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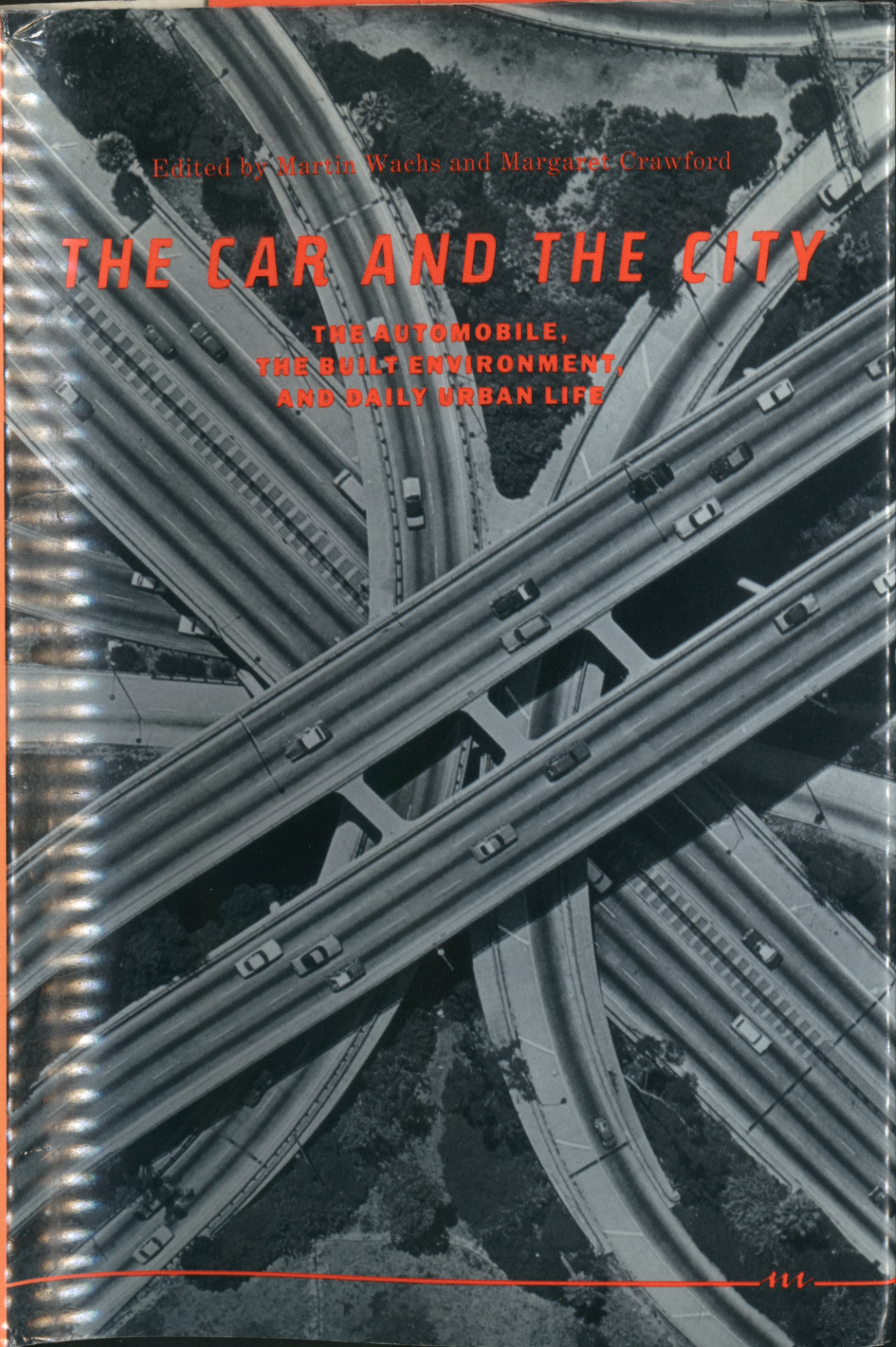
THE CAR AND THE CITY

MICHIGAN



Edited by Martin Wachs and Margaret Crawford

THE CAR AND THE CITY

THE AUTOMOBILE, THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, AND DAILY URBAN LIFE

Martin Wachs and
Margaret Crawford

INTRODUCTION

A recent television documentary asked half a dozen centenarians what they remembered as the most exciting moments of their lives. Without hesitating, each of them mentioned their first automobile ride among two or three of their most prominent memories. When asked what development had changed daily life the most in the century through which they had lived, all six mentioned the automobile. The modern American city is home to nearly as many cars and trucks as it is to people, and surely the automobile has molded daily life as profoundly as any other object of technology created by humankind.

