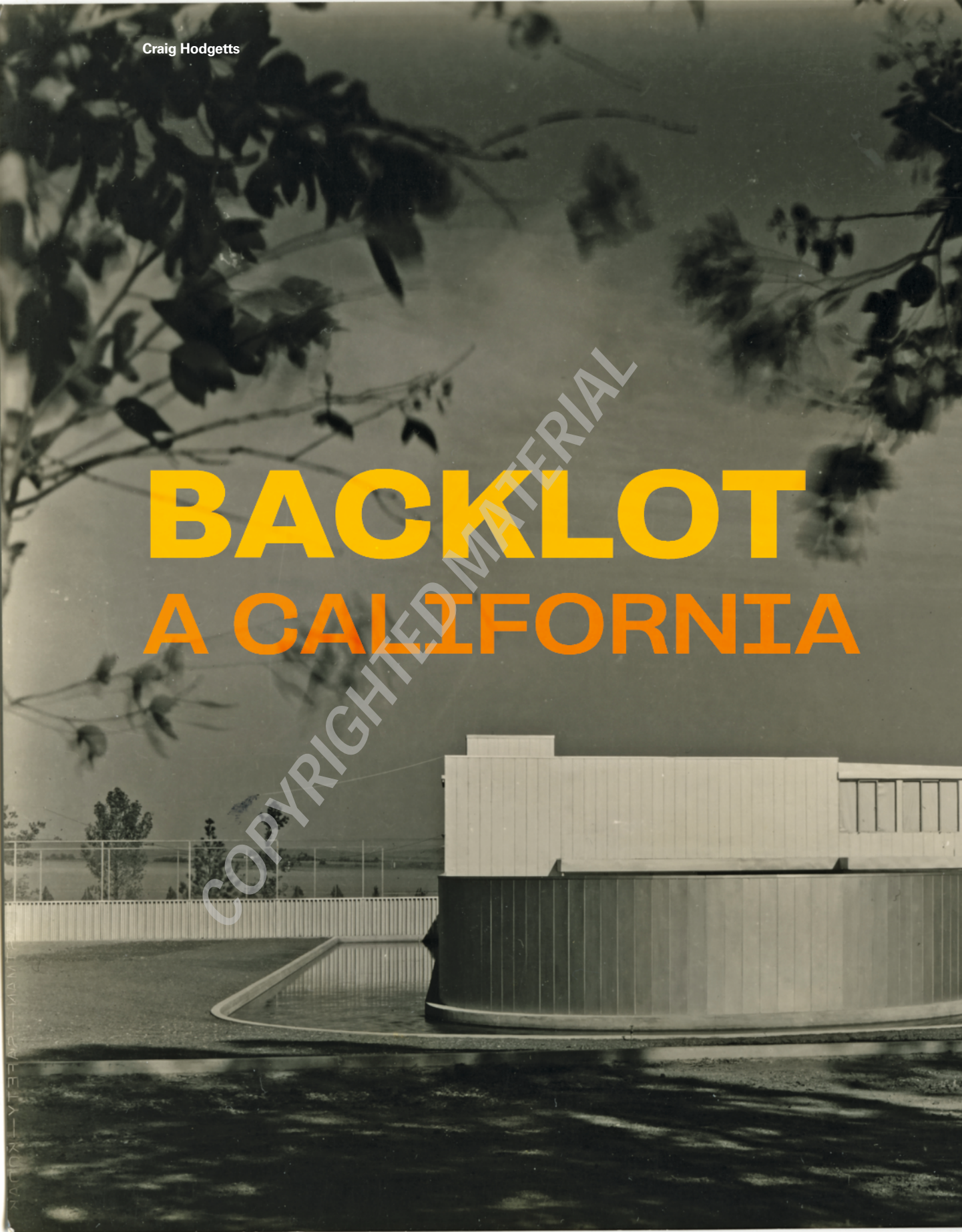



Craig Hodgetts

BACKLOT

A CALIFORNIA



JAMES SAFETY-KOOPER



Richard Neutra,
Josef von Sternberg House,
Northridge, California,
1935

The clean, low-profile, pre-formed steel panels and corrugated metal of the house Neutra designed for Joseph von Sternberg on 13 undeveloped acres (5 hectares) in the San Fernando Valley had nothing in common with the pastiche styles favoured by Hollywood celebrities in the 1930s, but rather possessed a sublime modesty and sobriety. The house was demolished in 1972.

