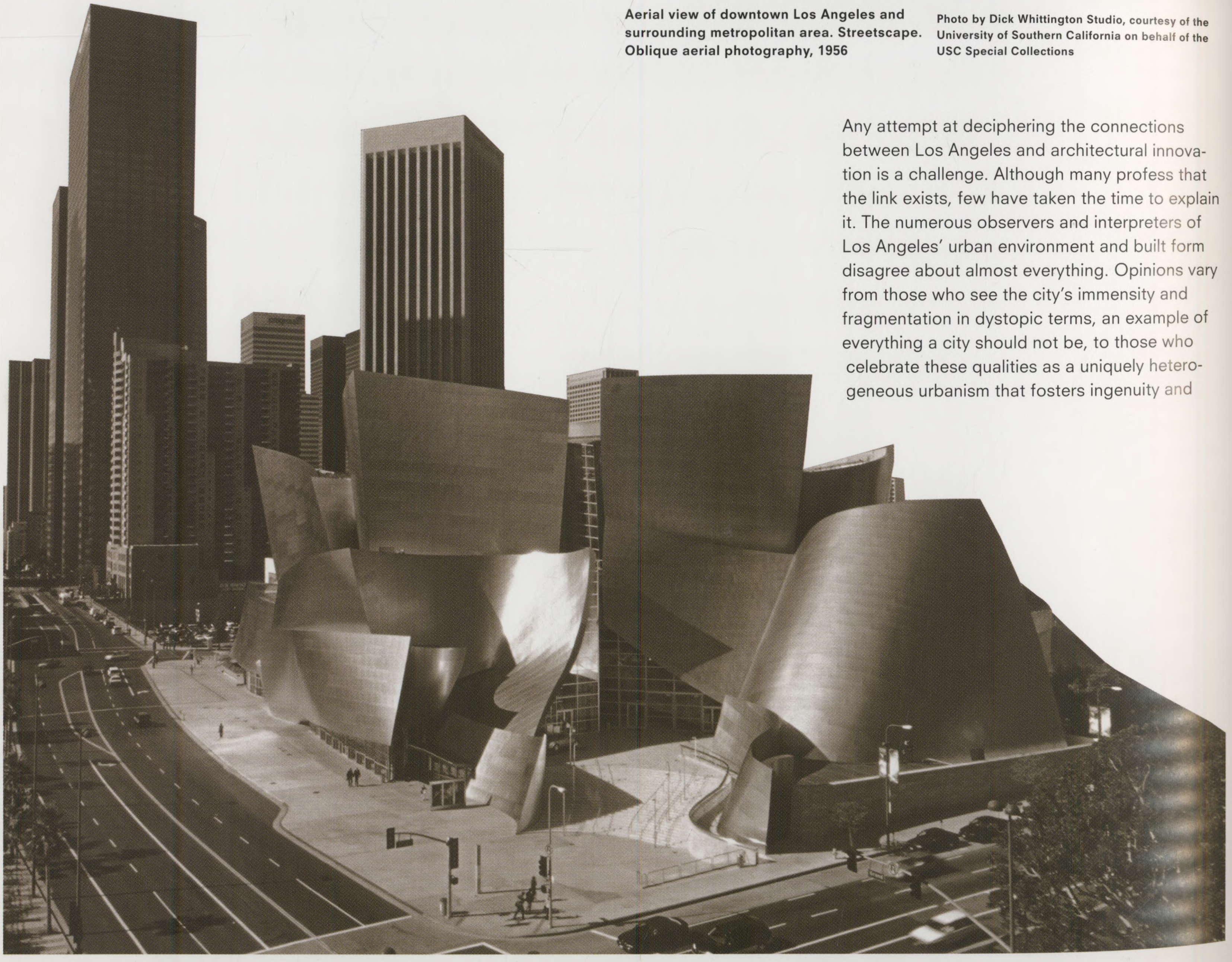
City without Limits: Architectural Innovation and Urban Imaginaries in Los Angeles

