Eden on Fire

Martin Filler



Leslie Brack: Untitled*, 2019*

I first visited Los Angeles exactly fifty years ago and fell in love with it the moment I saw the gigantic steel and sprayed concrete doughnut atop the Randy's Donuts drive-in on my way out of LAX. On the plane I read the architecture critic Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), an appreciative and seductive study that marked a major turning point in the appraisal of the city's idiosyncratic character following decades of disdain.

Yet what initially grabbed me about LA was not so much its architecture, high or low—though its preponderance of clean white (if mainly mediocre) buildings was so refreshing after the sad gray decrepitude of New York City in the Seventies—but rather its incredible green lushness. Here were bushy ficuses planted as street trees, eruptions of magenta bougainvillea cascading down walls, bird-of-paradise and lily of the Nile flowers glorifying traffic medians, and of course the palm-lined drives of Beverly Hills that made you the star of a movie in your own imagination.

It was not until I ventured into the dry brown foothills north of Sunset, which retained the original vegetation of the region—coastal sage scrub, live oak, and chaparral yucca, among other native plants—that I realized how much of a human concoction this earthly paradise really was, and that almost none of the species that delighted me were indigenous, least of all the palm trees (which tend to be dangerously combustible). But wasn't suspension of disbelief what Hollywood was all about anyway?

The timing of Banham's book couldn't have been better. His sympathetic view of the laissez-faire LA design ethos, with which he expanded on Pop Art's elevation of the commercial vernacular to serious cultural status, arrived at the start of a remarkable two-decade period, from around 1970 to 1990, when Los Angeles was the epicenter of architectural experimentation in this country. *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* offered a plausible prehistory to the new directions being pursued there. Rather than looking down on LA as an ad hoc urban jumble, as establishment urbanists had done since Nathanael West skewered it as an architectural (and human) freak show in *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Banham came up with a quartet of arresting categories to account for the region's unusual geographic diversity and multifarious psychic aspects. His four ecologies comprise Surfurbia (sixty miles of beach communities from Malibu to Corona del Mar); Foothills (neighborhoods including the Pacific Palisades and Altadena, both of which were decimated by this year's wildfires); the Plains of Id (low-density flatlands between the mountains and the Pacific); and Autopia (the all-pervasive car culture spawned by unchecked urban sprawl).

A working-class Brit who lived through the Blitz, Banham cherished an optimistic belief that modernism held the answers to perfecting the built environment, if not human nature itself. He also had a romantic streak, and like many of his countrymen (though not Evelyn Waugh, the Jonathan Swift of Forest Lawn) he saw Southern California as a sparkling sybaritic wonderland antithetical to drab, inhibited Britain. The cover image for the first edition of his book was his younger compatriot David Hockney's painting *A Bigger Splash* (1967), which depicts a turquoise swimming pool in front of a flat-roofed midcentury modern house and two tall, skinny palms against a cloudless azure sky, rendered in the flat sun-blasted tonalities of LA's endless summer.

I got much the same feeling when the architect Charles Moore took me to see his recently completed Burns house (1973) in Santa Monica Canyon, an ochre-and-pink stucco hillside aerie that brought to mind an abstracted Italian villa, complete with the requisite swimming pool, which he'd designed for a UCLA professor. (Happily, it was undamaged by the January fires, thanks to Kevin Keim, director of the Charles Moore Foundation—which now owns the house—who acted as a one-man fire brigade despite the neighborhood having been evacuated.) On a clear day you can see the ocean from the upper stories, and I thought that if even academics could live like this in LA, no wonder people flocked here by the millions. As long as the living was this good and the Big One (which everyone always thought would be an earthquake, not a fire) never came, who could blame them for wanting to climb aboard, no matter how crowded it got? But because LA is so spread out, the pressures that overpopulation put on its fragile ecosystem were not particularly apparent (except for automobile congestion, among the worst in the nation) until climate change made it all too evident how unwise it had been to build in so many parts of the region, which despite one of the most extensive water diversion endeavors in history remains a potential tinderbox.

When I went back to Banham's book in the aftermath of the multiple conflagrations that began in Los Angeles on January 7 and destroyed some 16,000 structures, forced as many as 200,000 people to evacuate their homes, and killed twenty-nine, I was astonished by one passage in the Foothills chapter in which he comments on the reshaping of LA's abundant sloping terrain into tiered terraces to provide flat building lots for new houses:

> The effects of mountain-cropping techniques are obviously going to be profound, ecologically and otherwise. Without joining the chorus of doom from professional Jeremiahs at Berkeley and in the Sierra Club, I must still admit that it proposes a different kind of ecological disturbance to those previously practiced in Los Angeles.

