

Los Angeles

The Architecture of Four Ecologies

REYNER BANHAM

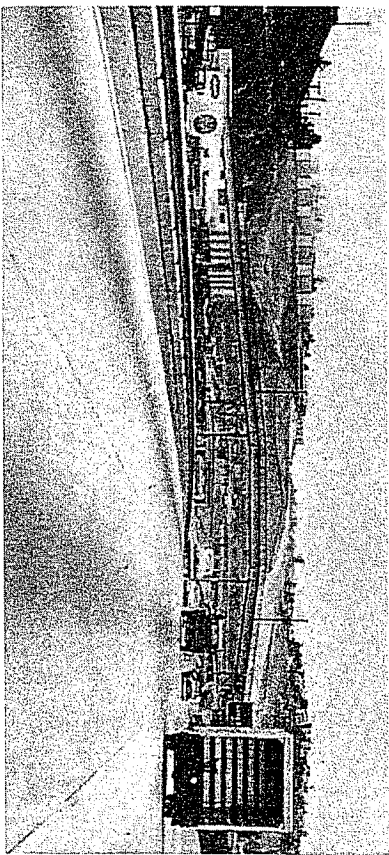
Introduction by ANTHONY VIDLER

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The first time I saw it happen nothing registered on my conscious mind, because it all seemed so natural – as the car in front turned down the off-ramp of the San Diego freeway, the girl beside the driver pulled down the sun-visor and used the mirror on the back of it to tidy her hair. Only when I had seen a couple more incidents of the kind did I catch their import: that coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors. A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one's destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway, the mile or two of ground-level streets counts as no more than the front drive of the house.]

[In part, this is a comment on the sheer vastness of the movement pattern of Los Angeles, but more than that it is an acknowledgement that the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.] Through the famous story in *Cry California* magazine about the family who actually lived in a mobile home on the freeways is now known to be a jesting fabrication, the idea was



111. Freeway-scape, drivers' eye view

immediately convincing (several other magazines took it seriously and wanted to reprint it) because there was a great psychological truth spoken in the jest. The freeway is where the Angelenos live a large part of their lives [111].

Such daily sacrifices on the altar of transportation are the common lot of all metropolitan citizens of course. Some, with luck, will spend less time on the average at these devotions, and many will spend them under far more squalid conditions (on the Southern Region of British Railways, or in the New York subway, for instance) but only Los Angeles has made a mystique of such proportions out of its commuting technology that the whole world seems to know about it — tourist postcards from London do not show Piccadilly Circus underground station, but cards from Los Angeles frequently show local equivalents like the 'stack' intersection in downtown; Paris is not famous as the home of the Metro in the way Los Angeles is famous as the home of the Freeway, (which must be galling for both Detroit and New York which have better claims, historically). There seem to be two major reasons for their dominance in the city image of Los Angeles and both are aspects of their inescapability; firstly, that they are so vast that you cannot help seeing them, and secondly, that there appears no alternative means of movement and you cannot help using them. There are other and useful streets, and the major boulevards provide an excellent secondary network in many parts of the city, but psychologically, all are felt to be tributary to the freeways.

Furthermore, the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive, which can be duplicated, in part, on other systems (England would be a much safer place if those skills could be inculcated on our motorways) but not with this totality and extremity. If motorway driving anywhere calls for a high level of attentiveness, the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles

seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical.

That concentration is required beyond doubt, for the freeways can kill — hardly a week passed but I found myself driving slowly under police control past the wreckage of at least one major crash. But on the other hand the freeways are visibly safe. I never saw any of these incidents, or even minor ones, actually happening, even in weeks where I found I had logged a thousand miles of rush-hour driving. So one learns to proceed with a strange and exhilarating mixture of long-range confidence and close-range wariness. And the freeway system can fail; traffic jams can pile up miles long in rush-hours or even on sunny Sunday afternoons, but these jams are rarely stationary for as long as European expectations would suggest. Really serious jams seem to be about as frequent as hold-ups on London suburban railways, and might — if bad — disrupt the working day of about the same number of citizens, but for most of the time traffic rolls comfortably and driving conditions are not unpleasant. As one habituated to the psychotic driving (as Gerald Priestland has called it) in English cities, and the squalor of the driving conditions, I cannot find it in me to complain about the freeways in Los Angeles; they work uncommonly well.