SUBURBIA STORY

The story of California – the influence of its émigré architects during the 20th century and its important position in developing the 'cool' mid-century modernism that was to become so fashionable around the globe – cannot be underestimated. **Craig Hodgetts**, architect and academic, and founding half of architectural practice Hodgetts+Fung, looks back at those heady days and the evolution of Los Angeles as an architectural mecca.





Wilshire Boulevard looking west along the envisioned 'Miracle Mile' from Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles, California, c 1920

This undeveloped dirt road would soon become a densely developed commercial artery crossing Los Angeles from the downtown core to the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica.

Wilshire Boulevard at dusk, looking west from Catalina Street, Los Angeles, California, 1928

opposite: The Ambassador Hotel (1921), Wilshire Brown Derby (1926) and Wilshire Christian Church (1927) had by this time been put in place along this stretch of the boulevard, but billboards only announced promises yet to be kept.

It did not take much – just the trifecta of sun-drenched days, glowing beaches and the siren call of a liberated lifestyle – to prompt émigré architects already wary of growing tensions across pre-Second World War Europe to flock to California, and specifically to Los Angeles. Inspired in part by utopian visions of a modern industrialised nation, and looking forward to an open-ended future, they must have been dismayed to find a landscape littered with bungalows not so different from village architecture in the homeland. There were of course exceptions. But to two Austrians, Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, who arrived in the early 1920s, shared a fraught link to Frank Lloyd Wright and ultimately a communal live-work arrangement in Hollywood, LA was a blank slate – a tabula rasa that offered a rich mix of progressive values, daring clients and little in the way of bureaucratic building restrictions.

What they did not anticipate was that LA's cultural elite was still playing catch-up with an old-school European model – memorably manifest in the Art Deco Hollywood Bowl shell (Allied Architects) and Bullock's Department Store (John and Donald Parkinson) of 1929, but even earlier with American real-estate developer and conservationist Abbot Kinney's dreamed-up Italianate porticoes for a 1905 resort on the beach in what would become Venice. Crucially, they did not foresee that their disruptive experiments with concrete and steel would pose an existential threat to the traditional American balloon framing system. Not unlike the aesthetic travails Igor Stravinsky, Bertolt Brecht and Billy Wilder endured while working with Hollywood's entertainment moguls, Schindler and Neutra were destined to encounter the decidedly unsophisticated captains of the local bricks-and-mortar game, and had a devil of a time wedging themselves into a crowded field of local developers and designers.

Even so, by 1935, as Hollywood was bustling with actors, directors and producers busy burnishing their personal notoriety, filmmaker Josef von Sternberg's radical Neutra-designed house became all the rage. Modern architecture had arrived and gurus and patrons like faith-healer Aimee Semple McPherson, naturopathic doctor Philip Lovell and oil baroness Aline Barnsdall fed a posh appetite for experimentation, which Schindler and Neutra lost no time cultivating. The explosion of interest in modernist houses that are still radical, even today – Schindler's Lovell Beach House in Newport Beach (1926) and Neutra's Lovell Health House in LA's Los Feliz neighbourhood (1929) – had introduced the

two architects into the ranks of the international avant-garde even if they had a negligible effect on the vast middle-age paunch of LA. After the Second World War, taking wartime workers' housing as a template (ignoring the recent injection of European modernism), developers spread a first fuzz of lookalike housing along the sabotaged Pacific Electric rail network just in time to welcome returning veterans with federal loans beckoning them to buy into the California dream.

