

E-mails from the edge

Tony Hodges reports on three of the latest destination developments on the West Coast of the US.

Ask any outsider what the 'West Coast' evokes and chances are that the first images brought to mind are of Southern California: surfing, blondes, tan, beaches. Didn't *Baywatch* make its money by pulling all those images together for the rest of the world to ogle?

These values are transported around the world, but north of Los Angeles the 'West Coast' means something else and it is not as easy to categorise or export.

San Francisco, Napa and then, further north, Seattle, all represent that individuality which is at the heart of American culture. Destination cities all, they each breed individual destinations that sing 'I'm different' out loud. Each has its own sense of place, of 'somewhereness'.

San Francisco

The first city I ever visited on the American mainland was San Francisco. It was 1966, the so-called Summer of Love, and I was on my way up to Oxford. I nearly failed to make it any further and have loved the city ever since. Most visitors do Fisherman's Wharf and that instant shanty town does act as a model for seaside tourist magnets in cities the world over. But it is in the heart of San Francisco that you need to sink your teeth. Great restaurants of every persuasion, pretty streets and fine, mature buildings, inspiring museums and galleries, and all so accessible.

The resident population is less than three-quarters of a million but they are used to greeting many times that number of visitors and giving them a good time. Which is what they aim to do at Metreon, the new Sony Entertainment Center.

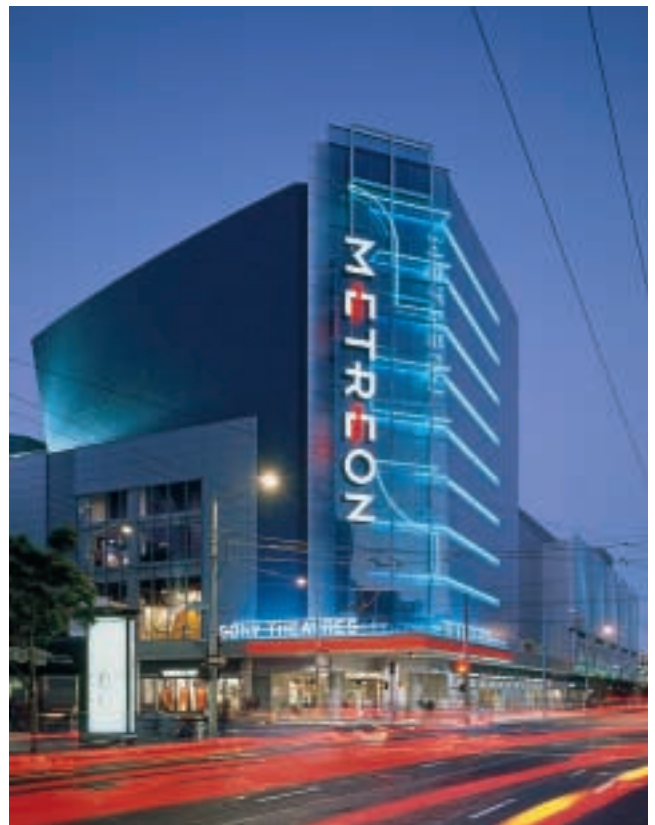
That they succeed at Metreon may not be entirely as Sony intend.

The Center itself is a large, square, modern block which, from outside its main corner entrance, reveals little of its contents. Or perhaps it does, since what is visible is a row of brand names: Sony, Microsoft, Discovery, the names on its cornerstone retail outlets and corporate anchors.

Once inside, you can be forgiven for thinking you are in a glorified multiplex that just got hitched to an electronic retail mall. Metreon is more than that, but first impressions count.

Ground floor is where you choose your movie, buy your tickets – to regular movie, IMAX, or other Metreon attractions – and shop. Each individual attraction costs a number of points on your Metreon access card; US\$20 buys one adult enough points to visit them all, but, since you are unlikely to visit Metreon without children, you can count on spending more. Especially when you venture into any of the eight retail zones or eight restaurant choices spread over four floors.

