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Our Car Culture Is Not a Problem

Our house culture is

Like so many fascinated by Los Angeles, I grew up worshipping the Case Study houses. With their crisp edges, clean lines, muted colors, and vast planes of glass, they struck me as the perfect objects of aesthetic desire, especially when seen through the loving, era-defining eye of architectural photographer Julius Shulman. I think of the most famous of all his images, the one of Pierre Koenig's Case Study House No. 22: one party-dressed lady perched on an ottoman, another relaxed in a faintly Corbusian chair, both visible through seemingly endless floor-to-ceiling windows and cantilevered over the illuminated grid of the city below. But somewhere along the way I lost my religion.

"Los Angeles is the most beautiful city in the world, provided it's seen at night and from a distance"—an apocryphal quotation and Shulman's photograph have reinforced each other and a certain idea of Los Angeles's peculiar appeal in our collective conscious. Appreciation for the city requires distance from the city, and the distance attained is an index of the success achieved. Look at any well-known picture of a Case Study house, taken by Shulman or a less legendary residential photographer, and you never see Los Angeles, at least not at any level of detail at which it feels real. When the city appears at all, it does so almost as an abstraction: a blanket of lights or a distant skyline, visibility dependent on the smog level of the day. Los Angeles functioned not as a setting for the Case Study houses, but as a backdrop.

But the city isn't a backdrop. It's the main event. It's where I eat and drink, where I buy books and watch movies, where I meet friends, and, indeed, where I actually live. The city is where things happen. The city is where I want to be. Why don't these houses want to be there too? The Case Study program sprang from laudable, democratic ideals, but they are the ideals of a different era. Our cities still need good affordable

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Case Study House #22 photographs by Julius Shulman. © J.Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

housing, but it's time to change our vision of that housing: it should not be in the shape of a house distant from the city.

The Case Study houses came to be at the behest of John Entenza, *Arts & Architecture's* publisher between 1938 and 1962, dreamed up in the magazine's editorial offices when wartime shortages and restrictions relegated capital-A architecture to the drawing board. Those constraints looked like they were going to ease enough that with its June 1945 issue, *Arts & Architecture* could announce that "eight nationally known architects, chosen not only for their obvious talents, but for their ability to evaluate realistically housing in terms of need, have been commissioned to take a plot of God's green earth and create 'good' living conditions for eight American families."

The announcement stated that each Case Study house "must be capable of duplication and in no sense be an individual 'performance,'" so that the housing solutions discovered "will be general enough to be of practical assistance to the average American in search of a home in which he can afford to live." In the event, every one of the twenty-four Case Study houses built out of thirty-six commissioned proved a one-off. And if you want to buy one of the Case Study houses that still stand today, as architectural treasures in Beverly Hills, Bel-Air, Pacific Palisades, and other areas now synonymous with wealth, it will cost you dearly.

Architectural historians still argue about why the Case Study houses failed to bring about a landscape of high-design, low-cost architecture for all. Still, they played straight into a distinctive fantasy of postwar American suburbanism. One could imagine enjoying the cultural and economic benefits of a major world city while at the same time avoiding engagement with that city on many levels. One could luxuriate in modern technology and design and at the same time live a life of ease in a kind of futuristic, small-scale simulation of a pastoral idyll. And though the Case Study project didn't pan out as a mass delivery system for that fantasy, the fantasy itself lives on.

In the decade after the Case Study program, Reyner Banham celebrated the unrestrained architectural exuberance and sense of possibility in the city's built environment in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. But that possibility and exuberance existed, for Banham, in only two of those four ecologies: the coast, which he branded "Surfurbia," and the hills, where you'll find the iconic Case Study House No. 22. The "Plains of Id" were not for Banham.

Those "central flatlands are where the crudest urban lusts and most fundamental aspirations are created, manipulated, and, with luck, satisfied," he wrote. The city itself, that roiling, hazy purgatory you might end up quite literally looking down upon, if not erasing from your personal geography entirely, was best seen at a remove.

