

Architecture review: 'Centers of the USA' at the Center for Land Use Interpretation

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Occupying a windowless, easily overlooked storefront on Venice Boulevard in Culver City, the Center for Land Use Interpretation has been putting together quietly impressive and obsessively detailed exhibitions, publications and field trips for nearly two decades.

They all tell some version of the same story: how we shape and find meaning in the physical landscape around us, whether it's through oil exploration, architecture, map-making or freeway building.

The center's latest show, which runs through Sunday, is both more of the same and among its finest yet. Organized by Matthew Coolidge, who founded the land use center in 1994, "Centers of the USA" accomplishes, at first blush, no more and no less than its title suggests: It charts all the places in the United States, nine in all, that claim to occupy the center of the country.

There's the geographical center (near Belle Fourche, S.D.); the population center (Plato, Mo.); and something called the "geodetic" center (a few miles outside Osborne, Kan.), pinpointed using a method that corrects for the curvature of the earth.

Now there's even a Google center: the point you reach if you call up a map of the U.S. on the search engine and zoom straight in as far as you can go. Depending on your browser, that'll take you to one of two other towns in Kansas, each of which is the hometown of a Google employee.

Los Angeles Times

The true appeal of the show, though, is the rich variety of themes that swirl up around its straightforward, even myopic focus. The exhibition is in many ways an exploration of the human desire to find and mark a center, a universal impulse that has gained new precision — and perhaps a new momentum — in the digital age.

“It’s really about finding the middle ground or consensus,” Coolidge told me. “Finding the most shared space.”

Organizing an exhibition like this one in Los Angeles, the first big city to develop without a single center, adds a layer of richness and irony to what’s on the walls. L.A.’s downtown is famously just one of many important districts in a vast and many-headed metropolitan matrix. Even the concept of “the most shared space” is unusually fraught in L.A., given the city’s dedication for most of the 20th century to protecting private space at nearly any cost.

That dedication seems to be wavering. Or maybe it’s always in flux. Thickening traffic and rising density mean Los Angeles is being forced to grapple once again with the idea of the public realm and to share space (on streets, buses and in apartment building foyers) more intensely than it has in many decades. Downtown in recent years has reasserted itself as a center — if hardly the center — of Los Angeles.

The land use center is at the edge of Culver City, which in less than a decade has gone from periphery to prominence in the cultural map of Southern California. Its position on the ever-shifting ranking of regional centers will get another boost when the Expo light-rail line opens later this year. In fact, the construction of new rail lines across the region is changing the definition of centrality in Los Angeles; the downtown-Culver City axis created by the Expo Line is poised to become one of the most important in Southern California.

Then too there is the fact that the Center for Land Use Interpretation has the word “center” right at the beginning of its name. That gesture is at once a gentle sendup of bureaucratic ego — every think tank wants to call itself the center of something — and slyly self-deprecating, given the center’s own nomadic impulse over the years and its low-key physical presence on Venice Boulevard, where it hardly seems to occupy the center of its own block. As the show’s wall text points out, in what qualifies as a tidy slogan for Los Angeles existentialism, “The center exists in many places, one of which is here.”

“Centers of the USA” is ultimately about the difficulty of marking or settling on a single center, in any territory, especially one as vast and changeable as the United States. The plural “centers” in the title is the first clue about that conclusion. (Finding a center of the country, Coolidge has said, “depends on how you establish the criteria, how minutely you measure the perimeter, and how you do the math.”) In a country for which the Constitution is in certain ways an extended essay on the theme of protecting minority interests, maybe it makes sense that we have more than one center; one imagines that North Korea has one and one only, end of discussion.

More interesting still is the relationship between the basic idea of a center — fixed, absolute, singular — and this country’s long-standing love affair with mobility and the freedom that comes with it. As part of the exhibition, the center outfitted a small trailer as a portable gallery space, hanging materials on its walls about the “Centers of the USA” project. It took this trailer, which it labeled a “mobile exhibit hall,” first to Lebanon, Kan., where it stood open to the public for a year next to the monument marking “the center of the contiguous United States.” In late summer of last year it began a tour of several other centers, covering 2,972 miles in all.

The mobility of the exhibit hall — suggesting an all-American hybrid of museum gallery and road trip — is a nice symbolic nod to the fact that because of population and demographic shifts, many of the centers of the U.S. are constantly, if slowly, shifting along with the data used to find them. The population center as measured by the Census Bureau, for instance, has been moving southwest for years, reflecting the growth of the Sun Belt.

Los Angeles Times

But that movement has slowed markedly in recent decades. And it's entirely possible that in the decades to come, if global warming or sky-high gas prices begin to make Phoenix and other sun-baked, sprawling cities less attractive, the American population will begin to shift north.

If that happens, the population center will move north as well. "When it starts moving north," Coolidge told me, "that'll really be some kind of tipping point."

The latest edition of the center's newsletter, the Lay of the Land, recounts the trailer's journey in detail. One section describes a visit on foot to the site of the population center of the country — as mathematically determined by officials from several federal agencies — in a wooded section of a privately owned Missouri property. A few months earlier a team of government surveyors had visited the spot and marked it with a modest pile of rocks.

"After fording a stream and entering a thicket," the newsletter reports, the center's group "arrived at a small clearing with the slumped-over rock pile and a small American flag. We all savored the moment of poise, imagining being surrounded, equally, on all sides, by everyone else in America."

One of the subtle strengths of "Centers of the USA" is that it makes clear both how satisfying and how illusory — or at least how fleeting — such moments of perfect balance can be.