“Oh, it will become bigger and bigger and extend itself north and south. And soon Los Angeles will begin in San Diego, swallow San Francisco and pave every acre of earth up to the Gold River. The only historic monuments spared will be the rest rooms in the gasoline stations.”

Attributed to Frank Lloyd Wright, late 1950s
Los Angeles is a city apart, not only in location, but in ideals and pursuits. This city, little understood, has been, and is, the model from which we currently fabricate our metropolitan areas; an experiment in urban and social planning unlike any previously known to humanity. To some these grand experiments have failed, miserably; to others, not only have these experiments been a success, but they have also forged the future in ways simply unthinkable a generation ago.

Misconceptions, many created by Angelenos, have set Los Angeles apart negatively and positively. To understand this place, a historic perspective of its creation must be acquired. Myths and generalizations promote unrealistic ideas of this city.

We must form our interpretations and truths about this habitation, as Los Angeles did not happen by accident. This city is purely the creation of people, nothing more and nothing less.

Significant contributions made by the people of Los Angeles are manifest within the realm of the house. Our understanding of the house today is the direct result of the work of scores of architects, designers, and planners who have worked in the Los Angeles region. Their efforts span over 100 years, continuing today, shaping the future of how we live in our most private environments.

Not working in a vacuum, they were influenced not only by the various movements occurring in their respective fields, but by the immigrants who chose to make this corner of the world their home.

Discovery

Despite popular mythology, Los Angeles does have a past; in fact, its history spans several thousand years. Because it is perceived as a city of constant change, the city has gained a reputation of being arrogant, elusive, eccentric and superficial.

It is told that the Chinese were the first to discover the western coast of North American in about 500 AD. Not being a people of territorial wants, they simply made note of their discoveries in journals, and never touched land. They left the true discovery of the coast to the Spanish in the early 16th century.

Spaniards discovered and named the California coast. The name “California” was derived from a popular Spanish novel of 1510, in which a terrestrial paradise is described...

“Know ye that at the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very near the terrestrial Paradise...It is the gold, and territorial conquest were the motivations of the Spanish. Instead the Spanish discovered the coast of California. It was Juan Cabrillo, who in late 1542, became the first European to meet the native people of the Los Angeles Basin, the Gabrielino.

The Spanish were not interested in conquering the Gabrielinos. They were more concerned with their religious conversion, which they felt would aid in the process of civilizing them. Once civilized, these indigenous people would make perfect colonists. The Spaniards set up a system of missions, presidio, and pueblos along the California coastal areas. This system stretched south from the San Diego Bay to Point Reyes in the north. From the beginning the missions were established to teach the natives self-sufficient techniques, such as farming, weaving, reading and writing. It was the Franciscan Padres’ original intent to return the missions and the land surrounding them to the natives once they were civilized.

It was the missions and the myths fostered by their existence that has left us today with the ideal of an Arcadian lifestyle in Southern California. Nothing, however, could be farther from the truth.

Human greed soon took over, and the missions were never returned.

The Town

Los Angeles was established in 1781 and named el Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles (The Village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels.) It was primarily established to provide supplemental hides, wine and tallow for the main mission San Gabriel to the East. They established the pueblo on a high point above the Los Angeles River to avoid flooding. The original pueblo plan was established using the Spanish Law of the Indies as a reference. The Law required the plan to have a central plaza. This plaza had its corners fixed by the cardinal points of the compass. The surrounding area was divided into building lots, sowing fields, with the remaining property being set aside for newcomers and common use.

Because of the region’s weather, ample water and fertile soils, the pueblo grew beyond Spanish expectations, becoming the largest settlement in California by 1820.
An early view of the Pueblo, the plaza is at the center with the church at the left.

The Promise

Los Angeles, the town, however, had certain logistical problems that severely limited the possibility of the area ever realizing its economic promise. There was no natural deep water port, available water was limited at best, flooding was a continuous problem, there was little timber for building, and, most importantly, the area was isolated by natural features unlike any other American city.

To the north, the Los Angeles basin is bounded by east/west traversing mountains, and between these rows of up to 10,000 foot peaks are expansive valleys. To the east is the southern end of the Sierra Nevada mountains and beyond them the great deserts of the Southwest. To the west is the Pacific, and to the south, Mexico.

Transportation to and from Los Angeles was difficult before the connection of a mainline railroad from the eastern United States. At best, a ship to San Francisco could be had every third day, a ship around South America every third week, or a stage coach daily to San Francisco, and then east.