Although he identifies that fundamentally destabilizing technique as perilous in a region where mudslides follow wildfires with predictable regularity, his throwaway reference to "professional Jeremiahs" reminds us how little heed was paid to warnings about the dire environmental consequences of such practices until much too recently. Banham died in 1988 at the age of sixty-six, well before climate change and its implications for the built environment raised much alarm beyond scientific circles. But even earlier than that, other writers registered anxiety over LA's volatile atmospheric conditions.

Because TV reports on the recent wildfires constantly repeated the name of the ill winds that stoked the blazes—the Santa Ana—I reread the all-too-prescient meditation on them by that peerless sibyl of LA, Joan Didion, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968):

> Easterners commonly complain that there is no "weather" at all in Southern California, that the days and the seasons slip by relentlessly, numbingly bland. That is quite misleading. In fact the climate is characterized by infrequent but violent extremes: two periods of torrential subtropical rains which continue for weeks and wash out the hills and send subdivisions sliding toward the sea; about twenty scattered days a year of the Santa Ana, which, with its incendiary dryness, invariably means fire. . . .
>
> Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, and, just as the reliably long and bitter winters of New England determine the way life is lived there, so the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are.

Dispatches from the fires this time mentioned a later book that offered

similar warnings of the coming calamity: Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998). It pitilessly recapitulates the helter-skelter planning history of Los Angeles with the same narrative skill and factual command that he displayed in his magisterial *City of Quartz* (1990). Davis, who died in 2022 at the age of seventy-six, was among the rare thinkers who comprehended the full range of issues that bear upon how cities and regions evolve. His complex, angry, and sorrowful expositions interweave political, social, economic, aesthetic, and psychological factors that must be seen as inseparable if we are to understand architecture and urban planning in their largest sense—as manifestations of the aspirations and shortcomings of the society that created them.

Ecology of Fear focuses more specifically on environmental concerns than its wider-ranging precursor and thus has received renewed notice because of this year's fires. In a deliberately provocative chapter, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," Davis, as always, identifies the socioeconomic impetus behind harmful planning choices with chilling clarity:

> Hillside homebuilding, moreover, has despoiled the natural heritage of the majority for the sake of an affluent few. Instead of protecting "significant ecological areas" as required by law, county planning commissions have historically been the malleable tools of hillside developers. Much of the beautiful coastal sage and canyon riparian ecosystems of the Santa Monica Mountains have been supplanted by castles and "guard-gate prestige."...
>
> The "flatland" majority—including the poor taxpayers of the Westlake district, most of whom have never seen a Malibu sunset—will continue to subsidize the ever increasing expense of maintaining and, when necessary, rebuilding sloping suburbia....
>
> Once again, politicians and the media have allowed the essential landuse issue—the rampant, uncontrolled proliferation of firebelt suburbs—to be camouflaged in a neutral discourse about natural hazards and public safety. But "safety" for the Malibu and Laguna coasts as well as hundreds of other luxury enclaves and gated hilltop suburbs is becoming one of the state's major social expenditures, although—unlike welfare or immigration—it is almost never debated in terms of trade-offs or alternatives.

Davis wrote his indictment a quarter-century before today's unprecedented catastrophes brought on by human-induced global warming, but the fact that these torments are self-inflicted does not lessen the suffering of those who have lost so much. Although major natural disasters are equal opportunity destroyers, much of the news coverage of the recent wildfires focused on the affluent, predominantly white enclaves of the Pacific Palisades and Malibu. Predictably, much attention was paid to Hollywood celebrities whose houses were destroyed, which offered an extra fillip of schadenfreude for the envious.

But among the worst-hit sections is the modest but beautiful Altadena neighborhood, a racially mixed anomaly on the east side of the city at the edge of the Angeles National Forest. Since the 1930s Blacks have been able to buy property in Altadena, decades before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 put a legal (if not always functional) end to the discriminatory practices that made very few parts of LA open to people of color. (The pioneering Black master builder Paul R. Williams, LA's so-called architect to the stars, was barred from living in most of the neighborhoods where he designed houses for white clients.)*

One lifelong Altadena resident, Zaire Calvin, a high school football coach, was interviewed on *60 Minutes* after he and three other members of his family lost their houses, among the seven thousand reduced to ash there. Even worse, his older sister, Evelyn McClendon, who lived next door to him but did not evacuate, was killed in the fire. Her remains were discovered in the ruins by Calvin and his cousin. Another Altadena resident, Victor Shaw, who had lived there for fifty years, was found dead with a garden hose in his hand after trying in vain to save his house.

