

Architecture

Super-museums are back. But are they best?

Two huge blockbusters in LA could radically remake the city — but London and Brussels offer a different approach



The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in Los Angeles © Sand Hill Media/Eric Furie

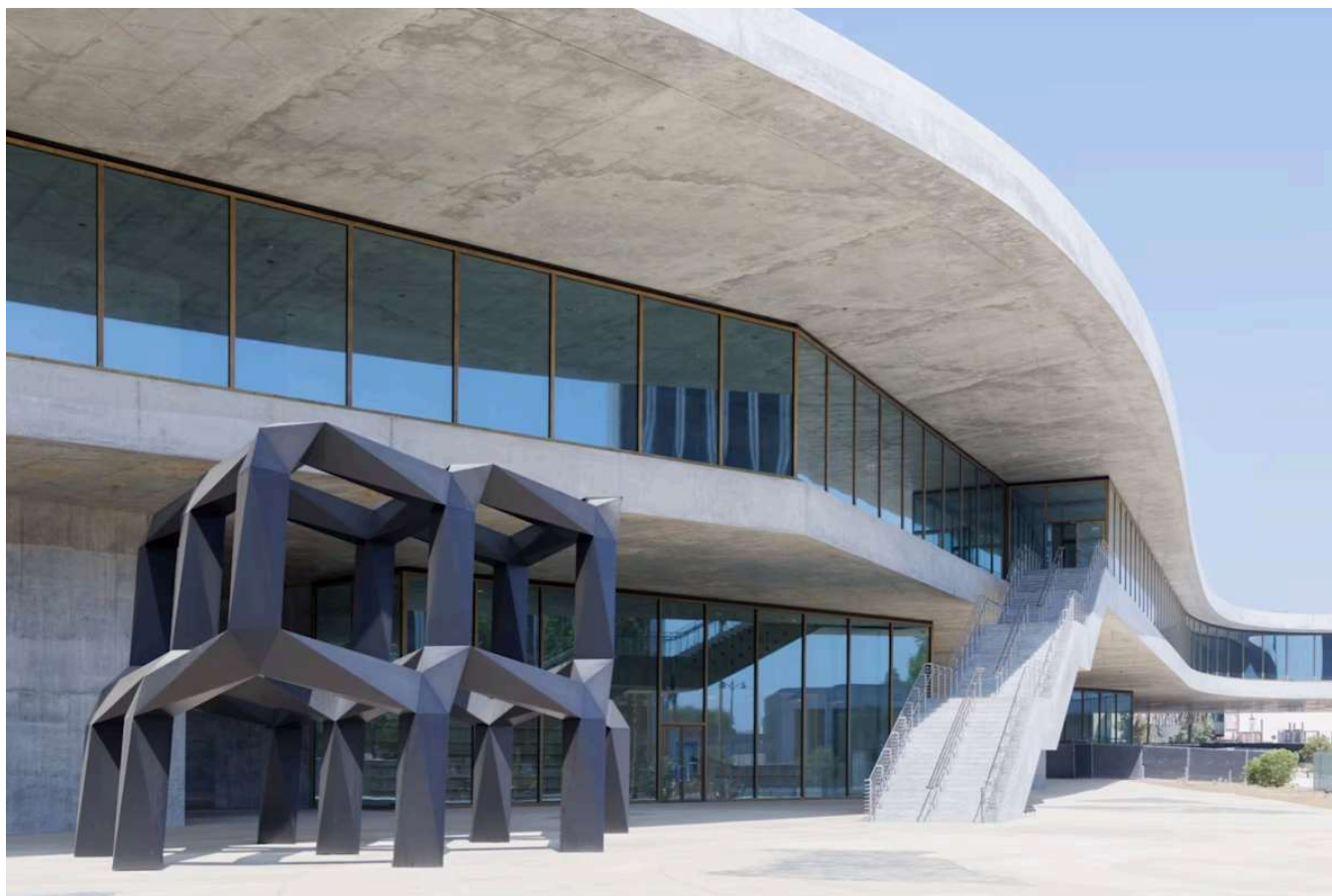
Edwin Heathcote

Published JAN 3 2026

The death of Frank Gehry last month might have suggested that the age of the blockbuster museum was coming to an end. The architect whose Guggenheim Bilbao made depressed, drab cities think that all they needed to revivify themselves was a striking, eccentrically shaped contemporary art museum has gone, but his vast Guggenheim Abu Dhabi limps on, set perhaps to be a bookend for that era. By the time it is completed (this year, apparently, though that has been said before), it will be a fossil, a dinosaur from another age.

Or at least that was how it seemed. This year will see the opening of two huge art museums, one new, one an extension, in a city that you wouldn't think really needs to be put on the map: Los Angeles.

The city that keeps reinventing itself, that was on fire a year ago, images of its celebrity dreamscape transformed into a hellish vision of its future on a burning planet, is betting on art and architecture to reimagine itself again.



