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Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies. By Reyner Banham. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971. Second Edition, 2009. Bibliography, illustrations, and index, li + 238 pp. \$22.95 paper.

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In its time, Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* was somewhat of an academic bombshell for architectural historians and urbanist scholars. The book, first published in 1971 (and appearing here with its original text and a new foreword) challenged at least two prevailing wisdoms of the era: first, that architectural history books should consist of a chronological, ordered presentation of the evolution of important buildings and forms in a city; second, that Los Angeles, with its low density sprawl, homogenous suburbs, gridlocked freeways, and slavish attachment to the automobile, was an urban design disaster.

In no uncertain terms, Banham turned both of these notions upside down. He argued for a design history that went beyond the usual encyclopedia-like catalogue of 106 *The Journal of San Diego History* structures to encompass the larger socio-cultural, ecological, and geographic context. In his words, he wished to place architecture "within the topographical and historical context of the total artifact that constitutes Greater Los Angeles" (p. 5). Banham further toppled convention by suggesting that architectural history was more than a history of formally designed structures; it needed to embrace the totality of the cultural landscape, from freeways to fast food restaurants.

The author rocked the academy by offering a far more sympathetic view of Los Angeles, which by the late 1960s was attracting a whirlwind of criticism from progressive urban planners and designers for its emerging sprawl, smog, and dull suburban forms. While in his opening chapter Banham attempted to portray himself as neutral in these debates, the main text of the book reveals a writer not only sympathetic towards LA's brand of urbanism, but one enamored by its possibilities. Banham maintained that "no city has ever been produced by such an extraordinary mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics, and culture; nor is it likely that an even remotely similar mixture will ever occur again" (p. 6).

It is Banham's passion for Los Angeles that is a driving force in the book's timeless quality. Eccentric and lively prose is accompanied by images that evoke the sense of Los Angeles being something new, something cutting edge, something that peers into the future. Adding to the book's allure is its presentation, a narrative that sweeps back and forth between chapters on Banham's four ecologies ("Surfurbia," "Foothills," "The Plains of Id," and "Autopia") and those on architectural styles. This sense of things being out of order is meant to challenge the reader to consider Los Angeles in a different way. It is Banham being post-modern before post-modernism had fully taken hold.

For all of its virtues, Banham's book is challenged simply by the passage of time. The 2009 edition tackles this challenge head on with a new foreword titled "After Ecologies" by architect and scholar Joe Day. Day writes about the ways LA has changed since Banham's book was published, and whether the four ecologies perspective remains valid. Day makes several astute observations about the changing Los Angeles metropolis: first, that the idiosyncracies recorded decades ago--odd buildings, modernist glass houses on hillsides, or surf culture landscapes -- no longer adequately define Los Angeles; second, that an entire school of urban theory (in architecture, geography, art, etc.) has evolved to create a much larger discourse on the city; third, Los Angeles has lost its status as the symbol of urban sprawl (Phoenix, Dallas, or Miami are just as representative) and as the national icon of urban design simulation (Las Vegas likely gets the nod); and fourth, in terms of globally significant growth, Los Angeles is now overshadowed by boom cities like Shanghai, Mumbai or Dubai.

Day also addresses a commonly held critique about Banham's use of the term "ecology." Banham managed largely to ignore the environmental and green dimensions of ecology, preferring to go with a more culturally nuanced version of the concept. In Day's words, Banham seems to imply that "ecologies...are simply what we make of them" (p.xxii). In this sense, perhaps times have changed. Los Angeles' future must embrace the question of how the region will sustain itself. Banham is silent on the apparent environmental (and social) contrast between those living in Surfburbia or wealthy foothill communities, and those trapped on the Plains of Id. This seems ultimately a glaring shortcoming in the original book – and one which screams out for a new epilogue: how will a metropolitan region of 17 million spread across over a thousand square miles of semi-arid, water deprived land, and ranked with the worst air pollution in the United States sustain itself through the twenty first century. What kind of ecologies will be needed? How will socio-environmental inequality be confronted?

Still, the value of Banham's book must, in the end, be its trumpet call to architectural historians and students of cities to think beyond buildings or sterile land use categories. The text is a primer on the importance of "sense of place" in architectural history. Banham had the audacity and insight to leap across scholarly boundaries, to stitch together a narrative that poetically blends critical historic details – Spanish colonial revival architecture, European modernism, shopping mall design, Hollywood, freeway landscapes. – into what will remain as the first, and still one of the best comprehensive studies of the Los Angeles built environment.