After Tel Aviv achieved UNESCO World Heritage List status, 1,600 of the buildings in the old part of the city were listed for conservation. The conservation plan sets out several requirements. A certain amount of infill building is permitted, following specific guidelines. Preserving the “modernist heritage” of Tel Aviv has required this and other innovative approaches to planning. This exhibition, promoting the architectural and urban values represented by Israel’s capital city, can be seen as both celebrating and reinforcing the importance of that heritage during a time of change.

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**Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990**

Getty Center Exhibitions Pavilion, Los Angeles
9 April–21 July 2013

National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.
20 October 2013–10 March 2014

*Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990* was an ambitious exhibition that drew on an earlier initiative by the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, chronicling the transformation of Los Angeles from a “fledgling pueblo in the mid-1800s to a vibrant urban center” in the mid-twentieth century. There has not been any major exhibition on Southern California’s architecture and urbanism since *Architecture in California, 1868–1968*, the groundbreaking retrospective curated by David Gebhard and Harriette Von Breton in 1968. Thus, *Overdrive* shouldered a huge burden of expectation.

Los Angeles, America’s second-largest city, has not been as lucky as the Big Apple. When we think of a quintessential twentieth-century American city that embodies exuberant architectural visions for the future and provides a dynamic urban theater for Horatio Alger-type “rags-to-riches” stories, we unconsciously conjure up images of New York. Despite L.A.’s claim of being “one of the most populous and influential industrial, economic, and creative capitals in the world” and its iconic image popularized by the celluloid glamour of Hollywood, the city’s architectural and urban histories have remained relatively understudied, compared to other global cities such as London, Paris, and New York.

This, of course, does not mean that there has been a dearth of worthwhile architectural and urban happenings in L.A. Among other books, David Gebhard and Robert Winter’s *A Guide to Architecture in California (1965)*; Reyner Banham’s *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971); Charles Moore, Peter Becker, and Regula Campbell’s *The City Observed, Los Angeles: A Guide to Its Architecture and Landscapes* (1984); and Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990) reveal a city that has been at the forefront of twentieth-century America’s pioneering experiments in architectural design and infrastructure planning.

Some observers, including Banham, presume that L.A. possesses unique qualities in terms of how its urban growth and various cultural myths (such as the city’s fabled “car culture”) intersect, to the point where its architecture and urbanism could not be sufficiently analyzed with conventional art historical frameworks. This is one city, for instance, where “mobility outweighs monumentality.” The notion of mobility implied a discursive space for futurist self-representation on the part of L.A.’s movers and shakers. In the 1960s, the Theme Building at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) sought to simulate the fast-track life of jet-age modernity. And its restaurant, suspended from two intersecting parabolic arms, masqueraded as a crystal ball for those who could not afford an airplane journey. In many ways, Southern California’s landscape-defining freeways, its Disneyland, and the architectural consortium L.A. Ten’s pathbreaking residential designs, among other contenders, were efforts to anticipate, represent, and shape a particular brand of future that would be uniquely suited to L.A.

The task of *Overdrive* was to map this city. It was not easy, however, to tell L.A.’s gigantic and conflicted story of modernity. While observing the city’s peculiar fascination with automobiles, its fluid sprawl, and investment in aerospace, one must also pause to consider Dorothy Parker’s characterization of L.A. as “seventy-two suburbs in search of a city.” The exhibition’s five sections—“Car Culture,” “Urban Networks,” “Engines of Innovation,” “Community Magnets,” and “Residential Fabric”—organized a vast body of material into an alluring narrative of a city’s dogged pursuit of a hopeful future.

Cocurators Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander presented the exhibition with tickling nostalgia. “Los Angeles’s identity is inextricably linked to the automobile,” the inaugural “Car Culture” section informed visitors, providing them with a cultural platform from which to appreciate “Google” coffee shops, drive-in restaurants, and other architectural typologies suitable for motorized lifestyles.1 With an imposing Disneyland poster, “Autopia at Tomorrowland,” the “Urban Networks” section portrayed the city’s “daring expansion” of water and power infrastructures, “pioneering freeways,” and transportation hubs, which collectively enabled L.A.’s octopus-like urban growth. “Engines of Innovation” outlined the influence of various emerging industries (such as aviation) on architectural materials and construction techniques.

