



Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies

Reyner Banham , Anthony Vidler (Introduction)

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Reyner Banham examined the built environment of Los Angeles in a way no architectural historian before him had done, looking with fresh eyes at its manifestations of popular taste and industrial ingenuity, as well as its more traditional modes of residential and commercial building. His construct of "four ecologies" examined the ways Angelenos relate to the beach, the freeways, the flatlands, and the foothills. Banham delighted in this mobile city and identified it as an exemplar of the posturban future.

Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies Details

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Nat says

Banham talks about the difference between the "well-balanced" meal of a hamburger you can eat with one hand and the kind that come ornamentally disassembled. Here's what he says about the latter:

"Assembled with proper care it can be a work of visual art as well; indeed, it must be considered as visual art first and foremost, since some components are present in too small a quantity generally to make a significant gustatory as opposed to visual contribution--for instance, the seemingly mandatory ring of red-dyed apple, which does a lot for the eye as a foil to the general greenery of the salads, but precious little for the palate" (p.93).

I've never gotten a ring of red-dyed apple with a burger. Is this some kind of mid century weirdness?

Banham could have profitably used terminology from *Learning from Las Vegas* in describing the difference between Jack-in-the-Boxes ("decorated sheds") and buildings like the Brown Derby ("buildings as signs") (p.94) (if *Learning from Las Vegas* had been written yet).

I didn't realize that "dingbat" was a term for a type of apartment building, rather than the little ornaments that those buildings usually have stuck on them (p.157).

There are what look like two arguments against driverless cars on p.202 that go as follows:

1. The marginal gains in efficiency of automation might be offset by the "psychological deprivations caused by destroying the residual illusions of free decision and driving skill" present in the current non-driverless arrangement.

1C. So we shouldn't automate driving.

2. The million or so human minds at large on the freeway system comprise a far greater computing capacity than could be built into any machine currently conceivable (this was in 1971, but presumably this is still true).

2C. Therefore, "why not put the greater computing capacity to work by fostering the illusion that it is in charge of the situation?"

Neither argument is very good.

Hippie L.A. girls (sitting outside something called *Color Me Aardvark* [which gets zero google hits]) are the Angeleno equivalent of Cockneys (p.217).

Wagner's *Los Angeles...Zweimillionenstadt in Sudkalifornien* from 1935 sounds super geil. Should try to track down a copy.

Andrew Holmes says

Far too intellectual and sociological to be viewed as a history either of architecture or Los Angeles society. Hard work and eventually I just gave up.

Alex Lee says

In this stunning work, Reyner Banham breaks out and challenges many of the norms of his time for urban development and how architecture should be considered. The work isn't academic, because it doesn't examine other people's positions, but it does wax poetic about how great Los Angeles is.

When I combined reading this book with his video, "Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles" you get a very different but complementary message. The point of this book was to convince others, his professional peers, that Los Angeles was worth considering. He wants to showcase how this vibrant and oddly made city, the product of its short history and global world economy expansion allows for the sense of freedom and wonderment that LA embodies. His video was much in the same way about the same thing -- although through his emphasis of lifestyle I got a more complete picture.

Los Angeles was also talked about by Baudrillard in his book America, as the example of hyperreality. LA got its hyperreality because it was starred in films that were shot here (because of the weather, and the open space). These films attracted stars to live here, and so we get the superficial image of wealth and status, where LA was the place to make it. From there, you have Banham's observation that LA was a place where anything could happen, architecturally or culturally.

In this way, Banham is, in a synecdoche-analogous way, celebrating capitalism's fruit as he celebrates LA and explores the social, economic and political pressures that made LA... it's kind of telling too, that in the film he says how Watts improved (as if to dismiss LA's inclusion in the history of racial prejudice, yes yes there are poor people, but they get watts towers)... and how in the book I am reviewing, he doesn't even mention racial tension at all, except in passing. Obviously the fruits, and the technological mastery that is LA should be cherished, enjoyed, although whoever paid for these fruits to be extracted... should not be given much thought at all.