Banham pointed to LA's rich heritage of private residential architecture—the Case Study houses and other gems—as a chief asset of the city. And this heritage has become part of a ritual defense in the face of complaints about the city's air quality, traffic, and insufficiently clear-and-present sense of history. But while those homes undoubtedly are great assets in the eyes of those who happen to live in pieces of that rich heritage, what pride is the rest of the city supposed to muster for a scattered, mostly unrelated series of houses of the wealthy, viewable only from the street in a passing car or—best-case scenario—amid the reverential hush of a paid tour? And what conclusions should outsiders draw about a city that touts those bloodless experiences as its peaks?

Many of those outsiders, especially those from more traditionally urban cities, have laid the blame for all of Los Angeles's shortcomings squarely at the foot of the automobile—or, less concretely, at the foot of the city's supposedly pervasive "car culture." But it takes little more than a glance at the city in the twenty-first century to conclude that whatever car culture might have once possessed it has dissipated. Motorists no longer move freely on the freeways ("Autopia," in Banham's styling), but instead inch through "rush" hours that have gradually expanded to consume much of the day, stuck in uninspiring vehicles: utilitarian, aesthetically bland, and often cheap, symbols not of liberation but dour obligation.

You may not want to drive, but you've got to do it to get from your single-family house, a dwelling by its very nature not serviceable by rapid transit, to wherever you're going. What holds Los Angeles back, then, isn't a car culture but the house culture that necessitates the car. It's a point made clearly by many of the Case Study houses themselves. Through their windows and out to those striking city views: the house is here; the city is there. Our "house culture" holds that ownership of your very own detached home is the goal for which all can strive. The result is built forms incompatible with a truly urban and urbane city.

This culture in Los Angeles may no longer hold up the Case Study houses as its prime ideal, but it continues to



LA-MAS considers accessory dwelling units, or granny flats, as part of the exhibit “Shelter: Rethinking How We Live in Los Angeles” at the Architecture and Design Museum.

regard them as something like pieces of art in a white-cube gallery, enshrined to highlight their beauty and independence of context. They stand as especially artistic by-products of the promise long held out by Los Angeles’s house culture, a siren’s call heard and believed across the rest of California, the rest of America, and increasingly, unfortunately, the world: we can build a new, better kind of city, one that simultaneously maximizes individual comfort and access to urban amenities. We can build a city of houses.

I think of a city as a place that has every dimension of variety, where things change not just as you walk north, south, east, or west, but as you go up and down, ascending a tower or descending into underground pathways and subway tunnels. The city also changes across the dimension of time, ideally serving a slightly different social, commercial, and even architectural cocktail from one day to the next. For me, this experience climaxes in the cities of east Asia, especially in Japan, where forests of towers, falling as suddenly

as they rise, act as ever-changing vertical streets sprouting from ever-changing horizontal ones.

For all its appeal in the imagination, the city of houses has one big problem: it doesn’t exist. Building and preserving a city of houses, where one plot of land gets used for exactly one purpose, strips away the multidimensionality that characterizes the urban itself. It seems like this realization has finally dawned on Los Angeles, but only after the city sprawled outward just about as far as it could, leaving no option but to face the challenge of doubling back and filling itself in more densely. It’s a long time coming: *New Yorker* correspondent Christopher Rand wrote in 1966 of the region’s “conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces,” extrapolating a future of “much high-rise living” for Los Angeles from a present in which “whatever its origin, the preference for one-family houses seems to be on the way out.”

Rand may have spoken too soon, but now the high-rises have come, and more cranes to build them seem to pop up

against the sky every day. Tall towers had already begun to appear during Rand's time in Los Angeles, but mostly on downtown's recently cleared Bunker Hill (once a neighborhood of houses, Victorians placed, by modern suburban standards, cheek-by-jowl) and the westside business district of Century City, built on a former 20th Century Fox back lot. But this small boom produced apartment buildings that were nothing more than apartment buildings and office buildings that were nothing more than office buildings, with a smattering of retail space here and there, in thrall to the deadening twentieth-century notion of the separation of functions in the urban fabric. That idea held strong fifty years ago, but has in this century given way to a renewed fashion for buildings, here given the special-sounding label of "mixed-use," but the norm in other countries, built to accommodate residential, commercial, and office space all in one.

