

## 1 In the Rear-view Mirror

A city seventy miles square but rarely seventy years deep, apart from a small downtown not yet two centuries old and a few other pockets of ancientry, Los Angeles is instant architecture in an instant townscape. Most of its buildings are the first and only structures on their particular parcels of land; they are couched in a dozen different styles, most of them imported, exploited, and ruined within living memory. Yet the city has a comprehensible, even consistent, quality to its built form, unified enough to rank as a fit subject for an historical monograph.

Historical monograph? Can such an old-world, academic, and precedent-laden concept claim to embrace so unprecedented a human phenomenon as this city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula? – otherwise known as Internal Combustion City, Surfurbia, Smogville, Aerospace City, Systems Land, the Dream-factory of the Western world. It's a poor historian who finds any human artefact alien to his professional capacities, a poorer one who cannot find new bottles for new wine. In any case, the new wine of Angeleno architecture has already been decanted into one of the older types of historical bottle with a success that I will not even try to emulate.

*Architecture in Southern California* by David Gebhard and Robert Winter is a model version of the classical type of architectural gazetteer – erudite, accurate, clear, well-mapped, pocket-sized. No student of the architecture of Los Angeles can afford to stir out of doors without it. But there is no need to try and write it again; all I wish to do here is to record my profound and fundamental debt to the authors, and echo their admission of even more fundamental indebtedness – to Esther McCoy and her 'one-woman crusade' to get Southern California's modern architectural history recorded and its monuments appreciated.



1. Chaos on Echo Park

Yet even the professed intention of Gebhard and Winter to cover ‘a broad cross-section of the varieties of Angeleno architecture’, is inhibited by the relatively conventional implicit definition of ‘architecture’ accepted by these open-minded observers; their spectrum includes neither hamburger bars and other Pop ephemeridae at one extreme, nor freeway structures and other civil engineering at the other. However, both are as crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles as are dated works in classified styles by named architects.

In order to accommodate such extremes, the chapters that follow will have to deviate from accepted norms for architectural histories of cities. What I have aimed to do is to present the architecture (in a fairly conventional sense of the word) within the topographical and historical context of the total artefact that constitutes Greater Los Angeles, because it is this double context that binds the polymorphous architectures into a comprehensible unity that cannot often be discerned by comparing monument with monument out of context.

So when most observers report monotony, not unity, and within that monotony, confusion rather than variety, this is usually because the context has escaped them [1]; and it has escaped them because it is unique (like all the best unities) and without any handy terms of comparison. It is difficult to register the total artefact as a distinctive human construct because there is nothing else with which to compare it, and thus no class into which it may be pigeonholed. And we historians are too prone to behave like Socrates in Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos*, to reject the inscrutable, to hurl the unknown in the ocean.

How then to bridge this gap of comparability. One can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree, as Richard Austin Smith pointed out in a justly famous article in 1965, and the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life. So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original.

But whereas knowledge of Dante's tongue could serve in reading other Italian texts, full command of Angeleno dynamics qualifies one only to read Los Angeles, the uniquely mobile metropolis. Again that word 'uniquely' . . . I make no apology for it. The splendours and

miseries of Los Angeles, the graces and grotesqueries, appear to me as unrepeatable as they are unprecedented. I share neither the optimism of those who see Los Angeles as the prototype of all future cities, nor the gloom of those who see it as the harbinger of universal urban doom. Once the history of the city is brought under review, it is immediately apparent 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. The interaction of these factors needs to be kept in constant historical view – and since it is manifestly dangerous to face backwards while at the steering wheel, the common metaphor of history as the rear-view mirror of civilization seems necessary, as well as apt, in any study of Los Angeles.

First, observe an oddity in the ‘Yellow Pages’ of the local phone books; many firms list, in the same size type and without comment, branches in Hawaii, New Zealand, and Australia. This is neither a picturesque curiosity nor commercial bragging – it is simply the next natural place to have branches, a continuation of the great westward groundswell of population that brought the Angelenos to the Pacific shore in the first place, a groundswell that can still be felt throughout the life of the city.