Margaret Crawford

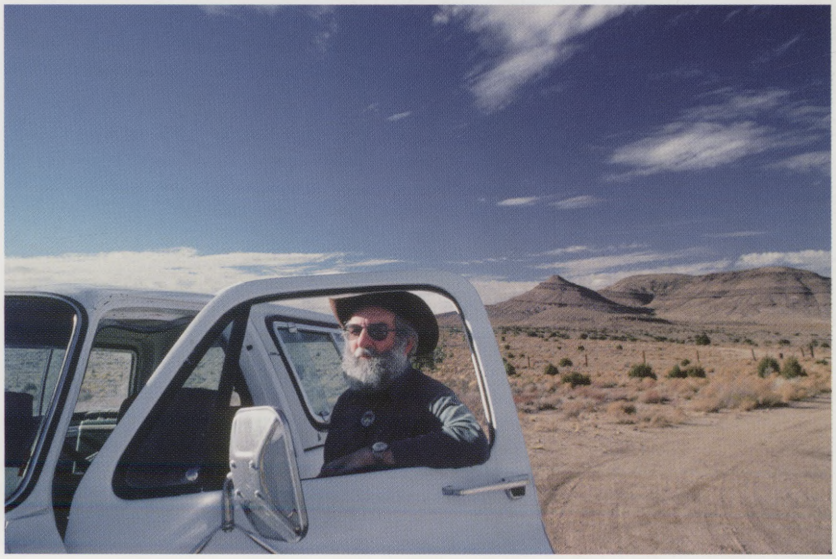
Aerial view of downtown Los Angeles and surrounding metropolitan area. Streetscape. Oblique aerial photography, 1956

Photo by Dick Whittington Studio, courtesy of the University of Southern California on behalf of the USC Special Collections

Any attempt at deciphering the connections between Los Angeles and architectural innovation is a challenge. Although many profess that the link exists, few have taken the time to explain it. The numerous observers and interpreters of Los Angeles' urban environment and built form disagree about almost everything. Opinions vary from those who see the city's immensity and fragmentation in dystopic terms, an example of everything a city should not be, to those who celebrate these qualities as a uniquely heterogeneous urbanism that fosters ingenuity and



Aerial view of Los Angeles, 2011



Reyner Banham near Silurian Lake south of Death Valley in San Bernardino County, California, 1980

creativity. Every declaration that Los Angeles is unique is met with an equal insistence that it is and should be more like other places. Even during the second decade of the twenty-first century, for every designer attracted to the city as a tabula rasa where anything is possible, there has been another who, seeing only chaos, urges centrality and connections with the past. Some of the best-known beneficiaries of the city's supposed architectural freedom deny that their work has anything to do with its Los Angeles origins. In 1992, Thom Mayne called this "regionalism" and dismissed it as "preposterous."[1] Even the city's most famous architect, Frank O. Gehry, only completed his first major public commission in the city, Walt Disney Concert Hall, in 2003, after several decades of producing major buildings around the globe.

In spite of these difficulties, it is still possible to argue that a recognizable urban imaginary underpins much of the work of the post-Gehry generation. As described by urban scholars, a city's imaginary is a highly selective mental construction made up of collectively shared representations of its urban space, history, and culture. This enabling architectural imaginary is deeply rooted in certain moments in the history of Los Angeles but also responsive to social and economic changes. It is both material—acknowledging the specific conditions that allow buildings to be built here, such as clients, climate, and costs—and imaginary, in its investment in the intangible "atmosphere" of openness and innovation that constitutes this particular architectural culture. Its composite nature allows it to contain both "truth" (empirically verifiable facts), and fiction (invented stories). As a "mental map," it highlights certain places and qualities while completely disregarding others. Over time, as the city changed, the balance of these elements altered but the overall construct has demonstrated a remarkably enduring power. As much as it has enabled several generations of remarkable architecture, it has also constricted the significance of that architecture in the city at large. Given the magnitude of recent changes in Los Angeles, its continued relevance is an open question.

