

BEVERLY HILLS REAL ESTATE

Proposed Institute Raises Ire Among Westside Residents

By Victoria Talbot

A massive new project that is designed to leave a small environmental footprint, but cuts across an established public open space easement in the former landfill area adjacent to the Getty Center was the subject of a nearly standing-room only presentation at the Skirball Center Sunday, organized by *ProtectOurWildlands.org*.

The proposal is the Scholars Campus at the Berggruen Institute, which is described as, "a peaceful environment where distinguished scholars and thought leaders develop and encourage new ideas for a changing world, and to propose practical solutions that can transform society-and humanity-for the better."

It is the brainchild of Nicholas Berggruen, once known as the "homeless billionaire" because he lived in five-star hotels. Berggruen, the investor and art collector with German and American citizenship, grew up in France and has settled in Los Angeles. His investment company, Berggruen Holdings, is registered in the British Virgin Islands. His charitable trust is in Bermuda.

Los Angeles Magazine referred to the proposed devel-

opment as a "21st century Monastery."

With 450 acres cresting the mountain, Berggruen's design by Herzog & de Meuron incorporates some very 21st century sustainability, including a reduced carbon footprint, passive cooling measures, harvesting energy from methane produced by the landfill, rainwater collection and conservation, and a "dark sky" strategy for reduced light impacts.

The institute claims that the project will minimize grading and promote reforestation, and "restore hiking trails in the most sensitive manner," according to their website.

At the Skirball meeting, however, a panel of local residents including members of the Canyonback Alliance, Upper Mandeville Canyon Property Owners Association and the Brentwood Residents Coalition, opposed the project.

The project area encompasses open space in the former Mission Canyon landfill from Upper Mandeville Canyon to Mountaingate including two ridges above Mandeville Canyon running north to Mountaingate and south to Mt. St. Mary's University.

Within the area are the

Canyonback Trail and Mount St. Mary's Fire Road, where hikers and nature lovers can find chaparral and riparian habitats and enjoy panoramic vistas to the ocean.

Berggruen's proposal runs through land that cannot be developed, according to agreements between the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), a state agency, and the former owners of the Berggruen land, Castle & Cooke. The property belongs to the state of California and is held in trust to preserve the wildlife and lands for future generations, said the group.

Several species of local wildlife inhabit the area, including bobcats, deer, coyotes, horned owls, quail, mountain lions, and a rich wilderness of native plants. The fragile ecosystem is endangered by overdevelopment, according to their website, which presents significant risk to the wildlife community from fire, traffic, noise and light pollution.

The project proposal, which is only in the preliminary stages of outreach, and nowhere near approvals, is for a scholarly village with resident scholars' homes imbedded in the terrain to reduce light



A rendering of the Berggruen Institute campus.

impacts and eliminate the need for air conditioning; a main pavilion dominated by a water capture and reclamation unit, incorporating a scholar's village with dining halls and meeting rooms on one ridge. The other ridge will incorporate the chairman's residence and several visiting scholars guest homes. Along the ridgetop, a pathway would intersect what is now a wildlife corridor. The total residency would include hundreds of people, say opponents, adding hundreds of trips daily to an area that is only slated for fire road foot traffic.

The alternative approved project is a 28-home development that Berggruen opponents support, as it is recessed from the open space area and not on

public land. At issue is that agreement, which a Berggruen spokesperson said they believe leaves an opening to accommodate the ambitious project proposal.

Ensuring wildlife protection, public access and fire safety issues dominated the presentation.

Of particular concern to residents in Upper Mandeville Canyon is the narrow winding road that is the only method of ingress and egress for the 4,000 residents. Residents actually train annually for the possibility of evacuation, and panelists warned of the potential for methane gas igniting as a result of increased human interactions.

(see 'BERGGRUEN' page 19)

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Canon Business Properties Inc.
190 N. Canon Drive
Suite 304
Beverly Hills, California
90210

Alexander Radosevic
alex@canonproperties.com
BRE #: 01042932
President
310.273.1975 x 105

Dylan McCarthy
dylan@canonproperties.com
BRE #: 01972863
Associate
310.273.1975 x 103



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BERGGRUEN INSTITUTE

(continued from page 8)

Methane gas is a by-product of landfill technology, produced from the layers of decaying landfill and released by flaring the gas to reduce underground pressure. The project sits atop two of the eight methane fields. The area was a landfill during the middle of the 20th century.

Repeated questions as to why the project can't be contained outside the public domain went unanswered, but the Chairman's residence, high atop the domain, may be answer enough.

Berggruen's vision for the institute includes an amorphous mission statement: "to develop foundational ideas and, through them, shape political, economic and social institutions for the 21st Century... As an outwardly expansive and purposeful network, we bring together some of the best minds and most authoritative voices from across cultural and political boundaries to explore these fundamental questions of our time." The Institute has published one book, *Governance For The 21st Century: A Middle Way Between West And East*, in 2007. Among its many initiatives, the Institute has the Think Long Committee for California, allegedly to repair the "broken system of governance while evaluating policies and institutions vital for the state's long-term future."

Berggruen, 56, is said to be worth about \$2 billion, born in Paris the son of a German-Jewish art collector, Heinz Berggruen, and actress Bettina Moissi, a Catholic of German, Italian and Albanian heritage. He went to boarding school in Gstaad, Switzerland until, according to the *LA Magazine* article, he was kicked out. He returned to Paris and passed the French high school exams at 16 and graduated from New York University at 19.

Berggruen made his fortune trading stocks, growing hedge funds and playing Monopoly with hotel chains. He also amassed a large art collection, which he housed in homes in New York and Florida.

Ten years ago, he divested of his real estate and moved in to his private jet, flying around from city to city, and earning the "homeless billionaire" moniker.

With the birth of his two toddlers, from two surrogates and a single egg donor two years ago, he settled down, in a way. He owns two condominium units, one to house the children and their nannies, and he reportedly purchased the \$41 million mansion in Holmby Hills that belonged to Louis B. Mayer's daughter.

His seeming impetuosity and mercurial lifestyle reflects the inner arena of an intense thinker. Berggruen, for all his eccentricity, has attracted people like Bob Hertzberg, Arianna Huffington, Google Chairman Eric Schmidt and economist Laura D'Andrea Tyson.

Berggruen missed the Skirball event, reportedly because he was in Davos, Switzerland for the World Economic Forum.

The new era of wealthy think tank owners is growing. The Berggruen Institute has engendered a sophisticated crowd who travel in rarified circles of politics, business and academia. Influential? Perhaps. But so too are many of the residents who oppose the project.

Interestingly, both sides profess a deep sense of commitment to the environment, to sustainability, and to the wildlife habitat. Both sides also feel entitled, though residents have, it seems, fought hard to obtain a legitimate legal claim to the open space.

The road ahead will be fought in courtrooms and among politicians and legal analysts. What is at risk is the legally adjudicated open space and the wildlife corridors.




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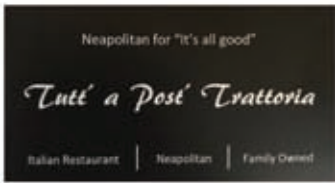
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