While this definitely scars the book, as Banham did write it to direct us to how LA got to be the way it is. I am thankful for his sections on its local history, and historical politics (which has greed and corruption)... but Banham probably didn't think so far as to analyze the cultural milieu of Los Angeles and ITS origins... which while arguably just as important as the physicality of Los Angeles, is just out of Banham's professional range, as he teaches Architecture, he isn't a philosopher. I do appreciate his insights, however. The range of research involved, travel, the pictures in the book, and his witty and engaging writing make this book easier to read, than it actually may sound. Given the domain of the book, it actually is quite good -- and living in Los Angeles -- I do note that some of his observations (physical and cultural) are dated.

However, if ecology were to be true to the sense of the word (rather than simply a metaphor he employs to cluster architectural infrastructures), Banham should have talked about the underpinnings of capitalism, its exploitation and the people who suffered, as much as he waxes about the fruits of capitalism as expressed in Los Angeles.

Connie Kronlokken says

This book, written about 1971 puts a positive spin on LA and its architecture. Mr. Banham, a British architectural critic, learned to drive to understand the freeways and seems to have a wonderful time deconstructing what he sees. "Los Angeles cradles and embodies the most potent current version of the great bourgeois vision of the good life in a tamed countryside." I am sure LA is now more crowded, but I myself enjoyed looking up at the hills with a little sickle moon hanging over them in the evenings, when I lived there long enough to get used to the freeways in 1990.

Timmytoothless says

A fun and frank history of how Los Angeles developed into a vast auto-tropolis. Serves as a great primer and, for the architecturally inclined, a loose travel guide to the "Internal Combustion City".

Suzanne says

Something of an artifact, a little bit dated, 43 years after publication, since things don't exactly stand still around here, but still a good resource for the student of Southern California history. Non-academic and entertaining, this one considers the area and its architecture from a slightly different angle than most books of this sort, looking at the "four ecologies" of the beaches, the foothills, the flatlands and the freeways as the major influences on the built environment and development of Los Angeles. Loved the chapters on all the great buildings (which seemed to concentrate on the international, modern and mid-century), the abundance of great pictures throughout, and the rich bibliography which will have me adding even more books to my already-groaning TBR list. Fun, too, to recognize a picture of a mid-century bank building located 3 blocks from where I grew up, knowing that just outside the right of the frame on the adjacent side street was a little medical building that used to house my mom's OB's office, the doctor who delivered both me and my sister.

Aatif Rashid says

Though a little dated now (his chapter on freeways and traffic especially so), it's an illuminating futurist architect's appraisal of Los Angeles as an ideal postmodern city, full of witty insights and the kind of light, beautiful 1960s prose that non-fiction books these days in their quest for directness have lost. I think people still cling to conservative views of what a city should look like, and even if you don't live in LA, Banham's book can help you appreciate modernist architecture and will give you a interesting vision of the exuberant optimism of the mid-20th-century:

"The motor age, from the mid-twenties onwards, again tended to confirm the going patter, and the freeway network that now traverses the city, which has since added major aerospace industries to its economic armory, conspicuously parallels the five first railways out of the pueblo. Indeed the freeways seem to have fixed Los Angeles in canonical and monumental form, much as the great streets of Sixtus V fixed Baroque

Rome, or the Grand Travaux of Baron Haussman fixed the Paris of la belle epoque. Whether you regard them as crowns of thorns or chaplets of laurels, the freeways are what the tutelary deity of the City of Angeles should wear upon her head instead of the mural crowns sported by civic goddesses of old.”

Archer says

Here is a brief dialogue between myself and Ben R. concerning this book, which will stand in as a review.

(after my giving of five stars)

Ben: Loved this book when I read it *before* I moved to LA. Despite his great approach (and a fantastic title) Banham has a tendency here to treat Los Angeles as some sort of exotic animal. That, given with the enormous changes to the city in the last thirty-odd years, makes the book- unfortunately- mostly useful as a piece of history.

