AX Theme Building is a rare gem from the time.
KMAN SALAS O'BRIEN

I Who live in Los Angeles and not in London / Find, on thinking about Hell, that it must be / Still more like Los Angeles." So wrote a gloomy Bertolt Brecht from his rather comfortable exile in Santa Monica.

Fascinating, significant, and flawed, *Overdrive: L.A.* Constructs the Future, 1940–1990—the first serious museum show to survey the growth of L.A.'s built environment—explicitly sets out to contradict the generic perception of the city as an incomprehensible, chaotic, and hellish sprawl. Instead, it argues persuasively that as the first modern and widely decentralized city in America, L.A. represents a new paradigm, one that has long been "a laboratory of cutting-edge innovation and planning in architecture and design," where the future is constantly reimagined and articulated in physical form.

Which future and imagined by whom, however, prove to be salient questions.

Dense with architectural drawings, models, films, digital displays, and art, the show segues through varied sections on car culture and urban networks, through "engines of innovation"—namely the oil, aviation, and aerospace industries that have been the patrons of large-scale building and construction projects—before ending with displays elucidating the rich variety of the iconic residential architecture for which the city is famed.

Frank Gehry's postmodern masterpiece.
COURTESY OF GEHRY PARTNERS/©GERALD ZUGMANN-MAK

The story of the growth of L.A. that emerges is one of the city as a site in which competing visions of the future were constantly in play, being shaped over time by a dynamic system of forces and influences: variously, the occasionally fundamental interventions by urban planners, the ever-present might of capital, and the cumulative force of millions of ruggedly individual citizen-consumers and several generations of architects and designers. It is the story of the latter that is most poignant, telling as it does of the final neutering and assimilation of a hollowed-out modernism by consumer culture.

There were moments when alternative visions flourished. In the 1920s Austrian emigrés Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler attempted to adapt the ideals of Frank Lloyd Wright to create Southern Californian modernism for the masses, experimenting with new materials and glass-enabled design principles to dissolve traditional boundaries between the interior of buildings and the exterior world. In 1944 the magazine *Architectural Forum*, anticipating the postwar hunger for change and innovation, published an issue on "New Building for 194X" filled with creative ideas for new styles and forms for living. Most experimentally of all, John Entenza, editor of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, became proactive in trying to launch the Case Study House Program, which ran from 1945 to 1966, commissioning eight innovative architectural firms to design eight model homes.

While these local outbreaks of ideologically sophisticated design left L.A. with a cluster of historical trends, their impact on the weight of history was minimal. Mostly, architects suffered from the small-scale and bespoke nature of their operations that naturally limited legacy. (Few of the more visionary architects had the foresight or drive to team up with the large-scale property developers who emerged postwar.) However, in some instances opposition to expressions of modernist principles was explicitly political. In 1945 a cooperative of progressively minded individuals formed the Mutual Housing Association and hired a top modernist team to design 500 low-cost homes in Brentwood Hills. With the McCarthy era looming, however, the wider community looked upon the group's progressive ideals as verging on anti-American socialism, and this, combined with a number of practical problems, limited the project and only 100 were built.

In 2000 the majority of the structures in L.A.—52 percent—dated from 1940 to 1969. It is in this period that the L.A. of sprawling, identikit suburbia, familiar to us now, was built.

Just as these particular dreams were fading, other rather more pragmatic but vastly more ambitious (in terms of scale at least) visions of the future succeeded in making themselves manifest.

In 2000 the majority of the structures in L.A.—52 percent—dated from 1940 to 1969. It is in this period that the L.A. of sprawling, identikit suburbia, familiar to us now, was built. These structures were built, however, not by creative architectural firms, nor by urban planers, but by defense and other industrial companies, armed with government loans and repositioning for peace. Exemplary was the world's largest home builders, Kaiser Community Homes, which in the late 1940s was building 20 houses a day using mass production and prefabrication techniques developed during the war. While form following function was an intellectual mantra for modernists the world over, these commercial builders proved so functional that they didn't bother to employ architects at all. In the process, they jettisoned any attempt to refashion the world through design in favor of giving the market what it wanted: simple homes aesthetically decked out in colonial or ranch styles. So it was that economic pragmatism prevailed over the utopian hopes of so many architects.

Innovative design survived, of course, but mainly in the form of a few rare trophy buildings that articulated the zeitgeist. From the dawn of the jet age comes the wonderfully futuristic and thus dated LAX Theme Building (used as a visual leitmotif for the marketing of the exhibition) standing in all its curved, spiderlike-cum-UFO glory. A couple of decades later Frank Gehry built his seminal essay in postmodern aesthetics in the form of his house in Santa Monica (1977–78), with its enclosure of a conventional house in a skin of confrontational and dramatic angular planes, formed from industrial materials. Several decades later still, he completed his magisterially curvilinear Disney Hall, which remains the architectural icon of the city.

At the other end of the spectrum of cultural importance and triumphant commercial deployment of content-free avant-garde aesthetics sits a host of so-called Googie-style buildings, roadside shops and restaurants, with their large windows, oversized graphic and monumental commercial signs, designed to be seen at speed from the car.

signs, designed to be seen at speed from the car.

Is the KFC in L.A.'s Koreatown playful and funky, or just modernism run amok?
JEFFREY DANIELS ARCHITECTS

Emblematic of how this trend has played out is the Grinstein/Daniels–designed Kentucky Fried Chicken that stands in Koreatown, built in 1990. A small architectural model in the exhibition describes its playful forms, alternately curving and angular. Immediately after viewing the exhibition at the Getty, I went to Koreatown to see the KFC for myself. From one perspective the building is fun, dynamic, and eye-catching. Inside the first-floor seating area is, for a fast-food restaurant, impressively spacious with its double height dimensions and sloping roof. But from another perspective this is a site where modernism got butchered, coated in bread crumbs, and deep fried.

Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future*, 1940–1990, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, runs through July 21.*

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