A battle lasting ten years between San Diego and Los Angeles occurred over which of the two towns would be connected to the Central Pacific's mainline railroad to San Francisco. The battle ended with the formation of a new railroad company, The Southern Pacific, a subsidiary (and thus a friend) of the Central Pacific. Los Angeles won through a series of land concessions and the inclusion of an existing rail line from the central city to the port at San Pedro. As a result, the Southern Pacific had a monopoly on intrastate transportation. Intra-city transport, on the other hand, grew easily and quickly. The structural framework for subsequent transportation systems in Los Angeles was thus established. These systems furthered the building pattern of the metropolitan area. They also provided greater accessibility for immigrants, and for shipments of the city's commodities to other parts of the country.

In 1884, a second rail system entered the city. The arrival of the first competitive railroad, the Antichion Topeka and Santa Fe, incited the greatest of all the early land booms to affect Los Angeles.

The boosters of Los Angeles realized that the only way to increase the economic activity of the area was to increase the population. Greater population meant higher production levels of goods, which in turn meant higher land assessment values that meant higher tax revenues.

The boosters of the area included the Southern California Immigration Association, which was supported by prominent property owners and consistently advertised the area, saying:

"No happier paradise for the farmer can be found than Los Angeles County, its unexcelled soil assures prosperity to the industri-
Housing...the Hillside Los Angeles
nearly everyone was attempting to get rid of
crease by 280% on average. The bottom
estate transfers and property values in-
ranchos were further subdivided and
many as half of them stayed. Land and
Pacific3 in the ensuing months, and that as
made that journey on just the Southern
summer that price was dropped to just $1.
(1884 dollars) each way. By the end of the
fare from St. Louis to Los Angeles by 1890. At the time of the war, the
five-fold increase in population of Los
area and was directly responsible for
war. This, in turn, brought more people to

The Pacific Electric
Henry Huntington came to California in the
late 1890s. Wanting, but not getting, a
controlling interest in the Union Pacific
Railroad from his uncle, he set forth to
create a system of his own that would rival
all other rail systems in the United States.
The year 1885 saw the birth of the electric
intra-urban (a rail system within a city’s
boundary) railroad in Los Angeles. By 1895,
there were several independent systems in
the basin.
Huntington saw a great advantage in linking
the existing rail networks. He single-
headedly set forth to create a network of rail
links to the center of the metropolis by
consolidating existing lines. To establish his
empire he used a method that was simple
and quite direct. The company he formed,
The Pacific Electric Railway, would buy a
large tract of land in some outlying locale.
Then, the company would connect the area
to a mainline of the rail system, subdivide
the land into lots for housing, and sell the
property to the newcomers. These newcom-
ers, to emphasize a point, were brought to
the land sales offices by rail.
The electric railroad was never a profitable
venture in the United States, and Hunting-
ton realized this. Land, its subdivision and
resale, was the main business force allowing
Huntington to build a vast personal
fortune and transportation network. This
network became the fundamental frame-
work that Los Angeles’s infrastructure and
settlements have followed to this day.
By the time Huntington sold his railroad to
the Southern Pacific in 1911, over 1,164
miles of railroad were in place. The network
stretched North from the San Fernando
Valley to Balboa Island in the South, West
from Santa Monica to San Bernardino in the
East, running 2,700 trains daily.

San Pedro
A true deep-water port was also essential
for the establishment of a major economic
center in the Southern California area. San
Diego had a natural deep water anchorage.
Los Angeles did not.
Phinneas Banning, an early railroad promoter in the area, seized the idea of establishing the port of call that the city needed. His purchase of the San Pedro/Wilmington rancho lands in the mid-1860s was the beginning of this journey. Quickly, he built a railroad link to the city center. Throughout the next 25 years he laid the foundation that established this free harbor at San Pedro as the largest in the world.

Water

To support a population of manufacturers, professionals and farmers that the boosters intended to attract, the town needed water. The basin had only enough naturally occurring water to supply a population 100,000. Water had traditionally been supplied by a system set up by the Mexicans. A system of zanjas (canals) channeled water from the Los Angeles River throughout the pueblo.

However, as the town grew and its water resources became limited, the privately owned water providers became increasingly difficult for the municipality to manage. Shortages were commonplace, and prices were unregulated; therefore, where one lived determined the price paid and the regularity of water service. The system reached its limits by 1910. Water service was placed under municipal ownership, and the city hired William Mulholland, a civil engineer, to devise a plan that would bring much needed water into the city. His plan was adopted as the California Aqueduct. This aqueduct, a 236 mile canal, brings water into the San Fernando Valley just north of the downtown area; it was completed in 1913. This aqueduct, the largest engineering effort to date of its kind in the country, was later joined up with an aqueduct siphoning water from the Colorado River. By 1925 the flow of imported water into Los Angeles had increased by 1,500%. These projects were not without costs to the environment. The Owens Lake, and River Valley, were obliterated and removed from the face of the planet as a result of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