The automobile is a critical part of American economic life, with one out of six of us earning a living by building, selling, advertising, servicing, insuring, or driving cars and trucks. It is similarly an important part of our cultural life, with car clubs, competitions, car fashions, auto designs, commercial messages, and auto shows commanding ever-increasing attention, along with images of autos in film, television, music, and literature.

Automobiles strongly influence the design of our neighborhoods and individual buildings, and we spend increasing amounts of time in cars on a variety of types of streets and highways. From the trip to the hospital to give birth to the ride to the cemetery to be buried, the automobile is as central an aspect of our lives as any object can be. It is party to family activities, careers, and leisure activities.

Despite its importance, the car is the subject of surprisingly little intellectual inquiry. Some historians have examined the evolution of the automobile industry and the "great men" whose companies have risen and fallen during the course of its history. A few architects have debated whether the car must destroy urban ambiance, or whether it can give life and variety to the modern city. Transportation planners and policymakers have debated alternative city forms and have evaluated the merits of investments in public transit as an alternative to highways. Environmentalists have decried the pollution and resource depletion brought on by dependence on the automobile. Artists and so-

cial critics have portrayed the American's love affair with the automobile. In unflattering terms, it is fashionable for intellectuals to present us as increasingly governed by our technology rather than by our minds and hearts. Rarely, however, have these different specialists talked with one another in efforts to understand how the automobile, the city, and modern life interact in a holistic and integrative way.

Few cities have become as associated with the automobile in popular imagery as Los Angeles. While the car was perfected in Detroit, the mild climate and relative affluence of Los Angeles made it one of the earliest and most active markets for automobiles. Los Angeles grew to prominence as a world city after the widespread adoption of the automobile, whereas the city's major competitors matured much earlier during the streetcar era. Thus, while all major world cities are influenced by automobile traffic and highway patterns, Los Angeles is more widely understood to be the product of its cars and freeways, and the automobile here is considered the premier object of conspicuous consumption and style consciousness. Although Los Angeles may have been one of the world's first largest cities to be considered a product of the automobile, all modern cities in every corner of the globe are facing the realization that the automobile is influential in determining urban form and in patterning daily life. For this reason, we regard this book as being about the automobile and the city more than we consider it specific to Los Angeles. Many authors have taken Los Angeles as a case study or a point of departure, but the intent has been to generalize from the experience and the analysis of this one metropolis, and most of the authors reject the notion that Los Angeles is in some way different from other cities because of its relationship to cars.

"The Car and the City," a symposium held at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in April of 1988, brought together one hundred sixty participants committed to developing an understanding of the automobile, the city, and daily life that went beyond disciplinary specializations and popular stereotypes. Los Angeles seemed the natural focus for many of the speakers. While a number of case studies and analyses dealt specifically with Los Angeles, most saw this city as a prototype or example, and the discussion was usually generalizable to other urban settings. But not all the speakers were from Los Angeles, and neither were they of similar disciplinary backgrounds. Architects were consciously paired with economists, urban planners shared panels with historians, and social scientists debated artists in efforts to understand automobiles and their influences on the city and daily living. The speakers included some who were internationally prominent because of their prior work on the motor car, the city, or the relationship between the two. It also included distinguished social commentators, who were asked to turn their attention to this topic for the first time, and some junior scholars taking fresh and exciting looks at the subject matter of the symposium. The papers led to lively interchanges, after which the authors each had the opportunity to expand and rewrite their papers. The twenty chapters in this volume are the products of this process.