Los Angeles looks naturally to the Sunset, which can be stunningly handsome, and named one of its great boulevards after that favourite evening view. But if the eye follows the sun, westward migration cannot. The Pacific beaches are where young men stop going West, where the great waves of agrarian migration from Europe and the Middle West broke in a surf of fulfilled and frustrated hopes. The strength and nature of this westward flow need to be understood; it underlies the differences of mind between Los Angeles and its sister-metropolis to the north.

San Francisco was plugged into California from the sea; the Gold Rush brought its first population and their culture round Cape Horn;



their prefabricated Yankee houses and prefabricated New England (or European) attitudes were dumped unmodified on the Coast. Viewed from Southern California it looks like a foreign enclave, like the Protestant Pale in Ireland, because the Southern Californians came, predominantly, overland to Los Angeles, slowly traversing the whole North American land-mass and its evolving history.

They brought with them – and still bring – the prejudices, motivations, and ambitions of the central heartland of the USA. The first major wave of immigration came from Kansas City on excursion tickets after 1885; later they came in second-hand cars out of the dust-bowl – not for nothing is Mayor Yorty known (behind his back) as the Last of the Okies, and Long Beach as the Main Seaport of Iowa! In one unnervingly true sense, Los Angeles is the Middle West raised to flash-point, the authoritarian dogmas of the Bible Belt and the perennial revolt against them colliding at critical mass under the palm trees. Out of it comes a cultural situation where only the extreme is normal, and the Middle Way is just the unused reservation down the centre of the Freeway.

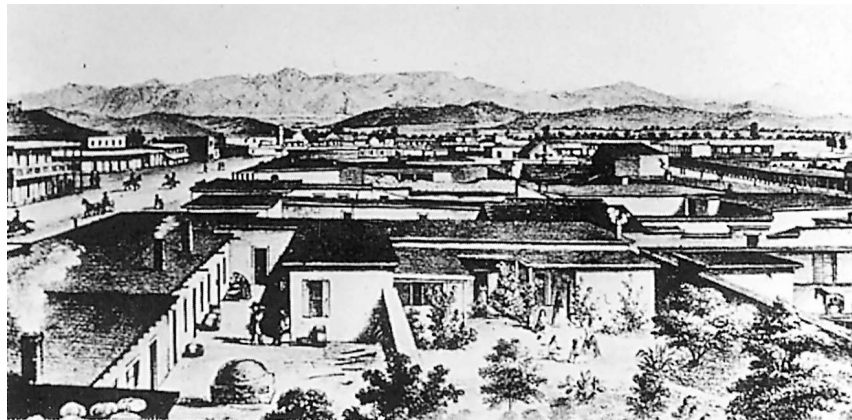
Yet these extremes contrive to co-exist with only sporadic flares of violence – on Venice Beach, in Watts, or whatever is the fashionable venue for confrontations. Miraculously the city's extremes include an excessive tolerance. Partly this is that indifference which is Los Angeles's most publicized vice, but it is also a heritage from the extraordinary cultural mixture with which the city began. If Los Angeles is not a monolithic Protestant moral tyranny – and it notoriously is not! – it is because the Mid-western agrarian culture underwent a profound transformation as it hit the coast, a sun-change that pervades moral postures, political attitudes, ethnic groupings, and individual psychologies. This change has often been observed, and usually with bafflement, yet one observer has bypassed the bafflement and gone straight to an allegory of Californiation that seems to hold good from generation to generation – Ray Bradbury in the most fundamental of his Martian

stories, *Dark they were and Golden Eyed*, where the earth-family are subtly transformed, even against their wills, into tall, bronzed, gold-eyed Martians who abandon their neat Terran cities and the earthly cares and duty they symbolize, and run free in the mountains.

In one sense, this Martian transformation was forced upon the arriving agriculturalists by their daily occupations. Whereas a wheat-farming family relocating itself in the Central Valley, around Stockton in mid California, might expect to continue wheat-farming, those who went to Southern California could hardly hope even to try. Where water was available, Mediterranean crops made better sense and profit, olives, vines and – above all – citrus fruits, the first great source of wealth in Southern California after land itself. Horny-handed followers of the plough and reaper became gentlemen horticulturalists among their ‘groves and fountains’.