The Early House

With transport, a port and water, Los Angeles quickly became a city—a mega metropolis. The population doubled, each ten years until the 1930s. The demand on the housing market was stretched as more people migrated to the city. Typically, an early house of Los Angeles was a derivative of the mission buildings themselves. The missions, built of mud brick (adobe), were fashioned by the memory of the padres and military engineers who had only seen the great churches of Spain. There is no record of any great or famous architect or church builders settling in the area during Spanish occupation. With an abundant labor force supplied by the native peoples and the limited availability of lumber, masonry construction of this type was seen as appropriate. This construction of one-story sprawling adobe dwellings were built in rows. Each row fronted a street and had an individual back yard or corral. This courtyard, used for cooking, raising small livestock and for family gatherings, was the living room of the house. The roof structures, using the limited lumber available, were typically flat. Wood beams were covered with tule, a grass, and then with asphaltum taken from the La Brea Tar pits west of the plaza, to keep out rain.

This type of house construction remained little changed until the American occupation. The Easterners who first established residency in the area came from places where brick was the material of choice. The early American buildings of Los Angeles, such as the Pico Union Hotel, were built of brick. For the most part, the idea of the house remained constant during the early years of the city, relying on the existing language of what had become domestic Mexican architecture.

The early American immigrants, not satisfied with the existing housing stock, rethought the typical adobe dwelling and made some innovative changes. The idea originated in Monterey California in the mid-1830s when an American settler added a second floor with a verandah, or balcony, extending the full length of the street facade. This became known as the “Monterey Style,” and was prevalent in the Los Angeles area by the early 1860s.

The housing demands, though, were not for typical dwellings as seen in the countryside of Iowa or Kansas. The immigrants were not attracted to the typical dwellings of the Mexican period, as they were poorly built, subject to severe damage from earthquakes and were extremely dirty. These newcomers were much more interested in a kind of dwelling that would reflect their desires and attitudes and reasons why they had come to this place to live.

The first land booms of the 1870s and 1880s ushered in the popular styles prevalent on the East Coast, the Victorian and Queen Anne, or Eastlake, house. The buildings reflect the changes in attitude toward technology occurring at the time. The machine was now capable of producing vast quantities of patterns and designs from wood. The architects of the period, fascinated with these possibilities, developed sometimes odd and unusual arrangements in their building, using these newly invented devices. Collision of form coupled with highly decorative detail seemed the order of the day.

Still, there was a feeling that this language was not an indigenous one to the area. It was not a response to the desires of the new inhabitants; they, after all, sought to differentiate themselves from their roots and to establish this region with its identity, in spirit, life-style and architectural form.

Land of Sunshine

Charles Flecther Lummis, founder of the periodical “Land of Sunshine,” and editor of the “Los Angeles Times” newspaper, studied...
the architecture of the Missions, spent two years living with the pueblo Indians in New Mexico, and burst onto the Los Angeles scene in the early 1890s.

Lummis, through his publication, the efforts of the Landmarks Club and the building of his own home in 1898, established the Mission Revival architectural tradition. This new language, Lummis argued, was most appropriate for the area:

"Los Angeles must learn from adobe architecture: thick insulating walls for comfort, a protected patio for privacy, and a verandah at the front for picturesqueness."

Greene and Greene

As a result of technological changes, the increased awareness of environment (as related to one’s health) and the explosive effects on society by the industrial revolution, the idea of home began to radically change. Nowhere was this phenomenon more apparent than in Southern California. Charles and Henry Greene, the first architects to break from traditional modes of design, arrived in Los Angeles in the mid-1890s. Their Bandini House of 1903 opened the entire building up to a central courtyard that contained a garden and fountain. All rooms were either entered en suite, or through a verandah. In effect, this house encouraged what had not been done previously: the complete interaction and focus of the inhabitants was from inside the house to outside.

The Greenes developed their architectural ideas by designing many average-sized single family dwellings in the Pasadena area of northeast Los Angeles. Considered by many critics as their most significant contribution, thus redefining how Americans dwell, were a series of grand winter retreats, mansions, for wealthy clients along the Arroyo Seco. Their greatest achievement is the Gamble House of 1908, built for the Gamble family of Proctor and Gamble fame.

The Gamble House is indeed a quintessential architectural masterpiece. It has been lauded and praised as a truly significant American artifact. It is in the detailing that this house is remarkable. As a somewhat simple winter vacation home; it has a penchant for the abstract and an elegant use of wood as both decorative and structural material. Every structural member, decorative detail and light-emanating device has been considered laboriously. No corner of this dwelling was overlooked or given less importance. An attitude about how one should live breathes throughout this great American home. As a work of architecture this building has left us a legacy of such delight and beauty that it is assured a presence in our collective psyche for an eternity.

