

## **How to Build Los Angeles: The Fantastical Structures of Reality.**

**A film, 'How to Build Los Angeles', and an accompanying essay.**

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['How to Build Los Angeles'](#)

[click here to watch the short film](#)

This essay and film discuss the making of Los Angeles. The essay is partly discursive, and partly self-reflexive. Within the essay, I discuss the views and versions of Los Angeles expressed in Bukowski's poem 'Waiting' (2002), Wanda Coleman's 'Angel Baby Blues' (2002), Joan Didion's 'Los Angeles Notebook' (2002), and *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* by Reyner Banham (1971). My discussion explores ways in which the writing of the city reflects Baudrillard's ideas on simulacra, simulations and the hyperreal (the term which Baudrillard uses to discuss that which is what it says it is, simply because it so loudly and clearly says that it is) (1998). This discussion is framed by a reflection on my process of building a cardboard replica of Los Angeles.

Los Angeles, and its affiliation with Hollywood and what is famously known as "the industry" (that is, the film industry), lends itself to a project centered around a visual medium. The first challenge that I faced upon making the decision to create a visual portrayal and discussion of the city was: how was I going to make a film about Los Angeles without actually going to Los Angeles? How could I possibly hope to even remotely encapsulate a far off and seemingly mythical dust bowl, from the familiarly English comforts of where I live, the city of Oxford? It was Reyner Banham's description of Disneyland in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* that gave me my first idea. He wrote about Disneyland as 'the set for a film that was never ever going to be made, except for in the mind of the visitor' (1971: 127). I imagined a film set, a cardboard Los Angeles in miniature.

I have been to Los Angeles once, for a period of three days; not enough time to make any claim to understanding or even really knowing about the place. What I *did* know about Los Angeles was largely absorbed through film and television as a young child. To look at on a Mercator world map, Los Angeles seemed to be one of the furthest populated points west that a person could go; the mythical pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It was where movies were made and where Disneyland was. It was where dreams came true. From what I could gather based on the image sold to me, Los Angeles was a city built on dreams. And so, when building my own version of Los Angeles, this seemed to be an important theme to keep in mind.

Some might go so far as to say that the city of Los Angeles is itself like a dream; a confusing mish-mash of eccentric and colourful images, larger than life characters, and unbelievable prospects and opportunity. But how can that be, when the very nature of those two things, cities and dreams, somewhat contradict each other? In *City A-Z*, Steve Pile highlights the extreme differences between cities and dreams, noting that 'Dreams are illusions, unreal. Cities are very real, the work of the conscious mind, not the random, absurd juxtaposition of astonishing images' (2000: 59). What makes Los Angeles a city of dreams is the fact that the city, like a dream, 'conceal[s] secret desires and fears' (2000: 59). Pile argues that 'the randomness of cities - their absurd or deceitful realities - has an inner meaning' (2000: 59) thus suggesting that the city is the concrete realisation of those hidden desires and fears.

To refer to Los Angeles as a City of Dreams, is to simultaneously signal it as being 'an absurd juxtaposition of astonishing images'. The over-the-top, flamboyant, and in some cases excessively lavish architecture of Los Angeles exists to distract from, and subsequently contradict and counteract, the visible presence of immense poverty in the city. This juxtaposition of images extends even to the structures themselves. Often quite simple and functional, they are hyper-projected (that is, overtly self-announced) by their absurd and fantastical counter-parts.

Banham details the ways in which, economically, it is more logical to 'put up relatively simple single storey boxes, and then make them tall enough to attract attention by piling up symbols and graphic art on top' (1971: 101). It is here that we start to get a sense of what could potentially be the "real" Los Angeles. With the weight of glitz and glamour and showiness bearing down on that which is simple, modest and functional, Los Angeles is impossible to see from under the image of itself that it is shouting at you. The jungle of billboards, towers, and novelty signposts all stretching up and competing for light obstruct our view of the Los Angeles such as is described by Charles Bukowski in the poem 'Waiting' (2002: 510-12 (511)).

Hot summers in the mid-30's in Los Angeles,  
Nothing to do, nowhere to go, listening to  
The terrified talk of our parents  
At night:  
"what will we do? What will we do?"  
"god, I don't know..."