(after ben's giving of three stars)

david: oh burn. Now see, I knew based on your review that you weren't going to give it five stars like me, but three! Mercy. Although I agree with your points, I think the judgment arrived by them would be different for me. Banham does treat the city with a certain degree of frivolity, but is LA really that serious a place? Perhaps moreso now that it has acquired more mass and more lives and history and such, but I think there was a certain sort of symmetry between the way he looked at the town, and the way the town looked at itself. Almost no one else in the nation knows LA as a whole, except for the people that live there (and then only a percentage of those), because LA doesn't present itself that way. What are we shown of LA on the screens of the nation? Vignettes, Icons. Banham realized this and presented the city in that way, and it gave a lot of new possibilities (I think) for the writing of architectural civic histories. Witness a more pedantic and unreadable book such as Rykwert, vs. DNY by Koolhaas. You can bet Koolhaas has read his Banham in the way he breaks up the city into themes, in the way Banham breaks it up into zones. Either way they destroy the continuous historical narrative and present things in a much more experientially fulfilling manner. Both are dealing with history yes, but they're not letting history dominated the narrative structure, or the telling. And while Banham's version of LA might have changed significantly, is his way of looking at it any less important? I imagine (without, albeit, living there) that there are still some of the strange juxtapositions and themes that he points out in his book, perhaps in new physical forms and contexts yes, but still there nonetheless. Car culture has evolved from his original examination, for example, but people are still treating the freeway as a giant outdoor room, with ramifications galore. Outdated, perhaps, but only in some ways, and still important in my estimation. (also, I really like defending things)

Casey Schreiner says

Hands down one of the best books about L.A. I've ever read. Whether or not you agree with Banham's predictions and analysis, it's fantastic food for thought and an absolute must-read for anyone who loves to hate or hates to love Los Angeles.

Ian says

"How then to bridge this gap of comparability. One can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree, as Richard Austin Smith pointed out in a justly famous article in 1965, and the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life. So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original" (Banham, pg. #5).

"Visiting houses in Beverly Hills or Bel Air can be an hallucinating experience; an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* mingles with an overwhelming desire to sidle along corridors with one's back to the wall and to kick doors wide open before passing through. The same urges seem not to be felt (by myself, at least) in the beach-houses of Malibu, however many movies they may have appeared in, which suggests that there is a peculiar authority about the Beverly Hills type of human ecology when seen and transmitted through the eyes of Hollywood — and so there should be; Hollywood Boulevard is the main street of the foothills, and Beverly Hills is where Hollywood lived from the time Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford gave it the seal of approval by buying their piece of land on Summit Drive" (Banham, pg. #83).

"Both Hollywood's marketable commercial fantasies, and those private ones which are above or below calculable monetary value, have left their marks on the Angel City, but Hollywood brought something that all other fantasies needed — technical skills and resources in converting fantastic ideas into physical realities. Since living flesh-and-blood actors and dancers had to walk through or prance upon Hollywood's fantasies, there was much that could not be accomplished with painted back-cloths and back-projections; much of Shangri-la had to be built in three dimensions, the spiral ramps of the production numbers of Busby Berkeley musical spectacles had to support the weight of a hundred girls in silver top hats, and so on... The movies were thus a peerless school for building fantasy as fact, and the facts often survived one movie to live again in another, and another and others still to come. Economy in using increasingly valuable acreage on studio-lots caused these fantastic facades and ancient architectures reproduced in plaster to be huddled together into what have become equally fantastic townscapes which not only survive as cities of romantic illusion [...], but have been elevated to the status of a kind of cultural monuments, which now form the basis for tourist excursions more flourishing than the traditional tours of film-stars' homes" (Banham, pgs. #106–109).