The basic plants and crops for this transformed rural culture were already established on the land before the Mid-westerners and North Europeans arrived, for the great wave of westward migration broke across the backwash of a receding wave from the south – the collapsing Mexican regime that was in itself the successor to the original Spanish

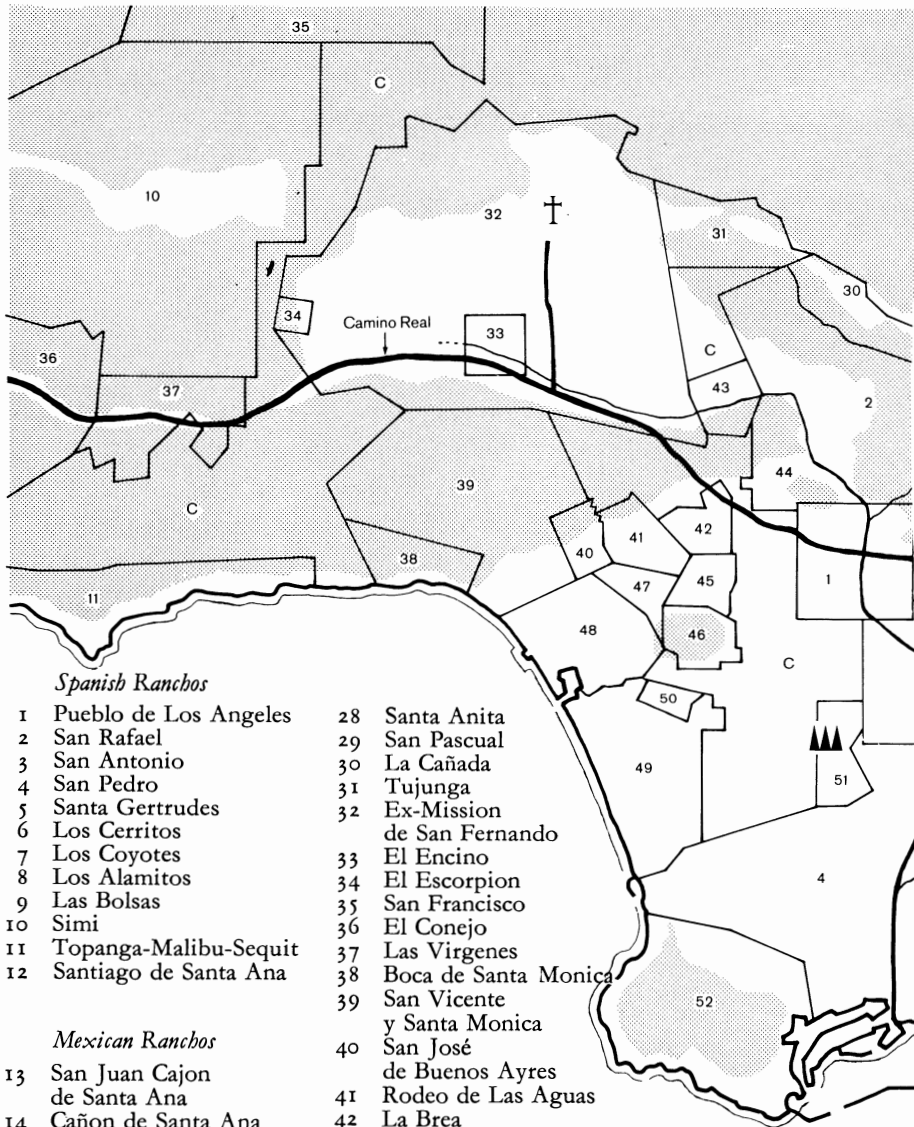
## 2. The pueblo of Los Angeles in 1857



colonization of California. The two currents swirled together around some very substantial Hispanic relics: the Missions, where the fathers had introduced the grape, olive, and orange as well as Christianity, the military communication line of the Camino Real and the Presidio forts, the very Pueblo de Nuestra Señora Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula [2].