Angelenos, who have never known anything worse than their local system, find plenty to complain about, and their conversations are peppered with phrases like 'being stuck in a jam in the October heat with the kids in the back puking with the smog'. At first the visitor takes these remarks seriously; they confirm his own most deeply ingrained prejudices about the city that has sold its soul to the motor car. Later, I came to realize that they were little more than standard rhetorical tropes, like English complaints about the weather, with as little foundation in the direct personal experience of the speakers.

This is not to minimize the jams, or even the smog, but both need to be seen in the context of comparisons with other metropolitan areas. On what is regarded as a normally clear day in London, one

cannot see as far through the atmosphere as on some officially smoggy days I have experienced in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the photochemical irritants in the smog (caused by the action of sunlight on nitrogen oxides) can be extremely unpleasant indeed in high concentrations, but for the concentration to be high enough to make the corners of my eyes itch painfully is rare in my personal experience, and at no time does the smog contain levels of soot, grit, and corroding sulphur compounds that are still common in the atmospheres of older American and European cities.

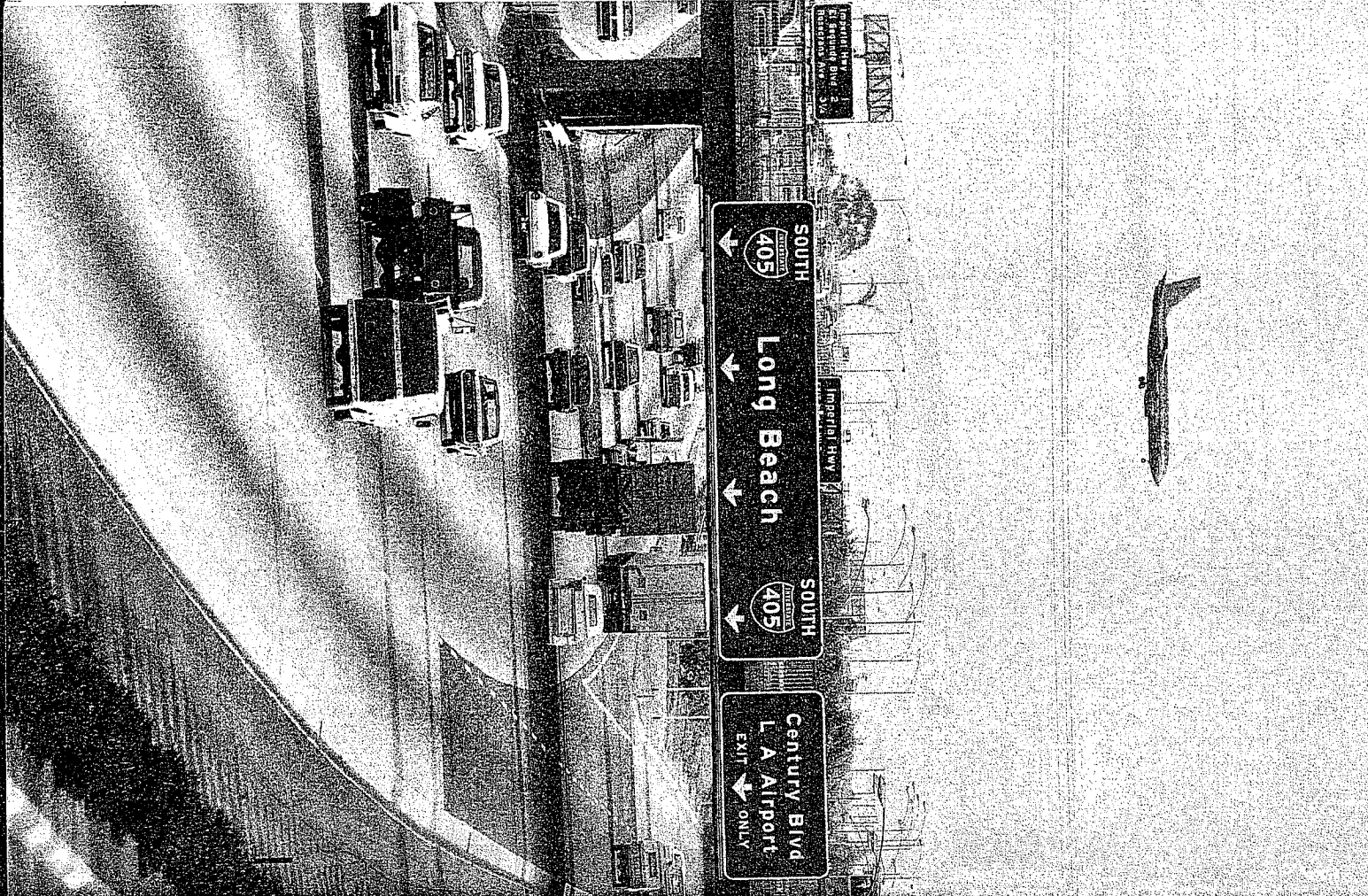
It is the psychological impact of smog that matters in Los Angeles. The communal trauma of Black Wednesday (8 September 1943), when the first great smog zapped the city in solid, has left permanent scars, because it broke the legend of the land of eternal sunshine. It was only a legend; the area was never totally pure of atmosphere. The Spaniards called it the Bay of Smokes and could identify it from the ocean by the persistence of smoke from Indian camp-fires, while plots of land in South Cucamonga were advertised in the eighties as being free from 'fog-laden sea-breezes'. But there is a profound psychological difference between fogs caused by Nature's land-forms and light breezes and God-given water, and air-pollution due to the works of man. To make matters worse, analysis showed that a large part of the smog (though not all, one must emphasize) is due to effluents from the automobile. Angelenos were shocked to discover that it was their favourite toy that was fouling up their greatest asset.