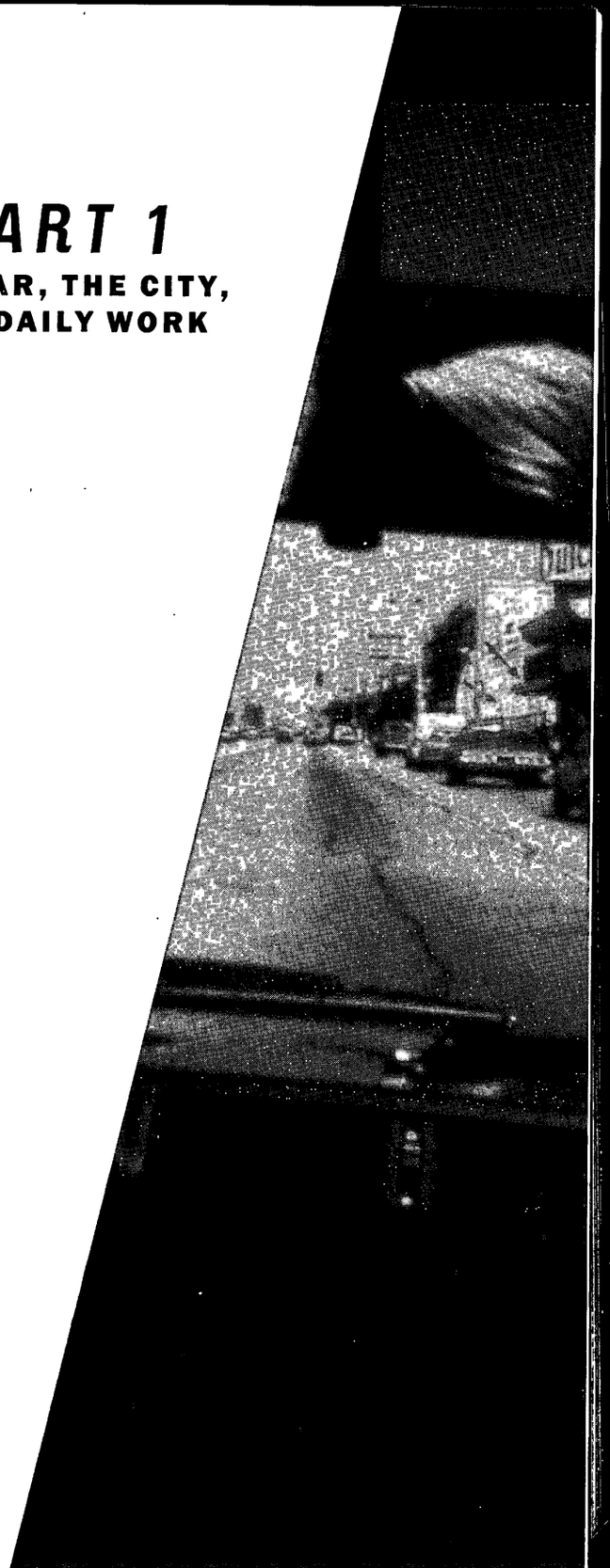
The book has been organized into five parts to focus attention on some common themes that ran through the symposium. Within each part, there are chapters dealing with historical development of current patterns and analyses of current patterns and problems. While we hope that the grouping of chapters makes the subject matter digestible, we recognize that the approaches and styles of the authors remain quite diverse. The authors all had strong personalities and unique perspectives, and that is what made the symposium interesting. To a great extent their work resisted easy classification, and the reader may note strong links between chapters that have been placed in different sections.

Part 1 consists of three chapters that address the automobile's linkage to the daily economy—the work done by urban residents and the commutes between home and work. It is through working and navigating the city that most people experience the automobile, and we believe that an interdisciplinary examination of the car and the city should begin with that experience. Part 2 includes four chapters that have in common an emphasis on family life, gender differences and roles, and the automobile as an object of status in daily life. Part 3 focuses on the ways in which the automobile has affected and been affected by ideas about design. It contains analyses of individual buildings, communities, commercial strips and downtowns, with an eye toward understanding the interaction between cars, traffic, people, and buildings. It also looks at the automobile as an object to be designed and the ways in which the design of cars affected and has been affected by the design of buildings in the automobile era. Part 4 consists of five chapters that examine the special character of Los Angeles

in relationship to the automobile. Spanning nearly a hundred years, the chapters look at its early days, and carry the analysis to the present. These chapters consider the special place of Los Angeles in the evolution of the automobile industry and the special place of the automobile in the evolution of the "idea" of Los Angeles. Part 5 includes three authors' speculations about what makes the car so special a part of American life and what is in store for us in the future. While many want to control or tame the auto and others want to accommodate to it, the authors of these final chapters try to explain why the auto has been as influential as it has and what its past implies for future policies and programs.