The waiting room that is Bukowski's Los Angeles exists on the ground, unseen beneath the highways and train lines and endless advertisements. In a city where the sky is already occupied by eye-catching signs, there is no space to move up. There is 'nowhere to go'. Bukowski reveals Los Angeles to be a city of 'neither men nor boys' (2002: 511), a waiting place between dreams and the waking world. Where I had previously believed Los Angeles to be the furthest point to which one could escape, for Bukowski, it is the end of the line, a city saturated with dreams, giving way to whoever can shout the loudest.

In his essay 'The System of Objects', Jean Baudrillard imagines the modern city stripped of all signs, and replaced instead with the expression GARAP, functioning to be interpreted endlessly as a sign and signify nothing but 'a society capable of generating such a sign' (1998: 408). He wrote that 'if we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising'. When applied to Los Angeles, this can be interpreted to mean that the consumption of Los Angeles as an obtainable dream is done predominantly through the advertised image of Los Angeles. What we are consuming is not Los Angeles itself, but its image. Baudrillard points out that GARAP 'signified despite itself, [...] is consumed as a

sign'. In this way, the Hollywood sign is as meaningless a signifier as the non-word GARAP, and much like the ways in which 'to some extent, people have come to 'believe' in GARAP', to a similar extent, people have come to believe in the Hollywood sign, and the signs and signifiers that compile Los Angeles. It is a belief that is infectious, extending even to those who view the city from the shaded roots of its advertisement to the world, encouraging them to hang on, instilling Bukowski's aforementioned belief that there is nowhere else to go.

In 'Angel Baby Blues', Wanda Coleman cites smog addiction, ambition, pride, or some other factor, all as potential voices that are telling her that she's '[she's] gonna make it if [she hangs] on long enough' (2002: 687-89 (687)). As the dream of Los Angeles seeps down from the smog-clustered heavens, Angelinos are indoctrinated with the idea that this is the place 'to make it or break it', a place to 'get on with it do it or die in the effort'. Bukowski shares similar ideas in his poem 'Roll the Dice', where he encourages the reader, 'if you're going to try, go all the way' (2003). He continues:

It could mean not eating for 3 or 4 days  
It could mean freezing on a park bench  
It could mean jail  
It could mean derision  
Mockery  
Isolation.

He names all of these things as a 'test of your endurance', but assures the reader that 'you'll do it / despite rejection and the worst odds / and it will be better than / anything else / you can imagine'. Here he portrays hard work, dedication, endurance, and the survival of Los Angeles against the odds as a rite of passage in your journey to reach your dream.

Coleman expresses a sort of indignant claim to what is hers by right, for having fought out the hardships of a life on the ground of Los Angeles. There is a certain pride that comes with the Angelino identity. To be of the City of Angels inspires hope, even amongst the cynics and the *fallen* angels of Los Angeles. Reyner Banham supports this idea when he

describes Los Angeles as 'the home of the most extravagant myths of private gratification and self realisation' (1971: 124). Coleman claims that she 'can't give up or give up on it it's my birthplace it's my / pride having paid my dues'. She refuses to give up on Los Angeles without a fight, not before she has 'collect[ed] what's due [her] / [her] wings' (2002: 689). From reading Coleman's account of what it is to dream in Los Angeles, we can establish that dreams are not merely another layer in the Los Angeles image, nor are dreams confined to the rich, white and upper classes of Los Angeles. Pile writes that 'through dreaming, it might be possible to imagine different transformative possibilities' (2000: 60) such as Coleman's imagined metamorphosis. Coleman's Los Angeles, one that lists character after character from her memory, where places merge into places and 'Santa Monica becomes Sunset becomes Macy South on Boyle' (2000: 60) depicts a Los Angeles of citizens piled in on top of one another, reminding us of the scale of the problem with the urban landscape. This is what Pile suggests makes it so easy to forget the foundations of the dreams of the city; 'freedoms and opportunities, their new communities and cosmopolitanism' (2000: 60). Therein lies the true dream of Los Angeles, to rise, and build, and transform; to be granted wings.