The establishment of the architectural language of Greene and Greene is a direct response to the desired life-style of the Los Angeles region. It was they who saw the future of the automobile and they were first to incorporate it into their house designs. Of greater importance perhaps is that the Greenes understood the desire and need for a regional architectural expression, while at the same time they preserved and promoted the existing artistic traditions.

The extensive work of Greene and Greene influenced house design not only in Los Angeles, but the entire country. Soon after their masterworks were completed, publica-
The Bungalow Ethic

The most significant consequence of the bungalow’s popularity as a dwelling type on Los Angeles domestic architecture is that it firmly established the idea of outdoor living in the population at large. This idea provided the immigrants with the needed identification with an indigenous architecture as well as the lifestyle that they had been in search of.

The bungalow was not, by any means, a panacea. As the building type developed first in India, and later was transported to England, it was typically seen and understood as a temporary dwelling. As a matter of course, the masterpieces of Greene and Greene, Heineman and the “Representative California Home” of E.W. Stillwell & Co. were spacious and well built. However, once the fashion engulfed the American mainstream it was significantly watered down. As evidenced in the work of Frederick T. Hodgson:

“...described the Californian bungalow as ‘the best type of cheap frame house which had been erected in this country since the old New England farmhouse went out of fashion’...these could be constructed for between 700 and 1,100 dollars compared to over double the price for two-story houses. Plan prices were a mere five dollars. In the mild dry climate of California, where much of life was lived outdoors, the construction could be relatively flimsy and substantial foundations and cellars ignored.”

True, many great Craftsman style dwellings were constructed all over the country; however, the typical bungalow dwelling was, as time elapsed, a less than desirable commodity. Many portions of Los Angeles, as well as other American cities, were covered with the cheaper versions of these houses. They were often built as speculative developments in subdivisions outside the central city. As they were generally built as speculative housing, construction costs significantly determined the characteristics of the building. It is not to say that the houses were, as a group, poorly built. Typically they were not. However, as a group, they were seldom regionally identified. Since the idea quickly found its way into mainstream culture through pattern books, the houses of Los Angeles were being built in Minneapolis, Washington, D.C. and Tampa. Seldom were the environmental characteristics, such an integral part of the California designs, considered in these varying locals. What happened was that a house that would be very comfortable as a winter retreat in Southern California ended up being built as a permanent home in South Dakota. Other complaints about the bungalow abound. However, the most recognized remains the size of their kitchens. Although the house type was lauded for its “mechanistic kitchen,” they were usually extremely small. Typically, the bungalow was a temporary dwelling; as such, little space was provided for the kitchen as it was not deemed necessary. Constructing a smaller kitchen, like using redwood siding, at the time was significantly cheaper.

The bungalow was, however, loved. It did leave Los Angeles with an identity. For the suburban dweller, the bungalow not only became the ideal home, it also represented an ideal lifestyle. One impression given in 1914 by a writer named Mary Austin for “California. The Land of the Sun” signifies the era:

“In this group of low hills and shallow valleys between the Sierra Madre and the sea, the most conspicuous human achievement has been a new form of domestic architecture.

This is the thing that strikes the attention of the traveler; not the orchards and the gardens which are not appreciably different in kind from those of the Riviera and some favoured parts of Italy, but the homes, the number of them, their extraordinary adaptability to purposes of gracious living. The Angelenos call them bungalows, in respect to the type from which the latter form developed but they deserve a name as distinctive as they have in character become. These little, thin-walled dwellings, all of desert-tinted native woods and stones, are as indigenous to the soil as if they had grown up out of it, as charming in line and the perfection of utility as some of those wild growths which show a delicate airy fluorescence above ground, but under it have deep, man-shaped resistant roots. With their low and flat-pitched roofs, they present a certain likeness to aboriginal dwellings which the Franciscans found scattered like wasps nests among the chaparral along the river—which is only another way of saying that the spirit of the land shapes the art that is produced there.”

California Modern

Contemporary with the passing of the bungalow ethic in the city was the emergence of a group of architects who, through various routes, had been trained in the languages of the early modern movements. Among these were Irving Gill, Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Although Wright is the exception, for the most part these designers established the rules of the game, built most of their work in Los Angeles and lived in the city for most of their professional careers. They provided not only the region, but the entire world, with invaluable lessons. They increased our understanding and realization of living a designed life, with architecture as the focal point.
Gill worked in the Sullivan and Adler office at the same time as Wright. Gill, intrigued by the San Diego area, moved there early in the century. It was in San Diego that Gill developed the tilt-slab method of concrete construction and applied it to his domestic architecture. He used the form language established by the Missions, but abstracted and simplified it using concrete as a primary material. He believed that, “if the architects’ will is to do great and lasting work they must dare to be simple, must have the courage to fling aside every device that distracts the eye from structural beauty, must break through convention and get down to fundamental truths... Any deviation from simplicity results in a loss of dignity.”