Many Altadenans also suffered severe losses to their livelihoods, especially those who operated small service businesses—landscaping, contracting, maintenance, and the like—from their homes, where equipment and work vehicles also went up in flames. The fires afflicted both rich and poor with the utter indifference of nature, but whereas many residents of the Pacific Palisades and Malibu likely have other resources to fall back on, that is not the case for Altadena's blue-collar strivers, a large percentage of whom may have permanently lost a hard-won toehold at the bottom end of the prohibitively expensive Los Angeles real estate market.

Many of the neighborhood's residents own their houses, or whatever is left of them, because they've been passed down for two or three generations—a means of transferring familial wealth that could be yet another casualty of the fires. Because insurance companies increasingly have denied coverage for properties in high-risk areas nationwide, the state government has established the California FAIR Plan (the acronym stands for "fair access to insurance requirements") to help homeowners who don't have other financial protection, but with its current funding it can pay only a fraction of the likely replacement costs of a catastrophic property loss.

Talk of rebuilding the destroyed Los Angeles communities willfully ignores the probable recurrence of equally destructive outbreaks. (It took twenty-four days for the fires to be fully extinguished.) Recent natural disasters in supposed "climate havens" such as North Carolina demonstrate that no place is exempt from danger these days. A significant proportion of disaster losses occur in areas such as river floodplains, wooded hillsides (sometimes defined as the "wildland–urban interface"), and shoreline areas. California, always said to be the testing ground for new modes of living later adopted by the rest of the country, has been at the forefront of residential expansion into locales that are more vulnerable because of rising sea levels, extended periods of drought, and more powerful winds as global weather patterns mutate in response to the ever-warming planet.

Yet the peculiar American definition of "freedom"—allowing anyone to do anything anytime and anyplace they please—remains at the root of the rising incidence of houses destroyed each year by fire, flood, and landslide, and until that delusion is abandoned the devastation will continue. The most likely agent of change will be the insurance industry, which increasingly refuses to underwrite high-risk properties and in turn prevents potential buyers from securing mortgages.

Where the many thousands of displaced Angelenos will live now—even if their ruined neighborhoods are rebuilt, it will take a long time—is the most pressing question. Prices for high-end properties in unscathed areas of the city have skyrocketed, but what about the many displaced residents who live paycheck to paycheck? In *Ecology of Fear*, Davis noted an involuntary demographic shift well underway by 1990, when rising housing costs pushed many low-income people into decaying postwar suburban subdivisions of flimsily built tract houses in outlying districts of LA:

> The colossal $42 billion damage inflicted by the 1992 Northridge earthquake clearly exposed this building quality crisis as residents were literally killed by shoddy construction. Although no one has yet attempted the calculation, there is little reason to suppose that this suburban housing deficit—the inability to finance the replacement costs of obsolete and unrestorable building stock—will be any smaller....
>
> As a result, minorities typically inherit municipal scorched earth—crushing redevelopment debts, demoralized workforces, neglected schools, and deserted business districts—as their principal legacy from the old order.

The great paradox of life in coastal Southern California has always been the stark contrast between its climate—what could be more delicious than a clear, sunny, slightly cool LA spring morning?—and a lurking awareness of the manifold natural disasters that have repeatedly threatened this precarious lotusland. Gore Vidal, who died at his home in the Hollywood Hills in 2012, perceptively called our nation the United States of Amnesia, and nowhere does that seem more accurate than California, where the wildfires in 2018 that ravaged nearly two million acres and killed one hundred people did not motivate civic leaders in Los Angeles to take immediate steps to protect their city from a similar disaster. The mid-twentieth-century dream that Los Angeles is America's Eden, celebrated by Reyner Banham as he tooled around its freeways, has been superseded by the dark reality envisioned by Mike Davis, who foretold with uncanny accuracy what the other side of paradise would be like. ●

*See my "Hollywood's Master Builder," *The New York Review*, October 21, 2021.

Old Passports

Walking by a flea market in Pest.
Walking by its table of late Eighties Soviet chic, in pieces.
Some old movies begin as a cheesy map
gone up in flames to quick-start
real people talking, in trouble, if-in-fact.
True or false, the backstory all over again. Yes, we *backstory*,
you *backstory*, I *backstory*....
Russian medals, insignia,

military whatnots, uniform caps for sale—
memorabilia = cherished, no matter what. No matter
that soldiers too young on their glad
desperate way out of history stripped down
right on the streets of Budapest.
After all, worth a few HUFs, that stuff, said one of us
alive and well, his childhood staring
wide-eyed straight at me.
I could see the ten-year-old he'd been, shrunk down
to bigger now.
Netherworld

come closer. The scattering—
worn passports on that table too, covers ragged, bent—
blue, maroon, black. Bulgaria, Albania,
Romania, Czechoslovakia.... So forth and so on.
Smoke, fire—
little squares inside, blurred

I froze into and
stop there

—Marianne Boruch