While no collection of essays on disparate subjects can be complete or definitive, we believe this anthology is unique. It is surely one of the most integrative scholarly treatments of the automobile and its impacts that has yet been assembled. It contains some original historical analysis, a variety of perspectives on the social meaning of the auto and its use, strong personal statements about the relationship of the car to urban design, and some speculations on how these themes are woven together into the fabric of the modern and future metropolis. It is offered as a contribution to a small but growing body of thought on one of the most important objects of everyday life.

PART 1
THE CAR, THE CITY, AND DAILY WORK



INTRODUCTION TO PART 1

Three authors address the relationship between the car and the city in terms of the urban economy. They all argue, in one way or another, that a proper understanding of the mutual influences of the car and the city on each other requires study of the world of work—the spatial separations between home and work and the use of the automobile and truck at work and to travel between home and work. The contention is not new, but the approach taken by several of the authors is indeed novel.

Historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr., examines the evolution of American city form, focusing on Los Angeles. Warner looks for the roots of today's travel patterns in earlier concepts of community and neighborhood. He finds that Los Angeles was a deliberately planned response to earlier notions of work and community and that in earlier years public transportation was depended upon to provide contact between racial and ethnic groups who worked together in commercial centers but lived in more segregated residential communities. Today's lower density living and working communities, connected by freeways and autos, provide greater class segregation in both workplaces and living places than he deems desirable. Warner examines the emerging urban economy and concludes that there is a need for conscious policies to promote affordable multiclass housing and community-based services including transportation.

J. B. Jackson, an astute, individualistic observer of the American landscape, points out that, as the American community evolved, the motor truck played a very critical role. He argues, however, that the role of the automobile has been far better understood and enumerated than the role of the motor truck, which he sees as playing an equally critical part in structuring the metropolis. The automobile as a "work vehicle" is the subject of his chapter, which includes some interesting statistics and anecdotes about the evolution of the truck and such mobile workplaces as ambulances, cement mixers, and other specialized vehicles. As interesting as the trucks are the working landscapes with which they are

associated—the space-consuming, nondescript, sometimes grimy industrial districts filled with transfer points, warehousing sheds, and terminals. These districts occupy an important and large part of the urban scene, but they seem to have been mostly ignored by urban designers and commentators on urban form and function.

Joseph Corn, an historian of technology, comments on the chapters by both Warner and Jackson, and takes their perspectives a step further. He writes about another contribution of the automobile to the world of work: the automobile repairing and servicing industry, which has itself become a major employment sector. Corn discusses its evolution from humble beginnings in the blacksmith trade. He traces the service industry from a necessary support for new car sales to a profitable independent business enterprise.

16. Margaret Crawford

THE FIFTH ECOLOGY:
FANTASY, THE AUTOMOBILE, AND LOS ANGELES

With the opening of Disneyland in 1955, an environmental paradigm emerged that was to haunt the ecological, cultural, and psychological landscapes of southern California. By organizing his amusement park around thematic zones based on fictional environments, Walt Disney replaced the squalid ambience of the carnival with conceptual models of American mythology at two-thirds scale. Main Street equals small-town America, Frontierland, the myth of the western frontier, and Tomorrowland, the corporate and technological promise of the future. These myths were packaged to be consumed, which quickly made Disneyland the most visited attraction in southern California.

In spite of its incredible success, Disneyland itself was only good for an afternoon, not for life; physically, it was too limited and its technology too evident to be directly adopted as a model for environmental planning. At the same time, its reduction of a complex and debatable reality to a single, agreed-upon theme—a theme that could be both cliché and archetype—suggested that environmental reality could be replaced by a focused thematic unreality at a larger scale.

This possibility offered a way out of the ecological impasse facing Los Angeles in the late 1950s. Although the city had long generated fantasy commercial architecture, such as Tail o' the Pup, a hot dog stand shaped like a hot dog, or the Brown Derby, a restaurant built as a hat, based on limited images, these buildings existed as isolated elements in a larger environment dominated by powerful geographic features. In the early 1960s Reyner Banham classified Los Angeles into four ecologies: three natural systems, the beach, the foothills, and the basin, connected by autopia, an artificial network of roads and freeways.[1] Fantasy architecture, confined to a setting of palm trees, orange groves, and snow-capped mountains, had no room to expand.