This idea of rising or failing, of making or breaking it, more heavily enforces the idea of Los Angeles the city, as a concrete realisation of a dream, concealing secret fears and desires. More so than the threat of earthquakes and other such natural disasters such as the Santa Ana described by Joan Didion in her essay 'Los Angeles notebook' (2002: 535-57), the real danger to the city is the idea that the dreams of its citizens will not hold as stable foundations for the hyper-dream billboards advertising the dreamland of Los Angeles. This danger is manifest in the Angelinos' desire to see their city burn to the ground, realised in the mind-altering powers of the Santa Ana.

Didion cites Raymond Chandler's claim that when the Santa Ana winds blow, 'Anything can happen' (485), a statement that reminds us of the image of Los Angeles that is advertised to us. This Santa Ana is a formidable natural force that encourages Angelinos to rebel. A wind that whispers of how 'Every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the

edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks' (485, again citing Chandler). In a city stifled by the smog of pretence dreams, the arrival of the Santa Ana clears the air. It is in nature that the true desires of the Angelinos are revealed. Didion describes the weather of Los Angeles as 'the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse' (487), but in reality it burns away the grime enough to allow the city to truly unveil itself, as Didion reminds us: 'the wind shows us how close to the edge we are' (487).

The Santa Ana reveals 'Los Angeles' deepest image of itself' (488), the city on fire, 'just as we had always known it would be in the end' (488), Didion comments. In her use of language here, we are again left with the impression of Los Angeles being 'the end' but the idea of Los Angeles' most ingrained impression of itself is the city on fire, arguably reveals not the city's fears, but its desires. The Santa Ana not only reveals the hidden desires of the city, but 'accentuates its impermanence, its unreliability' (488), highlighting the ways in which the city's façade conceals the fact that the city itself is but a dream. The Santa Ana strips Los Angeles of its signs, bringing it as close to "reality" as is achievable for a city.

I have placed the word "reality" in quotation marks, because Jean Baudrillard's essay 'Simulacra and Simulations' would argue that there is no "real" Los Angeles. The fantasy of Los Angeles exists to conceal the fact that there is no reality of the place. Baudrillard noted that 'reality was being increasingly replaced by sign systems that recodified and replaced the real' (2004: 365-376 (365)). In the foreword to his essay, he quotes Ecclesiastes as having said that 'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none' (365). Baudrillard goes on to state that simulation relies on the 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality'. With this in mind, I could argue that my cardboard model of Los Angeles, in a bedroom in Oxford, is just as much the "real" Los Angeles as the city itself, provided that all of the signs and signifiers of the place are present.

Interestingly, the creative process of building my model was helpful in aiding my understanding of the theories I had read around the topic of the city. Very much in the way that the fantastical fantasies of Hollywood had to be built in three dimensions in order to, in the words of Banham, support the weight of the 'living flesh and blood actors [who would] walk through or prance upon' them (1971: 125), my model needed to be strong enough to bear the weight of, and project, the image and reputation of Los Angeles in such a way that made it instantly recognisable as the place.

Baudrillard proposes that there is no better model to aid the understanding of simulation, than that of Disneyland (2004: 369). Disneyland is the ultimate simulation of a fantasy magical kingdom, providing a harsh contrast between the fantasy world within the confines of the grounds, and the reality of the car park and beyond. The contrast is clear: Disneyland is imaginary; the rest of the world is real. Not so. Jean Baudrillard argues that Disneyland is merely *presented* as imaginary 'in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact, Los Angeles, and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation' (369). Disneyland does not exist to convince us that the fantasy is real, but to conceal from us the fact that reality has been replaced by an order of signs and signifiers.

Banham refers to Disneyland as 'the set for a film that was never going to be made' (1971: 127). The same can be said of Los Angeles. Disneyland is a fantasy brought to life, in much the same way as Los Angeles, like a dream, is the concrete realisation of desires and fears. Los Angeles is the site of manifestation for our own fantasies, keeping them separate from our day to day lives and existing to convince us that the rest of America, and indeed the rest of the world, is where reality happens, when in reality Los Angeles simply distracts us from the truth that there is no reality.

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