Los Angeles: The Architecture And Urban Design Of Nontradition

KAREN FIGURA LANGE
California Polytechnic State University
USA

ABSTRACT

Past urban planners, real estate speculators and myth makers have achieved the fantasy city of the future in Los Angeles. Based on the public dream of individualism and the desire for space, Los Angeles is a city inspired and created not by history but by future endeavors, speculative gestures, unlimited possibilities and fantasy. Rising from an agricultural village it has attained metropolis status through industries that promote and depend on myth; real estate development, tourism, film. Los Angeles has become the city it dreamed of being; a future city without historic connections and foundations. Without a sense of community, reality became image.

The simultaneous development of the automobile and airplane fueled the growth and pattern of urban evolution in Los Angeles. Populated by individuals escaping their personal histories in the mid-west and east, Los Angeles became a city of newness with a civic lust for the new and a general acceptance that new is better. This lead to city development without historic precedent, and a reliance on technology, first the automobile and airplane, later the computer. In the end the city resembles suburbia infinitum, a city of nowhere, without a center, egalitarian and without hierarchy. Over this pragmatic patterning lies the concern for architects today; to work from within to create a sense of place without responding to the historical models, but developing an event from fragments, estrangement and loss of connectivity.

INTRODUCTION

It is the intention of this paper to discuss the natural consequences of action taken in the development of the City of Los Angeles as the seeds of its present condition and the architectural response to the condition. This condition is designated by urban sprawl, social fragmentation and the myth of image. The architecture reacts to the speed of transportation and media, fragmentation of materials and grids, and the image of multiplicity.

Unquestionably Los Angeles is not a historic city. Developed in this century in light of advances in technology, it has become the city that expresses most our society's preoccu-pation with the individual, individual freedoms and democracy. The very nature of Los Angeles is change. Its structure is changing, the frame is being redefined, away from the historic definition of urban planning. It is a city deconstructed through movement, as freeways slice through its urban fabric. The collision of events with the existing infrastructure brings about a city of confrontations and combinations, of events and societal reorganization. As in the past Architecture and Urban Design are seen as the physical manifestations of the good will of society at large, the utopian dream, savior of society through the built environment. Urban change as created by architecture is in effect today, as exemplified by Los Angeles. These changes are the result of vast migration, urban sprawl, social and spatial segregation of marginalized societies, and the new Age of Information.

The pattern of Los Angeles is based on the original settlement grid repeated and colliding across the organic boundaries set by nature. These two systems set the stage for the architecture of change and event that is apparent in Los Angeles today. The original patterning of the site, along with the movement generated by transportation systems, have combined to form an architecture endemic to the place. The grid of the International Style has met the diagonal of cubism in the very nature of Los Angeles' plan. This plan of skewed angles is then reflected in the city's architecture.

BACKGROUND

The City of Los Angeles was founded as a pueblo in 1781 on the Spanish colonial grid system and surrounded by land grants for agricultural purposes. These land grants, or ranchos, were based on natural restrictions and elements of the land forms in contrast to the grid of the pueblo. These early patterns, although updated into domestic, single-family home grids and commercial, super block grids, are still mirrored in the town and community layouts evidencing the collision of the original grid and the natural boundaries set by nature and the land grants.

Almost 100 years after its beginnings, taxes, from the annexation of California into the United States, and severe drought cleared the original families from the Spanish land

grants through destruction of the cattle and tallow industry. The land surrounding the town was taken over by business-men from the east, ending the domination of ancestral land owners. Under American law lots could be sold and taxes levied to support the local government. Real estate taxes and speculation begot the Los Angeles we know today; one in which speculative land ventures have made many rich and separated the classes through land ownership. The social system of have and have-not has led to many problems only now coming to a head. The warring factions of gangs and the riots have shown us a diverse population on edge. According to Lebbeus Woods, in *The End of Architecture?*, "The riots in Los Angeles in May 1992 are but one part of an ongoing rebellion in the USA, a rebellion against a social system constructed on greed and lust for wealth."[1]

Before the advent of the car, Downtown Los Angeles was surrounded by many small towns such as Santa Monica, Pasadena and San Pedro. These towns were separated from each other and Downtown until this century by agricultural lands and connected by broad boulevards and rail lines. The agricultural lands between Downtown and the outlying villages gave rise to the myth of Los Angeles as a Garden City. As these agricultural lands were developed after World War II to raise taxes for the growing city, the land took on the character of nowhere. Homogeneous growth fueled by the new freeway system, new airport and flood control projects covered the Los Angeles basin.

