

GARY RUSSELL

In 1995, commercial architect Gary Russell helped found the Wilshire Center Business Improvement District (WCBID), becoming Executive Director in the process. Wilshire Center is bordered by Hoover Street and Wilton Place on the east and west, and 3rd and 8th Streets to the north and south. The historic neighborhood experienced a downturn in the '90s due to the L.A. riots and the closure of high profile properties like the Ambassador Hotel. The diverse area has staged a comeback thanks to the Purple Line, Korean entrepreneurs and mixed-use developments. Russell has also introduced the Cool District concept, which intends to decrease carbon emissions in Wilshire Center by two percent per year for 40 years, beginning in 2010. We met at his 10th story office in, where else, Wilshire Center.

NA: When you relocated your business to Wilshire Center in 1985, what was the district's identity, and what is the identity today? In the '70s, it was the Fifth Avenue of the West, so it had a very prestigious kind of image. Bullocks Wilshire, Sheraton Town House and the Ambassador were up and running. We had the Brown Derby. It was the place to be...That couldn't hold. A lot of competition went downtown. Bunker Hill took all our tenants away. It started to age a bit, and for a variety of reasons it just changed...Right now it's a great place to work, live and shop. That's our model. We're creating this imagery of a unique urban village, because of the transportation, because new schools are being built, because of the density we have.

Why was it important to form the Wilshire Center Business Improvement District? In the early '90s, we had a series of actions that happened. The L.A. Riot came through and we got damaged. Then we had the building of the Red Line [now the Purple Line] coming through here, so our street was razed up. We had a lot of buildings that were closing down. The Ambassador closed in the early '90s, then Sheraton Town House and Bullocks Wilshire...Our vacancy rate went up to 32 percent. A writer wrote our obituary, calling this place a "ghost town" in about '94... We decided that we didn't want to close up. There was still value here. We started to create an image, rebuild ourselves...We built that streetscape project along Wilshire Boulevard, raised \$6 million...The BID maintained this streetscape, but then we realized the BID had other capabilities...We built security, marketing and advocacy after that.

What would you tell the writer who wrote Wilshire Center's obituary? Obviously he was wrong in perspective. It was a community that cared and took back the street. We built the community...Now the vacancy is down to 12, 13 percent. There are all sorts of new developments.

How important was Korean immigration in terms of bringing the neighborhood back? They took a big chunk of the commercial space. The Korean community absorbed about 40 percent. So they were obviously able to help us lower our vacancy rate, and help us give a different definition to our community too. The Latino community and Korean community help us make up our diverse community, which we're very proud of.

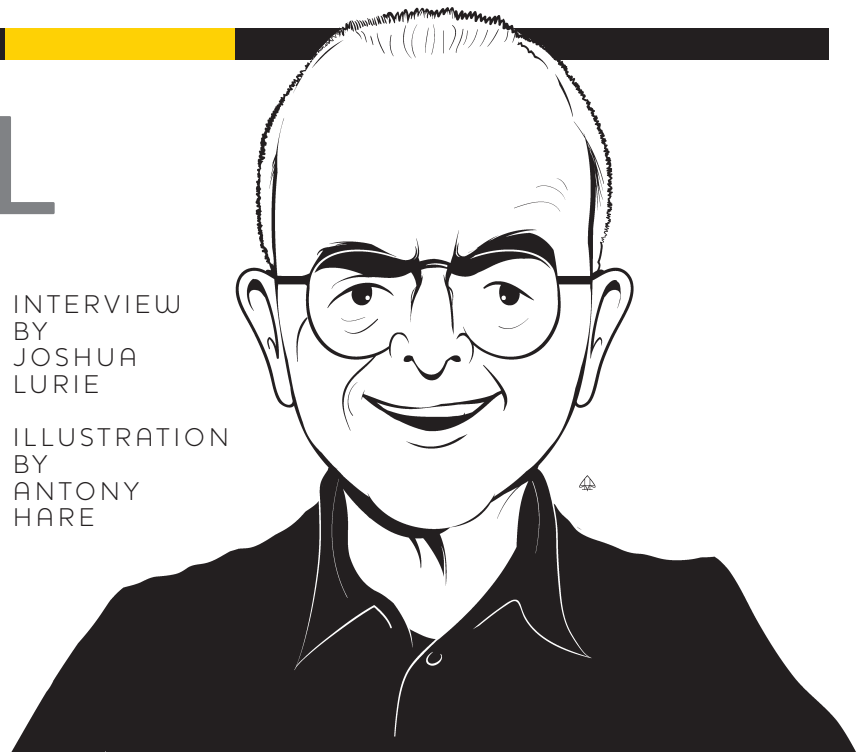
What has the Purple Line meant for the neighborhood's redevelopment? For five years we suffered during construction, not seeing anything. It's now positioned us to get people out of their cars. People can come to this area without the use of a car. You can get out of this area to other centers, to Hollywood, to Universal, to Downtown, to Pasadena, to Long Beach. You don't need a car. Part of the urban village is creating this housing mix, office and transportation. It's that Cool District concept of reducing our carbon footprint.