Gill set up a practice in Los Angeles in 1915. His commissions included a vast number of houses, including the ill-fated Dodge House in West Hollywood of 1916, sadly torn down in the early 1970s. The Dodge House is considered by many as the complete expression of Gill’s genius. Another structure, the Horatio West Court Apartments, 1919 in Santa Monica is based on the idea of a bungalow court. These apartments were designed as four white stucco blocks. Each block had an open balcony used as a sleeping porch on the second floor. The entrance to the dwelling was placed under the sleeping porch beyond an arched opening in the wall. All the entrances were accessed from the central courtyard.

Sadly, Gill’s art and craft have for the most part been overlooked as simply a regional expression of a certain time. Significantly, his efforts have enhanced the often unattainable ideals of the Greenes, as the masses simply could not afford to have their work. With a similar penchant for detail, but with a simpler repertoire of material, Gill was able to create living environments equal to those of the Greenes. Furthermore, Gill’s work aided in the effort to epitomize the Southern California experience.

Rudolph Schindler, trained under Otto Wagner in Vienna, emigrated to the United States just before the beginning of World War I and worked in Chicago for three years. In Europe he was exposed to the Wasmuth Portfolio produced by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1910, he made it his priority to work for Wright, which he did, starting in 1918. Wright brought Schindler to Los Angeles in 1920 to supervise the construction of Aline Barnsdall’s Hollyhock House on Olive Hill. Schindler had traveled to the Southwest earlier and was exposed to the indigenous adobe architecture of that area. He designed a project for an adobe house in Taos that would lay the foundation for his later work in the Los Angeles area.

The influence of Wright’s work on Schindler cannot be underestimated. Schindler quickly identified what qualities and attitudes were imperative to the establishment of a truly Californian or Angeleana architectural tradition.

His contribution of over 450 buildings in the Los Angeles area, of which the vast majority were residential, has influenced not only the American modern architectural movement, but also the basic premises by which later houses have been considered in this country. His earliest Los Angeles work, his own home and studio where he lived until his death in 1953, embody many of his architectural premises.

Richard Neutra established the acceptance of Modern Architecture in Los Angeles. His practice in Los Angeles that spanned some 43 years, produced hundreds of homes and many schools and commercial buildings. Neutra is little known, however, for his understanding of the human condition. During his time, he was considered an authority on the fields of human physiology, and sociology. In 1954, he published one of many books, Survival Through Design. This book established Neutra as an authority on sustainable design, and the effects of such design on the health and well being of the users of buildings designed within his guidelines. He was, however, a designer and architect first. He applied his knowledge mostly to his architectural works but certainly also to his writings. His effort was to create human dwellings that enabled the spirit, cleansed the soul and healed the mind.

Frank Lloyd Wright was convinced that Los Angeles was a location for him to develop his prototypical house. His first built commission in the city, Hollyhock House, 1914-1923, has proved to be a significant, transitional piece between his Prairie Houses of the 1890s-1910s and his Usonian Houses of the 1930s-1940s. Hollyhock House is mostly praised for its site planning. This house, like the Lovell Beach House by Schindler, competently and beautifully integrates the inside with the outside, using the garden as an architectural mediator, again setting a precedent and a response to the desires of the inhabitants of Los Angeles.

Wright, in further developing a response to the environment of Los Angeles, built several urban homes using his textile block construction method. The first, La Miniatura, 1923, in Pasadena, is considered the most poetic of all the homes. Here Wright incorporated the flow of a natural spring, damming it to form a pond in front of the house. Water had become an integral part of Wright’s houses with the rebuilding of his home in Spring Green, Wisconsin after the fire of 1914, and he used it as a material in La Miniatura with equal effectiveness. Additionally, Wright built three other houses, Storer, 1923, Freeman, 1924 and Innis, 1924, all in the Hollywood Hills.

Each furthured Wright’s ideals of building—landscape integration, the architectural significance of roadways and the power of the outdoor room.

Consequence

All was not well with the City of Los Angeles. While these many significant architectural efforts were being realized, the business interests of the city recognized that within the domain of commerce, problems were surfacing. During the 1920s and 1930s Los Angeles had prospered chiefly on tourism, real estate and agriculture. The business leaders of the metropolis realized, at about this time, that a city is not built upon tourism, real estate speculation or agriculture alone. It was also realized by these individuals that a city such as Los Angeles could not attract the large manufacturing interests away from the Midwest and East. These regions had already in place the infrastructure to support their industries; Los Angeles did not.