The “Community Magnets” section argued that architectural innovations—including those dedicated to culture, sports, shopping, and even faith—had played a crucial role in Southern California’s unique ability to galvanize different communities.

Herbert Ryman’s 1963 drawings of Disneyland, as well as architectural models of various entries for the Walt Disney Concert Hall competition, were highlights of this section. Finally, “Residential Fabric” proposed that “more than any other building type, the private house has made Los Angeles famous for innovation in modern architecture.” Southern California’s comfortable climate and “surfurbia” landscape attracted many prospective homeowners, while motivating architects to rethink the conventions of domestic architecture. Here, John Lautner’s Buckminster Fuller–inspired Malin Residence (Chemosphere, 1960), “levitating” on a steep slope, and the Romanian émigré Haralamb Georgescu’s

unrealized, ecology-driven Skyloft (late 1960s) were presented as apt commentaries on L.A.’s robust investments in architectural innovations.

An assortment of photographs, maps, historic video clips, animated diagrams, and architectural models (for example, Grinstein/Daniels Inc.’s Googie-style KFC and Frederic P. Lyman’s Las Flores House) provided visitors with a synoptic view of L.A.’s multifaceted architectural and urban developments. The overall impression of the exhibition was that of an enthralling journey into history—though, perhaps, too much of a heroic history.

The main shortcoming of Overdrive was that its curators offered a somewhat airbrushed history of L.A., calcified in a blend of nostalgia and optimism. The curatorial challenge lay in articulating a credible return to a historical era with sufficient intellectual caution against impulses to glorify it. How does an exhibition infuse documentary narratives of the past with the introspection of hindsight? The politics of a “golden age” often tends to sanitize history, masking any anomalies that would blemish the very premise of an age being golden. To their credit, the curators of Overdrive indeed considered the usual conceptual fallacies that taint valorized histories, reminding visitors that the term “overdrive” refers to a hazardous condition in which “an engine churning at top speed may overheat.” In other words, L.A.’s accelerated growth exacted an environmental cost. The problem, however, was that this cautionary tale was not forcefully developed throughout the exhibition. A heavily choreographed history of the future appeared to have stymied the type of urban narratives—both nuanced and conflicted—that make L.A. such a fascinating city.

Overdrive perhaps warranted a more balanced reflection on the two sides of L.A.’s story, or what Mike Davis has called the city’s “sunshine” and “noir.”3 Although Overdrive included a small number of environmentally challenging items, such as Smog, Los Angeles (photograph, 1949), the exhibition’s hyped atmosphere seemed to be incompatible with stories that are socially uncomfortable. The city’s population, social polarization, and racial tensions grew simultaneously. Market-driven real estate development often uprooted the city’s native vegetation—such as the Joshua tree, the region’s natural marker—when a particular landscape element did not fit into the developer’s upscale vision of picturesque homesteads.

The show indeed needed a tinge of self-doubt that turning to literary L.A. might have supplied. Nathanael West’s nonheroic social appraisal of Southern California’s backstage and its underclass workers, explored in The Day of the Locust (1939), would have provided fodder for new insights into the intersection of class and “car culture.” James M. Cain’s narrative austerity in portraying a “paradise” without embellishing it with palm trees and eucalyptus, artificial sunshine, and pretentious optimism could have informed the examination of hyperurbanization’s environmental dilemmas.

Overdrive is a satisfying show, a visual feast of engrossing historical materials. That said, one is left contemplating how best to mesh “standard” and “revisionist” histories credibly for both specialist and nonspecialist audiences.

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**Related Publication**
Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander, eds., Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990 (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013). (For a review of this publication, see *JSAH* 73, no. 2 [June 2014], 291–94.—Eds.)

**Notes**