The exterior of the new David Geffen Galleries at the LA County Museum of Art © Iwan Baan

The most prominent project is Swiss architect Peter Zumthor's huge, amoeboid extension to the LA County Museum of Art, surely the most expensive museum extension ever at an estimated \$720mn. The design for the David Geffen Galleries started off as a spreading black blob, a neat visual reference to the La Brea tar pits next door and the city's genesis in the oil boom. It seemed the perfect symbol for a city built on gas, on crude and on the automobile. It even extends over the road, bridging the traffic like a superglam Italian Autogrill.

The wacky blobs that had skipped out of fashion are, it seems, back, like space cruisers looming on to our screens at the beginning of a new movie

The black disappeared and the concrete went grey, then the curved glass disappeared and the building now looks like something very different indeed.

Perhaps an airport terminal. There have been criticisms, from its lack of wall space (works will need to be hung directly on concrete walls, which will lead to an abundance of holes and repairs over the

years) to its overabundance of harsh California light and the radical value engineering of Zumthor's extravagant design. What it undoubtedly still is, though, is a blockbuster.



A view from the David Geffen Galleries at dusk © Iwan Baan

There is an irony inherent in looking at this design soon after Gehry's death. Gehry, though born in Toronto, was an architect steeped in the vernacular of Los Angeles: not its upmarket villas but its everyday. His early work was a conversation with the city's backlots and side alleys, its industrial infrastructure and workshops. He is best known in LA for the Walt Disney Concert Hall (2003), but his most interesting work was something very different. His Danziger Studio (1965), for instance, was a blocky, ruthlessly unspectacular building that sat somewhere between an Austrian early modernist villa, a wholesale warehouse and a backstreet body shop. It was the opposite of what he later became famous for.

Zumthor, on the other hand, is the essential central European artist. His buildings are meticulously wrought and intense. Nothing is ad hoc. They famously take years or even decades to build and do not come cheap. He is the antithesis of LA, with its soundstage sets and architecture of effect. It will be truly fascinating to see what he has made of this city, what he has done to it and what it has done to him.

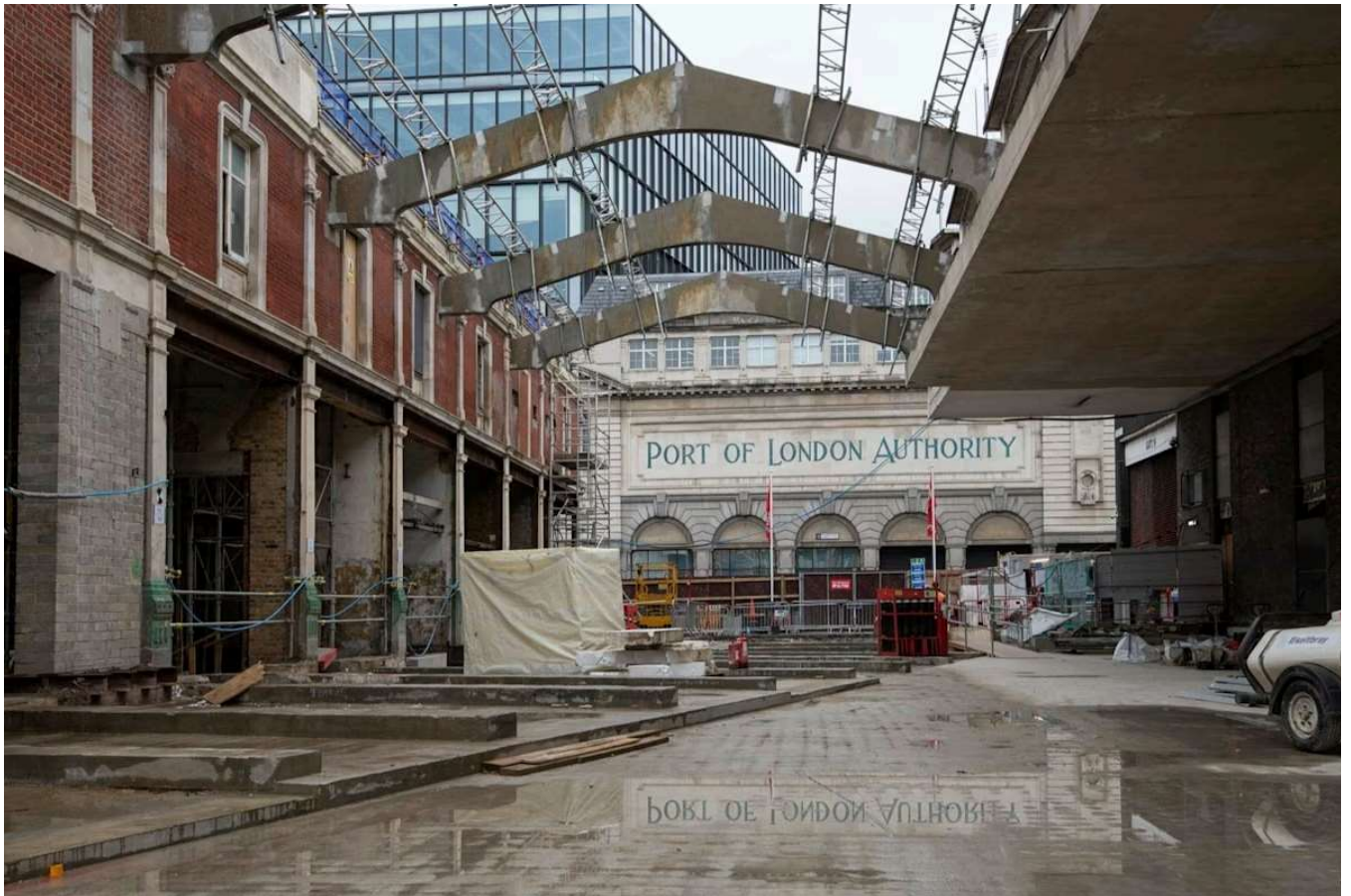
To the south-east of LACMA, over in Exposition Park, is another new museum building by an architect more firmly in the late Gehry than the late Zumthor mode. Ma Yansong and his practice MAD Architects are based in Beijing and this will be his first big cultural building in the US. The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art is a filmmaker's reaction to the kinds of things that will be displayed at LACMA on the museum with no walls.



