

REVIEW:

OVERDRIVE: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940-1990

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Sprawling, uncontained, and driven by blind ambition—these entrenched stereotypes surrounding Los Angeles are exploded by the recent exhibition organized by the Getty, *OVERDRIVE: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940-1990*. Provocatively suggesting that during the postwar years of expansion the engine of growth was perhaps accelerating too hysterically towards the future, curators Wim de Wit, Christopher Alexander, and Rani Singh ambitiously manage to present a fifty-year history that still reads as more coherent and continuous than the images of a frantic and disordered sprawl might have one at first believe. This exhibition at the Getty Center stands as the

centerpiece of the 2013 Pacific Standard Time festival sponsored by the Getty and focused on examining postwar Los Angeles architecture and urbanism. Conceived of as a partner to last year's 2012 Pacific Standard Time festival devoted to Los Angeles art, this year's installment focuses on architecture. This year's broader festival, featuring a range of eleven diverse exhibitions at various institutions, is anchored by the Getty's wide-ranging survey exhibition. As such, the three curators set themselves the task of establishing an overarching narrative outline of the postwar history of Los Angeles's built environment. The *OVERDRIVE* exhibition narrative drives assuredly from the

overwrought postwar moments of excess through to the efficient pragmatism of the 1980s, when events such as the 1984 Olympics reflected the expediency required of a spent engine. The oft-repeated claims to radical break-aways by various Los Angeles schools are here calmly presented within a broader sense of continuity.

This expansive survey exhibition, filled with a sweeping range of artifacts, is divided into five thematic sections. The Car Culture section features an examination of the ways in which Los Angeles's identity has been closely linked to the automobile and the ways in which the built environment responded to such a dominance by the car. From Jet Age Googie coffee shops designed to entice those passing by in cars to later approaches to strip mall designs, the car-centric design ethos is well illustrated with a range of examples. The Urban Networks section features an overview of the aggressive expansion of infrastructure—showcasing the development of transportation, water, and power systems. For example, various early renderings and models of LAX feature the airport as an early pioneer of global satellite systems. The Engines of Innovation section features a wide range of economic drivers from the oil, aerospace, and entertainment industries and their involvement in propagating their interests through design. For example, the development of Century City as a hub for the entertainment industry is featured through various renderings. The wide-

ranging Community Magnates section features various efforts at forming local identity through culture, sports, consumption, and faith. Disneyland, churches such as Lloyd Wright's Wayfarers Chapel, and commercial centers designed by the likes of Victor Gruen are all presented as equally vital community centers. The exhibition concludes with a Residential section featuring a selection ranging from Los Angeles's history of tract housing and the Case Study program to the more customized homes of John Lautner, Frank Gehry, and Morphosis.

Within such a broadly sweeping narrative, details inevitably become underplayed. But curiously, one such detail that might have aided in this effort towards communicating a response of fatigue in the face of such over-determined excess—the emerging role of the user—is left largely undeveloped within the exhibition. In reaction to the over-determination of the postwar engines of growth, the 1960s and 1970s was a period in which the concept of the user was increasingly becoming activated in response; participation, feedback, grassroots, and DIY were all becoming part of the design lexicon. And yet the role of the user in the face of such over-heated instruments of growth is only lightly hinted at in the exhibition. For example, the history of the evictions and the homeowners' active resistance that preceded the construction of Dodger Stadium was lightly treated and breezily juxtaposed with playful renderings of Disneyland's Anaheim park. A second

instance of underplaying the role of the user within the exhibition is the repeated use of establishing fly-through videos, shown on small screens at various points in the exhibition. These computer-rendered fly-throughs of various urban areas had been digitally created specifically for the exhibition as orientation devices. And yet their sterile computer renderings of unarticulated urban massing, devoid of people, and abstract zooming between buildings at the vantage point of a low-flying plane, rather than at any typical user's lower vantage point, seemed to again circumscribe the role of the user within the exhibition. Even a slight focus on the historical role of the user within the urban environment might have served to further reinforce the given exhibition theme of the overwhelming drivers of urban growth and the subsequent reactions to them.

Ambitious in its scope, the exhibition was organized around Los Angeles's equally ambitious obsession with a relentless drive towards the future. Often presenting itself as resistant to historicizing, given such a blinding drive towards the glamour of the future, Los Angeles's divergent sprawl here appeared somewhat contained within the historical narrative set forth by the exhibition. Perhaps more attention paid to the reactions against such an extreme *overdrive* of postwar growth, particularly from the perspective of the urban user, might have helped to reinforce the sense of excess of Los Angeles's own self-narrative. But

certainly the perhaps blind ambition of presenting a full fifty-year exhibition retrospective on one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country seems a fitting starting point for a city that loves to celebrate itself.