But not every Angeleno—even among the younger cohort who supposedly have come to a generational realization that, to live in a city, you must live in the city—embraces it. "Yeah, they're putting up a new mixed-use building across the street from us," I once heard a woman at a party say with audible dismay. When I asked what she thought was the matter with mixed-use buildings, she immediately clarified that their mix of uses itself doesn't bother her, but their blandness does. Most new mixed-use buildings, once they appear, seem to have emerged not from any strong design idea but instead from the simple economic imperative of quickly capitalizing on a lifestyle trend.

These contemporary buildings, while essentially sound building blocks of urbanism, often project a lack of imagination aggressive enough to remind one of the Los Angeles that James M. Cain described in 1933 as subject to neither "reward for aesthetic virtue" nor "punishment for aesthetic crime." It's enough to drive anyone back to the dream of an older Los Angeles, to the day of the Case Study houses. Hence the passion of local architectural preservationists, who seem ready to do battle not just for Pierre Koenig and Charles and Ray Eames, but for drive-in coffee shops and other midcentury novelties of questionable architectural value. But at least they're kind of neat to look at.

Judging by their work so far, the architects enlisted in this current moment of urbanization dare not attempt either aesthetic virtue or aesthetic crime, a timidity that seems to

validate the premise implicit in the preservationists' work that, if you let an old building fall, whatever rises in its place will, by default, be blockier, blunter, and blander, with nothing more interesting on the ground floor than a Starbucks. So much for the thrills of city life.

As justifiable as it seems given our current crop of architecture, the assumption that the built environment of Los Angeles reached its high-water mark decades ago, and that we can now only hope to hold on to architectural remnants of that time of optimism and eccentricity has become a self-fulfilling prophecy—and a big part of our current problem.

The Los Angeles preservation movement tends to submit to the same confusion that plagues preservation movements all over the western world: that between the artifacts of a culture and the culture itself. The Japanese, by contrast, don't bend to the same deep insecurity about their culture that we do. They know that any new building will be just as much a product of the Japanese culture as the one it replaces and no less meaningful a structure. Witness the recent outcry over the demolition of the Tokyo Olympics-era Hotel Okura—an outcry heard almost exclusively from Westerners.

So when we idealize the Case Study houses, perhaps we idealize not physical buildings as much as we idealize the culture of the time that produced them, years that now feel impossibly distant when, in Banham's words, "the program, the magazine, Entenza, and a handful of architects really made it appear that Los Angeles was about to contribute to the world not merely odd works of architectural genius but a whole consistent style." To say nothing of longing for a time when a regional architecture magazine had the resources to commission actual, built work from a host of big-name architects!

Los Angeles looked about to contribute its own architectural style to the world again in the 1980s when the zeitgeist branded a cohort of local architects including Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, and Eric Owen Moss the "LA School." The sharp, cerebral, mannered modernism of the first wave of Case Study architects had been supplanted by a kind of sharp, cerebral, tough postmodernism, the fruit of a loose, primarily Venice-based movement that deliberately foregrounded a variety of harsh design elements: jagged edges; shapes, letters, and numbers in exaggerated scale; rugged industrial materials not just employed but deliberately left exposed.



MAD architects' vision for Cloud Corridor, a high-density village, photographed at "Shelter: Rethinking How We Live in Los Angeles" at the Architecture and Design Museum.

Whenever I pass by "LA School" buildings—Moss's complex of experimental office spaces in Culver City called the Hayden Tract; Gehry's Chiat/Day Building, fronted by a giant pair of binoculars, now home to Google in Venice; Mayne's Caltrans headquarters downtown—I do sense the traces of a bold new future, a future, as science fiction writer William Gibson put it, that is already here but unevenly distributed. New projects under construction in Los Angeles right now impress in their own ways—the efficiently compact footprints of buildings reclaiming downtown's surface parking lots and the sheer physical and technological scale of the Wilshire Grand Tower come to mind—but they lack bravado.

