

# Los Angeles Times Magazine

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**HEALTH &  
FITNESS  
ISSUE**

**WORKOUT**

A home gym,  
a little Zen  
on the side

**ELIXIR**

Meet the guy  
behind the  
kombucha  
drink craze

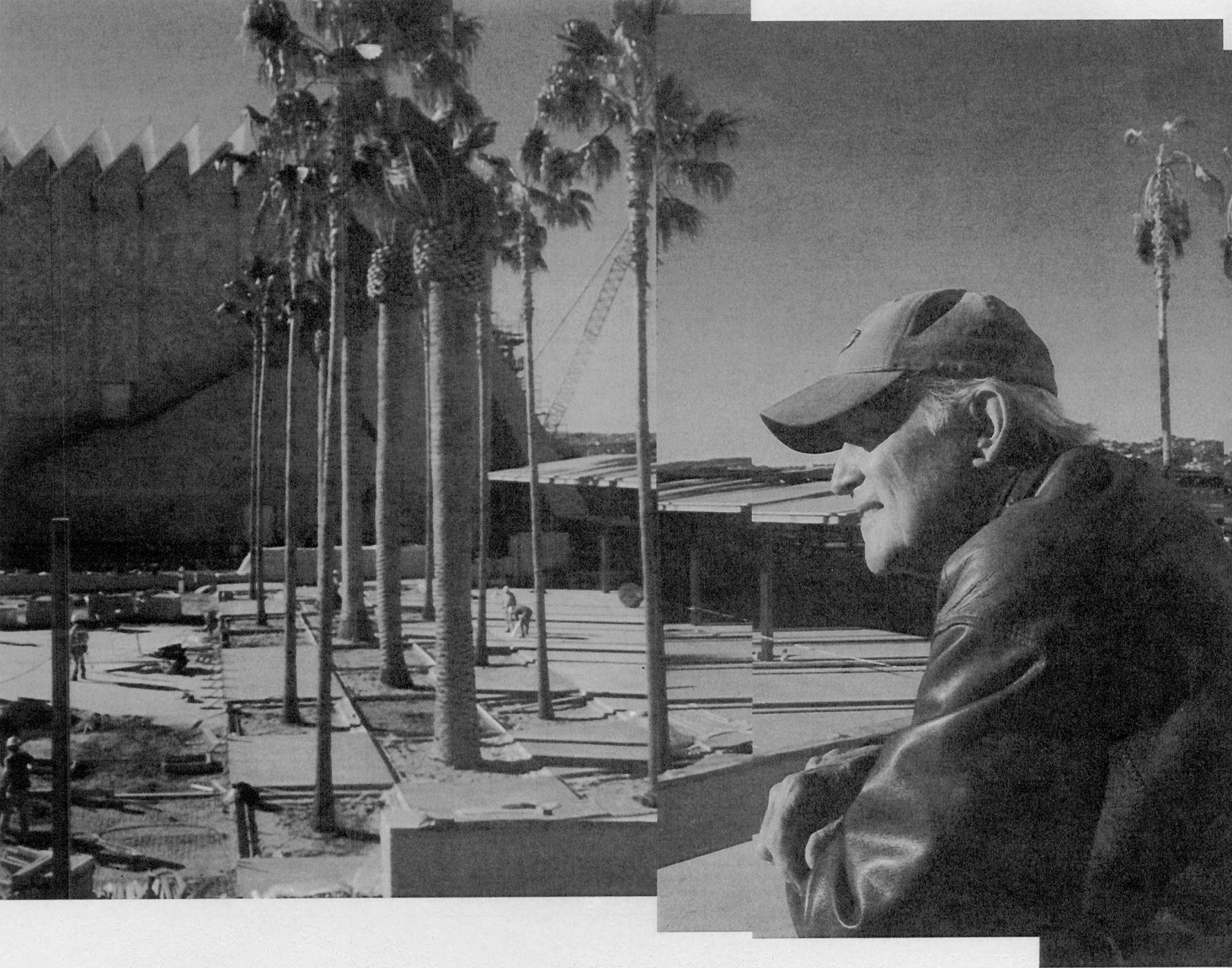
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Dan Neil and  
The Real Girl

## FRESH

'Juno' star **Ellen Page**  
glows in tomboy  
chic fashion





## Palm Pilots

Leave it to artist Robert Irwin, who created the Getty Center garden,

**Forget what you know about the palm**, that topknot-on-a-pole that punctuates much of Los Angeles. Come Feb. 16, when the Renzo Piano-designed Broad Contemporary Art Museum opens at LACMA, you're going to be reacquainted with the tree. Your impressions will never be the same.

