

Friendship Center: A Product of Harmony
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When thunderous El Niño rains pounded Los Angeles this winter, halting construction at sites all over Southern California and wreaking havoc with traffic, project supervisor Ted Fujioka wasn't worried at all about the fate of the Los Angeles Friendship Center, which opened on Sept. 21. A veteran of four decades of SGI-USA enterprises, he knew exactly what to do. "We used any downtime to sit around with the various contractors and talk," he said — about how best to execute the plans, the difficulties of laying out such a radical triangular design, and solving issues that hadn't even come up yet.

"By the time the weather cleared," he says, "everyone was working in harmony." He showed no surprise, then, when the Friendship Center opened two months early: "The members' determination and daimoku made it happen."

Since day one in July 1996, when the idea for a Los Angeles neighborhood-based center was born, until its completion two years later, the LAFC has been a product of the members' wishes — but it took the compassion of SGI President Ikeda to make this "castle of kosen-rufu" a reality. The SGI president donated the funds not only to purchase the property in the first place but to build a brand new building when plans to refurbish the earthquake-damaged engineering company building on the site proved impractical.

Things moved fast: a committee of architects, leaders from each Los Angeles region and volunteers drew up a mission statement for the friendship center and started researching ideas for its design, materials, lighting, decor — tossing back and forth ideas on what would be the most welcoming colors and textures.

The center is made up of two buildings — one that houses the main hall, with seating for about 400, and a triangular-shaped one that contains offices, meeting rooms and the bookstore. It ushers in a new era of people-oriented meeting places, according to Los Angeles Region Leader Ian McIlraith, thanks to grass-roots involvement "from its inception through its evolution as a structure and in the scope of its features."

One of the departures from tradition is that the main hall boasts a colorful, versatile flooring suitable for performance group rehearsals as well as events where food is served. The center's layout highlights natural gathering places, the soothing greenery of an atrium and a full-sized basketball court to accommodate energetic kids of all ages. There are seven Gohonzon enshrined in the center, making every multi-purpose room one in which members can chant.

In the hectic last few days before the opening, the members continued to show the depth of their involvement. One couple who happened to be retiring from their nursery business arrived with dozens of plants for the garden, while another member drove up from Santa Ana with a truck-load of saplings.

Perhaps more important than the physical environment of the center is what has happened and will continue here: harmony, discovery, creation.

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