Until the latter part of the last century, Los Angeles was a small village. Railroad ticket gouging by competing rail-roads drew vast numbers of migrants with one way fares of $1 from the Missouri Valley. Beckoned by stories of the weather and natural beauty, they converged on Los Angeles with new hopes and dreams. The foreign atmosphere made them gullible to real estate speculators. The very reason for the existence of Los Angeles was expansion with the city's population growing almost 1,600 percent in the years be-tween 1900 and 1940.[2] "The fact that the spectacular growth exactly coincided with the automotive age further weakened the idea of community."[3] and fueled the sprawl of the town. As the citizenry gained independence through their vehicles, Los Angeles became "the first city on wheels, its landscape in three directions unbroken by natural barriers that could give it coherence and definition."[4] The automobile allowed real estate speculation to occur on virgin land, an easy and abundant raw material in Southern California, and was unbound by the natural terrain.

The form of Los Angeles has been defined by the automo-bile.

> Its monuments are the artifacts of civil engineering, off-ramps and interchanges that sweep into concrete parabolas. There is no past, the city's hierarchy is jerry-built, there are few mistakes to repeat. The absence of past and structure is basic to the allure of Los Angeles. It deepens the sense of self-reliance, it fosters the idea of freedom, or at least the illusion of it.

> Freedom of movement most of all, freedom that liberates the dweller in this city from community chauvinism and neighborhood narcissism, allowing him to absorb the most lavish endowments his environ-ment has to offer - sun and space.[5]

Without history and community, the auto becomes image in Los Angeles, the vehicle for individual escape and fantasies.

The formation of Los Angeles as the modern metropolis of the twentieth century owes its development to the freeway system as its leading articulation device and form delineator. Contrary to historic city growth from the center, Los Angeles is multi-centered due to the rapid expansion of its periphery into a network of interconnecting freeway arteries that rapidly replaced the rail lines. This network surrounds an infill system of subdivisions in search of their own center and identity. These centers reflect the ethnic diversity of Los Angeles, segregating areas to the interests of the land owners with varied ancestral nationality; Korean, Latin, Vietnam-ese, part of the more than 100 various ethnic diversities represented in Los Angeles[6]. These areas of ethnic stratifica-tion mirror the original divisions of the Spanish land grants, at odds with the Downtown grid, yet at one with the natural boundaries of Los Angeles.[7] As these ethnic subdivisions strive for a connection with the place, the tensions and frictions of urban life emerge. With the social swelling of the ethnic tide encompassing the city, the clash of the original land plats and abundant land available for speculation through transportation technology, Los Angeles has become the nonhierarchical city, nontraditional in the sense of the physical collisions of its grids and the equalizations of races, cultures, ideas and traditions.

INFORMATION AGE

The path of the car cuts broad swipes of asphalt across the landscape and urban tissue of Los Angeles. Contrary to the historic development of cities on a body of water or river, where concentric development narrows the scale of the urban environment as one approaches the center, the freeway moves people at frightening speeds away from one node and into a series of subdivisions, suburbs, and green belts on a triangulated pattern on the scale of giants. Privatization of ourselves, our spaces and our cities has occurred through the use of the automobile capsule, removing us from one center and placing us in another with only accelerated glimpses of media expression in terms of billboards, information signage, and highlighted points of architectural interest in our periph-eral vision.

"The privilege of our age is to remain confused."[8] Living in the Information Age we live in an age of uncertainty, stifled with so much information that we become skeptical of information and disinformation, unable now to separate the two. We live in a period of crises, informed through television, radio, computers. We respond with an architec-ture of uncertainty, creating an urban environment of shock.

Fig. 1. Los Angeles Skyline

According to Bernard Tschumi, recent studies have shown that "the fragmentation and dislocation produced by the scaleless juxtaposition of highways, shopping centers, high-rise buildings, and small houses is seen as a positive sign of the vitality of urban culture."[9] He concludes that making an event out of urban shock, intensifying the experience of the urban adventure may be the answer to the overdose of media and electronic super-highways in this information age. Shock goes against the authority of permanence suggested by historicism.

> In a world heavily influenced by the media, this relentless need for change is not necessarily to be understood as negative. The increase in change and superficiality also means a weakening of architecture as a form of domination, power, and authority, as it historically has been in the last six thousand years.[10]

This weakening of architecture, this change suggested in the relationship between structure and skin, suggests a change in the evolution of the urban environment. As the role of dominance by architecture in our environment weakens so does its hold on the anchoring of our plans for our cities. Through an understanding of the events and circumstance of the contemporary condition, it is possible to design for the creation of a new city both nontraditional and nonhierarchical, responding to the events of technology, multiculturism and the pluralistic view that it implies.