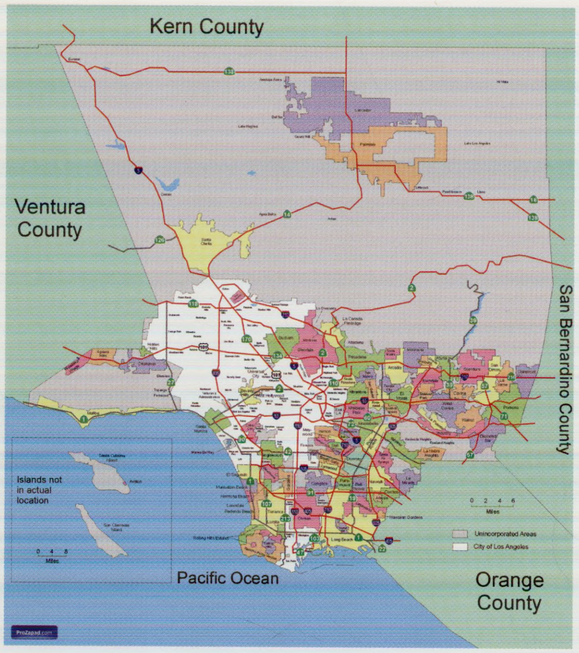
1973

Reyner Banham established the foundation for this particular understanding of the city in his groundbreaking book, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, first published in 1971. Abandoning the historian's objectivity, Banham explained his fascination with what was then an understudied and underappreciated city, arguing that the very qualities that most observers singled out to attack were actually the city's greatest assets. This began an interpretive argument that continues today. Banham saw the city's vast extent as a thrilling expansiveness rather than sprawl, its divergent architectural forms as visually expressive rather than chaotic, and its multiple centers as representative of diversity rather than fragmentation. What critics depicted as indifference and alienation in the social environment, he interpreted as collective cultural tolerance and a permissive atmosphere. He praised the inhabitants' mobility rather than decrying their auto dependence, naming his fourth ecology "autopia." He singled out the freeway system as the only monument in the city, promoting a new mode of urban perception in which movement itself gave the city unity. This had radical

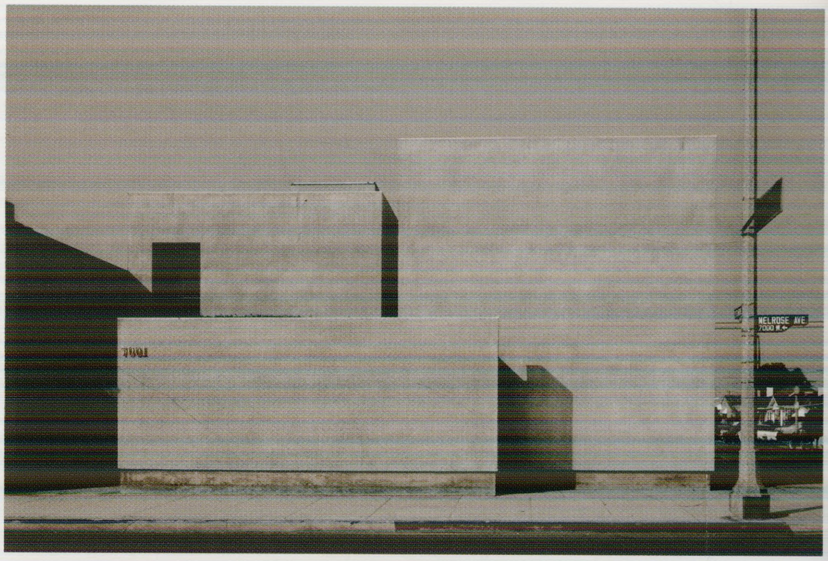
---

[1] John Chase, "Introduction," *LA 2000+: New Architecture in Los Angeles* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006), 9.

Gehry Partners, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 2003



Map of Los Angeles County, 2007
Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Almanac
@ LAAlmanac.com



Frank O. Gehry & Associates, Danziger Studio/House, West Hollywood, California, 1965

implications for urbanism. When critics bemoaned the lack of a real downtown, he claimed that, since everywhere was, at least theoretically, close to everywhere else, this eliminated the need for a center.