"Set in the middle of a city obsessed with mobility, [...] in this city Disneyland offers illicit pleasures of mobility. Ensconced in a sea of giant parking-lots in a city devoted to the automobile, it provides transportation that does not exist outside — steam trains, monorails, people-movers, tram-trains, travelators, ropeways, not to mention pure transport fantasies such as simulated space-trips and submarine rides. Under-age children, too young for driver's licenses, enjoy the license of driving on their own freeway system and adults can step off the pavement and mingle with the buses and trams on Main Street in a manner that would lead to sudden death or prosecution outside. But more than this, the sheer concentration of different forms of mechanical movement means that Disneyland is almost the only place when East Coast town-planning snobs, determined that their cities shall never suffer the automotive 'fate' of Los Angeles, can bring their students or their city councillors to see how the alternative might work in the flesh and metal — to this blatantly commercial fun-fair in the city they hate" (Banham, pgs. #109–110).

Adam says

I read this in the midst of a bout of terrible, crippling nostalgia for LA after having to leave the city in late 2012 for grad school. I think it's somewhat of a literary trope about LA that people love it despite the fact that they really aren't supposed to. Honestly, the kind of love people like Reyner Banham and I have for LA just doesn't add up: You spend most of your time in awful traffic on terrible old freeways to navigate a grotesque suburban sprawl that paradoxically features almost nowhere to park, the job you can't find does nothing to help you meet the absurd costs of living, it's the exemplar of hyperbolic consumer culture, global warming has turned good weather into one more thing to which the wealthy westsiders lay exclusive claim, and the whole city is an architectural and urban planning disaster. And yet, Reyner Banham was a distinguished architectural critic who professed an unabashed love for the city. If you are not familiar with the technical vocabulary of architecture (as I wasn't when I read this), you will find some of it a bit confusing, but Banham was clearly writing with a wider audience in mind so you'll get enough out of it, as I sure did. His love for the city really comes through in the prose, and that makes it a real joy to read, even if you don't always know what he's going on about. His sudden, uncharacteristically dismissive attitude toward downtown is hilarious. I wonder what he would say about its current "comeback."

A nice supplement to the book is an old BBC (I think) special featuring him driving around LA listening to an eight-track in his car. I first saw it on YouTube but I've noticed it comes and goes. It even features his own nerdy narration. I recommend this book to anyone interested in architecture or anyone who's feelin' nostalgic about good ol' LA.

Andrea says

Mr. Banham completely ignores all dynamics of poverty and racism in LA, which makes his book rather like an amputated limb analyzed at a great distance from both its body and the mob of wealthy LA boosters (including Banham himself) who removed it with a blunt axe. There are some insights, and it is both eminently readable (in fact its exaggerations and over-the-topness contribute to this) and full of pictures. But all in all, it is infuriating and just plain wrong more often than not.

I do like the idea of LA design, urbanism, and architecture as the language of movement. To some extent this is true, as Banham writes:

One can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree, as Richard Austin Smith pointed out in a justly famous article in 1965, and the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life. So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original.

What I find more significant, however, is that this is not true of everything and everybody, aside from how often the freeways completely cease to move at all, and the most common perception of LA is being stuck. This shows how the city has become a failure of movement, but perhaps in 1971 this failure wasn't entirely

apparent. But more importantly whole sections of the city were intentionally left out of this movement, freeways facilitated movement above and around the 'ghettos', leaving them out of sight out of mind. And it's residents, most without cars, are left outside of this life of the city, and according to Banham, thereby unable to understand it. I think this is an important insight, but one I have extrapolated as Banham never makes this connection. Even when he highlights (in a most racist pun which I find rather unforgivable only 6 years after the Watts riots)

And with the beginning of the sixties, and the passing away of the last PE connexions, no place was more strategically ill-placed for anything, as the freeways with their different priorities threaded across the plains and left Watts always on one side. Whatever else has ailed Watts - and it is black on practically every map of disadvantages - its isolation from transportation contributes to everyone of its misfortunes.