But, psychologically shocked or no, most Angeleno freeway-pilots are neither retching with smog nor stuck in a jam; their white-wall tyres are singing over the diamond-cut anti-skid grooves in the concrete road surface, the selector-levers of their automatic gearboxes are firmly in *Drive*, and the radio is on. And more important than any of this, they are acting out one of the most spectacular paradoxes in the great debate between private freedom and public discipline that pervades every affluent, mechanized urban society.

The private car and the public freeway together provide an ideal – not to say idealized – version of democratic urban transportation: door-to-door movement on demand at high average speeds over a very large area. The degree of freedom and convenience thus offered to all but a small (but now conspicuous) segment of the population is such that no Angeleno will be in a hurry to sacrifice it for the higher efficiency but drastically lowered convenience and freedom of choice of any high-density public rapid-transit system. Yet what seems to be hardly noticed or commented on is that the price of rapid door-to-door transport on demand is the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey.

The watchful tolerance and almost impeccable lane discipline of Angeleno drivers on the freeways is often noted, but not the fact that both are symptoms of something deeper – willing acquiescence in an incredibly demanding man/machine system. The fact that no single ordinance, specification or instruction manual describes the system in its totality does not make it any less complete or all-embracing – or any less demanding. It demands, first of all, an open but decisive attitude to the placing of the car on the road-surface, a constant stream of decisions that it would be fashionable to describe as 'existential' or even 'situational', but would be better to regard simply as a higher form of pragmatism. The carriage-way is not divided by the kind of kindergarten rule of the road that obtains on British motorways, with their fast, slow, and overtaking lanes (where there are three lanes to use!). The three, four, or five lanes of an Angeleno freeway are virtually equal, the driver is required to select or change lanes according to his speed, surrounding circumstances and future intentions. If everybody does this with the approved mixture of enlightened self-interest and public spirit, it is possible to keep a very large flow of traffic moving quite surprisingly fast.

