

Is the Big Orange actually rotting under its skin? Did Eden truly lose its garden, or was it always a sham? Are the promises of paradise indeed shadowed by the ubiquitous exigencies of reality? Notwithstanding apocalyptic predictions, foreseeing 'ecologies of evil' or 'ecologies' of fear, one wonders whether Los Angeles has not all too frequently been described as that which it is not. Bertold Brecht, describing his years in Los Angeles in the 1940s as 'exile in paradise', wrote the following poem on the city, entitled *On Thinking about Hell*.

*On Thinking about hell, I gather
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Brecht's metaphor of Los Angeles as hell seems to have been surpassed by the reality of events. The racial conflicts in 1965 as well as the LA Riots in 1992, during which various sectors of the urban fabric were destroyed, is evidence of an accumulated tension in a city at odds with itself. As is the case of numerous other contemporary cities, Los Angeles is undeniably confronted with matters of pragmatic concern: uncontrolled growth, environmental depletion, the pending collapse of its infrastructure and social institutions. The limited availability of water, for example, brought from as far away as Colorado, constitutes an ongoing reality for which no conclusive

1 solution has been found. The breakdown of one of the main sewage treatment plants in 1987, which led to a massive pollution of the Santa Monica Bay with human waste, was just another
2 circumstance delimiting the city's development. Near-to irresolvable problems persistently
3 undermine the conditions needed to sustain equilibrium. Impervious to such difficulties, however,
4 the city unwaveringly manages to maintain the myth of the American Dream, to which
5 perceptions of Los Angeles by and large succumb.

A-DIMENSIONALITY Metropolitan regions of the scale of Los Angeles cannot be addressed in terms of traditional understandings of urban design. Prevalent theories, often based on European models, are not adequate to explain the constitution of so-called mega-cities. In order to understand the forces at work in the formation of large agglomerations, other approaches need to be developed, new vocabularies and instruments devised. Not a city in a traditional sense, Los Angeles can be considered a metropolitan region formed by a compilation of urban and suburban structures monotonously covering vast surfaces of land, for which the term *sprawl* has been appropriated. Quantities rather than qualities tend to determine the character of the built environment. Multiplicities prevail. Confronted with exponential growth and with expansion at an ever increasing pace, Los Angeles has been exposed to the phenomenon of large numbers, accelerated congestion as a criteria of mass culture, and outsized magnitudes of all factors involved in the production of its territories. Paul Virilio observes in *L'espace critique* a loss of dimension associated with the contemporary metropolis in which the concept of the measurable is diffused. Los Angeles might
6 accordingly be portrayed as fundamentally a-dimensional, a lack of dimension further undermin-
7 ing customary readings of the city as a well-formed artefact. Initial

approximations for understanding the city suggest that the generative processes involved in the definition and transformation of the urban fabric need to be addressed. Specific procedural patterns have established themselves over time, without being specifically planned, including the mechanisms that have led to an urbanization of the city's surrounding landscape. Comprising social and economic parameters, these processes are complex, interlocking, and dynamic – their results being hardly predictable. Questions concerning architectural form are rarely at the core but rather the procedures contributing to the material making of the city region, inadvertently defining its structure and outward appearance. The architectural form of the urban tissue can only be read after the fact, as a resulting byproduct and side effect of certain actions. While raising the question of how territories are engendered, the following analysis suggests readings of the city in an attempt to trace operational forces at work in the formation of the contemporary urban terrain as found in Los Angeles. The approach searches for spatial practices, not those delineated by formal preferences but instead premised on interactive and varying means of adaptation. The city as a formation ensues from processes.

CASE STUDY: REAR ELEVATION The following case study of a rear elevation of a typical commercial building in Los Angeles exposes particular generative principles from which to extrapolate processes operating at the urban scale. From the structure of a micro-element, a reading of the city's macro-organism shall be enabled. Facing a parking lot, the building is a two-story structure subdivided in separate workshops and retail units. Its construction is a combination of a typical wood frame – for the interior partitions and the roof – with an external masonry load-bearing wall. The entire assembly is straightforward and cheaply built.



2 Windows and doors are protected by steel bars and gates. Other openings at ground level are bricked-up. The facade provides a backdrop against which various technical installations are mounted. Various components such as pipes, light fixtures, and security sensors are directly affixed to the wall, including water meters of the Department of Water and Power of which – although supplying all the tenants – four of the original seven meters have been removed. A disconnected drain pipe is in close proximity to exposed telephone wires connecting to the central switchbox of Pacific Bell Company. Water pipes, electrical distribution panels, and conduits are randomly placed next to or on top of one another. An air conditioning unit, secured by a sheet of plywood, has been added ad hoc within an existing window frame. A vent pipe is left disconnected, while another one slides through a gap in the wall connecting to a heating unit inside the building. The roof membrane, periodically repaired with layers of tar, barely covers the wall edge. In compliance with changing Building Code requirements, seismic reinforcing has been added offering additional structural support.