In his division of LA into 4 ecologies, he looks at Surfurbia, the Foothills, Autopia and...I still cannot quite get my head around this, the plains of Id. He writes:

The world's image of Los Angeles (as opposed to its images of component parts like Hollywood or Malibu) is of an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with tickytacky houses clustered in indistinguishable neighbourhoods, slashed across by endless freeways that have destroyed any community spirit that may once have existed, and so on ... endlessly. Statistically and superficially this might be a fair picture if Los Angeles consisted only of the problem areas of the City proper, the small percentage of the total metropolis that urban alarmists delight to dwell upon. But even though it is an untrue picture on any fair assessment of the built structure and the topography of the Greater Los Angeles area, there is a certain underlying psychological truth about it - in terms of some of the most basic and unlovely but vital drives of the urban psychology of Los Angeles, the flat plains are indeed the heartlands of the city's Id [79].

These central flatlands are where the crudest urban lusts and most fundamental aspirations are created, manipulated and, with luck, satisfied.

How easy to write off the problem areas of the City proper, even though hundreds of thousands of people inhabit them. And don't get me started on the age-old exploitative connections between poor people, Black and brown people, and the satisfaction of (white) lusts and working out of unbridled desires. Such a labelling represents the projection of fear and desire onto a population from the outside, not the reality of life from within these communities. Ghettos represent much more than the contained repository for the Id of the white and wealthy. Though perhaps Banham is talking about any and all communities built onto the flatlands as his vast map indicates. But to group all of these areas together, even in the simple terms of architecture, seems a gross simplification.

I will end with Banham's own overblown claims, which at this point in time seem faintly ridiculous. There is much to learn from LA, but that it is a healthy and vibrant metropolis which should serve as a model seems very much in doubt. That he could believe it to be so so soon after the Watts riots is in itself ridiculous, unless he was impressed with how easily and geographically the complaints of the poor were contained.

On the other hand, there are many who do not wish to read the book, and would like to prevent others from doing so; they have soundly-based fears about what might happen if the secrets of the Southern Californian metropolis were too profanely opened and made plain. Los Angeles threatens the intellectual repose and professional livelihood of many architects, artists,

planners, and environmentalists because it breaks the rules of urban design that they promulgate in works and writings and teach to their students. In so far as Los Angeles performs the functions of a great city, in terms of size, cosmopolitan style, creative energy, international influence, distinctive way of life and corporate personality ... to the extent that Los Angeles has these qualities, then to that same extent all the most admired theorists of the present century, from the Futurists and Le Corbusier to Jane Jacobs and Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, have been wrong. The belief that certain densities of population, and certain physical forms of structure are essential to the working of a great city, views shared by groups as diverse as the editors of the Architectural Review and the members of Team Ten, must be to that same extent false. And the methods of [218] design taught, for instance, by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Planning in New York and similar schools, must be to that extent irrelevant.

Somehow, I don't think this claim of irrelevance has made much of an impact.

Karl says

An L.A. love-letter, persuasive despite my own East Coast bias. Is there no stronger recommendation I can provide than to say that this book made me consider moving to L.A., if only for a moment? Lyrical, smart, concise, and well-researched: everything a book about a city ought to be.

Stephen says

I finished this book in the relative comfort and safety of my bed. My lovely wife and I watched "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo," the Daniel Craig/Rooney Mara version last night. The almost three-hour movie was so disturbing, and unsettling that I knew I could never go directly to sleep. So I finished the book.

A little background. My son and daughter-in-law live in LA, the Little Armenia neighborhood in a California Bungalow. We, my wife and I visited them in February, over almost two weeks. We started in LA, one night and then road-tripped to Palm Springs, and into AZ - Arcosanti, Scottsdale and Phoenix, doing mostly "architectural stuff." I have a Master's Degree in City Planning as well. So that being said, this is a book that I found particularly engaging. Banham, an Architectural Historian, who just happened to fall in love with the city and spent a good deal of time there, postulates that LA has four ecologies, with a distinctive architecture associated with each one. Surfurbia, The Foothills, The Plains of Id and Autotopia. These are natural ecologies, the beaches and surf and man-made - Autotopia. Each of the four sections is divided into two chapters where he discusses the natural environment and adds in-depth history and factual information about professional city planning attempts and then in the second chapter of that section goes into the distinctive architecture associated with each ecology. It is with his ability to look with his British Eyes, that allows this new way of observing and includes in those observations the manifestations of popular taste and industrial creativity. Remember, Southern California boomed along with the M-I-C after WWII and much of that industrial creativity is seen in the built environment.

