

# VENTANA MONTHLY, SEPTEMBER 2009

## The Makeover

Aesthetics and eco-sensitivity merge as Ventura steps up. Here, Sean Leonard, the man behind two of the city's highest profile building projects, talks shop.

By James Scolari



Upon completion, the WAV project will be the first LEED-certified affordable housing project in Ventura County, and only the second in the state.

With the popularity of web-based social networks, the idea of “community building” resonates like never before. Yet in the most elementary sense, the process has always begun with the brick-and-mortar endeavor: buildings rise through the labors of the driven, and community moves in to inhabit the result.

Sean Leonard knows how communities are built—inside and out. He began his career as a concrete subcontractor and went on to oversee some of the highest profile projects on this or any coast, including the Disney Concert Hall, L.A.'s Gas Company Tower, the Wilshire Courtyard, the Third Street Promenade, and many others.

Despite the high-profile résumé, Leonard's firm—which the American Institute of Architects twice voted “Building Team of the Year”—is a local establishment, headquartered in Camarillo. Most recently, S.L. Leonard & Associates took on the task of managing construction for two of Downtown Ventura's most significant developments: the Working Artists Ventura (WAV) project and the expansion of the Museum of Ventura County.

**Is it unusual to be working on two high profile projects in a single community, especially a small community like Ventura?**

It's actually somewhat by design; I opened the business here about six years ago, specifically focused on Ventura County. We've had some success up here, but much of our reputation and our expertise comes from larger, more complex projects. Compared to L.A. and Orange County, there simply aren't many projects like that to be found. So when two nice projects come up in Ventura, well, we have a keen interest.

**When these projects are complete, you'll have had a profound impact on the face of Ventura and the manner in which some people perceive it. That's a pretty heady responsibility, brokering a bit of the transition from yesterday to tomorrow.**

That's the great thing about our industry. I've been working in Southern California for a long time and have been involved in a lot of prominent projects in L.A., some of the high rises and the Disney Concert Hall. I can drive down there with my kids and tell them, "Hey, I worked on that project." We did a project called Wilshire Courtyard about twenty-three years ago, and I tell my son, "When you were born I was working on this project, and when I took you home from the hospital, we stopped by with your mom to show you off to my colleagues."

**And the next time you want to show your kids a grand project you've been involved with, you won't have to drive far from home.**

Yes, you can see the WAV project from the freeway! We live in Camarillo, so they see the library [I worked on] all the time. They brag about it to their friends.

**It's likely that's not all they brag about; your reputation indicates a preference for working with nonprofits.**

That's very rewarding work, collaborating with clients who are doing something you believe in. The people we work with have wonderful missions, helping a lot of people. For instance, we've been working on a number of affordable housing projects—working, say, with Cabrillo Economic Development, on the one hundred fifty units that were just completed off of Vineyard and the 101. When that place filled up, when they first opened it, it was so gratifying. Also, when we opened up the library in Camarillo, to see all those kids there the first day, running through the place, getting so excited about the architecture and the technology...

**In terms of your presence in Ventura County, what do you see coming that we can look forward to?**

Denser housing is one thing that we're moving toward, and transit-oriented development is another: building projects around transit centers. Our WAV project is going to have electric cars donated by GM that the tenants can check out and use for free.

**More forward-thinking design, perhaps an authentic sustainability ethic?**

Of course there are different ways to measure sustainability, but we find most of our clients have a deep social conscience and are looking to create buildings that embrace that ethic, so we want to be able to guide them through that process. You know, to get a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) -rated building takes a lot of commitment from a lot of team players, and we like to think that with our background and expertise we can help them bring the right players together and guide the process.



The expanded museum will have an additional 18,000 sq. ft. of galleries and other facilities. Nearly twice as many visitors are expected annually.

**It's one thing to set oneself up in contracting and follow the money, but it seems you're working more with an eye toward building community. When that trend penetrates the national consciousness, the future could be very exciting.**

We all feel the same; we don't have one of those cutthroat environments in our office. We talk a lot about the people we're helping, the people that our clients are helping. With WAV, we have a client from Minnesota, a nonprofit organization called PLACE (Projects Linking Art, Community & Environment), and the founder is a man named Chris Velasco, who is a very passionate guy. It's contagious, his passion—it's infected all of us. He's done a lot of great things, things that many other people would not dare to try. So that's part of it too, increasingly bumping into like-minded people. And yes, it is exciting.

**Do you find that some potential clients are attracted to the marketing buzz behind green building, but when the rubber hits the road it's a greater commitment than they're willing to undertake?**

We have clients who say, "We'd really like to do it, but how much will it cost?" It's very hard to put a specific dollar amount on [sustainable building], so what we try to do is shoot for it, and if our budget allows we can do it; if not, we try to incorporate as many of the big issues as we can. Luckily, in California we have Title 24, which requires a great deal of energy efficiency. The next step up from that, to be LEED-rated, for instance, is not a huge leap. Hopefully, we can help our clients make the right choices to get where they need to be.

**You say the work is gratifying, and it's gratifying from this end, too, knowing there are developers making a conscious effort to work in that win-win paradigm.**

Instead of putting up pictures of the buildings, I like to draw focus to some of the people we're helping, you know? Let's put up a picture of some of the kids who are benefiting from this, or some of the tenants who are moving into the buildings, people who had mental health issues who were helped by supportive housing. Anyway, that's why we do it.



To learn more about Camarillo-based S. L. Leonard & Associates, visit [SLLeonard.com](http://SLLeonard.com).

The **Working Artists Ventura (WAV)** project is located at the corner of Thompson Blvd. and Ventura Ave. in Downtown Ventura. See [PlaceOnline.US/projects/overview.html](http://PlaceOnline.US/projects/overview.html).

The first phase of the expanded **Museum of Ventura County** project, located at 100 E. Main St., is scheduled for completion in late 2010. The Museum's temporary location is 89 S. California St. Admission is free. For detailed info and updates, log on to [VenturaMuseum.org](http://VenturaMuseum.org).