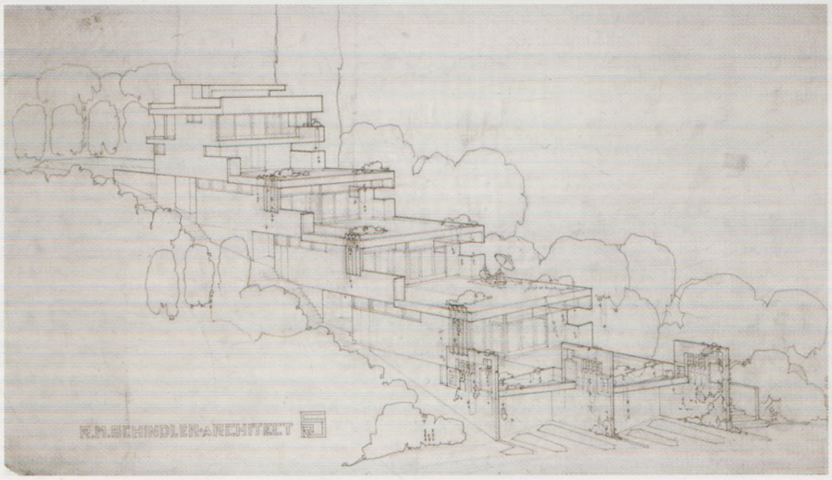
Banham argued that this unique form of urbanism had generated some of the world's greatest architecture. Although earlier writers like Esther McCoy had celebrated local designers, none had argued for them with Banham's breadth and vehemence. Going far beyond accepted critical norms, he crossed the boundaries between popular culture and high-art architecture, discussing buildings that ranged from Googie coffee shops and dingbats to Spanish Colonial Revival churches and the work of the acclaimed modernists Irving Gill, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Charles Eames. This breadth demonstrated the city's freedom, which encouraged innovation and resulted in not a single Los Angeles style, but in many versions of homegrown modernism. Banham discovered superb modernist houses scattered around the city, mostly along the Pacific shore or hidden in the canyons and winding roads of the foothills. In spite of their excellence, they were largely domestic commissions, noted Banham, while the city's large-scale public or commercial buildings were left to corporate firms.

Most crucially for subsequent architects, Banham identified an architectural imaginary that functioned at two wildly disjunctive scales, the macroscale of the vast conurbation and the microscale of the individual building. For Banham, the city's dispersal and low density offered the practical advantage of open space, "room to maneuver" that provided architects with a sense of potential and agency. Unlike the dense and congested cities of Europe and the East Coast, there was a lot of vacant land available for small buildings of all types. He was astonished by Greater Los Angeles' expanse—seventy square miles not yet filled in—which, viewed from Griffith Park, stretches off almost infinitely south to the harbor. And this was only part of a far larger city whose totality was invisible, extending west and east to the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys and south to Orange County. Subsequent writers have identified this unprecedented form of urbanism as a new urban aesthetic as compelling in its own way as the vertical skyscraper canyons of Manhattan. As early as the 1920s, a few Angelenos understood that this new mode of modern urbanity had a grandeur that commanded awe, constituting what historian Jeremiah Axelrod called the "horizontal sublime," an infinitely extending metropolis that promised equally endless possibilities.[2] For architects, this produced a paradox: since the city's enormity precluded any notion of architectural intervention on an urban scale, its apparently infinite expanse could function psychologically as a symbolic stand-in for freedom and opportunity.

If the vastness of the region provided an expansive mental context, the scale of the building was where architects actually operated. Although most architectural innovation took place in the limited "ecologies" that Banham identified as "surfurbia" and the "foothills," the vast "plains of id" actually occupied most of the city's territory. While Banham dismissed it as a service area that primarily fed and supplied the foothills and beaches, its endless street corridors also served as an important

---

[2] Jeremiah Axelrod, *Inventing Autopia: Dreams and Visions of the Modern Metropolis in Jazz Age Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 212–13.



Rudolph Schindler, drawing for Bubeschko Apartments, Los Angeles, 1941
Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara

Richard Neutra, Strathmore Apartments, Los Angeles, 1937
Luckhaus photo, Richard and Dione Neutra Collection, College of Environmental Design, Special Collections, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

repository of architectural ideas. The city's commercial architecture, often authorless, offered two different models for design: one, the object building, or "duck" identified by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; the other, the stucco box, the generic "decorated shed." Banham was the first to look seriously at Los Angeles' heritage of historical styles, which came in respectable versions such as the Spanish Colonial Revival auto showrooms or shopping plazas found across the city or implausibly exotic renditions like Grauman's Chinese Theatre. He also traced the evolution of whimsical commercial vernacular styles, as they evolved from the giant hats or hot dogs of the 1920s to the 60s futuristic modernism of the aforementioned Googie coffee shops. These startling sculptural objects stood out against a monotonous cityscape composed of expedient and undistinguished stucco boxes. These could take multiple forms, from the ubiquitous standardized two-story dingbat apartment to an early Gehry building, the Danzinger Studio of 1968, which Banham presciently recognized as an important new synthesis of ordinary streetscape and high-art intentions.