The attractions are undeniably slick, as high-tech as you would expect from Sony and its electronic friends. IMAX is the biggest movie ever ('an eight-storey view of the world'); the Sony Theatres are state-of-the-art with 'THX-certified SDDS sound and Perfect View Seating for total comfort'; 'The Way Things Work – in Mammoth 3D' lets you explore



Metreon - A Sony Entertainment Center is located at 4th and Mission Streets in San Francisco
Picture courtesy of Timothy Hursley

mechanics and machinery on three screens, courtesy of architect and illustrator David Macaulay; 'Airtight Garage' features computer-play in the electronically re-imagined world of French graphic novelist Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, 'with three games invented just for Metreon'; 'Where the Wild Things Are' is good old-fashioned themeland – 'a larger-than-life playspace sprung from the pages of Maurice Sendak's renowned children's book' with magical forest, bubbling cauldrons, crazy hall of mirrors, real-live monsters, all classic stuff but slick.

You suspect the real point of Metreon, however, is to be found in the shops and restaurants. Certainly, there is fast food and a lot of child-friendly food that aims a little healthier, but Dad might find relief here too, given the choice. As ever on the West Coast, the names have it: Jillian's South of Market, Firewood Café, Buckhorn, Longlife Noodle Co., Sanraku, Montagne, Malvina's, and In the Night Kitchen (next to Wild Things, naturally).

The stores are bang on the money. The Discovery Channel Store has taken the best of the now absorbed Nature Company, put it together with one of the few great world brands in TV, and – click – instant turnaround. Microsoft SF

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shows what you could do with technology, Early Learning Centre, and funds galore. The Way Things Work Shop, Moebius Shop, Wild Things and Metreon Marketplace all show how themed destination retail outlets should be laid out, merchandised and staffed. Madame Tussauds' management will doubtless have taken notes by now.

Above all, the Sony outlets declare the real purpose of Metreon. Sony Style shows how far Sony has come on the aesthetic front. Hear Music displays the best yet, computerised, 'dial-a-disc' sampling system that High Fidelity aficionados-to-be could imagine. (Yes, they even screen the Yardbirds' biography for you.) The Sony Digital Imaging Experience and Playstation shops require neither explanation nor further promotion from this visitor.

Quite simply, the retail offer at Metreon is even slicker and stronger than its attractions. The brand messages beat the entertainment messages hands down.



View from Metreon across Yerba Buena Gardens to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

However, for this visitor, the best thing about Metreon is its location: not just that it is central (five minutes' stroll from Union Square, just south of Market) but that it forms the southern perimeter of Yerba Buena Gardens. In these beautifully sculptured and watered public gardens you find free music, dance, poetry and theatre; couples and families picnicking under a blue San Francisco sky; high-energy collections, concerts, events at the Yerba Buena Center; and, across the street, clearly visible from Metreon, the wondrous Museum of Modern Art.

In fact, as the escalator took this other-worldly visitor up yet another floor of Metreon's undeniably commercial experiences, the bright, green, open space of Yerba Buena Gardens looked like a welcoming oasis of good times and brand relief. Very San Francisco, though probably not what Sony intended. You never know, however; they always were 'those awfully nice Sony people', after all.

Napa

Less than an hour's drive north lies Napa Valley, home to the wineries and winemakers who first flung open the doors to the New World of Wine.

California wines flow from all over the state and Napa faces serious competition from Sonoma, Carneros, Mendocino and the like, but the Napa Valley name on the label merits a premium. This is where the great, historic names of California wine put down their roots: Beaulieu, Stags Leap, Mondavi and their ilk.

This is also serious real estate. Framed by stunning mountain ranges, this is a beautiful valley, even by Tuscan or Rhone standards, and it has been decorated by picturesque towns and dramatic contemporary architecture. The aesthetic ambitions of the Valley wineries match those of their wines. In a recent advertising campaign for Robert Mondavi wines, fellow winemaker and legendary film maker Francis Ford Coppola declares: 'Wine is art. Bob taught me that.' The connection between wine and other art is everywhere. In St Helena restaurants, food is treated as art; at the Mondavi mission building winery, summer events feature world-class concerts ('Boz Scaggs: Sold Out', so the sign told its tale); on Mount Veeder, the Hess Collection winery features a world-renowned collection of contemporary art.

So when the eponymous founder of the Robert Mondavi wine empire had a vision for a museum to celebrate wine's contribution to culture, he



The American Center's 80,000 square foot building on the Napa River Bank in Napa, California. The US\$70 million international cultural museum and educational centre will open in November 2001

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unsurprisingly had it dubbed The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts. This US\$70 million project is not open until late 2001, but this observer was shown the site and plans and there is no doubt the funds are being put in place (starting with a US\$20 million bequest from Bob Mondavi himself).

