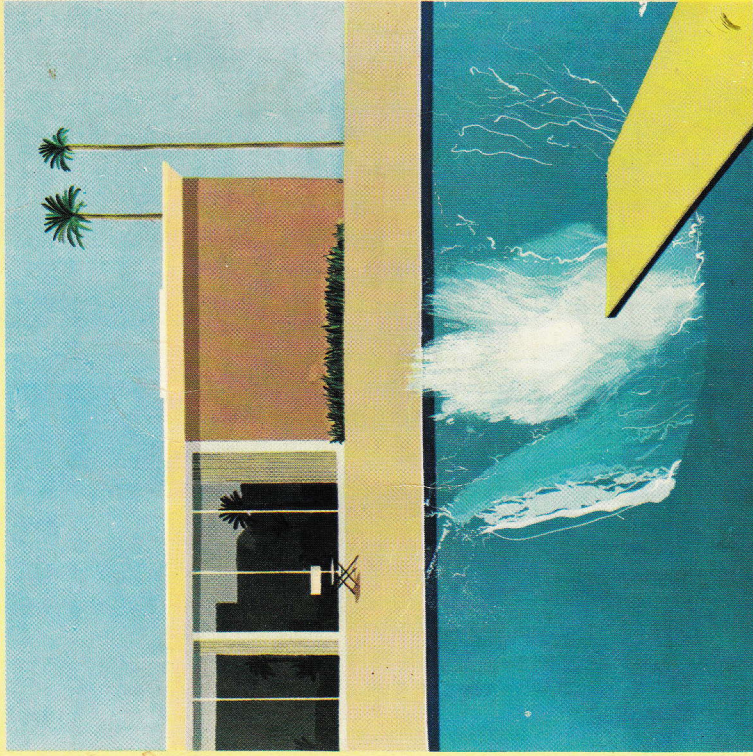


Los Angeles



THE ARCHITECTURE
OF FOUR ECOLOGIES

REYNER BANHAM



A Pelican Book

I3 An Ecology for Architecture

An even greater urban vision than the view of Los Angeles from Griffith Park Observatory is the view of Los Angeles on a clear day from a high-flying aircraft. Within its vast extent can be seen its diverse ecologies of sea-coast, plain, and hill; within that diversity can be seen the mechanisms, natural and human, that have made those ecologies support a way of life – in the dry brown hills the flood-control basins brimming with ugly yellow water, the geometries of the orange-groves and vineyards, the bustling topologies of the freeway inter-sections, a splatter of light reflected from a hundred domestic swimming pools, the power of zoning drawn as a three-dimensional graph by the double file of towers and slabs along Wilshire Boulevard, the interlaced rails and roads in the Cajon and Soledad passes, the eastern and western gates of the city.

Overflying such a spectacle, it is difficult to doubt that it is a subject worthy of description, yet at ground level there have been many who were ready to cast doubt on the worth of such an enterprise. At one extreme, the distinguished Italian architect and his wife who, on discovering that I was writing this book, doubted that anyone who cared for architecture could lower himself to such a project and walked away without a word further. At the other extreme, two hippie girls who panhandled me for the mandatory dime outside *Color Me Aardvaark*, asked me why I had a camera round my neck and then riposted with 'Aw heck, there's lotsa picture-books about LA already!'

Between such unthinking hostility from outsiders, and equally unthinking indifference from the Angeleno equivalent of Cockneys, Los Angeles does not get the attention it deserves – it gets attention, but it's like the attention that Sodom and Gomorrah have received, primarily a reflection of other peoples' bad consciences. As a result of

such failures of attention (Peter Hall omitted it from his *World Cities*, in spite of his known enthusiasm for Los Angeles) puzzled outsiders, like the editor of *Progressive Architecture*, who would genuinely like to know more, are apt to suppose that the essence of Los Angeles must be curiously ineffable to anyone but its inhabitants.

Yet the city is as far from being an impenetrable mystery as it is from being an urbanistic disaster-area. From the time of Anton Wagner's exhaustive *Los Angeles . . . Zweimillionenstadt in Südkalifornien* of 1935, Los Angeles has supported an extensive and responsible literature of explication, and an equally extensive literature of well-informed abuse. And in view of the rather short history of construction and administration to be explained or abused, that literature ought by now to have made the place one of the most open books in the history of city-making.

