the limits of his opinion-based urban criticism as compared with grounded urban research; an example is his attributing the failures of advocacy planning to the lack of visual representations of the ideas being presented. Kolson makes his case with little reference to the substantial body of work on vernacular architecture and urbanism that has been produced during the past several decades. While a more serious connection with existing scholarship would have anchored this work intellectually, in the final analysis Kolson’s question remains critical for students of urban design: do grand plans produce the kinds of cities in which we want to live? The author clearly answers in the negative, but provides few constructive suggestions for channeling the laudable impulses that even he would agree motivate many urban improvement schemes.

As a work of urbanist criticism, in the tradition of Kolson’s heroes, Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, this work surely will find many sympathetic readers. Practitioners of urban design, however, may find the book frustrating since it provides few clues about what might be learned from past follies to inform future planning and design projects. Kolson has argued in public forums, as well as in Big Plans, that virtual-reality models of cities may indeed be overly pristine, even misleading. Still, it is unclear how this insight might redirect our efforts to reconstruct the historic built environment for research and preservation purposes. If Kolson’s central point—that great plans are at odds with less rational forces shaping urban development—is true, then how shall we plan for our cities?

In his conclusion, Kolson argues for a dynamic approach to urban development that values the layers of meaning that accumulate over time, rather than grandiose planning that imposes a new order without respect for the existing context. However, his love of the vernacular leaves unclear the ideal role of government and the proper place of environmental design professionals in the development process. I was left wondering how the accretion of vernacular layers might mitigate the excesses of private development, such as the tendency to privatize public space; or systematically rectify oversights such as the failure to produce sufficient affordable housing. Ironically, despite Kolson’s expertise in political science, the book does not articulate the desired role of government in remediying structural inequalities in urban development. In the end, I did not know what role Kolson envisions for the planners, architects, and urban designers who agree that vernacular processes trump idealistic plans in the production of richly layered cities. Less attention to grand plans and more attention to the extensive literature on citizen participation might have provided a clearer and more constructive direction for the grassroots future of urban design. Faced with a classroom of urban-design students who accept Kolson’s premise that great plans contain the seeds of their own destruction, this reader wishes for a deeper exploration of what should be done.

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The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism


When we talk about architecture in cities, we are immediately drawn into a host of related issues, from urban design, traffic, and zoning to race, politics, and economics. Such factors often cannot be discussed intelligently without further broadening the scope to include regional planning, the environment, and state or federal legislative policy. The interconnected nature of the contemporary metropolis makes it hard to imagine significant changes occurring in one part that do not have important effects on others.

Architects have operated in this complex arena over the past century from a wide range of formal, ideological, and economic perspectives. They have worked under the banners of functionalism, brutalism, modernism, contextualism, historicism, and deconstructivism. But what they have frequently lacked is a comprehensive, synthetic way of looking at the urban setting that takes into account its many variables. Instead, architects have tried to project these styles and ideologies onto the city and have been regularly surprised when these do not seem to fit.

Using Los Angeles as her case study, Dana Cuff, professor of architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles, has written an extraordinary book that begins to address the interrelations of architecture with urban history, modern urban politics, economics, philosophical understandings of the meaning of land ownership, scale, and urban history. The publication focuses on housing because it is the clearest architectural manifestation of both progressive and conservative ideologies in the twentieth century, and because the failures of public housing in Los Angeles have much to teach us about urbanism in the United States. This is both a history of housing efforts and a hands-on history book for designers.

The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism is really two books. First, it is a review of the key ideas, principles, and laws that define designers’ operations in, and ideas about, the modern city. Second, it is a series of illustrative case studies of large-scale public and private housing projects in Los Angeles, from the Aliso Village of the 1930s and 1940s to the ongoing debate surrounding the 1,100-acre Playa Vista site, which entered the realm of convulsive urbanism in the 1940s when Howard Hughes bought it for his aircraft operations, and whose ultimate disposition remains uncertain today. One ought also to note the Studs Terkel-like urban social history as Cuff documents the stories of residents who were most affected, and least accommodated, by many of these giant projects.

