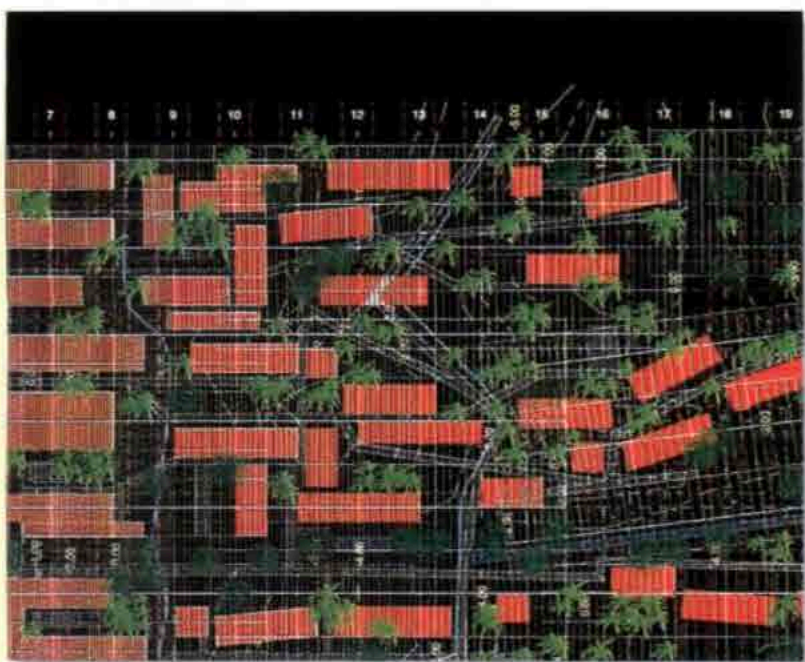


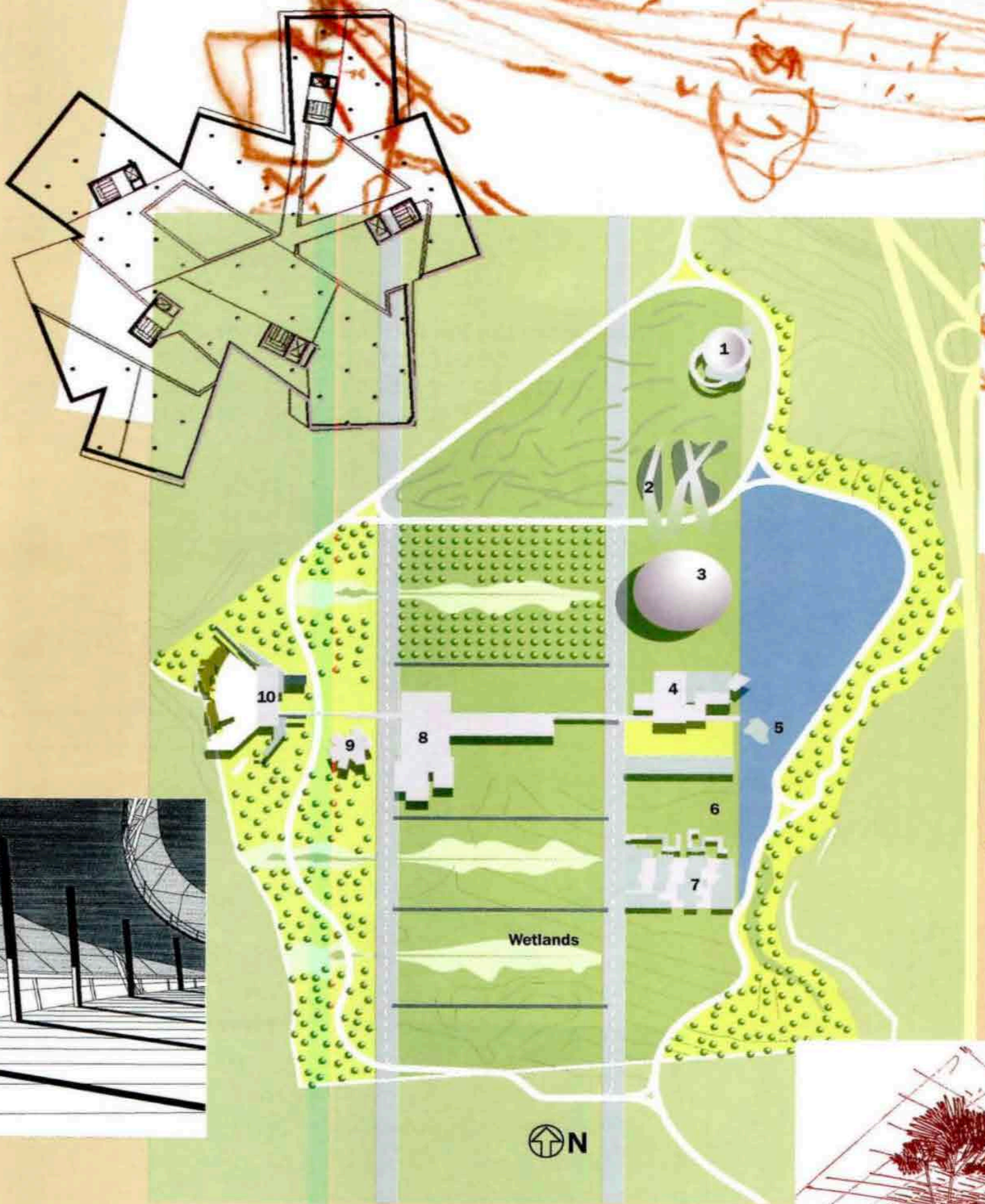
P R O J E C T S

**WORKING IN CENTRAL MEXICO AND
DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN, ARCHITECTS ARE
BRINGING THE HISTORIC AND THE VENERABLE
INTO THE 21ST CENTURY.**



A successful businessman envisions a \$200 million complex where culture and commerce, housing and entertainment work together to create a new kind of urban development on the edge of Guadalajara, Mexico. He commissions 10 star architects from around the world to design major buildings there. If built as planned, this multiuse center will complement the city's historic downtown with a forward-looking architectural showcase. Two thousand miles away, the New York Stock Exchange hires a pair of young computer-savvy architects to take the 207-year-old institution into cyberspace. Using laminated glass and electronic pixels, the architects connect the real and virtual worlds. In both of these projects, hard-nosed capitalists are asking architects to help them tackle the challenges of the future and lead the way to the next millennium.

A dream team of international architects designs the **JVC CENTER** with hopes of putting Guadalajara on the must-see map. Can they pull it off?



- 1. Palenque
- 2. Fairgrounds
- 3. Convention center
- 4. Entertainment and shopping center
- 5. Children's museum
- 6. Art museum
- 7. Housing and hotel
- 8. Office and shopping
- 9. University
- 10. Amphitheater

by Clifford A. Pearson