The key to attracting large industry lay in the costs associated with doing business. The greatest cost, labor, was the key to persuading hundreds of manufacturers to set up shop in the area. The pivotal point in the establishment of Los Angeles as an open shop city occurred in 1910, when the workers at the “Los Angeles Times” attempted to unionize. Their protest, which
resulted in the printing plant being dynamited and 20 lives ending, failed. This event established Los Angeles as the largest metropolitan area in the country to keep labor unions out. This lasted until the end of World War II. The architectural consequence of this was that housing costs had to be maintained at increasingly lower levels than the rest of the country.

To contain labor, transport, and promotional costs of new manufacturing industries, the City Council undertook a massive promotional campaign in Eastern, and Midwestern industrial bases encouraging them to open branch factories in Los Angeles. To entice them, the Council promised low wages (because Los Angeles was union free), extensive in-place transportation facilities by way of the Southern Pacific and Pacific Electric Railroads, and extensive inexpensive land in outlying areas to the south and east of the downtown area.

By establishing these branch factories close to the San Pedro docks, East Los Angeles and South Central Los Angeles, they attracted not only workers, but also land subdividers. This new industry was directly responsible for the increased habitation of these areas throughout the 1930s, resulting directly in the establishment of such cities as Compton, Montebello and South Gate, all worker’s suburbs.

The central city did, however, remain the focus of commercial, retail and professional enterprises until the end of World War II. The speed by which the train could bring workers into the city was unrivaled. However, as the 1920s unfolded and the introduction of the automobile embraced Los Angeles society, the days of the electric railroad and downtown as a viable commercial and residential district, were numbered.

As the branch factories opened and traffic increased in the traditional downtown shopping districts, so did the expansion of suburban retail markets. Prominent mercantile concerns relocated old stores and opened new ones along Wilshire, Hollywood and other fashionable boulevards. Meanwhile, in conjunction with local realtors, mammoth manufacturing firms established segregated industrial complexes throughout Los Angeles. Steelmakers constructed furnaces at Torrance, oil producers erected refineries at El Segundo and Venice, aviation companies built hangers near Santa Monica, and film producers spread motion picture studios over the San Fernando Valley. Thus, business decentralization, combined with residential dispersal, created an urban form in greater Los Angeles consistent with its growth and yet unique in the United States of 1930.

As industry grew farther and farther away from being centralized, it also moved farther away from the transportation means of choice, the railroad. Instead, these establishments required roads, and more roads.

By the mid 1920s the electric railroad’s monopoly on rapid transit ended and the automobile began to set the pace of land development. Whereas the Pacific Electric had previously reached out farther and farther along its lines to establish new subdivisions, the automobile reached the new areas more easily and quickly. In 1925 an intensive rapid transit plan for the city was devised, using interurbans, street cars and buses to knit the system together. The effort was quelled by suburban homeowners groups who were more interested in maintaining the growth of automobile use, and the plan was dropped in 1926.

**Control**

With the tremendous increases in suburban and industrial development in the basin, a call for control was heeded. Zoning, though not new to urban areas, was more extensively defined in the early part of this century in Los Angeles than in any other metropolitan area. The word “variance” was born in Los Angeles as a result of these zoning endeavors. It was the very same people who insisted on the regulations who cried out the most if any of these rules would directly apply to their concerns. Although fully adopted, zoning regulations were extensively modified. Zoning, initially considered an instrument of planning subject to administrative control, was transformed into a method of promoting real estate interests through political influence. In its short history, zoning, far from guiding the expansion of the metropolis, merely sanctioned the preferences of segregationists and private enterprise.

It was the efforts of planners who tried from the early 1910s to incorporate parkways into the landscape of the urban environment. Although their efforts were not a complete failure, none of their original...
projects were realized as proposed. To their credit, they were able to establish a network of major highways within the basin. As with many road projects, they exceeded capacity well before their actual completion. The first major parkway was completed in 1939. The Arroyo Seco Parkway connected downtown with Pasadena. Although this was a success initially, no other parkways were ever built.

Restraint and Refinement

As with most American cities, the Depression of the 1930s practically made time stand still in Los Angeles. As funds were lacking, so were prosperous immigrants to the city. The Depression gave Los Angeles a time to catch its collective breath. As industry contracted, the subdivisions subsided and commercial growth all but halted. Whatever the slowing of life caused by the Depression there was, it did not, however, change two critical things: Los Angeles’s prominence as a world city, nor its inhabitants’ attitudes about living.

Among those to embrace the moment were a new generation of young architects, who, not accustomed to being on the high horse of the architectural profession, made a decided effort to address the needs of the middle class.