Bullets to Ploughshares

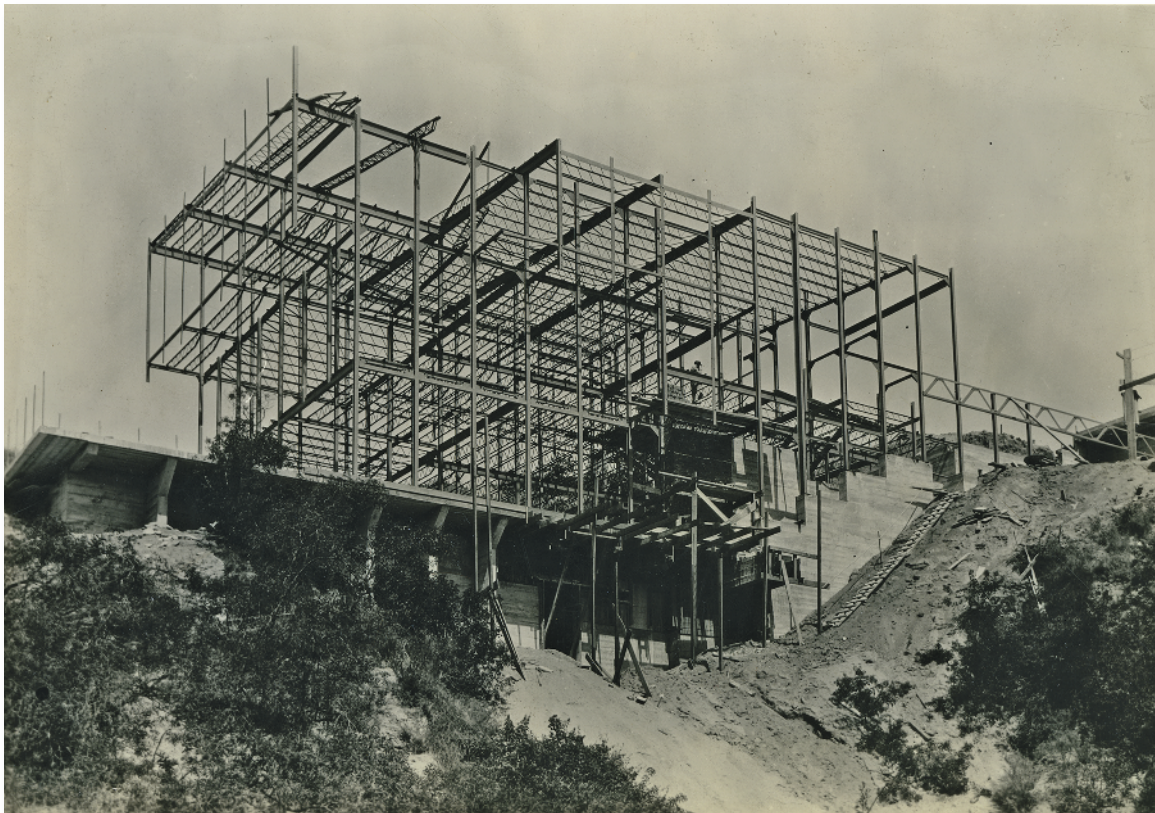
Industrial jobs were plentiful. Once the hub of wartime production, California was evolving into an industrial powerhouse. So for the heirs to postwar California, the spoils were a grab bag full to bursting with novel technology, raw materials and manufacturing know-how. Aluminium, fibreglass, plastics, Formica, stainless steel, chrome and plywood were there for the taking, and quickly began to transform the look of every imaginable commodity. Charles and Ray Eames, who developed a process for forming plywood in the bedroom of their Neutra-designed apartment in Westwood, quickly began raiding surplus inventories, leading in rapid order to the plywood and fibreglass chairs that became synonymous with their name.