Bring 10 of the most innovative architects in the world to your hometown, tell them to stretch their imaginations, and set no initial budgetary constraints. That's what businessman Jorge Vergara Madrigal is doing in Guadalajara, Mexico, where he has started work on a new cultural and business center that he hopes to inaugurate late next year and to have buzzing by 2003. It sounds too good to be true. Indeed, there are many skeptics who doubt he can pull it off or can do it with the quality that initial sketches seem to promise.

The scope of the vision and its commitment to high design are almost unheard of in a time when many governments have washed their hands of grand urban schemes and the private sector has made quick profits its top priority. Although Vergara's development won't have a high enough density or enough housing to be a real city, the diversity of its facilities (convention center, fairgrounds, offices, entertainment and shopping complex, museums, hotel, housing, amphitheater, university, and even a *palenque*, or traditional cockfighting ring) take it well beyond the typical corporate office park or residential development. When asked what other places he used as models, Vergara says, "There aren't any."

Vergara, who has amassed a fortune in the past eight years sell-

ing architectural plans. "It's a mistake for us to eat the whole cake," explains Vergara, "but we want to maintain a certain standard, a level of quality."

"The main goal [of the JVC Center] is culture," says Vergara. "But culture doesn't make a profit, so we bring in business to support it." In particular, the convention business is underdeveloped in Mexico, states Vergara, even as 40 percent of all convention centers in the U.S. are booked up to six or seven years in advance. Less than two hours south of Dallas by plane, Guadalajara could attract many trade shows with the proper facilities, he reasons. Vergara hopes to develop a flow of 25,000 to 30,000 people each day and up to 400,000 people for conventions.

