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## Design from a Different Perspective

by Robert Wilkes



*The Harbor at Marina Bay in Santa Monica, California, is part of a real estate project and the look of the marina mirrors the tranquil look of the living spaces, with strong curb appeal.*

Marina operators see their job as providing a safe, secure environment for boats on water. Real estate developers tend to view their mission as creating gracious living spaces. Both perspectives can be effective and valuable in creating attractive, unique marinas.

The Harbor at Marina Bay is a beautifully tailored and fashionable marina in Marina del Rey, near Santa Monica, California. AvalonBay Communities Inc. owns and operates the marina and adjoining apartment complex. The marina provides the branding theme for the property and offers a tranquil and charming ambiance for the residents. It has 207 single-berth slips ranging from 22 feet to 60 feet and 11 side-tie slips. Side-tie slips can accommodate vessels up to 90 feet. The slips were at first offered exclusively to the apartment tenants, but are now available to the public.

AvalonBay, a nation-wide real estate investment trust, acquired the property in early 2013. "We have enormous faith in the future of a revitalized Marina del Rey," Senior Portfolio Operations Director, Brad Romano, said, "AvalonBay and the previous owners wanted to set the bar high. We

challenged our marina builder to create a very special marina with the same standards and amenities or better."

The owners naturally brought a real estate perspective to the project with a focus on the residential units. As a result, the original 1960s wood-dock marina underwent what might be called a "real estate" makeover. The marina was definitely not a neglected afterthought during the renovation, but a stunning, blue-chip, custom-designed marina.

### Custom Throughout

As real estate agents know, the attractiveness (and sales potential) of a property depends on curb appeal and first impression. Harbor at Marina Bay puts this theory into practice right at the top of the gangway. The long promenade is lined with palms on one side and a stately line of tall, sculptured light stanchions on the other.

Pass through an entry gate and the eye is immediately attracted to the dynamic sweep and intersecting line and form of the custom-designed gangway. Dramatically flared side rails provide an expansive, open feeling and give the impression that the four-foot gangway is much wider. The striking gangway is

mill-finished aluminum and illuminated with night lighting.

The Bellingham Marine Unifloat docks were manufactured at the company's Dixon, California, plant. "The owner wanted the same architectural attention to detail as the residences," Manager of Project Development for the Southwest Division, Eric Noegel, said. "We agreed to help them develop customized decking to give the project a signature feature that would set them apart and express sophistication. Our Dixon plant made about a dozen samples to compare color, texture and pattern. We created a one-of-a-kind stamp to create an ashlar pattern in the deck." Ashlar refers to finely dressed and fitted stonework considered the highest form of masonry in classical architecture.

"We used a powdered release that was broadcast over the deck and then stamped in," Noegel said. "That resulted in indentations that are darker than the faces of the stones and resemble a grout line." The deck is sealed with a curing compound, and the end result is a handsome dark gray.

The rounded ends of the finger piers were cast in special forms and trimmed with medium-density polyethylene (MDPE). "Round finger piers are architecturally distinctive and practical," Noegel said. "The rounded ends soften the angular geometry of the marina, adding curves where they're not expected. It really catches your eye. And they're more forgiving when docking a boat. We also used heavy-duty pre-stressed square guide piles for this project. The guide piles are stronger, and therefore, we didn't have to use as many. That was a cost saving because there were fewer to buy and install."

There are in-slip pumpout hydrants installed along each walkway, so tenants don't have to move their boats to use the system. The locker boxes and power pedestals are integrated and equipped with water meters and hose racks. "Other marina owners found that just installing the water meters reduced consumption by about 75 percent," Noegel said. "It didn't matter if they read the meters, just their presence on the pedestal caused tenants to be more careful with water

## MARINA DEL REY: A SHORT HISTORY

Marina Del Rey has always been a place for visionaries. In the late 19th Century, local developers were convinced the swampy estuary of Ballona Creek (at what is now Playa del Rey) could provide the commercial harbor that fast-growing Los Angeles was lacking. After investing \$300,000, an enormous sum at the time, the enterprise went bankrupt when community leaders chose San Pedro instead. The swamp remained, compelling local authorities to create the Ballona Creek Mosquito Abatement District.

Fortunately for future residents of California, the dream didn't die. Having lost out to San Pedro for the commercial harbor, local leaders persisted with a vision to build a vast small-craft harbor at the site. They acquired the land in the early 1950's, and their timing could not

have been more perfect. It was the era of great public works and infrastructure projects undertaken by the Eisenhower Administration. The project was funded by a 50-50 partnership between the federal government and Los Angeles County. The marina took its name from Playa del Rey (The King's Beach) and was called Marina del Rey (The King's Marina).

Construction began in 1954. The scope of the project was vast and extraordinary. At the time of its commissioning in April 1965, Marina del Rey offered 6,000 slips and was one of the most far-reaching projects of its kind. Civil engineers were so successful at transforming the swamplands into prime California real estate that the Ballona Creek Mosquito Abatement District was disbanded shortly thereafter.



The promenade along the entrance gates received the same attention to detail as the rest of the project.

usage. They pay for themselves and save money in the long run."

### The Consulting "Expert"

Marina del Rey presents a number of difficult challenges to marina owners looking to renovate. The task of obtaining geotechnical, electrical, environmental, fire suppression and other permits and approvals can be circuitous and time consuming, especially if someone is new to the process. An owner may also meet political resistance from neighborhood groups who generally oppose

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Rounded finger ends break up the angular geometry and stand out along the docks.

“gentrifying” their neighborhood. The county has restrictions on the number of slips to be out of commission throughout the harbor at the same time, and pile driving is limited to the months of September through April. With all these hurdles, it’s not surprising that owners often hire expeditors, or “experts,” to help them get through the process and shorten the time involved.

The Harbor at Marina Bay is a good example of the value of a consultant who knows the ins and outs of getting entitlements for marina renovations in California. The apartment/marina

property had a series of three owners over a 10-year period during the planning, permitting and construction of the marina. The first owner, Decron Properties, was, like AvalonBay, primarily a real estate development company and unfamiliar with redeveloping marinas. They brought on Bellingham Marine as a consultant. Eric Noegel was assigned to the project. “We worked with Decron to outline the project,” Noegel said, “then we helped them all the way through the entitlement process. They chose us because they wanted a long-lasting concrete dock marina and they wanted to work with a company familiar with the rules and regulations. It was a good partnership, and eventually they awarded us the project. We were given turnkey responsibility from the top of the gangway to the ends of the finger piers. We got all the entitlements in place and started the project.”

“Of several projects being proposed throughout the harbor, we were able to get this project approved first,” Noegel said. “Then, Decron sold the property

to Archstone Enterprise LP. We had to present our case and win the project all over again.” Bellingham Marine was awarded the project a second time and work resumed. AvalonBay acquired the property from Archstone when the marina was about 50 percent completed.

## Conclusion

The Harbor at Marina Bay demonstrates that the infusion of new ideas from people outside the marina industry is a healthy and creative stimulus. Experienced marina operators are masters of the practical considerations of building or renovating a great marina. But the visionary ideas of people from outside the industry will accelerate change, introduce new products and materials, and open horizons in every way. The Harbor at Marina Bay has indeed set the bar high, and is leading the renaissance of Marina del Rey. ⚓

*Robert Wilkes writes about the marina industry from his home in Bellevue, Washington.*

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