Over the last year, artist Robert Irwin and landscape architect Paul Comstock have been "curating" a collection of palms that will function as a living LACMA display—an ever-changing exhibition of botanical sculpture that introduces Piano's addition and links the elements of the museum's campus.

The first palms planted were 40- to 50-foot-tall trees, 13 in all, that front Piano's new entry pavilion like the columns of the Parthenon. Four additional trees march alongside. The group features two iconic L.A. palms: the Canary Island date, a species that lines the streets of Beverly Hills, and the Mexican fan, which appears often along Wilshire Boulevard.

"They fit the fabric of the site," Irwin says. In fact, the trees he selected are so common, he adds, "that in some places, you might not even notice them."

At the Broad, however, they're difficult to avoid, providing a towering,

harmonious backdrop in the arrival plaza for "Urban Light," an installation of 202 vintage L.A. streetlamps by artist Chris Burden. As visitors walk among the stalwart palm trunks, they will be able to view other pieces of outdoor art before reaching the promenade that connects all of LACMA's buildings.

The promenade is the site of what Irwin calls "our museum of palms," a series of displays of strange and unexpected palm varieties. Self-contained but related exhibits will present examples from six continents. Many of the trees, arranged in clusters to boost their impact, will be relatively small, allowing visitors to scrutinize their elaborate fronds and trunks.

For Irwin, 79, the viewer's perception of any artwork is crucial. Active engagement with the art experience, not the art object itself, is what creates meaning. Irwin has spent his life developing this approach, beginning in the 1950s as a practitioner of Abstract Expressionist painting. In the 1960s, he moved on to pioneer the L.A.-based approach called Light and Space. Eventually, he abandoned studio work for large, site-responsive installations.

These have included gardens, such as the highly detailed Central Garden

**TREE PEOPLE**  
Robert Irwin, left,  
and Paul Comstock  
are planning a  
“museum of palms”  
outside the new  
Broad gallery.



For more photos of Robert Irwin and Paul Comstock and a rendering by Irwin of the palm garden, go to [latimes.com/magazinepalm](http://latimes.com/magazinepalm).

## to find inspiration in the near-ubiquitous tree for a new LACMA installation **By Susan Heeger**

at the Getty Center, where he clashed famously with architect Richard Meier over control of the project. He has had no such problems with the Genoa, Italy- and Paris-based Piano, whom he calls “a nice man and a very good architect. We met a few times and agreed on a general approach to the grounds.”

Irwin was tapped for the LACMA garden by director Michael Govan, former head of New York’s Dia:Beacon museum, where Irwin designed the landscape and master plan.

“The history of modern art has been leading us to a phenomenological way of looking at the world, and nothing exemplifies this more than gardens,” Irwin says. “They’re constantly changing, and the observer is crucial to the process.”

Comstock, 56, who until 2006 headed the landscape design department at Walt Disney Imagineering, has developed several LACMA gardens, including one for the B. Gerald Cantor Rodin Collection. He now has design studios in Calabasas and Malibu. “My role here with Bob,” he explains, “is to add practical input to his artistic vision of these palms. He sees the beauty of their structure; I tell him what conditions they need to survive.”

“I’d drown without Paul,” Irwin says.

Together, they have palm-hunted coast to coast, seeking collectors, tree brokers and, as Comstock puts it, “the friend of a friend who might have something interesting.” The rarity of the palms they have collected adds to their allure. “Most of these you can’t just stroll into a nursery and buy,” Comstock says. So far, he and Irwin have assembled a list of must-haves that includes more than 30 varieties, which they will showcase in seasonal displays.

“We’re still working out the details,” Comstock says.

“We’re designing on the run!” cackles Irwin, who has reshuffled the plaza palms many times to accommodate changes in the museum’s construction.

For an artist whose aim is to help us see the world anew, any vision, like any garden, is an evolution. But what’s clear here, even at this stage, is that the shape-shifting palm is a fine subject for an artful meditation. ■

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