But at certain points, notably intersections, the lanes are not all equal – some may be pre-empted for a particular exit or change-over



ramp as much as a mile before the actual junction. As far as possible the driver must get set up for these pre-empted lanes well in advance, to be sure he is in them in good time because the topology of the intersections is unforgiving. Of course there are occasional clods and strangers who do not sense the urgency of the obligation to set up the lane required good and early, but fortunately they are only occasional (you soon get the message!), otherwise the whole system would snarl up irretrievably. But if these preparations are only an unwritten moral obligation, your actual presence in the correct lane at the inter-section is mandatory – the huge signs straddling the freeway to indicate the correct lanes must be obeyed because they are infallible.

At first, these signs can be the most psychologically unsettling of all aspects of the freeway – it seems incredibly bizarre when a sign directs one into the far left lane for an objective clearly visible on the right of the carriageway, but the sign must be believed. No human eye at windscreen level can unravel the complexities of even a relatively simple intersection [112] (none of those in Los Angeles is a symmetrical cloverleaf) fast enough for a normal human brain moving forward at up to sixty mph to make the right decision in time, and there is no alternative to complete surrender of will to the instructions on the signs.

But no permanent system of fixed signs can give warning of transient situations requiring decisions, such as accidents, landslips or other blockages. It is in the nature of a freeway accident that it involves a large number of vehicles, and blocks the carriageway so completely that even emergency vehicles have difficulty in getting to the seat of the trouble, and remedial action such as warnings and diversions may have to be phased back miles before the accident, and are likely to affect traffic moving in the opposite direction in the other carriageway as well. So, inevitably the driver has to rely on other sources of rapid information, and keeps his car radio turned on for warnings of delays and recommended diversions.

Now, the source of these radio messages is not a publicly-operated traffic-control radio-transmitter; they are a public service performed by the normal entertainment stations, who derive the information from the police, the Highway Patrol, and their own 'Sigalert' helicopter patrols. Although these channels of information are not provided as a designed component of the freeway system, but arise as an accidental by-product of commercial competition, they are no less essential to the system's proper operation, especially at rush hours. Thus a variety of commanding authorities – moral, governmental, commercial, and mechanical (since most drivers have surrendered control of the transmission to an automatic gearbox) – direct the freeway driver through a situation so closely controlled that, as has been judiciously observed on a number of occasions, he will hardly notice any difference when the freeways are finally fitted with computerized automatic control systems that will take charge of the car at the on-ramp and direct it at properly regulated speeds and correctly selected routes to a pre-programmed choice of off-ramp

But it seems possible that, given a body of drivers already so well trained, disciplined, and conditioned, realistic cost-benefit analysis might show that the marginal gains in efficiency through automation the residual illusions of free decision and driving skill surviving in the present situation. However inefficiently organized, the million or so human minds at large on the freeway system at any time comprise a far greater computing capacity than could be built into any machine currently conceivable – why not put that capacity to work by fostering the illusion that it is in charge of the situation?

If illusion plays as large a part in the working of the freeways as it does in other parts of the Angeleno ecology, it is not to be deprecated. The system works as well as it does because the Angelenos believe in it as much as they do; they may squeal when the illusion is temporarily shattered or frustrated; they may share the distrust of the

Division of Highways that many liberal souls currently (and understandably) seem to feel; but on leaving the house they still turn the nose of the car towards the nearest freeway ramp because they still believe the freeways are the way to get there. They subscribe, if only covertly, to a deep-seated mystique of freeway driving, and I often suspect that the scaring stories of the horrors of the freeways are deliberately put about to warn off strangers.

Partly this would be to keep inexperienced and therefore dangerous hayseeds off the carriageways, but it would also be to prevent the profanation of their most sacred ritual by the uninitiated. For the Freeway, quite as much as the Beach, is where the Angeleno is most himself, most integrally identified with his great city.