Unlike residents of cities like San Francisco, London, and Paris, who treasured their urban fabric and stock of historic buildings, Angelenos did not value their built environment. In a city with few monuments in the traditional sense, preservation barely existed. This very lack of preciousness encouraged clients and designers to take chances and try something new. In spite of their low status and often-flimsy construction techniques, the extremity of these forms, and the astonishing variety of buildings that served very ordinary purposes set a liberating example. For architects interested in experimentation, they demonstrated the ability to express strong ideas with limited technical means. In such a heterogeneous visual environment, context could never become a restriction. This knowledge freed adventurous designers to take formal risks unimaginable in more restrictive urban environments.

1993

Twenty years later, Banham's interpretation of the city, echoed over the years by other writers, was so embedded in the general consciousness that many dismissed it as a cliché, historically important but no longer relevant. It described a city whose outlines and destiny had been largely established by the end of the 1920s and was gradually filling in. Change followed existing patterns, and the city became more of what it already was. By 1990 Los Angeles had undergone economic and social changes so dramatic that many feared that the urban identity recognized by Banham was being lost. The regional economy continued to diverge from expected patterns and traditional models. After several rounds of industrial restructuring, it developed along multiple paths, so that no single industry dominated. Although the massive local economy ranked fifteenth in the world, its growth was unevenly distributed. The entertainment and ports industries thrived while factory closings decimated others. The appearance of large numbers of low-wage immigrant workers strained existing labor markets, particularly among African American men. The 1990 census listed more than 40 percent of adults in South Central Los Angeles as "not in the labor market."[3] Combined with the real estate market's volatile boom and bust cycles, this regularly

[3] Susan Anderson, "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 340.

Franklin D. Israel Design Associates, Drager House, Berkeley, California, 1994

produced serious regional recessions. The impact of these fluctuations was felt most by those at the bottom, widening the gap between rich and poor.

The expanding economy and the region's traditional attractions brought immigrants from all over the world, with the majority from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. They transformed the city's racial and ethnic makeup, which went from 81 percent white in 1960 to 43 percent in 2000,[4] becoming one of the first majority minority cities. In 1990, 40 percent of the population was born outside of the Unites States.[5] Although Latinos predominated, there were significant Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Armenian, Russian, Iranian, and Israeli communities, making the region the most diverse in the country. Rapid population growth pushed settlement outward to the city's natural boundaries. Inside them, residents were unevenly distributed according to class and ethnicity but, at the same time, continually in flux. Many Mexican immigrants settled in the traditional East Los Angeles barrio while those from Oaxaca preferred Santa Monica and the Westside. New arrivals from Central America stayed in the MacArthur Park area to save money, then began to buy houses in Watts, previously all African American. After realtors marketed Monterey Park as the "Chinese Beverly Hills," the adjacent San Gabriel Valley towns, once completely white, then primarily Latino, became predominantly Asian.

The tension produced by this unprecedented degree of ethnic diversity and economic disparity convinced many Angelenos that the city would not survive. Urban critic Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, published in 1990, and David Rieff's 1991 *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* both depicted the city in apocalyptic terms, seeing the visible and invisible boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, and religion as symptoms of a collapsing public realm and a multiethnic city on the verge of implosion. The urban disturbances of 1991 and 1992 appeared to confirm their fears. The verdicts in the Latasha Harlins and Rodney King trials unleashed an outpouring of anger, reflecting Los Angeles' intricate social landscape, in which cultures reacted and interacted in complex and unpredictable ways. African Americans called the uprising the "justice riots," attacking the racism of the criminal justice system. Others responded to economic issues such as poverty and unemployment, exacerbated by recession. The disturbances dramatized the city's tangled racial dynamics. Fifty-one percent of those arrested were Hispanic while only 34 percent were African American. Immigrants were pitted against one another and Korean stores were targets for much of the burning and looting that ensued during the riots.[6]

It is clear that the prevailing architectural imaginary could not accommodate these events and issues. Critic Charles Jencks argued that avant-garde practitioners such as Gehry, Eric Owen Moss, Morphosis Architects, and Franklin D. Israel literally mirrored the city's fractures in the colliding and splintering fragments of their buildings, but this interpretation mistakes compositional strategies for symbolism.[7] The torqued steel assemblages typical of Morphosis' work during this era, often likened to the dystopian film *Blade Runner*, might be seen as an emblem