From maize to modernism

The JVC Center site is 750 acres of corn fields in a picturesque valley abutting a national forest. Northwest of the colonial core of Guadalajara, the development will officially be in Zapopan, just across the Periferico or ring road from the city. For several decades the Periferico separated the urban center from its rural periphery. Now development pressure is rising and the JVC Center will be the first major project to jump beyond the city's traditional growth boundary. Not everyone is happy about this. But

JORGE VERGARA'S GOAL IS TO MAKE MONEY. BUT HE ALSO WANTS TO JUMP-START A REVIVAL OF MEXICO'S SECOND LARGEST CITY.

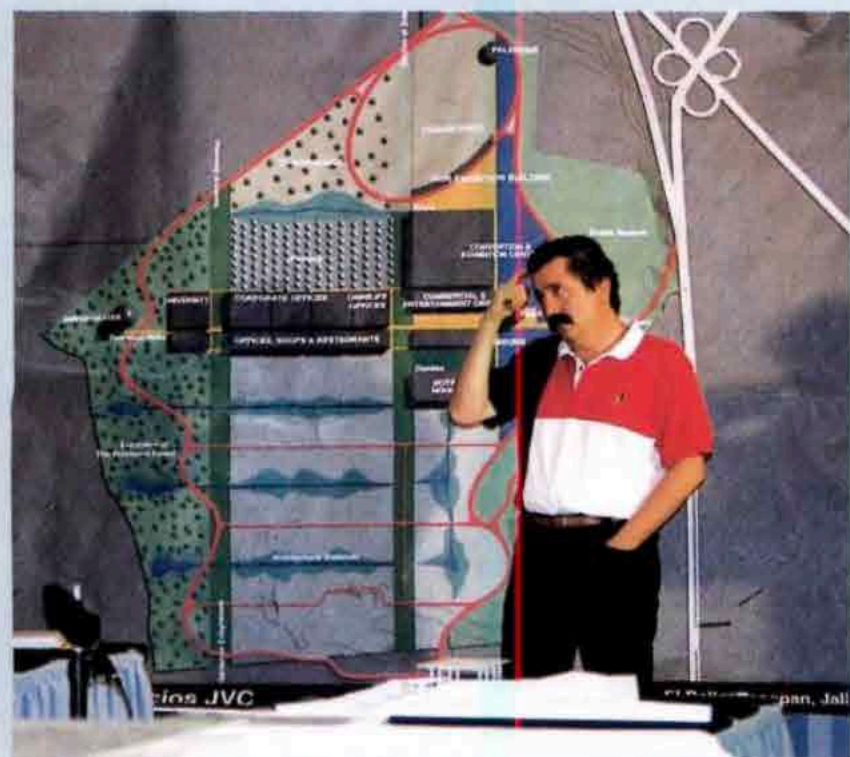
ing nutritional drinks and health products in Latin America and the United States, envisions a new kind of development where culture attracts business and business supports culture. His goal is to make money. But he also hopes to jump-start a revival of Mexico's second largest city by putting it on the world's cultural map. In other countries this might be the government's job, but in Mexico it is much easier for a private developer to get things done. Pointing to the example of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, he says, "They do this beautiful museum and they attract half-a-million people in one year. And they changed the city. With one building they did that. So I ask, 'What if we do ten?'"

Starting with fairgrounds for Guadalajara's annual autumn *feria*—Mexico's version of the county fair—the first 10 buildings of the proposed JVC Center—as the project is called—are being developed by Vergara's company, Grupo Omnilife. In the future, land will be leased to other companies to build additional hotels, offices, and various facilities. Vergara's organization, though, will retain the right to review subsequent

Omnilife is funding studies of the 2,470 acres surrounding and including the JVC Center site to develop a sensible growth plan for the entire area.

When Vergara approached local and provincial authorities about a year ago with plans for his development, he met with a wall of suspicion. Since the valley is an important watershed for the area, the first questions they asked concerned the water supply and other environmental issues. Studies by Omnilife consultants showed that the development could be low-impact by preserving wetlands on the site, creating a new lake, minimizing paving, and extending the forest from the hills into the valley. By early this year, regulatory agencies were looking at the project more positively, says Vergara, and the governor of Jalisco province threw his support behind it. "At first people were afraid of what these crazy architects would do," recalls Vergara with a grin. "Now people are excited."