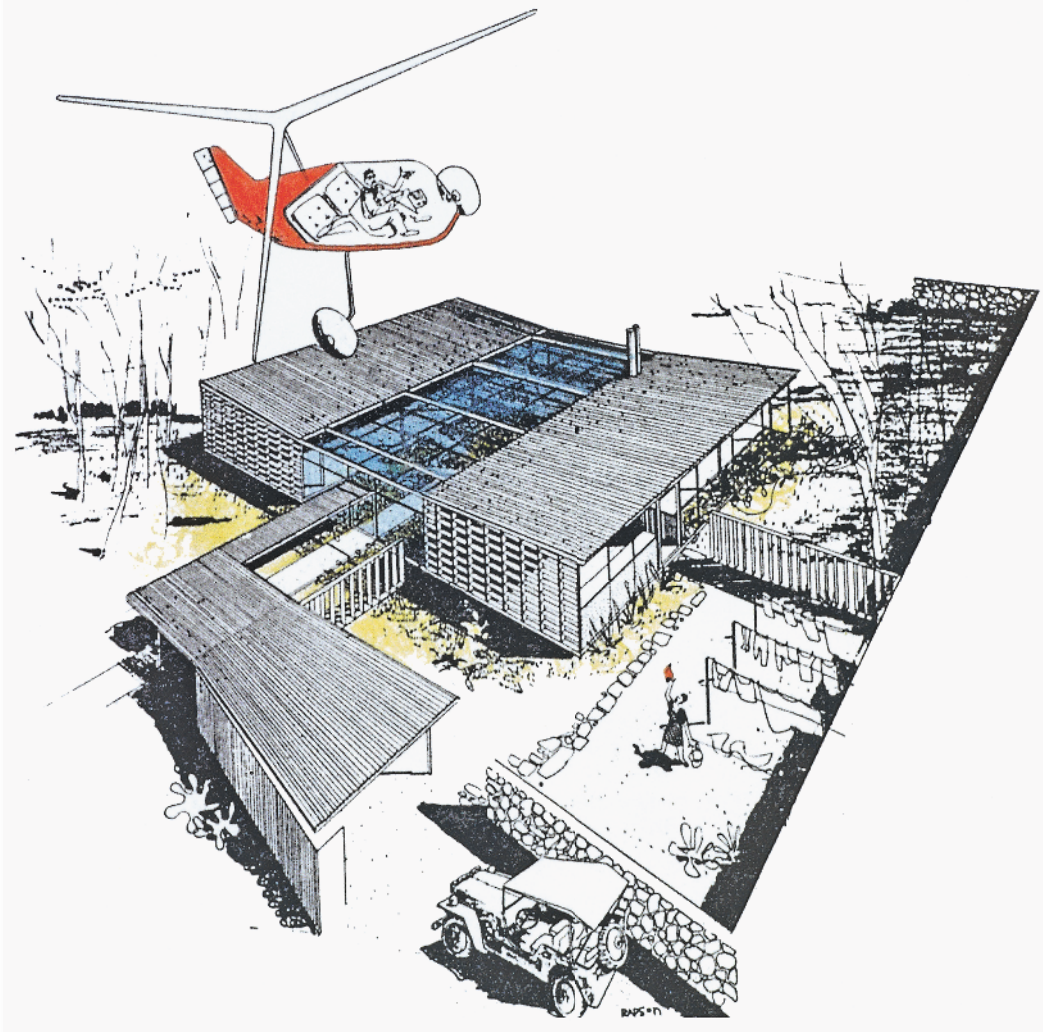
Richard Neutra,
Josef von Sternberg House,
Northridge, California,
1935

top: The Viennese-born von Sternberg revealed in his memoir that he envisioned a house in a meadow, seen here under construction – a distant retreat for himself, his books and his modern art collection, where he would plant a thousand trees.

Richard Neutra,
Lovell Health House
Los Angeles, California,
1927

bottom: The hillside house Neutra designed for naturopath Dr Philip Lovell in the Los Feliz neighbourhood of LA is considered to be the earliest steel-frame house in the US, and one of the first in which the sprayed-on concrete mixture 'gunite' was used. Neutra himself operated as contractor on this project in order to have more control over costs and the quality of construction.





Ralph Rapson,
Project drawing for Case
Study House No 4 (unbuilt),
1945

Rapson's unbuilt 'Greenbelt House' celebrates postwar suburban domesticity on the ground as much as it projects a modernist vision of seamless indoor-outdoor living.

Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, Ralph Rapson, Eero Saarinen, Raphael Soriano and others developed a language that showcased new materials, open plans and an indoor-outdoor ethos for living

With editor John Entenza's launch of the seminal Case Study House Program in the January 1945 issue of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, this exuberance crescendoed, propelling a flurry of interest in the distillation of a genuinely original vocabulary from the high spirits of the previous decades. Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, Ralph Rapson, Eero Saarinen, Raphael Soriano and others who participated developed a language that showcased new materials, open plans and an indoor-outdoor ethos for living. 'Carports' framed the fins and hues of glamorous cars, literally rendering them part of the interior decor of glassed-in living spaces. The 'California lifestyle' brilliantly evoked in serigraphs by Carlos Diniz in tandem with Julius Shulman's iconic photography of Case Study houses created a stir across the Atlantic, whereupon Norman Foster took off for studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Esther McCoy found her lifelong role as muse and chronicler of the era. Just three years after the Case Study programme was launched, a visionary commission went to Gregory Ain to design '100 houses for 100 average veterans' families' on a tract in Mar Vista. Ain refused to compromise with marketing pressures midway through, and only 52 of the homes were built, but the development remains a milestone in affordable single-family housing.