What's the best case scenario for the Cool District. Is it purely defined by that two percent standard? At the least. That's a standard, but how many buildings, say over the next ten years, can we get to reduce their greenhouse gases or carbon emission, by say 40 percent? What percentage of my buildings in the 33 million square feet can I get to do that? That's our first immediate target. How can we get people to keep their lights off when they don't need them? It's also that educational process too. How many people buy into the idea that there is an issue and there's some savings financially? Also we need to check the future for my kids and future generations. It's that education, those impacts, redoing their cooling towers, saving energy wherever they can, saving water wherever they can. Changing out fixtures. Seeing those things happen is when we begin to see real impacts.

With Wilshire Center's limited borders how much impact can you have? If it was just going to be for us, I wouldn't be spending this much energy...There are 35 [BIDs] in L.A. We're hoping to be a model, the greenest Business Improvement District in North America. The idea is to get other BIDs to take this on this challenge, to take on the two percent. Our executive directors meet on a monthly basis, with the other BIDs. We discuss issues. This year I discussed what we're doing. They're excited, [but] they want me to go through the pain. I don't mind that.

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LURIE

ILLUSTRATION
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ANTONY
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You lay down a challenge on Wilshire Center's website to run on 100% zero-carbon electricity by 2020, using renewable energy like solar and wind power. Is that realistic? I think it's realistic. It's a real push. We need, obviously, more resources to make that happen on a national level, a global level. We do have the resources here. In this community, we have fairly large available funds through the redevelopment agency to create solar panels. All these lots that face south can have solar roofs.

As an architect, what are some of the green measures you're taking? We look at keeping existing spaces as much as we can, not tearing them down. We always try to re-use, recycle, and then minimize.

Is there a model development within Wilshire Center that you'd like to see other developers mimic? The one at Wilshire & Western; they're going for a silver LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification], so they're making a real good attempt...Green in new construction is a given. Even the city ordinance now requires an attempt to really go for green to be certified. That's an important step. The real issue though is to get existing buildings to reduce their carbon footprint.

Are there some buildings where carbon reduction is just not possible, given how they're constructed? Every building has the capability. You look at the carbon footprint as how people travel to it, enter into it, the cars that they use, the landscaping around it, how much water they use, the use of electricity, if they use air conditioning, if cross-ventilation can happen, the solar community, insulation in walls, the lighting, solar panels...With residential, the problem is a lot of the individual units have one meter. If the tenant comes in with thousands of gadgets and plugs in, is not respectful of turning off lights, and doesn't want to recycle, keeps the showers running all day long, then it won't help, no matter how many solar panels you've got on your roof.

Are green measures more expensive or less expensive as far as construction? In a new building, certified LEED is real easy. Have recycled carpet and good insulation. Certified silver or gold is a little bit more expensive, but the thing is, you recoup that cost over the next five or ten years, easily.

Did you accomplish what you wanted by closing Wilshire Boulevard on Earth Day?

For the 100th Anniversary of Wilshire Boulevard, back in '95, we closed off Wilshire & Western. It was on Saturday, so traffic wasn't quite as bad. That was the first time that had ever happened during a weekday. It was a little bit of a challenge to get people to buy in. MTA wasn't too pleased with us, because we were deferring their buses, which surprised me, since the whole point of that was Earth Day car-free day...We had 10-15,000 people. It was just a phenomenal day. It was part of our awareness educational campaign for the tenants, people who use the facilities here.

What is missing from Wilshire Center that you hope to see?

We've got public transportation. The Ambassador Hotel is now changing into a school complex. We've got a lot of public schools around here. Kids and families will want to live here. We need some more park area. There will be a new park in front of the Ambassador Hotel that we helped initiate. We'll eventually begin looking at closing off side streets, put in more landscaping. In the '90s, we planted over 2000 trees as part of our BID project. We need more greenery, more culture. **NA**