

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO LOS ANGELES?

When I first visited LA from London in 1987, I was smitten by what I saw: a young cityscape of single family homes built in ersatz styles on verdant streets overlaid with a web of freeways transporting drivers from sea to mountain, under vast blue skies.

Dotted across this terrain were experimental small houses in off-kilter forms, made of banal materials used interestingly -- by architects like Frank Gehry, Frank Israel, Morphosis, Eric Owen Moss and Hodgetts + Fung. Then there were the craftsmen bungalows from the 1910s, early modern models of new living from the '20s, and their mid-century variants.

To a visitor from an “old European” city, where lack of virgin land and centuries of overbearing architectural precedent had constrained experimentation, this city was fantastic. LA seemed hypermodern, 21<sup>st</sup> century even. It was a totally happening place.

I was unable to shake off my passion for Los Angeles, and moved here in 1991, then started to get to know my soul-city a little better. I learned that LA was perhaps not 21<sup>st</sup> century, rather it was 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from the good weather, geography, and Hollywood, it was not really unlike many other Western, postwar, car-based American cities.

Most new homes were not experiments in style and life; rather they were retro, skin-deep, increasingly barricaded from “the other” in gated communities. Most commercial buildings were mundane corporate structures. And the region was becoming strangled by its car-dependence.

Not that this made me love L.A. any less; I just appreciated its tensions more.

But then in 1992 came the Rodney King riots, then fires, floods and a devastating earthquake. These calamities blew LA apart, physically, psychically, politically, exposing ethnic and economic segregation, and pressing urban needs for its growing, often poor, population. The innovative houses by quirky architects suddenly seemed rather trivial.

All this left the LA architecture community more serious. Some of the air had been let out of the balloon. It was as if the brightest spark at a party had OD'd.

But at the same time there was a kind of euphoria in the air as architects embraced a new sense of purpose – and over the following years turned their talents to the design of schools, libraries, multi-family housing, arts institutions—in short, the public realm.

Witness Thom Mayne’s Diamond Ranch High School in Pomona, Hodgetts + Fung Hyde Park Library and Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Or new spins on multi-family housing and green design by the next generations of architects like Lorcan O’Herlihy, Daly Genik and Pugh + Scarpa.

Some complain that L.A. is losing what made it so special in those pre-’92 riot, pre-congestion decades. They wax lyrical about a bygone era of creative innocence. They say that L.A., as it densifies and adds public transit, is becoming a feeble copy of the vertical East Coast cities to which it was once an airy counterpoint.

I think it is true that LA is more constrained than it was – thanks in part to costly land and the growing preservationist spirit that makes it – for good and bad -- more like my Old Europe. And I must say I did get a bit worried recently when the Ghanaian-Brit architect David Adjaye told me he thought LA was now a “classical city,” as in Classic Modern. Then, a few days later, the architect Joe Addo, also – coincidentally -- from Ghana, told me he thought the LA architecture was no longer making waves on the international stage. I do have a nagging feeling sometimes that something more “happening” might be happening somewhere else.

But one of the abiding characteristics of Los Angeles is its energy and forward movement. Despite rising limitations, the kind of creative souls who have made and remade this place are busy generating a new version of L.A.

The architecture may not be as zany as that of the older mavericks, but it is more sensory in terms of light and materials, drawing renewed inspiration from California Modernism while exploring a mean version of green.

The emerging LA has walkable, lively neighborhoods serving tighter communities that are somewhat more conscious of their fragile connection to this sublime land and climate. L.A. may not be hypermodern anymore but maybe it can become a model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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