By introducing the concept of the theme environment, Disneyland allowed a new system of land use to emerge, liberated from the physical setting of the city and based on a landscape of the imagination. Like Disney's "lands," theme environments consist of controllable settings designed to convey a unified image. Based on a carefully selected set of themes presented with a consistency and coherence not found in everyday life, they offer a reduced

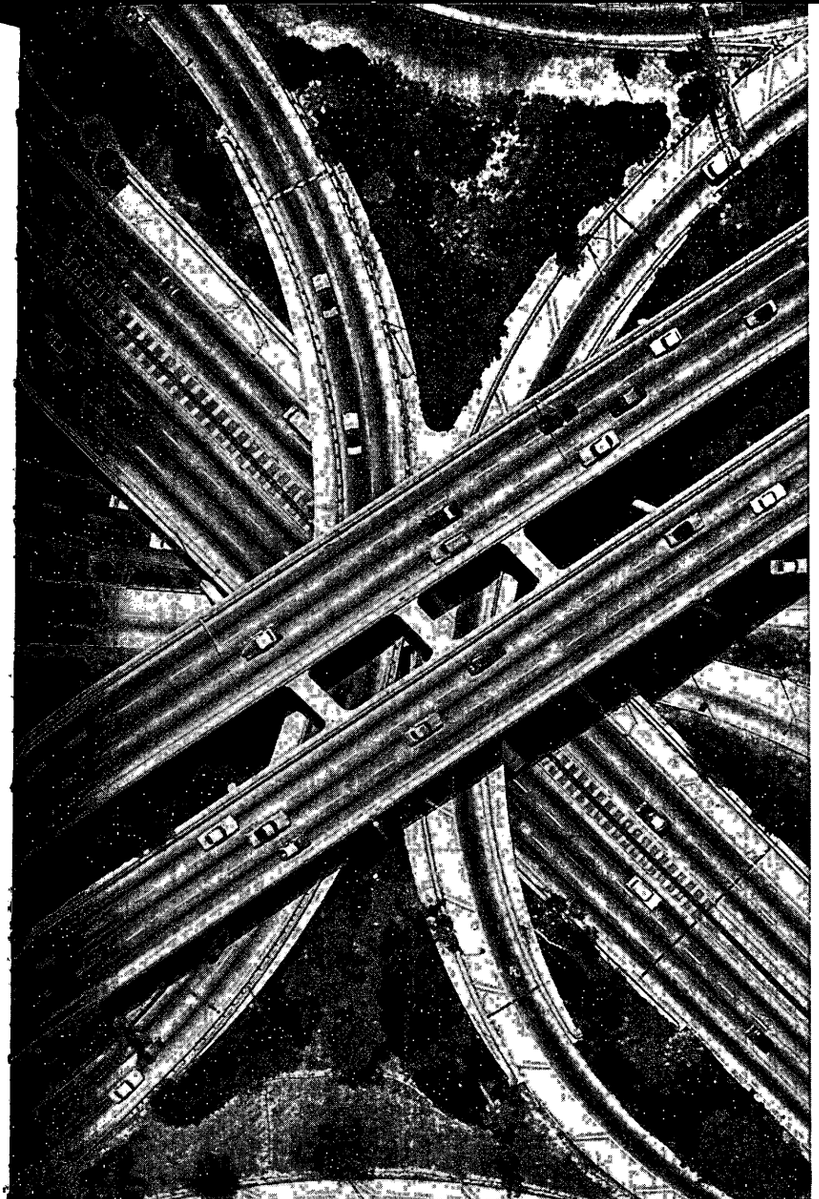


FIGURE 16.1
"The Stack"—four-level intersection of the Hollywood, Harbor, and Pasadena freeways, Los Angeles.

experience of a more complex reality, whether historical, geographic, or cultural. Themes, drawn from anywhere in time and space, are unlimited, but their presentation is restricted to communicating nostalgia and comfort. Whether based on fictional texts like Tom Sawyer's Island or on historical locations like New Orleans Square, these spaces have been drained of ambiguity and contradiction, their meanings reduced to entertainment.