And, above all, a system of ranching whose large scale, open-handedness and al fresco style were infectious, and whose pattern of land-holding still gives the ultimate title to practically every piece of land in Greater Los Angeles. Most of the original titles granted by the kings of Spain and by the Mexican governors were confirmed by patents granted by the US after 1848 (often a long while after; land-grant litigation became almost a national sport in California) and thus bequeathed to the area a pattern of property lines, administrative boundaries, and place-names [3] that guarantee a kind of cultural immortality to the Hispanic tradition.

So the predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture of Los Angeles ('Built by the British, financed by the Canadians') is deeply entangled with remnants of Spain, and has been so ever since an early-arriving *Yanqui* like Benjamin Wilson could translate himself into a 'Don Benito' by marrying into the Yorba clan, and thus into a ranching empire that spread over vast acreages to the east of the Pueblo. This ancient entanglement is still deeply felt, even if it is not officially institutionalized (as in the Spanish *Fiesta* in Santa Barbara, up the coast). It still provides psychological support for the periodical outbursts of pantiled roofs, adobe construction, arcaded courtyards, that constitute the elusive but ever-present Spanish Colonial Revival style, in all its variants from the simplest stuccoed shed to fantasies of fully-fledged Neo-Churrigueresque [4]. Such architecture should never be brushed off as mere fancy-dress; in Los Angeles it makes both ancestral and environmental sense, and much of the best modern architecture there owes much to its example.



*Spanish Ranchos*

- 1 Pueblo de Los Angeles
- 2 San Rafael
- 3 San Antonio
- 4 San Pedro
- 5 Santa Gertrudes
- 6 Los Cerritos
- 7 Los Coyotes
- 8 Los Alamitos
- 9 Las Bolsas
- 10 Simi
- 11 Topanga-Malibu-Sequit
- 12 Santiago de Santa Ana