Separation from our sense of place and our urban environment is not new. It has accelerated due to the pace of society and the availability of information. Our estrangement from our civic duties and our distrust of the civic body at large is largely the result of our alienation from the place of our memories, those shared; both ancestral and urban. Anthony Vidler writes of the consequences of the separation in an earlier age,

> For Benjamin Constant, writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire, urban estrangement was a consequence of the centralization of the state and the concentration of political and cultural power, where all 'local customs' and community bonds were brutally severed: 'Individuals, lost in an isolation from nature, strangers to the place of their birth, without contact with the past, living only in a rapid present, and thrown down like atoms on an immense and leveled plain, are detached from a fatherland that they see nowhere.'[11]

As the citizens of the city lose their connectivity to their past they become disenfranchised with their shared system of values. Urban man grows away from the larger body that connects the occupants of a city. In the end the city represents this separation from the social, experiential and spiritual qualities of urban life, reflecting instead our spatial and social fragmentation in decay, crime, homelessness and an architecture of no commonly held values. In Los Angeles crime and homicide have risen yearly even in 1992, despite the truce declared by gangs in response to the riots.[12] It is predicted that the next riot, following those of 1965 and 1992, will be a gang-led paramilitary rebellion, warfare at an urban level.[13] In the Los Angeles of today the alienation from the society is evident. The skyrocketing sale of fire arms is confirmation that the population is taking their protection into their own hands, acting where the politicians and civic institutions refuse to act.[14]

Our early modernist counterparts drew large scale conceptual plans that progress across the landscape into infinitum, i.e. Corbu, une ville contemporaine, and Wright, Broadacre City. The projected new "cities" were a utopian vision designed to change our lives and ourselves, creating the modern man. Corbu, though starting with a plan for a new city, une ville contemporaine, 1922, quickly moved into plans for the redevelopment of Paris, The City of Tomorrow, leaving the historic center intact. With the realization that existing cities would grow in an evolutionary manner, and not through abandonment of the existing center, Corbu began to focus on parts of the cities rather than the whole. The utopian vision of the modernists succumbed to a society content with itself, choosing in the end to allow architecture and not modernist city planning to create place. The current generation of theoretical architects, conscious of societal change and the need to build, continues where modernism left off, Tschumi states,

> You cannot design a new definition of cities and their
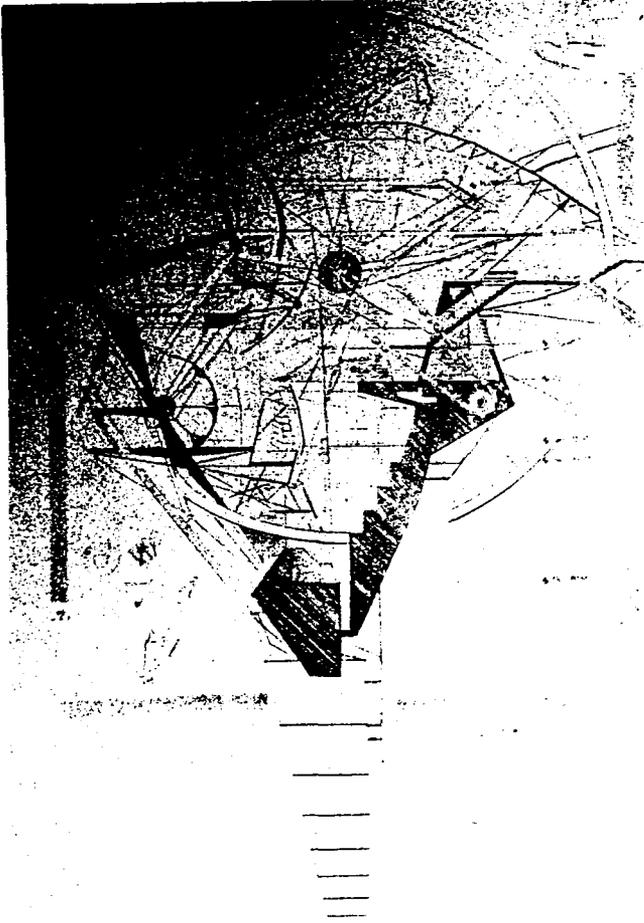
Fig. 2. Spring 1995 Student Work, Benjamin Edelberg

architecture. But one may be able to design the conditions that will make it possible for this nonhierarchical, nontraditional society to happen. By understanding the nature of our contemporary circumstances and the media processes that accompany them, architects possess the possibility of constructing conditions that will create a new city and new relationships between spaces and events.[15]