Wallflowers

But again, these modernist dreams, diffused worldwide via Madison Avenue and Hollywood from the early 1950s, had little impact on a feverish housing boom fuelled by federal subsidies, cheap labour and a construction system requiring little in the way of design, engineering or craft. It was not long before huge swaths of tract homes and blushing dingbat apartments with names like La Traviata and Villa Serrano lined bloated streets throughout greater LA. It was, in its way, a perfect formula for housing nuclear families gathered around a barbecue, or teens attracted as if by magic to drive-ins and commercial strips where they could show off their hot rods. Television, itself on the rise, echoed and reinforced a lifestyle of feckless youth culture, with parents lounging on La-Z-Boys while the laugh tracks of sitcoms echoed in the background.

The new generation of designers, beguiled by endless boulevards and a new kind of automobile-centric urban landscape, ushered in an architecture designed for motion. Soon the swooping lines, staccato colours and zigzagging neon of drive-in restaurants with names like Mel's and Norm's, motor hotels, gas stations and car washes lined the popular 'strips' of LA. Where provenance once ruled, the latest and newest was crowned king, and architects took the bait. For a culture already steeped in engine swaps, fake fur and TV dinners, Sunset Strip drive-ins offered architects like John Lautner and Helen Lui Fong a swashbuckling ride into a field already studded with icons like AC Martin's glittering 1939 May Company building anchoring the westward thrust of the 'Miracle Mile' along Wilshire Boulevard, and ordinary apartment buildings with underslung carports and swish graphics to sort them from the rubber-stamp plans of their neighbours.

John Lautner,
Googie's Coffee Shop,
Sunset Boulevard,
Hollywood, California,
1949

Here captured in a 35mm colour slide circa 1958, Lautner's folded, striped design for his coffee shop next to Schwab's Pharmacy on the southeast corner of Sunset and La Cienega (demolished 1989) established the Googie brand and set the tone for myriad coffee shops, restaurants and drive-ins famed for their bold geometric shapes, vivid palettes and graphics, and brightly lit modern interiors.

César Pelli and Daniel, Mann,
Johnson & Mendenhall (DMJM),
Urban Nucleus at Sunset Mountain Park,
Santa Monica Mountains,
Los Angeles, California,
1966

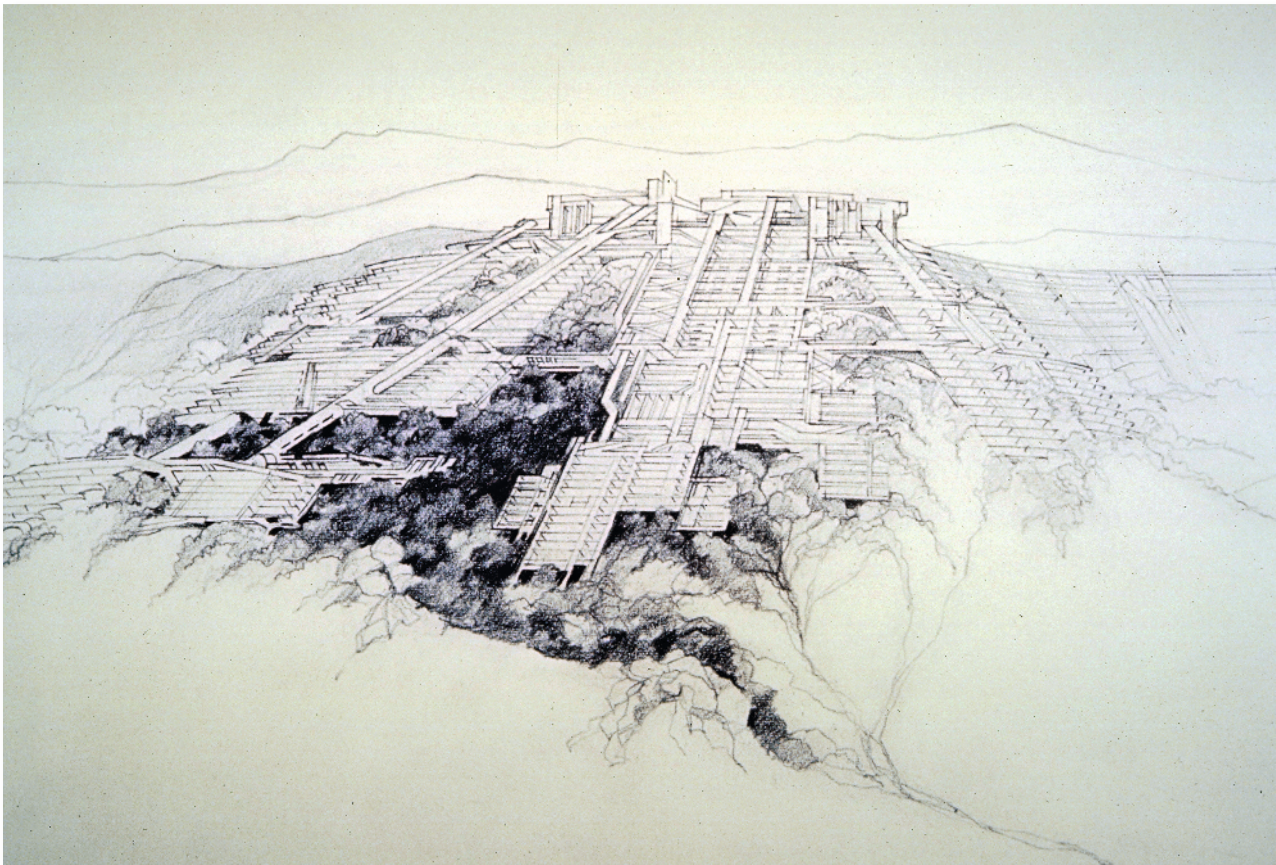
In contrast to the urban sprawl ubiquitous in Los Angeles, Pelli's project – commissioned by Sunset International Petroleum Corporation but never built – clings to the contours of its Santa Monica mountain site. The dense, sustainable and liveable ensemble of terraced communal dwellings is deployed with machine-like precision in a mash-up of ancient and futuristic references.