This concept had significant social implications. In addition to providing thematic arenas for consumption, Disneyland transformed public space itself into a commodity. Charles Moore noted that although Disneyland introduced public space into the "private floating world of Southern California . . . you have to pay for the public life."[2] The public realm, described by Hannah Arendt as an area where people define their own identity and awareness of others' identities through participation in ritual and civic life, was replaced by a place where human needs for public experiences are shaped by fundamentally commercial purposes. In spite of its window dressing, which is derived from reassuring visions of other times and places, Disney's artificial version of public life is totally divorced from any traditional social, religious, or cultural context.[3] Here, the individual defines himself through consumption choices.

The multiplication of similarly packaged environments testifies to the accuracy of Disney's insights. "Consumerist" architecture, its principles based on behavioral manipulation through communicable imagery, primarily characterizes building types directed toward leisure activities.[4] Offsetting the rationalist standardization imposed by the workplace, its fantasy fuels the need for entertainment and escape in other areas of life. Most widely applied to consumption environments such as shopping malls, stores, and restaurants, and often to hotel and resort architecture, thematic approaches are increasingly appearing in residential architecture. The extra level of metaphor provided by theme images, such as clapboard villages or Spanish haciendas, gives otherwise indistinguishable housing and condominium developments a marketing edge over less communicative projects.[5]

Existing buildings, particularly those with historical associations, can be easily repackaged into theme environments, as the transformation of several city blocks into New York's South Street Seaport "festival marketplace" indicates. A large area of the town of Monterey, California, has been thematically unified with the widespread application of motifs inspired by John Steinbeck's novel, *Cannery Row,* turning the real Cannery Row into a parody of itself.[6] The ultimate expansion of Disneyland beyond the confines of the theme park into daily life is illustrated by Disney Corporation's own

FIGURE 16.2
Map of Disneyland's Tomorrowland.

Studio Backlot project in Burbank, a complex containing a shopping mall, entertainment center, hotel, and theme park, all based on a completely fictional premise.

The theme of a movie backlot provides a mental structure that allows the infusion of fantasy and spectacle into every aspect of the building. The nature of the cinematic medium, inherently fragmented, justifies the juxtaposition of disparate attractions, such as a steakhouse in a boat that appears to be teetering on the edge of a waterfall, a seafood restaurant where diners would have the illusion of eating underwater, and a nightclub hosted by holographic images of celebrities of the past. Hotel rooms would replicate famous movie sets, with employees dressed as film characters. Even the parking lot, covered by a huge sheet of water, would become "the Burbank Ocean."[7] The megastructure requires only the addition of housing to become an inhabitable fantasy, a complete world in itself.

More than simply extreme examples of kitsch, these environments represent a broader cultural tendency toward the domination of fantasy images, which has significant cultural implications. Theme environments can be seen as particularly visible examples of a hyperrealism increasingly present in contemporary life. As defined by the poststructuralist philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality is a condition in which "simulation" effaces and replaces reality.[8] Hyperreal representation produces an imitation that becomes more real than reality itself. One effect of the hyperreal is to impoverish reality. An actual small town can never be as perfect as Main Street in Disneyland, just as Fifth Avenue will never be as clean or well organized as a shopping mall.[9]

Theme environments are not unique to Southern California. Boxcars made into train restaurants and newly built New England fishing villages that are actually shopping malls have become a staple of the American commercial landscape. They are perhaps most evident in recently developed Sunbelt cities, without historic infrastructure or hierarchical organization. Only in their point of origin, however—Southern California, with its constant stream of immigrants, absence of conventionally perceivable history, and lack of urban self-definition—have they become a dominant realm of spatial and social experience. As in Hollywood films, also clearly a significant cultural influence in the local acceptance of theme environments, fiction vanquishes the real.

The means for achieving the dominion of the hyperreal was the subsumption of the region's three natural ecologies by the fourth, autopia. The

triumph of the automobile and its necessary road network allowed another, latent, ecology to emerge, the ecology of fantasy. Fifteen years later Banham's original taxonomy, still tied to natural processes, is no longer valid. The automobile severed the links between Los Angeles' culture and its natural setting. This development resolved the increasing contradiction between the automobile and the basin's natural limitations, which produced environmental damage from smog, ruptures of urban pattern, and destruction of landscape features. In the new ecology of fantasy the car is no longer an ecological villain but a means of liberation, providing access to an unlimited and constantly changing set of theme environments.