This is much more than Bob's baby, however. He has typically and wisely brought other powerful figures into the fold and is anxious to share the glory. The doyenne of American cooking, Julia Childs, is involved, as is the Culinary Institute of America. Great wineries such as Beaulieu Vineyards are sponsors, and trustees include luminaries of the boutique wine galaxy such as the Staglins of Staglin Family Vineyard and the Slawsons of Terre Verte. They have hired a top-flight Director, Peggy Loar, previously at the Smithsonian, and they clearly mean business.

Except that the business is strictly not-for-profit. This charitable status affects the Center's planning from top to bottom. There is an awareness that long-term sustainability demands proper and effective business practices, visitor throughput, sensible pricing and high-profile marketing, but the not-for-profit ethos brings an undeniable museum feel to the project. This is the private sector behaving like the public sector.

Everything designed to date reeks of class, in a top-of-the-market, American city museum style. The logo, house magazine ('Copia', sic), architecture, gardens and planned exhibits all ooze restraint. The events programme is yet to be published, but you can be sure it will be highbrow. Every other sentence in the Curator's description of the Center's contents is 'education': on the history of American food and wine, on grapes and vines, on the technology of winemaking, on everything. On being asked if the Center would be fun to visit, entertaining enough for the ordinary wine-drinking visitor, she replied: 'I believe that education should be entertaining.' A far cry from the branded mall of Sony Metreon, or indeed from the planned Mondavi attraction at Disney's new Californian experience. At the American Center in Napa, there are even to be restrictions on branded wines available for sampling and sale. The restaurant looks extensive, naturally, but the retail space is modest and you do not have to pass through it as you exit the Center. There is something wonderfully old-world about the museum ethos. The look may be modern, but the feel suggests late Victorian philanthropy and the sharing of knowledge for the common good. The question is: will the Center attract enough visitors with its clearly serious, even elitist approach to ensure sustainability?



Over 21,000 aluminium and stainless steel shingles cover EMP's exterior
Picture courtesy of Stan Smith

The further north you go, the further away from Los Angeles, the better life gets

There are now five million visitors a year to Napa Valley and the Center is looking for 300,000 of them, a mere 6%. Yet those visitors come to the valley, in the main, to visit real wineries, to taste and buy famous wines. Will they take a detour to discover the cultural truth behind the wines?

The Center will occupy an enviable acreage in the town of Napa, itself looking to upgrade its civic amenities, from the current suburban sprawl of small-town America to something more in keeping with the capital of a world-ranking wine region. The Center's land has the benefit of river frontage (to be improved) and scope for magnificent gardens, but its location demands every visitor leaves the highway long before reaching Napa Valley's vineyards, the main object of their journey. Will the Center's appeal attract them off their main route?

There is too much talent, passion and funding behind the American Center of Wine, Food and the Arts for it not to open with a fanfare and eventually succeed. Between those two points there will probably have to be some rethinking and a better balance struck between entertainment and education, American and world influences, even between commerce and philanthropy. Perhaps even a snappier, more memorable brand name. Oh, but it does warm the heart to see a vision of such scale and style emerging in the land of Disney.

Seattle

The further north you go, the further away from Los Angeles, the better life gets. San Francisco may be commercial but at least it's quirky. Napa may define plutocracy, but its beauty is celebrated with passion. When you reach Seattle in the State of Washington, you are breathing pure, fresh air.

Until this, my first visit, all I knew of Seattle came from the pages of Tom Robbins novels, hilarious descriptions of a very rainy landscape. They failed to prepare me for warm-hearted people, handsome streets, world-class food and wines, and the joys of its coastal location. The city had clearly gained scale and stature from Expo investment long ago (for instance on the monorail system linking downtown to the theme park delights of the Seattle Center), but the size of the population did not seem to have grown to fill the space. Only in the hot tourist spots of the seafront markets and themed attractions was there ever a queue visible, and in both cases the wait was worthwhile. Incomparable

Incomparable displays of great fish and organic produce on the one hand, and one of the world's great new visitor experiences on the other



Roots and Branches Sculpture in EMP
Picture courtesy of Tim Streetporter

displays of great fish and organic produce on the one hand, and one of the world's great new visitor experiences on the other.