The centers of a multi-centered urban community such as Los Angeles take on essential characteristics related to those of historic centered cities. But as in the citadels of medieval time, closeness breeds distinction and not conformity. The multi-centers of Los Angeles are looking for a specialized view in a pluralistic society. The multi-naturedness of the view distorts and nullifies its connection to the historic meaning of architecture, the familiarization of space. How is architecture to respond to the radical relevism of the multicultural viewpoint? In a fractured community the center becomes an amalgam of urban fragments. The term 'city' becomes an organizational tool to coalesce the abstraction of objects spaced on the landscape. Due to the size and complexity of Los Angeles, urban design in our own time analyses the fragments and not the total. Our own perception

of smallness, in relation to the total, and the failures of utopian modernism, creates our inability to conceptualize space on that scale. Growth in the current urban environment of Los Angeles is dependent upon the ability of the fragments to reform and regenerate themselves.

Architecture in the urban arena is about the event. The multi-centeredness of Los Angeles is the result of freeway nodes, points where freeways cross each other or large boulevards. For these centers to have a place or heart they must encase an event. Santa Monica has created a center within itself in its outdoor mall. Lively, people oriented it evolved into a place of continuous meandering hordes of people. It shocks us not through historic familiarity but through its vast quantity of participants. Contrary to the plan that formed the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, the municipality of Santa Monica is developing a livable pedestrian center through actively directing mixed-use projects within their downtown commercial district. This action preserves the residential neighborhoods surrounding the downtown and creates a audience for the activity. In urban design the event allows for the possibility of action or another event, so that the event is not the end in itself nor the beginning, but the factor of multiplicity. It suggests movement, multiple views, fragmentation and not a logical sequence of actions.

EXAMPLES

As the Information Age replaces the Industrial Age and with it the resulting architectural response of Modernism, architecture and urban design look to the future. Current technology is expanding and infiltrating our lives. As our capacity to garner information increases with accessibility, sequential patterning is no longer relative. Time and thinking must function in relative spans, recreating our knowledge and understanding base. From this comes an architecture of transparency and media information; mediarchitecture.

The West Coast Gateway Competition was a call for suggestions for reclaiming public space above an eight-lane freeway in Los Angeles. Studio Asymptote has created a proposal for the entry into the Los Angeles basin using the infrastructure of the existing freeway system to announce the idea of place through shock: by movable limbs, mutable facades, redefining perspective and depth. Spanning the Hollywood Freeway, the architects have reclaimed the air above the roadway to define an 'anticipatory order'[16] based on movement, episodic time, optics, and telecommunications. As the definition of the city becomes only as memorable as the remembered image, the West Coast Gateway/ Steel Cloud project is a production of images, 'visually fictitious,'[17] a project to be remembered as if it exists.

Suggested in the competition brief is the notation regarding the deep scar in the urban structure of Downtown, Los Angeles, formed by the freeway. Another architectural firm, Dagmar Richter, proposed a different solution to the West Coast Gateway Competition by employing a veneer architecture to cover the scar, plastic surgery of an architectural
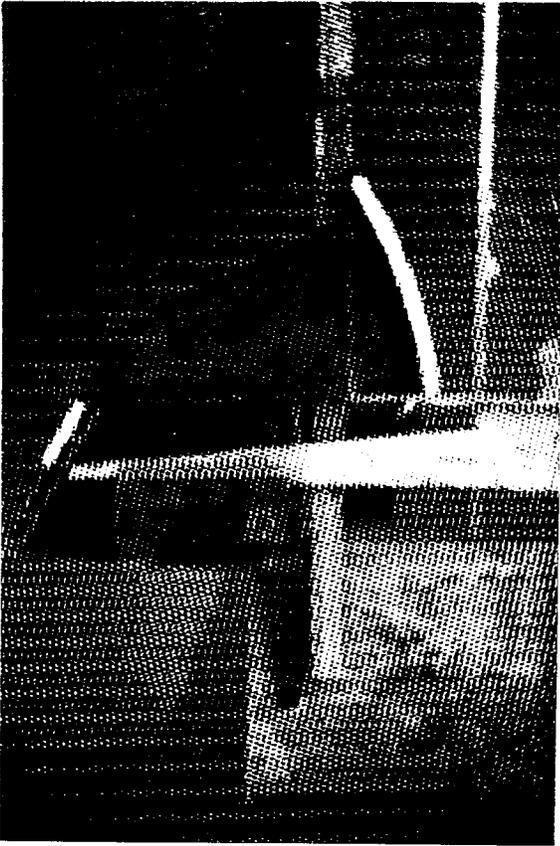
Fig. 3. Spring 1995 Student Work, Richard Diaz