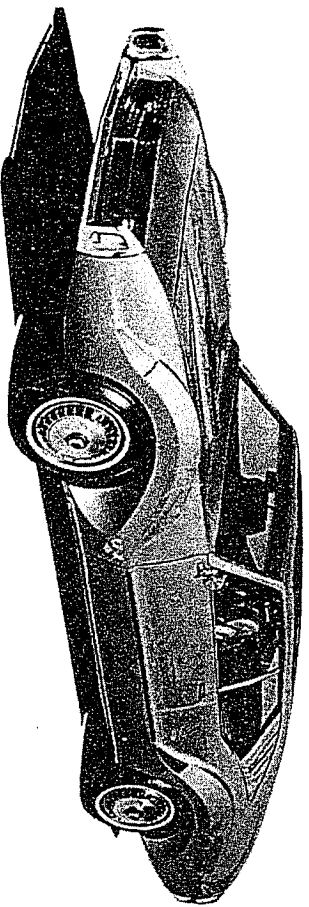
Say, isn't that your old Aunt Nabby who just passed you in the outer lane of the Berdoos at eighty? There she is, six months in Southern California and already she's got the glued up ash-blond hair, the wrap-around shades and the tight pants and . . . a chrome yellow Volkswagen with reversed wheels and a vroom-vroom exhaust.

Thus wrote Brock Yates in *Car and Driver* magazine, a capsule account of identification with Southern California citizenship via the automobile as a work of art and the freeway as a suitable gallery in which to display it.

The automobile as art-work is almost as specific to the Los Angeles freeways as is the surf-board to the Los Angeles beaches. It has a lengthy tradition behind it, but that tradition derives far less from the imported dream cars, the mile-long Hispanos or the gold Dual-Ghias of the film stars, than from the wonders wrought in backyards by high-school drop-outs upon domestic Detroit-built machines. The art of customizing, of turning common family sedans into wild extravaganzas of richly coloured and exotically shaped metal, was delinquent in its origins, however much the present apologists of the hot-rod cult may try to pretend to the contrary, and the drag-racing which is almost the dominant local land-borne sport in Los Angeles is simply a

ritualized version of the illegal sprint races that used to take place on the public highways.

But in the uninhibited inventiveness of master customizers like George Barris [113] and Ed Roth, normal straight Los Angeles found something that sprang from the dusty grass roots of its native culture – ‘to ride forth seeking romance . . . to speak in superlatives



113. Customized car, George Barris, designer

. . . to throw dignity out of the window, to dress dramatically . . . to tackle the impossible’ – tamed it, institutionalized it, and applied it in some form to almost every vehicle awheel in the City of Angels (whence its influence has spread back to Detroit and thus to all other motorized parts of the globe). The customized automobile is the natural crowning artefact of the way of life, the human ecology, it adorns.

If you regard the freeways, with Brock Yates, as an ‘existential limbo where man sets out each day in search of western-style individualism’ then the assertiveness of the style of the art-automobile might be regarded as an aid in that anxious search. But my own observations of Angeleno drivers at close range suggests that many of those who flaunt a wild rail on the Berdoo or the San Mo are relaxed and well-adjusted characters without an identity problem in the world for whom the freeway is not a limbo of existential *angst*, but the place where they spend the two calmest and most rewarding hours of their daily lives.

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My first consciousness of any specific architecture in Los Angeles occurred almost exactly twenty years before writing these words (and probably triggered the process which led to them being written) when I discovered Charles Eames’s house [114] in an American magazine. That experience was not unique; the Eames house has had a profound effect on many of the architects of my generation in Britain and Europe. It became the most frequently mentioned point of pilgrimage for intending visitors to Los Angeles among my friends, some of whom were later to edit a special issue of the English magazine *Architectural Design* devoted to Eames’s work, and to his house. For most of two decades it has shared with Rodia’s towers in Watts the distinction of being the best known and most illustrated building in Los Angeles (a fact which still surprises many Angelenos).

The reasons for the reputation of the Eames’s house are as multifarious as they always must be for a durable masterpiece. The inherent originality and quality of the design are manifest, but it is quite likely that the simultaneous appearance in the world’s press of Eames’s globally successful steel and moulded plywood chair, the most compelling artefact of its generation in some ways, helped to focus world attention on everything that Eames was doing at the time. Again, the style of both the house and the chair answered exactly to an emerging taste for that kind of fine-drawn design in many parts of the world. But the most crucial factor is external to Eames’s qualities as a designer: it was the publication of the house, like the chair, in John Entenza’s Los Angeles-based magazine *Arts and Architecture*.