But the architecture of drive-in culture was viewed with suspicion by establishment developers. Apparently unaware of the coming youthquake, they went on supporting the hacks who had found a profitable niche in the construction of satellite shopping centres further and further from the old urban core. White flight eviscerated LA's downtown, which fast became a ghost town, with gaunt turn-of-the-century buildings long abandoned by the merchant class that built them, newly occupied by flamed-out attorneys and accountants. A creative torpor, dominated by Hollywood's inept posturing, descended on the city. It seemed a hopeless state of affairs, which by the late 1960s had become something only architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham could celebrate. The hum of traffic rose in concert with the density of smog and the endlessness of summer, while a tangle of new freeways ambled over the horizon to more endlessness. A revolutionary flash of hope came with César Pelli's 1966 award-winning Urban Nucleus at Sunset Mountain Park design for a dense community in the Santa Monica Mountains, which challenged the premise of spec residential design and lifestyle. Inspired by European hill towns and yet far ahead of its time and energised by a cascading rhythm, Sunset Mountain promised to achieve urban density in the undisturbed natural landscape, swapping graded lots for closely packed housing nestled into the site, and sustainable goals for developers' land grabs. But it was not to be. The die had been cast.

As the blanket of low-rise single-family housing punctuated by mid-rise commercial buildings and shopping centres spread across the city, there seemed little appetite for architecture, much less the innovative sort that had been projected from the 1920s. On my first visit to LA, ex-Eames visionary filmmaker John Whitney, a native Angelino, deflated my initial enthusiasm by ensuring me there was nothing much to see. When Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* was first published in 1971,¹ painter and critic Peter Plagens published an 11,000-word excoriation in *Artforum* entitled 'Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil', in which he went so far as to label Banham's book dangerous: 'In a more humane society where Banham's doctrines would be measured against the subdividers' rape of the land and the lead particles in little kids' lungs, the author might be stood up against a wall and shot.'²

Beach Boys

It is hard to say what attracted a bevy of newly minted architects to Venice Beach, a place caught between eras and still recovering from the demise of hundreds of oil wells that peppered its shoreline from 1929. Disenfranchised by the City of LA almost as soon as it was annexed in 1926, by the 1950s Venice was considered a slum. Notorious for neglected canals choked with rotting plants, menaced by motorcycle gangs and avoided by tourists, there was nothing to recommend it but sunlight and the ocean – even the



scrappy beaches were mostly deserted. The final blow came when Abbot Kinney's Ocean Park burned down in 1969. But rents were cheap and abandoned storefronts beckoned anyone prospecting for studio space. Although the Eames studio had been hiding there in plain sight since 1943, established firms wanted no part of it, and the outliers moved in.