sort. The design is the spatial representation of an archaeological investigation of site and the Downtown. It reclaims as public domain the terrain dominated by the machine. By layering distinct platforms for human activity representing cartographically the historic movement associated with the site, they have documented paths, framing and building volumes as a progression through space and time. Using the framework of ideal space, that which is a product of mental processes, and real space, the product of social praxis, they have created an ambivalence within the space that defines their project.

As Brunelleschi's dome provided a metaphor for the people of Florence, reminding them of their bonds, it created an urban memory. The urban memory serves us not only in our recollection of the space, but of our actions there. Eric Owen Moss has created buildings and proposals within Culver City, one of the multi-centers of Los Angeles, designed to restore an urban memory into an industrialized wasteland. The buildings are created specifically to service industries in the Information Age, "neo-industrial"[18] enterprises reliant on the accessibility of information and speed at which it can be disseminated. Using borrowed air rights and abandoned right-of-ways, Moss has created an infill of juxtaposition within a sea of warehouses. Shocking with calculated disequilibrium, Moss draws at once from our urban memories of medieval Europe and Lebeus Woods'

dark urban fantasies. Multiple paths and small courtyards define circulation systems of chance meetings and information sharing on a human scale. Moss' buildings play on our sense of remembrance, of shared activities and recollections of actions past on our first visit. He builds a layering of fragments and transparencies to jar and shock us but also to rekindle our urban memories. The structures are recognizable from both the perspective of the velocity of the automobile and the human speed of walking. Moss answers the urban memory, but also replies to the future of technology.

The architectural response to the Information Age is centered in Los Angeles. Here urban design, driven by the automobile, consecrated by Broadacre City, has moved into theoretical issues encompassing the technology of the moment, the shock of the event and the idea of relative time.

STUDENT PROJECTS

An enlightened attitude toward the problems of the Information Age and its urban response are evident in the projects within my design studio. Two of my fifth year students are pursuing thesis projects regarding infill sites within the downtown sector of Los Angeles. Choosing to work within the relatively recently imposed supergrid, they are both searching for the definition of place, action and architecture to create a human scale within the larger framework of the freeway culture and the historic and out-molded modes of transportation. A third student works within the bounderies of Southern California ignoring both existing codes of urban plan as divides Los Angeles; those of the city and those of the suburban exterior.

Both Downtown projects use defunct transportation systems as a means of generating space and connection to the site through urban memories. One project reflects and repeats the railway lines on the existing Santa Fe Freight Grounds in contrast to a new pedestrian scale. The linear energy of the former railway lines collides with the organic rambling of structure and passages. The student seeks to empower the individual through connectivity to the site. Through user design and construction the design student creates a synergistic interaction, allowing the user to control the quality and direction of their own environment. The second project links across city blocks, projecting a smaller scale onto the existing supergrid. Using a reconstruction of the Angel's Flight funicular to reconnect the remnants of Bunker Hill with less desirable sections of the city, the student creates blocks within blocks, defining a grid within a grid in plan and elevation. The proposal defines a museum and theater center, linking the existing city and MOCA on Bunker Hill with the historic theater district on Broadway.