By hiring an impressive list of cutting-edge architects from around the world and thinking big, Vergara has caused a lot of people to take notice. What will Wolf Prix's entertainment and shopping center be



Jorge Vergara Madrigal is not your typical corporate mogul. With no college education and a career that includes time as an auto mechanic and a restaurant maitre d', Vergara (above), at 43 years of age, has built the most successful nutritional supplements business in Latin America, outselling his former employer Herbalife on his home turf, according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*. This success stems from a culture of self-improvement that Vergara has established at the company, one that flows from his efforts to promote better education and his own story of turning around his life by adopting a healthier diet. Earlier this year, ARCHITECTURAL RECORD editor Robert Ivy, FAIA, interviewed the Omnilife president in New York. *On the origins of the JVC project:* "My concept was to hire the best architects in the world and show the world we could design and build in a cost-effective and business-wise way. We wanted to show that we could make a new kind of city based on humane planning and at the same time honor architecture." *On his instructions to the architects:*

"My approach wasn't to say, 'I want this convention center and I want it this way.' I said, 'I want you to tell me and imagine the best convention center. After you do that, I will budget it and tell you to trim this or take that out, if I cannot afford what you imagined.' That was a different approach for these architects." *On architects working as a team:* "It's not easy to work with architects. They're really creative and emotional. But I wanted to put together a team that would make the project work—not only in terms of business but as a beautiful place, as a tribute to architecture, and as an example of what can be done as a team." *On getting things done:* "I promised [the architects] one thing after I found out that every one of them was frustrated by so many projects in their offices that never get off the drawing board. I said, 'This one is going to be built.'" *On the design approach at JVC:* "We have a rich culture here in Guadalajara, but it has been buried for 25 years. And I'm not old-fashioned. I believe in changes. That's why I like modern." ■

like? Or what about Thom Mayne's palenque, Enrique Norten's convention center, Carmen Pinós' fairgrounds, Daniel Libeskind's university, Jean Nouvel's office center, Toyo Ito's museum, Steven Holl's housing and hotel complex, Philip Johnson's children's museum, or Tod Williams and Billie Tsien's amphitheater?

And how will all these stars and their buildings work together? "We told the architects they must work as a team," says Vergara. "They must listen to one another and their buildings have to communicate with each other. I didn't want to create a museum of architecture; I wanted a city." To that end, the architects have gathered several times in Mexico and the United States, presented their projects to each other, and discussed all aspects of the development.

Out of these meetings has come a master plan that concentrates development along two parallel axes and a cross street connecting the two. A winding surface road takes cars around the perimeter of the site, while a pair of service roads are buried underground so delivery vehicles are hidden from view. Most of the parking is also underground, one level below the buildings. For conventions and big events, electric buses will shuttle people from a large parking lot off-site to the JVC Center.

Norten and Bernardo Gomez-Pimienta, the two partners of

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TEN Arquitectos, have served as coordinating architects for the entire development, helping Vergara to assemble the architectural team and overseeing the master plan. "It's not really a city," says Norten of the JVC Center, "it's a part of an existing city." Norten adds that the JVC Center will be "both a contrast and a complement to Guadalajara. The idea is to create a tension between the new and the old that will activate the Avenida Vallarta," the main road connecting downtown to the new development. The architects are also talking with the government about extending one of the city's two subway lines to reach the new cultural and business center. "Guadalajara's political, banking, and commercial center will remain downtown," states Norten. But the old buildings in the city's colonial core aren't well suited to the new workplaces and large cultural complexes envisioned for the JVC Center.

Guadalajara and other Mexican colonial towns revolve around outdoor plazas, but the JVC Center will be different. "The JVC has a much lower density and a different mix of uses than downtown, so it requires a different character," explains Juan Carlos Name, a Guadalajara architect who is working with Pinós on the fairgrounds and with Holl on the housing and hotel complex. "Modern public space is different from traditional public space," says Norten. While conscious of the failures of Corbusian plans that set towers in amorphous parks, the architects aim to create public spaces that are "fluid, dynamic, that are defined by the architecture, and not just left-over spaces," states Norten. Vergara explains the break from the colonial planning model by saying, "You can fit only four buildings around a town square. Here we have 10, and all are important."

Establishing the right adjacencies is one of the keys to making the JVC Center work as a place, explains Norten. Some of these relationships follow logically from the buildings' programs; for example, the fairgrounds, convention center, and palenque will all be used at the same time, so it makes sense to cluster them together. But other buildings have been grouped together to enhance the project's mission of merging culture and commerce. As a result, the entertainment/shopping center will face the art museum across a landscaped plaza, and the housing/hotel complex will share a sculpture garden with the museum.