The analysis of this elevation allows several observations. The different elements are tied to specific needs, uncomplicatedly fulfilled through standard and sub-standard means. The various parts of the building's infrastructure are treated as independent systems, superimposed with little or no relationship to each other, leading to a precarious organization of intrinsically disjointed components. Yet, in its totality this type of assemblage forms a functioning entity, a multilayered through adaptable to change. Notwithstanding the size of the building, understood in this context as a probe, its traits, exposing principles by which the built environment is generated, can be extended to the scale of the city and its processes of production, suggesting *modi operandi*

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century, describes a method whereby latent forces are subliminally deployed in a direct and almost mechanical manner. Automatic writing operates within the realm of the subconscious made manifest in the reality of concrete experiences. Reyner Banham, in describing the flatland of Los Angeles as "a plain of Id," makes reference to a similar terminology borrowed from the field of psychology. The term *Id*, as used by Sigmund Freud to delineate the human psyche, is applied by Banham to identify the latent structure of urban developments. He writes: "The world's image of Los Angeles is of an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets... - in terms of some of the most basic and unlovely vital drives of the urban psychology of Los Angeles, the flat plains are indeed the heartlands of the city's Id." Transferred to understandings of the city, the term *Id* demarcates a generally accepted norm, anchored in the urban fabric, its suburban neighborhoods, and infrastructures. Determined by preset codes of conduct, an underlying sameness circumscribes the subconscious territory of the city culture. Within such a context, the processes of building, both at the level of individual construction and the urban scale, appear to be driven by a normative form of behavior - the production of the city as an automatic but nevertheless collective act.

CIRCUMSTANTIALITY Happenstance characterizes the structural organization of the city. An understanding of its development as a form of automatic writing suggests an acceptance of the circumstantial as a principle of urban formation. The relationship between constituent parts of the city is governed by their coincidental coexistence resulting into an *ad hoc* amalgamation of incompatible adjacencies. Freeway structures, electrical power lines, petrol stations, commercial buildings, and billboard signs are placed in close proximity to one another in disregard of their

respective differences. Ethnic and cultural diversities additionally accentuate the disparity of expressions. Coherence, as traditionally given by a unified formal order, is replaced by the chance meeting of disparate elements. When irregularities are substituted for regularities, other forms of order are implied. In whatever manner one wishes to evaluate this type of arrangement, it draws attention to the effacement of order as a compositional device in the making of the city. The manifestation of an architectural cacophony, directed by what appears to be random planning, might be an expression of an organization in which discontinuity is accepted as a principle of urbanity, admitting to a reading of the city as a heterotopic formation. Based upon the exploitation of differences, cohesion is achieved through the adjacency of parts stemming from fundamentally different origins. Given by the simultaneous superimposition of levels of reality, the urban tissue emerges as a force field in which different kinds of impulses make their way.

As concurrent phenomena, the homogeneity of the ordinary and the heterogeneity of discontinuous assemblages provoke a contradictory reading of Los Angeles. It is within such a paradoxical condition of a monotone-chaotic system that a particular trait of the urban condition unfolds. Jean Baudrillard makes reference in *America* to the coexistence of irreconcilable circumstances as a constituent element of contemporary culture. The inevitable erasure of identity as well as the stark contrast of extremes - given by their simultaneity and merged together into an indistinguishable mass - offer the impression of constancy, according to Baudrillard, in analogy to the strange unity of dream sequences. "You must accept everything at once," he writes, "... the violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of *simulacra* and images here is such that,



as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another; even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum."

AN-AESTHETIC Although governed by functional and technical considerations, guided by the directness of operational procedures, a type of haphazard constellation emerges, a form of *bricolage*, supported by whatever means are at hand. Such an approach has repeatedly been considered offensive to the eye and connoted with ugliness. The lack of reference to commonly accepted perceptual values might suggest other propositions pertaining to the visual domain, in which impurities are accepted as part of the vocabulary of form. What appears to be shapelessness is integrated into a sensibility, for which Theodor Adorno used the expression the "aesthetics of the ugly". To elevate, however, the category of ugliness into a revised and expanded definition of aesthetics might not do justice to understandings of the contemporary city, for it is rather the absence of aesthetic considerations that seems to dominate its conditions of production.

