



“Alas, Los Angeles” by Brian Rinker, via Flickr.

FROM THE EDITOR’S DESKTOP

Someone once said that to understand the West, recovering a sense of its history, visit Europe; and to see where it’s headed in the future, look to California. This trope offers something about nineteenth- and twentieth-century booster mentalities, but can it help us better understand twenty-first-century cities?

Finishing doctoral work in Scotland, spring 2012, headed for a postdoc year in Cambridge, and eventually back to California, I had lunch in London with a geographer. Discussing a book under development aiming to engage California’s rich culture, he asked if I planned to interact with “the Los Angeles School,” which I vaguely knew about, mainly from Mike Davis’s dystopian LA narratives. With a closer look, there appeared brighter notes, this being California, coming from Ed Soja, Allen Scott, Michael Dear, Jennifer Wolch, Michael Storper, Dana Cuff, among others, and an impression that a significant contribution to urban studies was underway.¹ This work not only respected a prized diversity reflecting Los Angeles as it really was, but perhaps provided tools for interpreting California and the world. That work was a response to the Chicago School, although from my initial impression it seemed momentary, pinnaled at the 1992 riots, and situational.

The conversations and contributions from the LA School have moved on, recentralized somewhat in the University of California—Berkeley and Los Angeles. While the LA School was critical, situated in social science, urban planning, and geography, another movement has emerged as more speculative, generative, and future-oriented. It brings urban planning, art, architecture, and the humanities to bear on questions of urbanism, and focuses on the movement from knowledge to action.

This issue of *Boom* brings these figures, and those from the LA school, back together, with traces of *redivivus*, although now with new voices assembled by guest editors Susan Moffat, an urbanist and journalist, and Jonathan Crisman, an artist and architect. They each serve as project directors of urban humanities initiatives at UC Berkeley and UCLA, respectively, working from two of California’s epicenters of culture.²

The urban humanities movement has been emerging far beyond California, though, with developments across US, British, and South African universities, thanks partly to targeted support by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and their Architecture and the Humanities Initiative, which has seen value in collaboration among environmental design and the humanities as a source of new ideas on cities. While faculty and graduate students experiment with new research methods included under this umbrella, university leaders aim to institutionalize bridges that make possible the interdisciplinary work that straddles bureaucratic and disciplinary silos.

This issue of *Boom* starts off with manifestos from lead co-principal investigators of these UC initiatives. For the UC Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative, Anthony J. Cascardi, dean of Arts and Humanities, and Michael Dear, professor emeritus of city and regional planning in Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, demonstrate an intellectual engagement with this enterprise that bodes well for its sustainability. Meanwhile, the lead from UCLA's Urban Humanities Initiative, Professor of Architecture Dana Cuff, in collaborative interinstitutional fashion presents with Jennifer Wolch, dean of UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, the fruits of an intensive program to develop a cohort of scholars fluent in the multilingual, multi-vocal methods that are the core of the urban humanities. Participants include scholars like Todd Presner, a professor of languages, literature, and Jewish studies at UCLA; Greg Niemeyer, a New Media scholar at Berkeley; Shannon Jackson, a professor of rhetoric and performance studies; and Walter Hood, a professor of landscape architecture.

This sort of collaborative innovation is something California is quite favorable to, its communities frequently on the edge of contemporary social change, confronting and shaping forces of globalization, environmentalism, social hybridity, immigration, and the emerging information age. Student work done in "studios" promotes collaborative, iterative learning; and fieldwork provides on-the-ground engagement with cities for ongoing speculative inquiry. Hybrid methods emerge to help develop the intimate knowing and learning about cities that yields meaningful projects that cultivate practical skills.

The range of creative practices presented here, and others underway, are somewhat messy, experimental, playful, and hopeful for our urban spaces—and for the urban nature, humans, and other creatures that make these places their home. Now it's to you, our readers, that we submit these rich approaches, which beautifully explore and richly display both what the urban humanities may mean for the university, for our cities, and for our shared humanity both in California and beyond.

Yours,
Jason S. Sexton

Notes

¹ For an earlier account of the LA School, see Michael Dear, "The Los Angeles School of Urbanism: An Intellectual History," *Urban Geography* 24.6 (2003): 493–509.

² Publications, interactive maps, and online exhibitions for each project can be found at globalurbanhumanities.berkeley.edu and urbanhumanities.ucla.edu.