The chapters are filled with wonderful photographs, maps and detailed analysis of what the hell was evolving in LA - so different from the East Coast and a unique off-spring of European modernism. One thing they teach you in CITY PLANNING SCHOOL is that highways, or freeways as they are known in Southern CA are BAD THINGS. BAD. BAD. BAD. They create division. Perhaps in old-rust belt cities: Detroit,

Cleveland and Pittsburgh. But in LA? they work. Perhaps not all the time are the cars moving at design-speeds and there are a lot of cars. But they work and they tie the 70-square mile megalopolis together. What we have at the beaches, or the plains, from downtown to San Bernadino, Pasadena to Long Beach is because of the freeways, which are the result of Huntington's Pacific Electric Railway - in the 1920s, the largest interurban railway in the world. Should they have kept it? Yes, without a doubt. And they are working very hard to bring it back. LA is and always will be a work-in-progress. As we saw riding down the escalator at LAX to Baggage Claim: a huge billboard cajoling us to start experiencing the \$44,000,000,000 being invested in the NEW DOWNTOWN LA! The book, published in 1971, and updated with new introductions predicted a world-class city. LA is.

I have now read two of the three books I wanted to upon my return from the trip. Joan Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," this book by Reyner Banham and for a noir version of LA, "City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in L0s Angeles," by Mike Davis, but the 2006 edition with an up-dated introduction by the author. I have the original 1992 publication which I read parts of in graduate school, but I want to read the whole thing.

J. says

Nicely thought-out, a serious analysis of the non-urban Urban Center without-a-center that is LA. Or *was* L.A. Necessarily compartmentalized, Banham's study takes an unrelated set of parameters and relates them from an overhead perspective on history, development, design, influences. What are now a deeply tangled set of cultural aspects were a little less so in 1971, when this was published. So something of a time-capsule, but one that looks imaginatively toward the future too.

It's not really fair to look at 2009 Los Angeles and pronounce judgements on Banham's vision; but it's fair to say that his optimistic and buoyant post-urban parsing of the course ahead hasn't evolved quite as he foresaw so long ago. Banham wanted to lay the foundation, it would seem, for the new direction in The American Lifestyle, it's minimum requirements, glories, idiosyncracies, conveniences and goals. But he pictures a world of wonder, a sunny, urban encyclopedia accessible by friendly freeway off-ramp, to each fortunate, smiling everyman of the future.

From the intriguing buildings of RM Schindler to the cartoon / drive-in schlock, Banham seems to have counted it all as fairly benevolent, a wealth of profuse intermingling, leading to an unpredictable if inevitable synthesis that would gel sometime in the future.

His vision of "Autopia", however, must leave the contemporary reader mystified :

"The banks and cuttings of the freeways are often the only topographical features of note in the townscape, and the planting on their slopes can make a contribution to the local environment that outweighs the disturbances caused by their construction..."

Surely, even thirty-eight years ago, the insight of this statement must have been fairly shallow :

"Furthermore, the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive, which can be duplicated on other systems ... but not with this totality and extremity."

L.A. was always a vast, epicurean Doughnut and Hole experience, though, so Banham can't really be faulted for a smart if otherwise all-doughnut perspective. To his credit, he's a shrewd judge of individual projects and architecture, rendering certain aspects of the city-in-the-making with deft & critical detail. It's on the Urban Planning And Design side where he might've wanted to hedge his bets a little more broadly.

Absolutely pick this up if you live in Los Angeles. It's a hard city to read, maybe not a city at all, and any solid attempt at getting an overall picture is a worthwhile one. Just maybe, the urban-center without-a-center IS a doughnut, after all.

As those post-ironists in Randy Newman's band will tell anyone who asks ---- "L.A. ! We love it !!"