The Experience Music Project (EMP) is Seattle's latest claim to fame. Brainchild of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and his partner Jo Allen Patton, it was originally conceived to house Mr Allen's unique collection of Jimi Hendrix memorabilia, later broadened to embrace a cultural mission: 'a destination celebrating musical innovation and inspiring young and old to be moved by the music.' As befits their commercial background (and Allen has invested in no less than 125 new media ventures, quite apart from Spielberg's Dreamworks enterprise), EMP lacks for nothing in terms of technology, design or indeed funds. This is a Whitney Museum for the twenty-first century, a Rockefeller Center for rock and roll. However, perhaps because of the subject matter, or the grown-up baby boomer attitude to unconditional giving, or the Seattle location, EMP avoids the merest hint of grossness you might associate with earlier exponents of American capitalism and munificence. This is a brilliant project in a wonderful place.

The place itself merits an exhibition of its own within EMP and gets it. Designed by Frank Gehry, the architect behind the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the building emerges to gasps of astonishment as your monorail journey reaches its destination. A fluid collage of panels (over 3000), clad in stainless steel and painted aluminium shingles – mirrored purple, brushed silver, bead-blasted gold, mixed with red and blue hues of electric guitars – all creating shapes that echo the energy and flow of guitar music. Gehry calls the shape 'swoopy', borrowing Paul Allen's instinctive reaction to an early design. This is a serious architectural icon.

Inside the building, design serves the content. You enter through a vast hall called Sky Church (from a Hendrix line) which doubles as a live performance and event venue by night. Here you collect your CD-based audio-guide (plus essential briefing) which is capable of storing over 20 hours of audio, from which you choose the material you want to hear. Ahead of you is the mountainous Roots and Branches sculpture, comprising 600 guitars. To your left the Gehry architectural exhibit, to your right Play On (short films, great sound), Northwest Passage (the region's contribution to rock), Guitar

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Gallery ('The quest for volume', a genuine history of the instrument) and – major queue – Hendrix Gallery.

Up a floor for Milestones, the authoritative history of American rock music, and the major interactive spaces: On Stage ('What's it like to play in front of thousands?'), Demo Lab (want to learn a dance step?), and – major queue again – Sound Lab, where you get to play the instruments, experiment with mixers, even create music of your own.

Downstairs there is Artist's Journey ('Ride the music in a truly one-of-a-kind multi-media experience'), but time was running out by now so this escaped analysis, as did the Learning Lab space (educational wing) and the Compaq Digital Lab (accessible archives).

EMP's retail offer is neatly assembled but oddly unambitious in comparison with Metreon's Sony offer. Would this not have been the place for the world's greatest music store? Food on offer is modest, too, mainly fast and definitively casual, but perhaps EMP's planners felt that rock 'n' rollers are more into munchies than menu gourmand.

Quite apart from the density and authority of EMP's exhibits, its design triumphs and its technological mastery, what impressed was the spirit of the place. Everyone joined in – staff and visitors alike – for a shared celebration of American music.

One could scarcely cavil at EMP. Well, perhaps just once. It is so American – in America, of America, for Americans – and, much as I love America, more of a nod to others' roles in shaping rock music would have been generous, appreciated, even proper. After all, it took the Brits to discover Hendrix, rescue the great blues artists, and redefine rhythm and blues.

Seattle and Washington State, on the other hand, seemed somehow separate from mainstream America, almost Canadian, and distinctly different from California to the south. There is money up here, in the labs at Microsoft, the Boeing hangars, the rolling farmland and the abundant waters. Yet Seattle and Washington seem to have avoided the worst blemishes of twentieth-century capitalism. Even their wines seem more generous and even-handed (and, take a tip, they will be the next big thing). It may well be that Seattle represents a bright new future for America and its West Coast, and Experience Music Project could do the same for destinations everywhere. The individual can win. With grace and a sense of place.

Web links

www.metreon.com

www.theamericancenter.org

www.emplive.com

(join EMP as a Roadie member for just \$35 and save \$20 on your entrance ticket, receive *Feedback* magazine every quarter, plus, plus, plus, ...). This website is reviewed on page 52.

Tony Hodges is a non-executive director of Locum Destination Consulting and an authority on branding. He travelled to Seattle courtesy of the World Vinifera Conference, which he addressed on the topic of breakthroughs in wine marketing.