The term *an-aesthetic* might be applied to describe a zero degree of architectural form, devoid of a *priori* compositional intention. Design in its traditional understanding as a form making process loses its significance. Formal appearances are not specifically constructed according to a canonical set of rules of beautiful form but emerge *de facto* from production as what they are. The city operates by-and-large without architects, for the territory's formation seems to be programmed by what Virilio called an *aesthetics of disappearance*.

In this context, one must ask what contribution architecture might bring to the mix, for its presence is barely noticed within the anonymity of the urban conglomerate. Two ill-fated

tendencies have reframed the discipline within the confines of economic procedures promoting architecture's commodification. The first tendency is marked by a withdrawal of architecture to the security of the enclosed environment, to the "vast spaces of enclosure," to borrow a terminology introduced by Michel Foucault and further elaborated by Gilles Deleuze to describe societies of control. The second tendency, privileging the image, turns architecture into a fetishized item, suggesting, as Gianni Vattimo asserts, that the *simultaneity of occurrences* delineating contemporary reality unavoidably involves forms of its representation as *simulacrum*. Vattimo writes: "That which becomes simultaneous also becomes simulacral, in the sense that it concerns appearances that cannot be referred back to a basic rationality."

LOSS OF PUBLIC SPACE Intrinsicly imbedded within the city's generative production mechanisms, preferences for the circumstantially ordinary, in all its ugliness, contribute to a bleak manifestation of the built environment. Such a development, combined with seemingly irresolvable ethnic conflicts, problems of waste removal, and air pollution, promotes an abrasive reality, one necessitating particular collective practices. Sigfried Giedion identified Los Angeles as early as 1951 "as one of the worst urban catastrophes of our time". This statement, marked by traditional European understandings of what civic life might be, points to the difficulty in assessing the conditions of emerging agglomerations. The situation has since acutely evolved. The city has grown into a decentralized region, intersected by freeway networks guarantying the mobility of its inhabitants. Within such a system, collective life – as traditionally demarcated by public space – can hardly be sustained. Los Angeles has evolved into a city without place, for which Gertrud Stein's expression *there is no there there* might suitably be applied. Confronted with



a space unable to find its place in the distinction between the public and private domains, alternatives are developed. Hermetically sealed places are created in which the notion of collectivity can artificially be maintained. An *Ersatz*-Culture is manufactured, simulating urban experiences and the qualities of a civic realm – be it at the airport, in the glazed atria of large hotels, in the lobbies of office buildings, in the shopping malls, and theme parks. One recognizes a new typology of buildings, strategically inserted within the city, in proximity to freeway arteries, yet, disclosing little concern for their immediate surroundings. As these centers are rarely connected to public transportation systems, one must rely on the car to partake in the ritual of an urban experience, unmistakably created within the precincts of an established order.

The privatization of the public domain points to a change in power structure involved in the making of the city. Urban places, customarily supported by the public sector, are now funded by private enterprises, subjugating the production of the city to their specific interests. This transformation is governed by economic, profit-driven mechanisms. Considering the seeming difficulty of sustaining a normal exchange of goods and services within the existing fabric, new contexts are created in which commerce and civic life can coexist, albeit only for those financially privileged. Charles Moore recognized as early as 1965, in an essay entitled *You Have to Pay for Public Life*, a tendency toward the creation of artificial urbanity in isolated centers, which he considered the new monuments of the city. These centers counterbalance the bleak and supposedly unsafe reality of the real city through the creation of other realities, presented as always joyful, festive, and extraordinary, realities for which the dream factories of the Hollywood Industry have given ample evidence of their commercial success.



2 Another poem by Bertolt Brecht, entitled *Hollywood Elegies*, specifically addresses the creation of counterfeit realities to which he had been exposed as a writer in Los Angeles.

The village of Hollywood was planned according to the notion

People in these parts have of heaven. In these parts

They have come to the conclusion that God

Requiring a heaven and a hell, didn't need to

Plan two establishments but

Just the one: heaven. It

Serves the unprosperous, unsuccessful

As hell.

20 **CASE STUDY: CITYWALK** The belief in the exclusive priority of one *establishment*, to borrow Brecht's expression, is at the core of a recent expansion of Universal City, one of the main entertainment centers of the film, video, and music industry. The CityWalk project is conceived as an urban network connecting existing structures belonging to the heterogeneous and fragmented context of Universal City. It forms the link between several parking garages, an amphitheater with 6,000 seats, a Cineplex with 18 theaters, and the Universal Studio Tours, visited by roughly seven million people annually.