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

design taught, for instance, by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Planning in New York and similar schools, must be to that extent irrelevant.

This is a hard thing to say about so many good people who believe that they have the best interests of urban man at heart. Nor can I repudiate their objections with the same absolute conviction they display in their rejections of Los Angeles, because I have been there and know that, while it does indeed perform the functions of a great city, it is not absolutely perfect. I have to admit that I do miss the casual kerbside encounters with friends and strangers to which I am accustomed in other cities – but I am happy to be relieved of the frustrations and dangers of the congested pedestrian traffic of Oxford Street, London. And if it is true that there is no worse form of urban alienation than to be shut up in your own private metal capsule in the abstract limbo of the freeways, I can think of another as bad – the appalling contrast between physical contact and psychological separation in the crowds herded shoulder to shoulder in a public transport system like the Paris Metro where, as Jean Prouvé once told me, 'on a *cherché deux heures sans trouver aucun sourire*'. There are as many possible cities as there are possible forms of human society, but Los Angeles emphatically suggests that there is no simple correlation between urban form and social form. Where it threatens the 'human values'-oriented tradition of town planning inherited from Renaissance humanism it is in revealing how simple-mindedly mechanistic that supposedly humane tradition can be, how deeply attached to the mechanical fallacy that there is a necessary causal connexion between built form and human life, between the mechanisms of the city and the styles of architecture practised there.

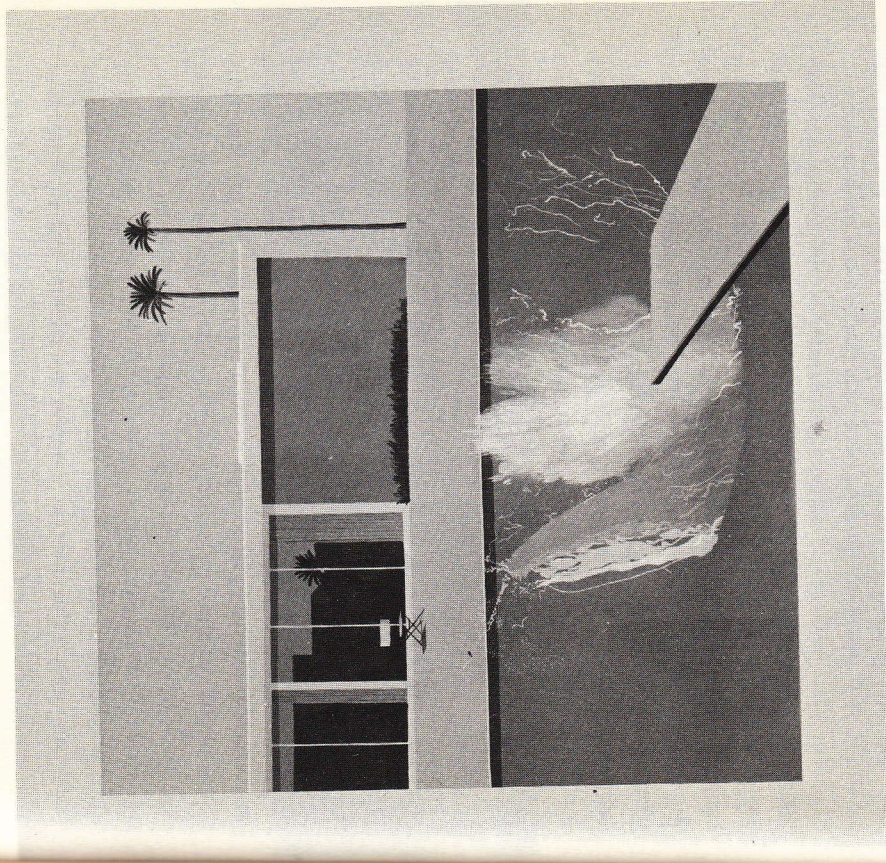
Consider the implication of this quotation from Herb Rosenthal's report on *A Regional Urban Design Center for the West Coast* (the quotation is in itself a pair of quotations from other sources conflated by Rosenthal):

Already the apartment houses springing up on the edge of Damascus have the look and scattered siting of their Arroyo Seco counterparts, and villas up in the hills beyond Beirut are very similar to the individual houses being built in the foothills beyond San Bernardino. . . . As they burgeon, foreign cities are likely to look more and more like American cities, particularly Los Angeles. The resemblance may be caused more by the automobile as a way of life, than by closer communications . . .