Most of the commercial and convention facilities (including the palenque, fairgrounds, convention center, entertainment/shopping center, art museum, and housing/hotel complex) are aligned along one of the two north-south axes, the so-called Garden of Enlightenment. Parallel to this axis and to the west is the Garden of Enlightenment, from which the university, amphitheater, and office complex emanate. Both of the north-south ways are pedestrian-oriented on grade but turn into vehicular service roads underground. Connecting these 1.25-mile long axes is a two-thirds-of-a-mile-long cross street that will start at the lake, end at the amphitheater, and be lined with shops and restaurants from around the world.

Fitting the buildings to the climate

In terms of the architecture, Vergara asked the designers to take advantage of the warm, dry climate, use as little air-conditioning as possible, specify mostly local materials, and maintain views around the site. He also gave the architects free rein to explore innovative design strategies and unusual programmatic combinations—without worrying about the budget. Only after the initial designs came in did the client have his staff review the plans to develop budgets for each building. "Every architect went further than I had imagined with their designs, but all of them are buildable," reports Vergara. And most of the buildings are coming in very close to the rough budget that he had estimated would be needed at the beginning of the project.

Some changes, though, are being made. For example, Holl's housing and hotel complex needs to accommodate more units, and the location of the amphitheater is still being debated. But the key ideas behind the projects have remained remarkably intact. "The magic of the project is that the architects were encouraged to dream at the beginning and not to design to fit a budget," says Francisco Cornejo, a partner in Grupo Corey, the local architect for the entertainment center and the children's museum and the project manager for the entire development.

Speaking of Vergara, Cornejo states, "Jorge doesn't follow the usual rules. He is unique and will build something different. Sometimes his thinking doesn't seem to make sense, but in the end it always works."

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And responding to an observer's skepticism about the size and complexity of the JVC Center, Cornejo says, "Many things will change. But one thing I'm sure of: If Jorge has it in his mind, it will happen."

Vergara estimates that the first phase of the JVC Center with the initial 10 buildings will cost between \$180 million and \$200 million. Up to 90 percent of this will be funded from Omnilife's internal sources. Only about 10 percent of the costs will be financed by loans and these will be for only the revenue-generating projects such as the convention center. "We reinvest all the money in our company and we save a lot." Last year Omnilife reported sales of \$312 million worldwide. "For the first two months of this year, our sales are up 48 percent," says Vergara. "We expect



Standing, left to right: Billie Tsien, Donald van Dansik, Enrique Ross, Daniel Libeskind, Nina Libeskind, Jean Nouvel, Juan Palomar, Tod Williams, Wolf Prix. Seated, back row: Francisco Perez Arellano, Fernando Romero, Alejandra Lerdo de Tejada, Enrique Norten. Middle row: Sergio Nuñez, Bernardo Gomez-Pimienta, Carme Pinos, Thom Mayne, Fabian Medina, Leonardo Lara. Front row: Monica Janet, Catalina Aristizabal.

to reach \$500 million in sales in 1999."

What kind of a place will the JVC Center be? More than an office park but not quite a city, the project has few precedents. Most of the time it will be populated with white-collar office workers, university students, affluent families visiting the entertainment center or museums, and foreign businesspeople attending conventions. Each October, the month-long feria will attract a broad cross section of Mexican society, bringing in hundreds of thousands of spectators for cockfights, boxing matches, and outdoor markets. The housing at the JVC Center will be beyond the reach of most Mexicans and will provide an alternative to traditional family housing. "A new kind of Mexican will live there—young, single professionals or divorced people," explains María Emilia Orendáin, a partner in Toussaint y Orendáin Grupo Arquitectos, which is working with Ito on the art museum. "Right now, all housing in Guadalajara is designed for

families only." Name adds, "I will move there, after my kids grow up. My wife and I will go to the movies every night."

With infrastructure work just beginning, the JVC Center faces a host of challenges. Vergara wants the fairgrounds to open in time for the October 2000 feria and have the palenque and convention center ready a year later. By 2003 the first 10 buildings are scheduled to be complete. Constructing complex buildings on such a fast track in a country like Mexico may not be feasible, but Vergara's vision is strong and infectious. "Jorge is using architecture to get things going in Guadalajara," explains Orendáin's partner Enrique Toussaint. That's a powerful example for Mexico or any other country. ■