Thus was born a brew of architects and like-minded artists who, totally unknown to one another, began to stitch together studios along the deserted alleys, until Thom Mayne, in the 1970s, opened his loft to fellow architects to show their work. This was not some romantic rendezvous of visionary individuals hell-bent on establishing themselves in a new firmament, as some have suggested. It was, rather, a feral place at the

far edge of the city where the reality of rusted fencing, torn corrugations and tangled sheet metal suggested a new way of thinking, a petri dish of creative inspiration that, if you were tuned in, force-fed your imagination, something like what *Artforum* editor Philip Leider meant by the term 'Cool School' artists.³

At the same time, Maurice Tuchman was launching the 'Experiments in Art and Technology' exhibition for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and a sputtering gallery scene with names like Ferus and Blum was springing up on La Cienega Boulevard to ignite imaginations. As the impact of visiting East and West Coast critics, artists and curators began to be felt in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed like there were no rules, no trappings of a critical crowd, so for artists and



architects alike, if it felt right, you might strip the façade from an existing storefront and fill the frame with a transparent scrim (Robert Irwin), or sell 6 x 3 foot (2 x 1 metre) signed posters from a table in the middle of the street (Robert Rauschenberg), or even invite passers-by to slather model parts with auto filler (Studio Works). As this nascent creative scene sputtered to life, only spasms of attention from the East Coast greeted projects like Pelli's startling 1966 Sunset Mountain and Studio Works' 1972 Mobile Theater Prototype.

When Frank Gehry decided to abandon his successful commercial practice and left his cushy Santa Monica space for a narrow storefront on the beach, no one really noticed. It was the 1970s, it was Venice – fast becoming home to misfits. It was not until the coincidence in 1978 of the 2-4-6-8 House by Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi of Morphosis,



and Gehry's own fenced-in readymade house, that the architecture establishment craned its neck to take a closer look at Los Angeles. By that time, the Venice boardwalk had been discovered by lithe women on rollerblades, and bodybuilders had set up a showcase on the beach in front of Gold's Gym. The circus had come to town, and with it an easy camaraderie among architects, artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers in their rough-hewn live-work studios. The same year, 1978, Bruce Marder's West Beach Café became the creative mixing chamber that had been lacking. A new culture was on the rise that would have far-reaching effects on architecture, art and the urban environment. In 1983 Marder commissioned Gehry to design Rebecca's across the street. In 1984, denizens at 72 Market Street tipped their stovepipe hats to sometimes rowdy guys who were inventing the next thing.

When the overarching dream of a contemporary art museum in downtown LA first materialised in an abandoned police garage in 1989, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) director-to-be Richard Koshalek – working from his Neutra-designed apartment – hatched an ambitious exhibition showcasing the Case Study House Program.⁴ Full-scale replicas of Case Study House No 4 by Rapson, and No 22, Pierre Koenig's Stahl House, were constructed by Hodgetts+Fung with 'lived-in look' interiors deftly accessorised by film production designers David Wasco and Sandy Reynolds-Wasco. The idea was for visitors to imagine themselves *living there*. Though the Koenig house might have been familiar to the general public, the unbuilt Rapson was a surprise to everyone. When asked to approve a mandated visitor's path through the courtyard, Rapson remarked that it was fine by him, so long as it looked like an airport landing strip. Could now be a good time to rethink Pelli's Sunset Mountain scheme? ▽

Notes

1. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, University of California Press (Los Angeles), 1971.
2. Peter Plagens, 'Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil', *Artforum*, December 1972, pp 67–76.
3. Philip Leider, 'The Cool School', *Artforum*, 2 (12), summer 1964, p 3.
4. See Elizabeth AT Smith and Esther McCoy, *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*, exh cat, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1989, p 67. See also *California Design 1930–1965: 'Living in a Modern Way'*, exh cat, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2011.

Frederick Fisher, Robert Mangurian,
Eric Owen Moss, Coy Howard, Craig Hodgetts,
Thom Mayne and Frank Gehry,
Venice Beach, Los Angeles, California,
1980

A number of the architects who had been living and working in Venice were photographed together on the beach in 1980. The photograph is a snapshot of the denizens of experimental architectural culture that thrived in LA in the 1970s and 1980s.

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