This stifling air of mediocrity is not limited to Los Angeles. San Francisco suffers from a different manifestation of the same syndrome. There one senses a city's enormous potential fighting to get out from under an avalanche of rigid restrictions and nostalgic ideals. Just as in Los

Angeles, a true urban form struggles to emerge from the legacy of the contradictory and mirage-like vision of a city with a suburban texture.

We must dispense with the dream of a city of houses once and for all, and acknowledge that even our rich heritage of privately held residential architecture adds little to, and in many ways actually detracts from, the public life of the city. The state's growing population increasingly means a growing urban population, which means someplace has to lead the way into a post-house California.

Los Angeles could do it. So could San Francisco. Or San Jose. Or Oakland. Maybe even Fresno. If pulled off right, a new California urbanism in any of these cities could provide a model for the rest of California, for the rest of the United States, and maybe our increasingly urban world.

In Los Angeles, that would require relinquishing our attachment to buildings like the Case Study houses even as we might rediscover the spirit that built them, the spirit

of a culture that characterizes Los Angeles more than any movement in residential architecture could: a readiness, willingness, and ability to reinvent the way in which we live.

What might a post-house Los Angeles look like? When Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* envisioned a thoroughly urbanized twenty-first-century future for the city in the early 1980s, it presented a downtown heightened in every sense of the word, with not just taller buildings and renewed industry, but a more diverse and densely packed population in action twenty-four hours a day—a vision that has shaped our image of dystopia for decades. To this day, the term “*Blade Runner*-ization” gets tossed around by those looking to block buildings they consider too big, or that would mix elements, functional or human or hybrid, that they don't want mixed.

In 2013, Spike Jonze's *Her* offered a vision of near-future Los Angeles that viewers found more appealing, or at least less hellish. But its glossy towers, high-speed trains, and sidewalks in the sky came cut and pasted by movie magic straight from Shanghai, opting for a bland, almost placeless internationalism rather than daring to imagine the possibility of a new and distinctive architectural aesthetic emerging from an urbanized Los Angeles.

Here in the real world, ideas for architecture stylistically suited to the next Los Angeles have begun to appear, if only just. Michael Maltzan's mixed-used development One Santa Fe in the downtown Arts District, with its quarter-mile length and candy-cane color scheme, exudes a brazenness of a frontrunner. *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne described it, complimentarily, as banality stretched in the direction of monumentality. Maltzan has injected a badly needed dose of vitality into the city's

architecture scene just by building something that is impossible to ignore and not argue about.

Another Maltzan design, the striking Skid Row Star Apartments, appeared in *Shelter: Rethinking How We Live in Los Angeles*, an exhibition at A + D, Los Angeles's architecture and design museum. Some of the concepts on display there looked like house culture artifacts spruced up to survive another century. Others, especially PAR's 6030 Wilshire, might point a way forward to a creative refiguring of the very idea of “house.” The firm envisions a 930-foot-tall tower atop the coming Wilshire/Fairfax subway station, but a tower that would, in the firm's own words, stand against the existing uncreative “tower typology,” which “has become anonymous, defined mainly by its height.” Instead, the structure would effectively consist of a “stack of individual houses, each with a direct connection to nature through oversized terraces,” none placed too rigidly atop the one below it, resulting in a vertical street of replicable yet “unique living environments with access to green space, qualities that are emblematic of Los Angeles living.”

Those very qualities placed near the top of the priority list for the editors of *Arts & Architecture* as they looked to the future back in 1945. “Perhaps we will cling longest to the symbol of ‘house’ as we have known it,” they wrote as they launched the Case Study Program more than sixty years ago, pondering the future of residential architecture to come in postwar America. “Or perhaps, we will realize that in accommodating ourselves to a new world the most important step in avoiding retrogression into the old is a willingness to understand and to accept contemporary ideas in the creation of environment that is responsible for shaping the largest part of our living and thinking.” **B**