The two opening sections cover definitions and property rights. Cuff
coins the useful and descriptive term “convulsive urbanism,” which she describes as sudden quantum changes in the urban landscape that occur as a direct consequence of the existence and occasional transformation of very large urban sites. Another cause of these convulsions was the disconnection of housing policy from urban reality in places like Los Angeles. It was a “fundamentally federal spatial policy” that sought to “construct a social history for the city, but from afar.” However, it was not only the distance from policymakers in Washington that doomed public housing in Los Angeles; it was the very nature of our American understanding of property rights.

Cuff reviews the bias in the United States for private ownership “rights” over the broader Lockean balance of rights and responsibilities that one finds in Europe. This important distinction makes clear why the importing of European models of urbanism, which presume a shared sense of ownership of the land, have usually failed in the U.S. It was easy, then, for opponents of public housing sponsored by federal legislation in response to the housing “emergencies” of both the Depression and the returning veterans from World War II to describe as “un-American” efforts to house even their neighbors in greatest need, especially once the emergency had passed.

The shift of responsibility for building public housing from the federal government to the states is clearly explained in sections on land regulation and eminent domain. The “takings” clause of the U.S. Constitution allowed land to be forcibly sold to the government as long as it was for a “public purpose,” but housing (unlike parks or roadways, for example) could not meet that criterion. So federal housing funds were soon transferred to the states, and the noble (and European-based) goal of community-building or social housing soon gave way to financial support for the buying of privately built homes. This battle between public housing and private enterprise is very well reported throughout the book. Though Cuff clearly wishes that more of the ambitions of the Regional Planning Association—with its preference for community building over “slum clearance”—had been realized, she finds fault with the ideological excesses of both sides when it comes to the case studies.

The second part of The Provisional City deals with the specific cases of Los Angeles’s convulsive large-scale housing at Playa Vista (1940–present), Westchester (1941–44), Aliso Village (1942), Rodger Young Village (1946), and the thwarted Chavez Ravine (also known as Elysian Park Heights, 1949–53). Each offers extremely useful insights for urban and architectural historians, students of public policy, and architects. Some of the stories are of a type with which architects will already be familiar, such as the profound erasure of history that occurred at Aliso Village. In this instance, an idiosyncratic street pattern was eliminated along with all of the “sub-standard” dwellings and replaced with a uniform (and urbanistically alien) arrangement of identical building blocks. This new pattern carried the now well-known pretense of egalitarianism, but reinforced the segregated character of the neighborhood as much as anything could.

Other stories are of particular interest to the young architect, for they speak to ideas that circulate through time and are current again. At Rodger Young Village, some of the dreams of postwar industrial production transforming the housing industry looked as though they might take hold. The 750 two-unit Quonset huts that made up the temporary encampment were cheap, easily produced and assembled, and, most important to many architects, promised new aesthetic possibilities more in tune with the age of the machine and of European modern architecture. The theme of industrial production and its relation to housing imagery and taste is carried on into the discussion of the building of the community of homes at Westchester, and the private housing industry (with roots in military defense production). Interestingly, then as now, there was much technical innovation in housing, but little found its way into the imagery of the home. Cuff leaves it to other writers to explore the detailed reasons why industrial imagery never replaced the traditional language of the wood-frame house, even though the external forces on the rhetoric of housing—building technology, materials, household appliances, gender roles, and work relationships—had undergone enormous transformations during the war years. Indeed, according to Cuff, California builders Fritz B. Burns and Henry J. Kaiser created radical new models for homes in the postwar era, including all-aluminum and all-plastic homes. But consumers simply did not want them.

Chavez Ravine constitutes perhaps the most tragic of Cuff’s case studies. Having watched urban development evolve over the intervening decades, we cannot help but see the collision of ideals coming together at this site. At the time development was under discussion, there were progressives advocating for public housing, locals defending the right of the small semirural encampment of Mexican-Americans to remain on the site, and a truly foreign language of socially committed community building proposed for the site by Richard Neutra. Opponents of Chavez Ravine, and of government intervention in the supply of housing in general, proved victorious. The outcome spelled the end of major federally funded housing projects in Los Angeles. A California referendum passed in 1950 (Proposition 10) required local approval of any proposed affordable public housing project, and the association of public housing with left-wing politics in the early 1950s made such approvals very unlikely.

