. The latter worked, though I think I can say now that I was somewhat naïve in how much control I truly had over my own life.

Was it hard getting work at first?

No, and in that I was very lucky. Wayne Ratkovich immediately hired me to work on the design for Rex Restaurant that was going in the ground floor of the Oviatt Building. Coincidentally, right around that time, my husband decided to start his own firm. So we were both launching our own separate businesses at the same time – and we were building our home and we had our baby.

That must have been quite a balancing act for you.

Yes, it was. David and I figured if we could survive this period, we could survive anything.

It sounds like you found the work satisfying.

Yes. Through our work, we were able to save several historic buildings that otherwise might have been demolished. You know, it's amazing coming from the East Coast where so many buildings get reused right alongside new buildings, but until right about this time, the trend here was to demolish all the old buildings and put up something new. That just



Through the Years: Clockwise from left, Brenda A. Levin with commercial building developer Wayne Ratkovich; with son, Eliot, and husband, David; working on a model of Bob Hope's home in Palm Springs; going over plans at Levin & Associates Architects' office in downtown Los Angeles.



RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

seemed so strange to me, to tear down these beautiful old buildings. We came in right at the start of the historic preservation movement here in Los Angeles and it really fit in with my sense of city-making.

You did a lot of work downtown, didn't you?

In the mid-1980s, developer Ira Yellin, who was also going around and buying up old downtown buildings for adaptive reuse, contacted me and I started working on some of his buildings – most notably the Bradbury Building and Grand Central Market.

How did you find the time to raise your son?

In the early years, I just brought him with me wherever I went. If I needed to, I handed him off to someone for a few minutes and then took him back as I went about my work. As he was going to school, I was constantly running late to meetings and picking him up. But I think he turned out OK; he now works at General Electric in their renewable energy division.

What is it like to share office space with your husband?

Before texting, emailing and cell phones, it made for easier coordination of our schedules – personal, professional and civic. This was especially true when we were raising our son. Now I can't imagine having to wait until the end of the day to catch up. People always ask: "Isn't that a lot of time to spend together?" No, not when you admire, constantly learn from and love each other.

You have worked on so many L.A. landmarks and projects. Which one are you most proud of?

I think the renovation of Griffith Observatory. It was my first totally public venue and an icon beloved internationally. What's more, it's visible almost 360 degrees around the city.

What about the Dodger Stadium renovation?

From the beginning, our charge from Stan Kasten and the owners was to improve the fan experience and create more fan amenities. Our task was to create the feeling that fans have when approaching Fenway Park or Camden Yards, of walking through the city to get to the stadium.

How did you do that?

That meant creating more plazas and spaces on the outside of the stadium proper; a place to meet people and socialize. So on the upper levels, we built two new team stores, two new concession buildings, a children's play area and a restroom building. We built seven new buildings in all. Of course, our specialty is making those buildings fit in with the existing architecture: the concrete blocks, the corrugated metal and the space for signage.

What was most challenging aspect of the stadium project?

The time factor: Seven buildings in five months. I like to contrast this with the painstaking work we're doing on Wilshire Boulevard Temple, which is taking us four

years and where you can focus on every screw, every piece of wood and every decorative element. With Dodger Stadium, decisions had to be made very quickly and once made, there was no time to go back and readjust.

You like to travel. What are some of your favorite places?

I love traveling to Europe and seeing all the different architectural styles. A recent trip we took to Turkey was absolutely amazing – so many different architectural styles right next to each other. But the best trip I ever took was to the Galapagos Islands. I truly felt at one with nature there; it was such a different experience for someone like me who lives their life in such an urban setting.

Architect Julia Morgan was one the most influential people in your life. How so?

She was one of the first prominent women architects and certainly the most famous. She designed Hearst Castle, but she also designed nearly 700 other buildings. She was my inspiration. We have one interesting parallel: Julia hitched her wagon to the Hearst family as it rose to prominence, while I hitched my wagon to Wayne Ratkovich as he rose to prominence in local development circles.

What's the best advice you've ever received?

Pay no attention to your Harvard classmates' East Coast bias and advice. Los Angeles – and California – is the place where architectural opportunity abounds. How true that advice was and still is.