Whatever the original authors of these quotes were arguing, their juxtaposition by Rosenthal tends to confirm the common mechanistic misconception that everything in Los Angeles is caused by the automobile as a way of life. I trust that the preceding chapters will have made it clear that, if there has to be a mechanistic interpretation, then it must be that the automobile and the architecture alike are the products of the Pacific Electric Railway as a way of life.

But all such explanations miss the point because they miss out the human content. The houses and the automobiles are equal figments of a great dream, the dream of the urban homestead, the dream of a good life outside the squalors of the European type of city [122], and thus a dream that runs back not only into the Victorian railway suburbs of earlier cities, but also to the country-house culture of the fathers of the US Constitution, or the whig squirearchs whose spiritual heirs they sometimes were, and beyond them to the *villegiatura* of Palladio's patrons, or the Medicis' *Poggio a Caiano*. Los Angeles cradles and embodies the most potent current version of the great bourgeois vision of the good life in a tamed countryside, and that, more than anything else I can perceive, is why the bourgeois apartment houses of Damascus and the villas of Beirut begin to look the way they do.

This dream retains its power in spite of proneness to logical disproof. It is the dream that appears in Le Corbusier's equation: *un rêve* × 1,000,000 = chaos. Unfortunately for Le Corbusier's rhetorical mathematics, the chaos was in his mind, and not in Los Angeles, where seven million adepts at California Dreaming can find their way around



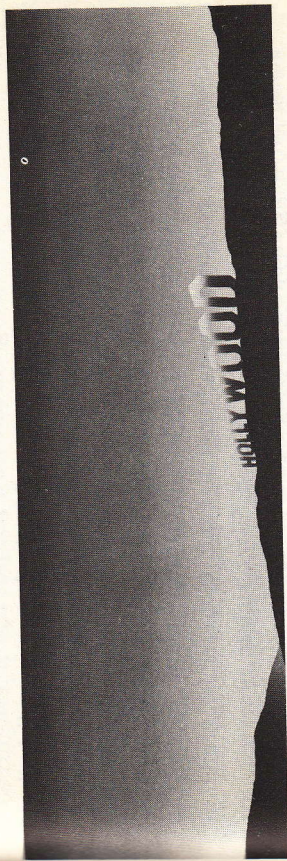
122. *A Bigger Splash* (oil painting), 1968, David Hockney

without confusion. But since the dream exists in physical fact - as fit as it can - its real failings are manifest enough to be well chronicled. But so too is the untarnished dream itself, at least in allegorical form. If Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* is the most visually perceptive account of its failings to appear in fiction, another locust book, Ray Bradbury's *The Silver Locusts* (The Martian Chronicles) is the purest distillation of the essential dream, in spite of its Martian subject-matter.

The neon-violet sunset light that disquieted the sensibilities of West's hero by making the Hollywood Hills almost beautiful [123], is also the light in which I personally delight to drive down the last leg of Wilshire towards the sea, watching the fluorescence of the electric signs mingling with the cheap but invariably emotive colours of the Santa Monica sunset. It is also the light which bathes Bradbury's Martian evenings. The lithe, brown-skinned Martians, with their 'gold-coin eyes', in Bradbury's vision are to be seen on the surfing beaches and even more frequently on the high desert, where communities like California City sprawl beside shallow lakes under the endless dry wind, and are his Martian ecology to the life. If the famous vision of a totally automated house, that will go on dispensing gracious living long after the inhabitants have vanished, has a prototype in existence it is probably over in Sherman Oaks, and if you seek a prototype of the crystal house of Ylla, look among the Case Study houses or in the domestic work done by Neutra in the fifties.

There is even the unspeakable Sam Parkhill, patented title-holder to half the land of Mars, for all the world like a Yankee 'Don' newly possessed of some vast Spanish rancho; there are the canals by which the crystal pavilions stand, as they were meant to stand in the dream-fulfilment city of Venice; above all, there are the dry preserved remains of the cities of an earlier Martian culture, like abandoned Indian pueblos or the forgotten sets of famous movies long ago . . .