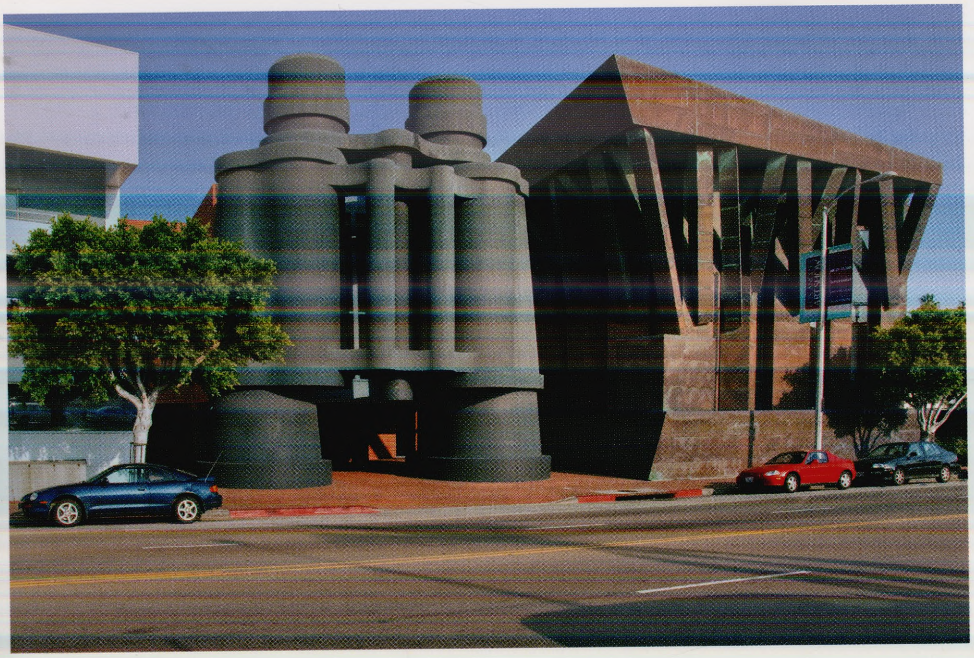
---

[4] James P. Allen and Eugene Turner, *The Ethnic Quilt: Population Diversity in Southern California* (Los Angeles: The Center for Geographical Studies, 1997), 45–49.

[5] Ibid., 44.

[6] "Understanding the Riots," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11 and 13, 1992.

[7] Charles Jencks, *Heteropolis: Los Angeles, the Riots and the Strange Beauty of Hetero-Architecture* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 24–30.



Frank O. Gehry & Associates, Chiat/Day Building, Los Angeles, 1991

of urban angst if they had not been created for the benign spaces of restaurants and clinics and explicitly intended to "communicate compassion and confidence."[8] But even if architects registered the urban zeitgeist, their responses were indirect, distanced, and hermetic. Even Davis's attacks on Gehry and other architects for designing a fortified city excluding the poor and homeless had little resonance.[9] Since the riots primarily took place in the "plains of id," they barely impacted the sites of architectural culture.

At the same time, as this exhibition demonstrates, these years were extraordinarily rich and productive for formal exploration in architecture. Gehry, in a series of small but daring local buildings, especially his own 1978 house, opened up an arena for experimentation that younger architects enthusiastically occupied. But they continued to practice in a context that mirrored the economic, social, and spatial patterns of architectural innovation in Los Angeles, in the early twentieth century. Architects worked individually in small firms, limiting their technical capabilities. Most of their buildings were still single-family houses, along with boutiques, galleries, and restaurants. Many of the urban changes produced benefits both real and imagined. Los Angeles' new image as a world-class if troubled city heightened a sense of possibility, raising the architectural stakes considerably. Immigration expanded a client base of open-minded but not necessarily rich people, bringing not only the poor and striving but also large numbers of wealthy individuals, many involved in creative industries. Teaching positions at Southern California Institute of Architecture, University of California Los Angeles, and University of Southern California provided financial security, allowing designers to survive between jobs. In spite of these advances, just like their modernist predecessors, avant-garde designers remained marginal to the city at large. As always, when major commissions came along, the city's conservative establishment usually awarded them to corporate offices or, for important public buildings, outside designers.