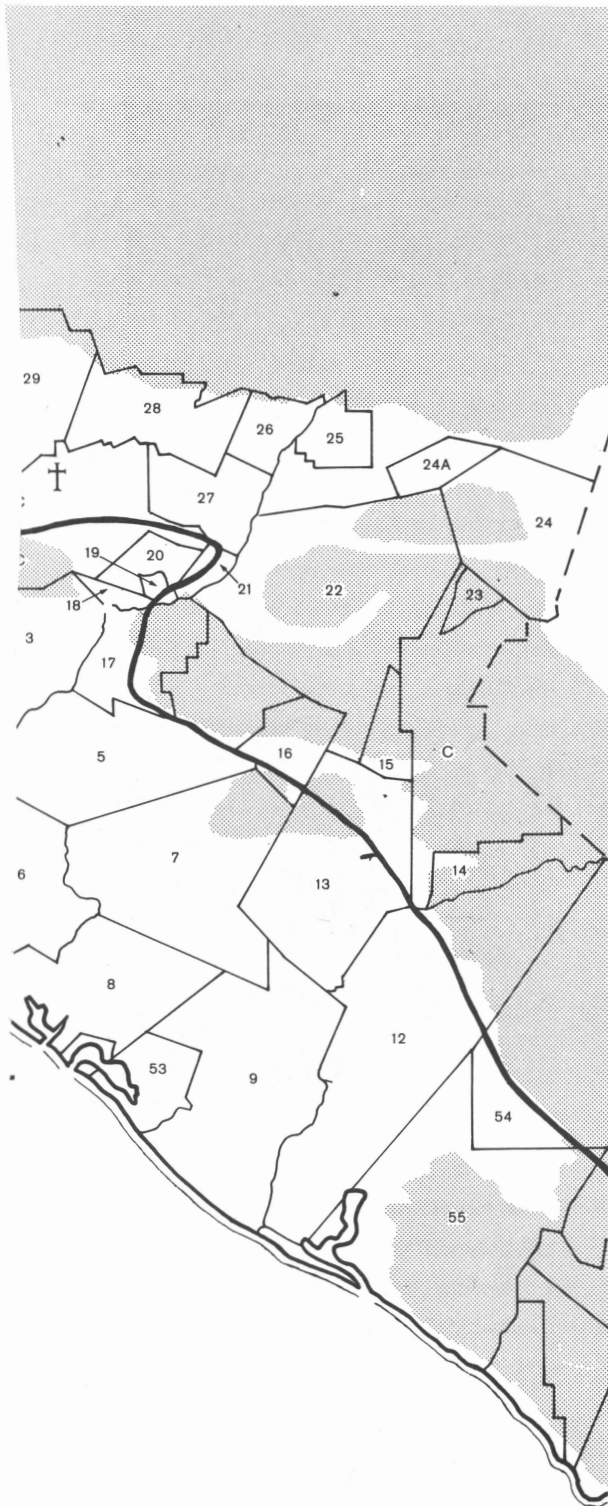
*Mexican Ranchos*

- 13 San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana
- 14 Cañon de Santa Ana
- 15 Rincon de la Brea
- 16 La Habra
- 17 Paso de Bartolo
- 18 La Merced
- 19 Potrero Chico
- 20 Potrero Grande
- 21 Potrero de Filipe Lugo
- 22 La Puente
- 23 Los Nogales
- 24, 24A San José
- 25 Addition to San José
- 26 Azusa de Duarte
- 27 San Francisquito

- 28 Santa Anita
- 29 San Pascual
- 30 La Cañada
- 31 Tujunga
- 32 Ex-Mission de San Fernando
- 33 El Encino
- 34 El Escorpion
- 35 San Francisco
- 36 El Conejo
- 37 Las Virgenes
- 38 Boca de Santa Monica
- 39 San Vicente y Santa Monica
- 40 San José de Buenos Ayres
- 41 Rodeo de Las Aguas
- 42 La Brea
- 43 Providencia
- 44 Los Felis
- 45 Las Cienegas
- 46 Cienega o' Paso de la Tijera
- 47 Rincon de los Bueyes
- 48 La Ballona
- 49 Sausal Redondo
- 50 Aguaje de la Centinela
- 51 Tajauta
- 52 Los Palos Verdes
- 53 La Bolsa Chica
- 54 Lomas de Santiago
- 55 San Joaquin

} now Irvine

3. Map of Spanish and Mexican Ranchos



0 2 4 6 8 10  
miles

- C Common land
- † Missions
- ▲▲▲ Watts Towers
- High ground



4. St Vincent's church, 1923, Albert C. Martin, architect

As this architecture shows, the mixture of Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon traditions could have provided the basis for an interesting culture, even if its economic basis had remained agrarian. But the Yankees were coming because they knew a better trick with land than

just ranching it; they stormed in on the crest of a wave of technological self-confidence and entrepreneurial abandon that left simple ranching little hope of survival. Land was acquired from the grant holders by every means in the rule book and some outside it, was subdivided, watered, put down to intensive cropping, and ultimately offered as residential plots in a landscape that must have appeared to anyone from east of the Rockies like an earthly Paradise.

Whatever man has done subsequently to the climate and environment of Southern California, it remains one of the ecological wonders of the habitable world. Given water to pour on its light and otherwise almost desert soil, it can be made to produce a reasonable facsimile of Eden. Some of the world's most spectacular gardens are in Los Angeles, where the southern palm will literally grow next to northern conifers, and it was this promise of an ecological miracle that was the area's first really saleable product – the 'land of perpetual spring'.

But to produce instant Paradise you have to add water – and keep on adding it. Once the scant local sources had been tapped, wasted, and spoiled, the politics of hydrology became a pressing concern, even a deciding factor in fixing the political boundaries of Los Angeles. The City annexed the San Fernando Valley, murdered the Owens Valley in its first great raid on hinterland waters under William Mulholland, and its hydrological frontier is now on the Colorado River. Yet fertile watered soil is no use if it is inaccessible; transportation was to be the next great shaper of Los Angeles after land and water. From the laying of the first railway down to the port at Wilmington just over a century ago, transport has been an obsession that grew into a way of life [5].

Lines were hardly laid before commuting began along them; scattered communities were joined in a diffuse and unprecedented super-community, whose empty interstices filled up with further townships, vineyards, orchards, health resorts, and the fine tracery of the second generation of railroads – the inter-urbans. By 1910 when amalgamations