Cuff reveals herself to be an even-handed critic of these tumultuous events as she reaches the final case study, the enormous Playa Vista site, whose ultimate disposition we still do not know. By this section of the book, Cuff has already documented the racist, redbaiting, self-interested politics of the opponents of public housing, and does little to hide her contempt for which
builders of private housing sought to undermine the government’s role in housing construction by using an extensive, seemingly civic-minded public process to obstruct and ultimately defeat public housing projects. The procedural roadblocks used to thwart public housing in the postwar era, such as massive public involvement, negative public-relations campaigns, and fear mongering, are now used by opponents of all large, contentious projects. That environmentalists have employed the same tactics to delay the development at Playa Vista for decades gives Cuff no comfort.

Indeed, though she argues persuasively that many of these case studies were “whale-sized, state-subsidized utopias,” Cuff maintains that the provisional nature of the city is a good thing and that these convulsions give it life. She also finds the enormous scale of the convulsions the only one that can accommodate the economic forces that exist in the contemporary city. I agree with this assessment, and would add that only by marshaling the existing economic forces in the city can we ever hope to gain control of its aggregated image. Importing European ideals about community has not worked in the past and is unlikely to work in the future, for, barring wholesale ideological change in the U.S., our views on property rights, economics, and politics will continue to underpin our built environment. The Provisional City, important for architectural and urban historians, is also an excellent book for architecture students, who will find an integrated view of the challenges they face in creating imagery that can address public ideals within these difficult constraints.

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Joan Ramon Resina and Dieter Ingenschay, editors
After-Images of the City

In testing the concept of an “after-image” as an analytical tool, the editors of this volume, Joan Ramon Resina and Dieter Ingenschay—both professors of literature—contribute fruitfully to the project of developing interdisciplinary methodological approaches to urban studies. The book is the product of a discussion group organized in conjunction with a conference called “After-Images of the City” held in 1998, though its contents differ significantly from the proceedings. In an introductory chapter, Resina explains that the after-image refers not only to visual imagery, but also to a social imaginary that “flashes up” (in David Harvey’s words) in all of the images that follow. Resina positions the after-image against Kevin Lynch’s rationalized, unified, Gestalt-influenced “image of the city,” which inadvertently naturalizes not only a contingent visual order, but also the unequal social relations that it implies. An after-image is not a “timeless Platonic entity” but a “temporalized, unstable, complex image brimming with the history of its production” (2). An after-image does not “represent”—a process that implies stable signs and referents—so much as it evidences mediations, the movements of social relations and of ideology. The analytic of the after-image allows the critic to circumvent the rhetorical pitfalls of freezing and monumentalizing urban conditions that are in fact constantly in process.

I would argue that this problem surfaces more often in literary studies, where the city sometimes appears static, as passive terrain for the movements of narrative, than in recent scholarship issuing from architecture and geography departments. Dana Cuff’s Provisional City (Cambridge, Mass., 2000) and Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin’s Splintering Urbanism (London and New York, 2001) are two recent examples that offer sophisticated accounts of urban change. Although the city is dynamic in these discourses, what appears static is the (normally dominated) subjectivity that exists within it, leaving unanswered questions about how people relate to the objects and images that surround them, what it is like to live in a city.

It is in exploring subjectivity that literary studies in general, and this volume in particular, have much to offer historians of the built environment. Of the nine contributors to this book, only one, Mary Woods, is an architectural historian, and only one, David Harvey, is a geographer; the other seven teach in literature, American studies, and Romance studies departments. All of the cities considered are European and North American. The essays vary widely in subject matter, depth of research, and level of engagement with the notion of the after-image. In fact, not all employ the term “after-image”: Debra Castillo’s keen analysis of the (pop) cultural constructions of Tijuana, for example, uses instead the notion of a “shadowtext.” What all of the texts do accomplish, however, is to provide an example of how an interdisciplinary approach to visuality can shed light on the relation between cities and subjectivity, even if not all of them venture into discussions of why cities look the way they do.

This is true, for example, of Ingenschay’s essay, “Bees at a Loss: Images of Madrid (before and) after La colmena.” In considering the recent Spanish novel, Ingenschay offers a striking account of how Madrid’s monumental ring highway, the M-30, might figure into the social imaginary of a madrileño student and drug dealer—a type of person who, if visible at all, is typically mute in discourses on the built environment. This type of analysis would be all the more valuable if it had a spatial component, but with a bibliography restricted almost exclusively to literary sources, the essay ventures no opinions as to why the M-30 might be there to begin with. In Ingenschay’s own words, “the metropo-