Angeleno Bradbury, sensibilities tuned to the verge of sentimentality, touches the quintessential dream in every other paragraph of his



Martian chronicles — the exquisitely wrought and automatic houses, abiding for ever in elegant and cultured leisure through the calm of a plupferf evening 'when the fossil sea was warm and motionless, and the wine-trees stood stiff in the yard'. Tod Hackett, the hero of the *Dry of the Locust*, by contrast, is an outsider from the Yale art school, and his eastern sensibilities are outraged by the extravagant styles of the houses he sees as he goes up Pinyon Canyon. Dynamite is the only balm his mind can envisage, until he notices that the houses are all built of ephemeral materials that 'know no law, not even that of gravity' and then 'he was charitable. Both houses were comic but . . . eager and guileless. It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance.'

It is indeed, especially face to face with the physical reality. The distant view, processed through morality and photography, erudition and ignorance, prepares us, as Nathan Silver rightly observed, for almost anything except what Los Angeles looks like in fact. The closer view can be totally disarming, precisely because of that eager guilelessness, that technically resourceful innocence that is in the art of surfing, in the politics of local liberals, and in practically everything else that is worth attention, including most of the Los Angeles architecture of any repute. At its most extreme it can become a naïvely nonchalant reliance on a technology that may not quite exist yet. But that, by comparison with the general body of official Western culture at the moment, increasingly given over to facile, evasive and self-regarding pessimism, can be a very refreshing attitude to encounter.

But there is more to it than technological self-confidence. There is also still a strong sense of having room to manoeuvre. The tradition of mobility that brought people here, sustained by the frenzy of internal motion ever since, and combined with the visible fact that most of the land is covered only thinly with very flimsy buildings, creates a feeling — illusory or not — that you can still produce results by bestirring yourself. Unlike older cities back east — New York, Boston, London, Paris — where warring pressure groups cannot get out of one another's hair

because they are pressed together in a sacred labyrinth of cultural monuments and real-estate values, Los Angeles has room to swing the proverbial cat, flatten a few card-houses in the process, and clear the ground for improvements that the conventional type of metropolis can no longer contemplate.

This sense of possibilities still ahead is part of the basic life-style of Los Angeles. It is, I suspect, what still brings so many creative talents to this palm-girt littoral — and keeps most of them there. For every pedestrian litterateur who finds the place 'a stinking sewer' and stays only long enough to collect the material for a hate-novel, for every visiting academic who never stirs out of his bolt-hole in Westwood and comes back to tell us how the freeways divide communities because he has never experienced how they unite individuals of common interest . . . for these two there will be half a dozen architects, artists or designers, photographers or musicians who decided to stay because it is still possible for them to do their thing with the support of like-minded characters and the resources of a highly diversified body of skills and technologies.

In architecture, and the other arts that stand upon the immediate availability of technical aids, the ill-defined city of the Angels has a well-defined place of honour. Any city that could produce in just over half a century the Gamble house, Disneyland, the Dodge house, the Watts Towers, the Lovell houses, no fewer than twenty-three buildings by the Lloyd Wright clan, the freeway system, the arcades of Venice, power-stations like Huntington Beach, the Eames house, the Universal City movie-lots, the Schindler house, Farmers' Market, the Hollywood Bowl, the Water and Power building, Santa Monica Pier, the Xerox Data Systems complex, the Richfield Building, Garden Grove drive-in Church, Pacific Ocean Park, Westwood Village *passé*, Bullock's-Wilshire, not to mention some one hundred other structures that are discussed in the preceding chapters (or should have been!) . . . such a city is not one on which anybody who cares about architecture can afford

to turn his back and walk away without a word further. Such a very large body of first-class and highly original architecture cannot be brushed off as an accident, an irrelevance upon the face of an indifferent dystopia. If Los Angeles is one of the world's leading cities in architecture, then it is because it is a sympathetic ecology for architectural design, and it behoves the world's architects to find out why. The common reflexes of hostility are not a defence of architectural values, but a negation of them, at least in so far as architecture has any part in the thoughts and aspirations of the human race beyond the little private world of the profession.