2013

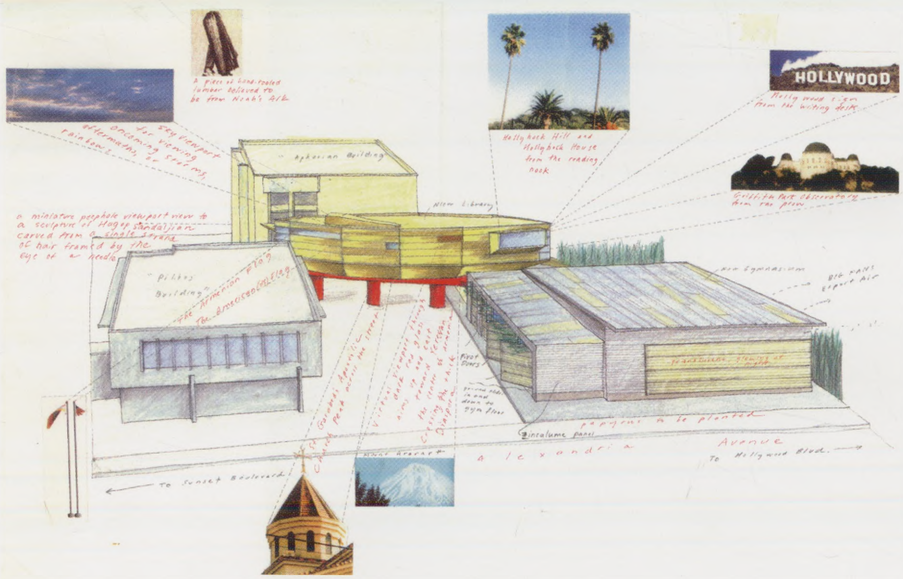
By 2010 there were indications that this historic model of innovative practice might no longer be tenable. If a culture of architectural innovation was going to continue, a new urban imaginary would be necessary. Many of the enabling conditions that Banham identified forty years earlier had vanished, prompting competing visions for the city's future. Greater Los Angeles had expanded far beyond the seventy square miles that had astonished Banham to nearly 5,000 square miles. If this even vaster extent might still be sublime, it was no longer infinite. Once the city reached its spatial limits, development doubled back and started filling in the remaining city. Even more startling, in 2010 the U.S. census announced that Los Angeles was the densest metropolitan area in the country. The significance of this fact was ambiguous, since it only measured population density. Los Angeles was still decentralized and its spatial density was unevenly distributed. Although some districts were visibly overcrowded, much of the city, as critic Christopher Hawthorne noted, contained large numbers of vacant lots. The center of downtown, cleared for urban renewal in the 1960s, was still waiting for redevelopment.[10]

---

[8] From the "Morphopedia" index of projects on Morphosis Architects' website, available at: www.morphopedia.com/projects/cedars-sinai-comprehensive-cancer-center. Accessed September 1, 2012.

[9] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 78.

[10] Christopher Hawthorne, "Contemporary Voice: Thickets of Diversity, Swaths of Emptyness," in *A Companion to Los Angeles*, eds. William Deverell and Greg Hise (London: Blackwell-Wiley, 2010), 481.


A piece of hand-tooled lumber believed to be from Noah's Ark
Sky viewport for viewing oncoming storms, aftermaths, or rainbows
"Aphorian Building"
New Library
a miniature peephole viewport view to a sculpture of Hagop Sandaljian carved from a single strand of hair framed by the eye of a needle
"Pilibos Building"
The Armenian Flag
The Broseiseo(es) Flag
Hollyhock Hill and Hollyhock House from the reading nook
Hollywood sign from the writing desk
HOLLYWOOD
Griffith Park Observatory from the prow
New Gymnasium
BIG FANS Export Air
translucent, glowing at night
Pivot Doors
ground slides in and down to gym floor
papyrus to be planted
Zincalume panel
St. Garabed's Apostolic Church
Peak across the street
Virtual viewport through dark red glass aims up and east toward Yerevan the center of Armenia crossing the thick Diaspora
Mount Ararat
Alexandria Avenue
To Sunset Boulevard
To Hollywood Blvd.