A member of this new generation was Harwell Hamilton Harris. His first independent commission, in 1934, was designed for a now more frugal group of professionals. Harris had a unique perspective when he began the design of the Lowe house in Altadena, a suburb north of Pasadena:

“I doubted that I would ever again design another building. This would be my first and last executed project. I went about its design with a solemn resolve: it must be a summation of all I have ever thought or felt about life and architecture.”

Within this one building Harris would establish the attitudes and perceptions he would pursue during the rest of his career in the city. The house is L-shaped in plan, to allow the living room to face the enclosure of the rear private garden, with the bedrooms flanking the leg of the L and the kitchen mediating the two. By pushing the dressing room between the two bedrooms out into the side yard slightly, and continuing this move in the landscape with planting, each bedroom had a private patio, with a sliding glass door, a la Schindler, where the occupants could push their bed out into the open to sleep outside on hot summer nights.

Harris’ most significant project was the Fellowship Park House, 1935. Built on his property above Griffith Park out of a salvaged prefabricated house and sliding glass doors removed from the Lowe House, he created a new architectural attitude. At first Harris felt the house might be a place in which to sit. As he finished the building he liked it so much that he decided to live in it, and added two additional bays to house a bath, storage and kitchen. The total cost of the building was $2,350, and it was under 500 square feet in area. This house, in its use of wood, a pitched roof and little more is what attracted the new clients of architecture to it.

Los Angeles architectural critics saw Harris as someone who bridged the years between Greene and Greene and the 1930s, using wood more directly and economically, but also with grace and elegant detailing.

Gregory Ain, born into a socialist Los Angeles family, believed that Modern Architecture could solve the social evils of the world. He considered the historic styles inane and felt that individualism was a wasted enterprise.

In 1937, Ain designed his most famous work the Dunsmuir Flats, south of Hollywood, in a mostly single-family residential area of Los Angeles. Set on a gradual slope, he skillfully placed four connecting units in a staggered pattern set off at a five degree angle to the lot line. Using the south side of the building for openness, view and warmth, he closed the north side, except for a continuous band of high windows that lit bedrooms, utility rooms and bathrooms. Each apartment had its own private entrance and each a private garden, all this on a typical Los Angeles 50x150 foot residential lot.

J.R. Davidson, a 1920s immigrant to Los Angeles, began his career by designing mainly commercial works and storefronts for the new boulevards from downtown to the ocean at Santa Monica. In his second...
A Davidson built-in storage unit.

neighborhood has a private garden and roof deck. Davidson's design skill was best exhibited in the interiors of his houses. He was trained earlier in Europe, designing 2nd and 3rd class accommodation of transatlantic ships. This training resulted in his intrinsic ability at designing built-in furniture and storage.

Transitions

The Second World War brought renewed growth to the area with the tremendous influx of defense-related industry. The end of the war brought an influx of returning service men. With the Federal government's assistance, many of these veterans were able to stay in Los Angeles. As a result of the birth of the American Dream, the Nuclear family and Levittown, Los Angeles embraced suburban growth. After the end of the war, the city began a revitalization program aimed at the rebuilding of the transportation infrastructure. The parkway plan of 1940 was changed to the freeway plan of 1946, effectively sealing the fate of electric rail service throughout the region. In this plan, 1,500 miles of freeways in a more or less gridiron plan were laid over the basin. In its best intention, no one would be more than three miles away from one of these transportation arteries. The train was all but eliminated. For the most part this plan was adopted, built between 1947 and 1994. To date over 770 miles of freeway crisscross the county. The Red and Yellow Cars of the Pacific Electric and Los Angeles Railway were slowly closed between 1947 and 1963. The last areas of the city to have their transportation service replaced with bus service was the South Central area.

Case Studies

The ending of the Second World War also brought a renewed interest in the design of the home, as witnessed by the efforts of John Entenza and his magazine "Arts and Architecture." There were severe restrictions on not only the sizes of homes built, but also on the materials with which they could be constructed. As the war ended, there was also a strong interest in developing economically accessible homes for the returning service men. It was the efforts of John Entenza's Case Study Program, with its underlying idea of superior affordable housing for typical American families, that encapsulated the efforts of architects and designers of the Late-Modern period in Los Angeles. The program, which lasted from 1945 to 1962 produced 36 designed houses, of which 27 were built.

The effect of this program was profound; not only did it establish the architectural careers of such people as William Wurster, Raphael Rapson, Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, Raphael Soriano, Craig Ellwood, Edward Killingsworth, Pierre Koenig and A. Quincy Jones, to name a few, it also increased residential building technology beyond any previously-known levels of perfection.