The automobile connects individual circuits of theme environments, a coherent conceptual grid overlaid on the real economic and topographic surface of the city. Driving from one theme environment to another, the endless, nondescript blocks of the city disappear. Robbed of conceptual validity, they become neutral filler between a set of points that construct a coherent thematic reality, physically discontinuous but conceptually integrated. Thus, although individual themes have coherence, serial themes only can become dominant in a setting of disjointed context.

More than just transport from one fragment to the next, the automobile functions as a medium, transforming our experience of the landscape we are traveling through. In the car we move through the city without disturbing it or it disturbing us. Like television, another individualized medium, the automobile distances us from the world outside our sealed capsule while restructuring and abstracting it. The world, through a television screen or a windshield, becomes two-dimensional, and substance is reduced to the level of image, a strictly visual event that does not invite participation.

Unlike the pedestrian, whose fully utilized senses require buildings providing a full range of stimuli, the driver's senses are numbed by the metal jacket of the car. Thus architecture, intended to be perceived slowly through touch, smell, and hearing, has been replaced by facades perceived completely with the sense of vision. Moving too fast to smell, sealed off from sounds by air conditioning, radio, and tape decks, and with touch limited to the steering wheel, the automobile's perceptual limitations have distanced the driver from a traditional sense of reality, dematerializing the world beyond the windshield.[10]

Moving through space in an automobile is also a televisual experience, a succession of quick cuts and rapidly edited fragments unified by the medium of the automobile. Baudrillard has observed that increasingly fluid and auto-

FIGURE 16.3
Los Angeles through the windshield.

mated vehicles produce fluid and automated space in which we let ourselves go, tuning into them like we tune into a television set. Driving promotes a flattening effect, erasing the fragmentation of time and space and homogenizing everything to the absolute present. It allows the continuous bombardment of people, places and things, once driven past, to be forgotten quickly. Driving erases memory.[11]

The physical environment reinforces these perceptual changes. Roadside architecture, identified primarily from the car, has undergone a similar transformation. Marc Treib and Philip Langdon have charted the shift away from the lively individualism of early commercial strips to today's bland "television roads" composed of standardized franchise outlets.[12] Similar economic and marketing forces have fragmented the city into single-use enclaves, accessible only by automobile. Without apparent logic, collections of disparate themes and functions face each other across roads and parking lots. Our unquestioning acceptance of this landscape of juxtaposition owes much to Disneyland's radical compression of themes remote in space and time.

Looking from nineteenth-century New Orleans across an African jungle and into the future has accustomed us to a fragmented vision of a discontinuous environment. At Disneyland discrete worlds collide with an ease previously achieved only in the most speculative science fiction. Spatial proximity breaks down accepted boundaries between near and far, past and future, and reality and fantasy. The abrupt shifts of time and space and the equation of fiction and fact present in Disneyland also resemble the perceptual model presented by television. Changing realities appears to be as effortless as changing channels.

To convince its users, the theme environment must sever all perceptual connections with its automobilized origins and setting. The theme environment's ability to communicate depends on its isolation from the realities of the necessities of its daily life. As the counterpoint to the automobile's diffuse, reduced experiences, encapsulated pedestrian spaces offer intensity and increased stimulation. In order to entertain, shopping, eating, and relaxing have become highly theatricalized. Spectacle has begun even to penetrate daily activities such as food shopping. West Hollywood supermarkets sell sushi from a bamboo structure with costumed Japanese chefs expertly trimming raw fish and emphasize fresh produce by displaying it on hay-laden carts with clerks dressed in overalls.

To maintain the illusions, valet parking has become a central element in the ecology of fantasy. Now offered by supermarkets, art galleries, and de-

FIGURE 16.4
Valet parkers on Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles.

partment stores as well as restaurants, valet parking reduces the need to physically interact with the social reality of the city to the six feet of sidewalk between the car door and the entrance, which allows an existence consisting totally of theme environments to become conceivable. So far, this degree of selectivity over one's surroundings made possible by avoiding city streets and urban reality is unique to Los Angeles. Unlike the structural layers of Fritz Lang's film, *Metropolis*, which separates the workers from the owner's skyscraper city, the automobile permits a synchronic organization in which, without physical barriers, consumers of theme environments are equally well protected from the unwelcome realities of class and ethnic differences.