4 A profit-driven real estate venture, the project adheres to unambiguous capital investment



strategies. Land-use criteria were accordingly defined. Founded on a premeditated fusion of commerce and leisure, a recreational attraction was to be realized, encompassing shopping and entertainment facilities. The entire complex was to be consolidated into a unifying theme park, a concept fully embraced by the architects under the direction of Jon Jerde and Richard Orne. Proof of their experience with ventures of this kind are a series of successful shopping malls and entertainment centers in Los Angeles as well as other American, European, and Asian cities. Their project for Disney outside of Paris is of significance, in that it anticipates the basic ideas later developed in CityWalk – both in terms of the scheme's circular geometry and the identification of an overriding theme for the design.

The central theme is that of the city. Keeping true to the concept of the theme park, for which Disneyland provides the model, the architecture of CityWalk is directed toward one specific aim, that of staging the city as theme. Urbanity – or better, its pictorial representation – is put forth as the motif of the project. As the name indicates, a city walk is re-created with streets and squares for pedestrians leading from the parking garages to the various destinations. Although built as a seamless entity, the street facades appear as a row of individual buildings. The discrepancy between internal structure and outer appearance constitutes one of the primary operational devices of such projects, a clear-cut line drawn between what can be seen and that which is concealed.

Striving to render a distinct sense of urbanity, the presented image, according to the architects, is to specifically depict Los Angeles. The design was accordingly based on an analysis of the city's street vernacular. Facades of typical storefronts, generally based on a superimposition of different

2 layers, were studied and their formal principles incorporated into the architecture of CityWalk. The project's street elevations are framed by a continuous layer within which free-floating billboard panels, lighting installations, and signs are integrated. Using specific iconographic elements, whether copied from existing buildings or recreated to recall Los Angeles' beach and leisure culture, associative connections are established. "Packed into CityWalk is a bit of Malibu, a touch of Westwood, a stretch of Melrose Avenue, a splash of Venice Beach." Operating on a type of emulation of found images and principles, CityWalk mimics the city. Within this framework, tenants are encouraged to make their own interventions, adding signs, paint, or other elements as they wish. Change and diversity, considered important to any type of urban evolution, are artificially promoted, yet within a programmatically accelerated time frame. Visual consistency is not an aim. Pursued instead is whatever amalgamation of bits and pieces that can contribute to a pulsating depiction of city life. Los Angeles' messy and cluttered urban conditions, however, are purely of pictorial interest, that is, in terms of a display of sanitized signs and symbols. Only a selective, edited understanding of the city is portrayed, that of an undisturbed image, homogenized and controlled. Visitors are not intended to identify with the real city but rather with a carefully created fiction, that of Los Angeles as the theme-park version of itself.

5 To the theme of the city, an additional one is added, that of film. Located in the midst of the Hollywood Studios, specialized in the making of illusion, the project appropriates the mechanisms of the film industry and its modes of production. With CityWalk, the step is taken from the movie screen to architecture. Techniques of filmmaking were accordingly applied to the process of design. Streets were conceived as film sequences, created by means of serially coupled still frames



and computer animations. The abrupt change of components in the facades' formal expression corresponds to the technique of montage, leading to scale juxtapositions and distortions. Buildings are made to appear purposefully larger than they are. At night, with the additional support of visual and audible effects, a virtual space is suggested, in which visitors become actors within a simulated urban scene.

As newly evolving prototypes, centers such as CityWalk disclose particular spatial practices, both in terms of how space is used and produced. These practices envelope architecture within a network of specific techniques, designed to promote and maintain the operational mechanisms of an economic system at work. Two seemingly contradictory techniques can be distinguished, namely techniques of surveillance and techniques of seduction.

SURVEILLANCE Surveillance aims at a seclusion of architecture from its physical and cultural contexts. As is the case for CityWalk, projects of this kind are often located within desolate neighborhoods. The greater the discrepancies, the more extensive the effort to establish a separation between these centers and their immediate surroundings. Importance is attributed to the aspect of security. Electronic systems are installed as a preventive measure, often demonstratively revealed to deter real or fictitious assailants. Architectonic means and spatial organization similarly pertain to security demands. Blank walls and fences enclose the premises with only a few strategically located entrances permitting access. These projects are bastions of safekeeping, not only offering external but most notably internal protection. A substantial investment of technical means and personnel guarantee social control reinforcing behavior according to expected norms. Not surprisingly has Los Angeles been described as a fortress,