Another student uses the vastness of Southern California to define a civic center within the openness of the natural landscape. Enclosing the program into an anthropomorphic capsule, the student responds against the vastness towards self-sufficiency and sustainability, contrary to the Los Angeles suburban model. Using the human head as a metaphor for
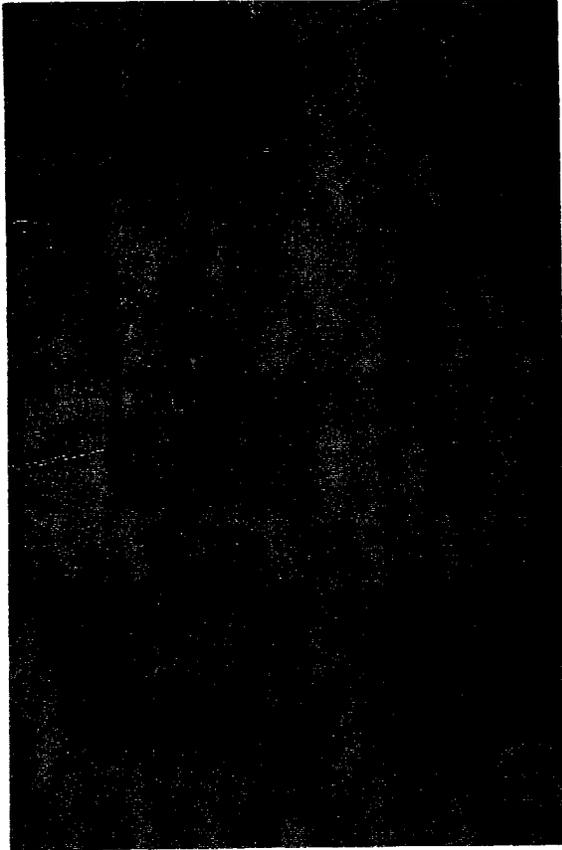
Fig. 4. Spring 1995 Student Work, Lily Livingston

the center of the civic government, the student creates event through a vascular-like circulation system, medieval in design, responsive to site and of a meandering nature. The building systems become the statement of place, a joint in the community, the beginnings of an urbanistic system in a non-urban location.

The students use connections in the old manner of human scale and pedestrian walks, in latter day versions tying into a renewed city fabric or creating their own. The fabric is made smaller, separating automobile from people. The car is relegated to a secondary role, a form giver but not definer. Pedestrian walkways create city sections, neighborhoods within cities. The first two projects are not separated from the city but rise above it or burrow into it, learning from the freeway, and creating a center where none existed in an industrial wasteland. Both of these projects exist in the fringe of Downtown. The third project creates urbanity in a parking lot, similar to the theater, in particular to films of the future such as *Blade Runner*.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the social unrest and multiple view points of an non homogenous society, the foundation for an architec-

ture of change, a cubism shifted, was laid down in the original pueblo grid and the contrary diagonal system set by the Spanish land grants. The collision of the two systems has predicted in urban form the architecture of Los Angeles today. In a city propagating the myth of youth and newness, technology is seen as the savior. Without a history Los Angeles is doomed repeat its mistakes, but as the young it has its heart in technology. The automobile has defined the existing plan and sprawl of Los Angeles, and new technologies in media will create its architectural image. The individual villages that constituet Los Angeles are based on thnic and cultural diversities and will define their own architectural image through the development of an event or center.

Los Angeles exists as the study of an evolving city, evolving within our lifetime as an experiment under great media attention. "What Los Angeles is experiencing is the future for us all. The violent juxtaposition of aerospace technology and neo-tribal politics contains the thesis and antithesis of the new planetary culture; hopefully, the synthesis will be contained in the coming twenty-first century."[19]

REFERENCES

[1] Lebbeus Woods, "Freespace and the Tyranny of Types", *The End of Architecture?* Peter Noever (Ed.), Prestel, Munich 1992, 87.

[2] John Gregory Dunne, "Eureka! A Celebration of California," *Unknown California*, Eds. Jonathan Eisen and David Fine, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1985, 20.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 20-21.

[5] Ibid., 26.

[6] Charles Jenks, *Heteropolis; Los Angeles, The Riots and the Strange Beauty of Hetero-Architecture*, Academy Editions, London, 1993, 14.

[7] Ibid., 30.

[8] Lois Nesbitt, "Asymptote: Practice of Limitlessness," A+U: Architecture and Urbanism, April 1994 # 283, 133.

[9] Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1994, 247.

[10] Ibid., 248.

[11] Anthony Vidler, The *Architectural Uncanny*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1992, 4, from *Oeuvres*, Benjamin Constant, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, Paris 1957.

[12] Jenks, 13.

[13] Ibid., 14.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Tschumi, 258.

[16] Jean Nouvel in Conversation *Tomorrow Can Take Care of Itself*," A.D. Architectural Design, July/Aug 1993, 9.

[17] Nesbitt, 134.

[18] Joseph Giovannini, "Fresh Off the Drawing Board," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Oct. 2, 1994, p. 39.

[19] William Irwin Thompson "Looking for History in L.A.", *Unknown California*, Eds. Jonathan Eisen and David Fine, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1985, 182.