An increasingly pluralistic and eclectic selection of themes has emerged. Mass consumers are limited to itineraries of shopping malls, chain restaurants, and purpose-built tourist attractions, but Los Angeles also has generated permutations of increasingly specialized and sophisticated theme circuits. The apparent profusion of choice follows the logic of marketing, which dictates constant novelty aimed at specific market segments. New themes rely on more abstract imagery; punk, new wave, and heavy metal themes are obvious. Art themes, utilizing constructivism, minimalism, or graffiti art, depend on less-accessible codes. Self-consciously hermetic high-art architecture, with its unique stylistic vocabularies, has been subsumed into a readily identifiable, therefore marketable, product.[13] Even recent immigrant groups, such as Koreans and Japanese, have created distinctive theme environments along Olympic Boulevard and in Little Tokyo, with images derived from Buddhist temples and zen gardens now used for restaurants, hotels, and shopping centers. In a city of endless atomization, infinite individual ecologies are available.

The consumption of fantasy themes is not available to everyone. The homeless, present in increasing numbers in the city, are both physically and economically excluded. Put on the streets by the shutdown of mental hospitals, the disappearance of family assistance programs, and the contraction of blue-collar industries, they must claim whatever marginal territory is available for living space: cars, sidewalks, and vacant lots. Rather than consuming prepackaged environments, they are forced to produce their own. They improvise provisional shelters from whatever materials are at hand and gather into temporary communities for safety and to obtain services. Their spontaneous creation of living environments from virtually nothing implicitly questions the calculated construction of the theme environment. Even seen

from a passing car, it is difficult to reduce the density of despair in Skid Row to a purely visual image.

More and more, irreducible realities intrude on the neutrality of the street, making it difficult to maintain an uninterrupted circuit of theme environments. "Street people," no longer confined to downtown, panhandle in many areas of the city. Unemployed immigrants sell oranges and peanuts at stoplights and gather at designated corners for the "shape-up"—of an informal labor market—to announce their availability for any kind of manual work. When they do find employment, it is often as the service workers, waiters, busboys, and valet parkers on whom theme environments depend. The presence of these silent observers, implies another, as yet unrealized, ecology, presently submerged but likely to become dominant given the fact that, according to demographic projections, immigrants will constitute over 40 percent of Los Angeles' population by the year 2000.

In a city devoted to the search for increasingly esoteric individual themes, immigrant groups establish community against great odds. Inheriting the physical city of pre-Disneyland Los Angeles, they lead urban lives familiar to the inhabitants of many cities: walking through crowded downtown streets, using public transportation, and gathering in public parks. All over the city, newcomers have reclaimed public places such as streets, parks, and markets, transforming them into functioning social space. Spanish-speaking Broadway, between Third and Eighth streets, offers the most concentrated street life in the city, with pedestrians far outnumbering vehicles. Olvera Street, Los Angeles' original civic plaza, turned into an ersatz tourist attraction in the 1940s, has come full circle to be used once again as a public square and paseo. The authentic intensity of these pedestrian experiences recalls traditional urban ecologies and points out the hollowness of their recreation inside theme environments. This forms a major barrier to the total incursion of the ecology of fantasy.

What will be the result of the inevitable collision of these disparate ecologies? One possibility is suggested by the science fiction film *Bladerunner* (regarded by many as an accurate projection of Los Angeles' future) in which everyone who can afford to has moved "off-world", leaving the city to its Third world inhabitants. Off-world is not yet available, but outlying, privately developed new towns (such as Mission Viejo or Westlake Village, whose physical and social coherence are maintained by deed restrictions and security guards) address the same needs. Another scenario is the expansion of theme environments to include "melting-pot" content, with non–Spanish-speaking, second-generation Chicanos happily dining in Hispanic-theme restaurants.

Less likely, given the constraints of consumer economics and class and ethnic division, is the possibility of synthesis. One can still imagine, however, a future in which environments that do not orchestrate escape from daily life might include an awareness of multiple realities. We cannot expect the individual automobile to disappear or for Los Angeles' dispersed fragments to come together, but we still can hope that the theme circuits we endlessly create might become inclusive rather than exclusive, expansive rather than reductive, and that the principle of mobility might be used to cross boundaries rather than to construct them.