Studio Works Architects, diagram for Pilibos School Library and Gymnasium, Los Angeles, 2006

Still, the threat and promise of density renewed decades-old demands that Los Angeles should be more like other cities. The perception of a newly dense city provided ammunition for visions of a Manhattan-like downtown, dense with skyscrapers and high-rise condos. In 2008, supported by the downtown corporate elite, large-scale developers, the city's Community Redevelopment Agency, urban planners, and citizens, billionaire Eli Broad hired Gehry to design its core, Grand Avenue. The irony of the architect who best embodied the city's freedom now designing an entire downtown further weakened an urban imaginary that celebrated the lack of a conventional urban center.[11]

Similarly, the automobility that defined the city for Banham was also in question. In spite of its popular image, by 2010 Greater Los Angeles had fewer freeways per capita than any major city.[12] Massive population growth produced traffic problems so serious that Los Angeles ranked first in the nation for congestion delays. Starting in the late 1980s, the Metropolitan Transit Authority had begun an ambitious transit program, combining new commuter rail, subway, and light-rail lines into a system that covered eighty-seven miles. Buses still served a far larger number of riders, with service that improved significantly over the last decade. Bottom-up transit solutions also flourished, with bike riders and pedestrians proliferating, even among groups with access to automobiles. Events like CicLAvia and organizations like LA Walks popularize nonautomotive uses of the city's streets.

In the 1970s, Banham saw the city shaping architecture, not the other way around. However, beginning around 2000, a number of factors came together to offer architects larger public roles. As Los Angeles' politics became more diverse, a new power structure emerged. Antonio Villaraigosa became the city's first Latino mayor in 130 years, and large swaths of Korean, Chinese, and Latino homeowners began to elect officials who reflected their values. Gehry's national recognition and the enormous popular success of Walt Disney Concert Hall (2003) produced a ripple effect that benefited architectural innovation in general. This encouraged institutional clients to extend important commissions to local architects that would have been unthinkable a few decades earlier, such as Thom Mayne's selection for the Caltrans headquarters. Both buildings, despite their urban settings, extend the tradition of object buildings to a monumental scale rather than propose new ways of relating to their surroundings.

Other institutions such as colleges, universities, and municipal governments followed their lead, with commissions that not only offered innovative architects a presence in the public realm but demanded engagement with new immigrant populations as users, if not clients. In 1998 population growth pushed the Los Angeles Unified School District to begin a major school construction program, hiring a surprising number of adventurous architects, including Studio Works Architects, Morphosis Architects, and Hodgetts + Fung. Other schools, libraries, and small public buildings proliferated, making new architecture both visible and usable in all parts of the city and for the first time, an accepted part of the public realm. In addition, increased density and the rising cost of land prompted private and nonprofit developers to produce more

[11] Cara Mia DiMassa, "Grand Avenue Project," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2006.

[12] Paul Sorensen, "Moving Los Angeles," *Access* 35 (Fall 2009): 26–30.

multifamily housing for all sectors of the population, ranging from luxury condos to affordable housing or even homeless shelters. For the same reasons, commercial projects have grown in size and scale, allowing designers to take on more complex projects and sites. Architectural interest in the city beyond the building is also growing, as books speculating on the city's urban future, by prominent practitioners such as Mayne and Michael Maltzan, demonstrate.[13]

What is still lacking, however, is an interpretation of the city's current reality that can transform these changed conditions into an operative imaginary. Design freedom is now found in many places, most notably inside a computer. The isolation that Gehry found liberating is no longer possible. These new circumstances will make it difficult to find a version of freedom situated in the conditions that define Los Angeles today. The city's inexhaustible multiplicity and diversity suggest other dimensions to freedom than fulfilling a personal vision. Even if actual mobility is stalled, unlimited mental movement across the boundaries of the city's microgeographies is still possible. This challenges architects to finally abandon their enclaves for once and for all, in order to discover and reimagine how the city could support a new kind of innovation.

---

[13] See Richard Koshalek, Thom Mayne, and Dana Hutt, *L.A. Now: Volume One* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); and Michael Maltzan, *No More Play: Conversations on Urban Space in Los Angeles and Beyond* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

A NEW SCULPTURALISM

Contemporary Architecture from Southern California

Skira Rizzoli New York