visitor attraction. It plays host to hundreds of Academy scientists who work in naturally ventilated laboratories and offices along the south face. It also plays host to 38,900 live animals and over 33 million research specimens, all of which need very specific conditions to which it responds. Combining a hard-working institution with a science museum-cum-fun-palace-cum-zoo, the Academy of Sciences, California, USA, by Renzo Piano is one of the world’s greatest buildings. It is one that exemplifies the power of design to bring learning and leisure together in a way that is both stimulating and enjoyable. As a visitor attraction, it is welcoming and clear; easy to navigate and extremely well connected with its natural setting. It is deep and bright. As a research centre it is functional and adaptable, and will no doubt attract many more of the world’s leading scientists (and specimens). And as a form of organisation in itself, it is efficient and sustainable, a perfect example of how to use LEED Platinum status for easy task for such a large and heavily controlled building.

As a piece of architecture, it is readable on many levels. As a piece of restoration, it successfully incorporates a number of existing elements into a balanced whole, including Ahmanson Hall, North American (California) Hall and the entrance to the Sherman Aquarium. As a piece of sophisticated engineering it delicately resists any threat from future earthquakes. All this occurs through architectural expressions that will surely appeal to those from all architectural tastes and none. There are moments of theatrical delight – diving deep into the watery basement to witness the world’s deepest living coral display, or rising beyond the canopy of its interior rainforest onto the world’s largest living roof – all arranged and concealed in a refined, classical High-Tech envelope.

Now, 72 years after its opening, the Academy is clearly still enjoying its work, enthused by the opportunity to teach a new generation about how architecture can responsibly and authentically learn from nature. Capturing its essence without resort to pointless mimicry or meaningless forms, it provides a reminder of how to integrate nature into our urban landscape.