When one thinks of the Case Study program, one may visualize the famous Julius Shulman photograph of Pierre Koning's Case Study House #22. Here building materials consistent with the preconceptions of mainstream Angelenos as well as Americans in general are abandoned. We realize that the technology available to commercial building enterprise is also available for home construction. We also see that the effects of such decisions can be quite dramatic. As a result of such imagery, we are left thinking that the best of this program is the steel and concrete framed houses. Indeed, these are successfully-designed houses. However, it is the wood houses that embody more truly the spirit of living in Los Angeles. With these buildings we are destined to remember, the great bungalows of the Greenes, the simple studio of Harris, and the overlapping counterbalances of Schindler. This collective work of the 20th Century, more than the other, has certainly influenced and reinforced our visions of home.
Pierre Königs Case Study House #22.
Thus, Los Angeles had entered a new central city area.

The idealized Southern California as it was portrayed in picture postcards to the nation, and the world.

Charles Lautner's Carling Residence, 1947.

Create a City

No longer considered a town, the business interests of Los Angeles turned to recreating a downtown, thus making the town a city. In 1957, the city eliminated its building height limit of 150 feet, and for the first time allowed Los Angeles to become a vertical city. In reaction to this change, the last vestiges of the residential character of the downtown area were completely removed; the landmark Bunker Hill, the highest point in the city center had its housing razed and the hill itself lowered by 120 feet. By the early 1960s, the plan had been designed and groundwork laid for what was to be the greatest transformation effort yet of a central city area.

Moving into the 1970s and the later part of the Modern Movement in residential architecture in Los Angeles, little had changed from the 1950s and 60s. Now, though, it was not the preoccupation with prefabricated mass-produced housing that intrigued and informed the designers. Instead, as seen in the work of Charles Lautner, it was the desire to respond to the individual necessities of the site, the client, and the designer. There were no more tremendous tracts of land to develop. At most, the architect could find a client who would be willing (and could afford) to allow experimentation. Where this failed to develop, the architect taking control would express, and experiment with his own resources.

Helmut Schultz, an architect who practiced in Los Angeles in the 1970s was interested in building industrialization. His interests led him to rethink the role played of the custom and the ready made elements of general building construction:

“We seem to find nothing wrong when traditional housing is built from ready-made standardized floor plans with custom-made building techniques. I prefer the opposite approach: to use custom designs that respond to special situations and user needs and then to build the houses with ready-made standardized parts as industrialized systems”.

He recognized the difficulties related to building on the hillside sites of Los Angeles and developed a system of construction using standardized building components.

Integration and Retrospection

The architect Frank Gehry, whose name has been made-through by no choice of his own-synonymous with deconstructivist architecture, entered the Los Angeles scene in 1965, forcing modernism to its limits, with his Danziger Studio on Melrose Avenue. Seen as the turning point in his previous Modernist dogmatic training, Gehry sought to express architecture as art and sculpture, rather than as an extension of an arbitrary Cartesian grid.

In his early works of the mid-1970s, Gehry found that clients would spend a great deal of money on a building project, and curiously, surround it with cheap chain link fence. As a result of these experiences, Gehry sought to explore the role that the material could be used forcefully and expressively in his future buildings. In 1978, he remodeled his own home in Santa Monica, starting the first of many experiments with not only this, but many other inexpensive, seldom-expressed building materials. Oddly enough, in this project Gehry incorporates his admitted “maverick” design notions within and around a typical California Bungalow. This single move brought full circle the ideas of Greene and Greene, Harris and Neutra. Gehry brought a fresh and innovative design approach to the house and housing in the city. Gehry has his ideas of why Los Angeles has architecturally prospered:

“There is still a lot of creative opportunity here. When I visit New York, Chicago, or Milan, for instance, the young architects do a lot of talking but have few chances to build anything. The opportunity exists in L.A. because of all the craziness of Hollywood, the ambiance of innovation generated by high-tech industries such as aerospace and electronics, and of course the benign climate that allows a lot of ricky-ticky construction that wouldn't survive long in harsher latitudes.”

A Collective History

Thus, Los Angeles had entered a new architectural age, one in which meaning has been found to be the greatest element lacking in building. From the likes of Gehry have sprung many new architects and many new works that reflect not only new meaning, but new ideas about how we live and can live in our houses. Leon Whiteson places the culture of Los Angeles in context:

“The perception that Angeleno life is seldom static or “finished,” and that its architecture cannot easily attain the completeness of more settled societies was one of Frank Gehry’s great insights. This is an ad hoc culture in which people and institutions make themselves up as they go along, and always seem aware that a changeable tomorrow is already here.”
Again, Los Angeles is the playground on the one hand, and the great experimental laboratory on the other. Its canvas is still fresh and alive with the eyes that we as designers and as human beings may appreciate. At the same time we can learn valuable lessons as the present becomes part of our collective history.

Photograph from the Collection of Margaret Hall Kaplan.

The Gehry House, 1978, Santa Monica, California.