representative of contemporary tactics of confinement. "The American city," according to Mike Davis, "is being systematically turned inside out - or, rather, outside in." More than simply promoting a spatial separation, architecture's introversion, according to Davis, results in a model of surveillance: "The valorized spaces of the new megastructures and super-malls are concentrated in the center, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalized in corridors under the gaze of private police." As Foucault's elaboration on the relation between space and power uncover, Bentham's dream of transforming the Panopticon "into a network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption," seems to have been fulfilled. Struggling to grasp what needs to be protected, architecture attends to the alleged necessity to advance the cause of capital investment. Far from being outwardly oppressive, architecture accomplishes its task by appearing subtly open and transparent, cheerful and seductive, promoting all the more the exercise of control "by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective."

SEDUCTION Seduction relies on simulation, which in turn dictates perception. Through the production of images, substituting the counterfeit for the authentic, a particular depiction of reality is upheld, founded on potentially false assumptions. This mutually dependent relation between the real and the false was recognized by Erich Maria Remarque as one of the characteristics of Los Angeles' culture in his novel *Shadows in Paradise*. "Real and false are fused here so perfectly," he writes, "that they become a new substance, just as copper and zinc become brass that looks like gold." With gold having the power to seduce, a different kind of reality is created, one in which fiction is sold as truth. Hollywood, apparently, has always been professional



in the construction of make-believe appearances. Within the domain of buildings, ordinariness is counteracted by applied layers of formal vocabularies attempting to attract attention away from the mundane while reinforcing a realm of simulated existences. Architecture is reduced to thin layers of veneer applied onto conventional structures in an attempt to provide noteworthy expression – a type of cover-up of the banal. While made of a most ordinary type of *papier maché* construction, applied imagery always pertains to the extraordinary. The widespread use of stucco as a building material attests to the fact that “it can do anything, mimic anything, parody anything”. Operating with scenographic accuracy, the overlay of icons and signs often addresses the realm of the imaginary, irrational, and fantastic, in order to transcend reality. A “hyperreality,” as maintained by Umberto Eco, is fabricated, where “absolute unreality is offered as real presence”. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard asserts the authenticity of the false, in the form of simulation, as a condition of contemporary culture. “It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality,” he writes, “but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.” Notwithstanding the seductiveness of such a proposition, the erasure of distinctions between the true and the false is ultimately put to work as a technique for the accretion of capital means. Architecture’s sign value, with its potential to seduce, offers within the context of economic performance, a surplus value, animating the never-ending cycle of consumption for consumption’s sake.

A-GEOGRAPHIC The worldwide proliferation of enclosed shopping and entertainment centers has ostensibly affected the development of architecture and urban design in the sense that they have increasingly become a-geographic. With physical separation comes a cultural separation. A

segregation can be observed between the specific characteristics of a local culture, kept outside the premises, and the all-encompassing values of consumer society, promoted within the premises.

In accordance with the strategies of a global economic system, an architecture is promoted that can easily be reproduced – anywhere at anytime. The reproducibility of architecture is facilitated in that it no longer necessitates compliance with local conditions. Architecture evolves as fundamentally neutralized *vis-à-vis* both its physical and cultural contexts.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, while exiled in Los Angeles, recognized as early as the 1940s the undeniable influence of modern media on society as a whole, in their essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”.

Exposed to pulp fiction, glossy magazine, and the trashy products of the film and music industries, they noted the impact of mass production on societal structures as a global phenomenon. “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry,” they write. As clichés and the predominance of effects “impress the same stamp on everything,” cultural identity is marked by the uniform repetition of stereotyped values, to be everywhere reproduced and subsequently consumed – consumed with alertness, while in a state of distraction. Escape from daily routine is offered through the creation of surrogate realities, proclaiming a happy existence as formula repeated. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the more sophisticated and flawless the reproduction techniques, “the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen”.

Architecture, in this context, corresponds to the products of mass culture and equally adheres to its principle of uniformity. Wherever these centers of leisure and entertainment are proposed, the same models are followed. Thematically structured, architecture bows to the effect and offers a

form of escape. It is the means to achieve the effect. Globally reproduced, it conforms to the standardization upheld by media corporations that supply the world with information. Architecture, in analogy to MTV or CNN, has become a consumable entity. Following the ideals of a consumption-oriented economy, it contributes to the colonization of the world with pre-packaged culture. Architecture conspires. "It enjoys a double victory: the truth it extinguishes without, it can reproduce as a lie within."

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10 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture Of Four Ecologies*, London, 1971, p161.

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