The lobby at the Lucas Museum, designed by MAD Architects, during construction

Star Wars creator George Lucas has been collecting non-abstract art, now filmically dubbed “narrative art”, for decades. It includes illustrations for children’s books and pulp covers, paintings and cartoons, but also works by Carrie Mae Weems, Jacob Lawrence, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as well as a massive collection of film memorabilia and a huge archive of African-American movie materials. It sounds an absolute blast.

Like LACMA, this building also bridges a road. The two museums look very different yet share many of the same obsessions: scale, bridging, a relationship to a neighbouring park, absorbing the traffic inside them and a fluid, almost liquid plan. The kind of wacky blobs that had seemed to have skipped out of fashion are, it seems, back, like space cruisers looming on to our screens at the beginning of a new movie. Together they promise to radically remake LA as a city of culture, encompassing, as it always has done, the high and the low through spectacle.



Construction work on the London Museum in Smithfield's old meat market © London Museum

It's intriguing to compare London's offerings for next year. Here the blockbuster new building really does seem to have faded away. The big opening will be the Museum of London — or the London Museum, per a small rebrand — not a new structure but the reuse of market halls at Smithfield. Extending deep underground, it encompasses massive brick vaults and the neighbouring tunnels of the rumbling Tube. It's a sensitive project because the remaining still-active meat market is scheduled to close in the coming years and, being London, the expectation is that this will become another Covent Garden, a place for tourists and out-of-towners rather than Londoners.

Smithfield is a delicate ecosystem of clubs, caffs, a sprawling hospital and designers' studios, all existing only because the bloody iron tang of the market, its late-night activity and the cold storage and warehouses around it preclude massive gentrification and create spaces perfect for other uses. Once the market has gone, the rents will rise, the clubs will disappear and the cafés will become coffee shops. The Museum of London is clearly trying to resist that shift with an intelligent intervention that includes revitalising the rows of butchers' shops which used to surround the site with independent businesses and workshops. We'll see.



V&A East Museum, designed by O'Donnell & Tuomey © Peter Kelleher/V&A

London's other new museum will be V&A East. After the huge success of its Storehouse, its open archive in a banal box on the former London Olympics site in Stratford, this is a higher-risk project. Not exactly a blockbuster, it is already dwarfed by surrounding buildings including the heft of the London College of Fashion next door. But it is, at least, a considered building by Irish architects O'Donnell & Tuomey.

What's fascinating about London is that those institutions which have reused existing buildings have almost always fared better than those building entirely anew. Just think of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, London's grandest new public room in half a century, or the V&A's Storehouse, where the lack of need to make an architectural statement with the exterior has led to a shedding of the neuroses and identity crises that often afflict big museums. It allows the institution to relax a little and concentrate on the museum.

In Brussels, the KANAL-Centre Pompidou is following the same model, appropriating a huge 1930s Citroën garage to house a contemporary art museum. Designed by Sergison Bates, noAarchitecten and EM2N, this industrial revivification looks like another of 2026's highlights, with the architects attempting to maintain as much of the old building's character and texture as possible.



Work under way at the KANAL-Centre Pompidou, designed by Sergison Bates, noAarchitecten and EM2N © Bart Grietens

LACMA not only failed to adapt an existing building, it actually demolished a bunch of intriguing museum buildings in the process. Even odder is that it appears that it will have less rather than more exhibition space at the end of the process. It might be that the sheer expense involved in creating the new blockbuster increasingly puts off all but the wealthiest private clients. If museums are then required to search for the most interesting existing structures, I suggest it will be better for the planet, for cities and, probably, for architecture itself.

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#), [Bluesky](#) and [X](#), and [sign up](#) to receive the FT Weekend newsletter every Saturday morning

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Architecture

Visual Arts

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Frank Gehry

Peter Zumthor