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LOS ANGELES, THE RADICAL
METROPOLIS OF REYNER BANHAM

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ABSTRACT

The book *Los Angeles – the architecture of four ecologies* by Reyner Banham (1922-1988) has been very controversial ever since it was first published back in 1971. There are those who see a seminal text in it, very influential to architects who have engaged in analyses of other urban realities since that decade. However, its critical fortune also includes severe academic, and not rarely, demolishing criticisms. The disputes waged on that moment, over the unavoidable examination of the Modern Movement dogmas, are reflexively, bravely, and sometimes provocatively present in the book. However, after four decades, it is interesting to carefully look at the book in order to appreciate its theses based on the development of the contemporary metropolises, which would probably be named by the author as the capitalistic metropolises of the fourth machine age. The article also tries to highlight the strength and the legitimacy of the methodological innovation the author has forged to articulate his thesis and his object – the Greater Los Angeles.

KEYWORDS

Los Angeles. Urban infrastructures. Metropolis. Architecture. Railway. Freeway.

LOS ÁNGELES, LA METRÓPOLIS
RADICAL DE REYNER
BANHAM

LOS ANGELES, A METRÓPOLE
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RESUMEN

El libro *Los Ángeles – la arquitectura de cuatro ecologías* del autor Reyner Banham (1922-1988) publicado en 1971 ha sido, desde su primera edición, objeto de mucha controversia. Algunos lo ven como un texto seminal, con mucha ascendencia sobre los arquitectos que se han dedicado al análisis de otras realidades urbanas desde esa década. Sin embargo, su fortuna crítica también incluye severas críticas académicas, y no rara vez, devastadoras. Las disputas emprendidas en ese momento, sobre el inevitable examen de los dogmas del Movimiento Moderno, están presentes en el libro de forma reflexiva, valiente, y, a veces provocativa. No obstante, después de cuatro décadas, es interesante mirar detenidamente el libro para apreciar sus tesis a partir del desarrollo de las metrópolis contemporáneas, que probablemente serían nombradas por el autor como las metrópolis capitalistas de la cuarta edad de la máquina. El artículo trata también de destacar la fuerza y la legitimidad de la innovación metodológica que el autor ha forjado para articular su tesis y su objeto – el gran Los Ángeles.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Los Ángeles. Infraestructura urbana. Metrópolis. Arquitectura. Ferrocarril. Autopista.

RESUMO

O livro *Los Angeles – a arquitetura de quatro ecologias* de Reyner Banham (1922-1988) publicado em 1971 tem sido desde sua primeira edição objeto de muita controvérsia. Há quem veja nele um texto seminal, com muita ascendência sobre arquitetos que se lançaram em análises de outras realidades urbanas a partir daquela década. Mas, sua fortuna crítica inclui também críticas acadêmicas severas e, não raramente, demolidoras. As disputas que se travavam naquele momento, em torno do incontornável exame dos dogmas do Movimento Moderno, estão presentes no livro de forma reflexiva, corajosa e, algumas vezes, provocativa. Porém, passadas quatro décadas é interessante debruçar-se sobre o livro buscando apreciar as suas teses a partir do desenvolvimento das metrópoles contemporâneas, estas que, provavelmente, teriam sido designadas pelo autor como metrópoles capitalistas da quarta era da máquina. O artigo busca salientar também a força e a legitimidade da inovação metodológica que o autor forjou para articular a sua tese e seu objeto – a grande Los Angeles.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Los Angeles. Infraestruturas urbanas. Metrópole. Arquitetura. Ferrovia. Via expressa.

“BURN, BABY, BURN”¹

The encounter of Peter Reyner Banham, architecture and urbanism English historian, with engineer background, acknowledged cultural reviewer, engaged with the Pop movement, with the metropolis of Los Angeles produced in the early 1970s a singular book: *Los Angeles – the architecture of four ecologies*². His intellectual trajectory, started under the academic guidance of Nikolaus Pevsner, has led him to very comprehensive theoretical interests. From the beginning of his massive theoretical and historical production, he has shown a major interest in the influence of science and technique on the rising European vanguard movements in the first two decades of the 20th century. With the publication of his book *Theory and design in the first machine age*, in 1960, he achieved an outstanding position both in the Anglo-Saxon world an internationally.

In the beginning of his career, the intellectual alignment of Banham led him to a historical-critical approach of the Italian futurism, and more specifically of the thinking and propositions of the architect Antonio Sant’Elia (1898/1916), who he classified as a “*revolutionary avant-garde*”. In an article published in 1955, he analyzes the Futurist Manifesto of 1914, and the series of drawings of the young Italian architect gathered under the title “*Città Nuova*”. This appreciation for the role the Italian futurism played in the beginning of the 20th century somewhat casts a light on the reading of *Los Angeles*, making clearer his methodological choice for approaching the paradigmatic South Californian metropolis. Central concepts and artifacts in the book, such as infrastructure systems, environment/ecology, mechanical systems, and even the customized surfboards, the hamburger, the movie, and above all the freeway, gain more significance when placed under the perspective of his theoretical formation with the issues highlighted in the Futurist Manifesto of 1914³.

When published, the book *Los Angeles – the architecture of four ecologies* was subject to passionate opinions. Somehow, those disputes opened the space for theoretical discussions that were flagging the debut of new approaches to describe the city – architecture relation. Opinions were vigorously exchanged,

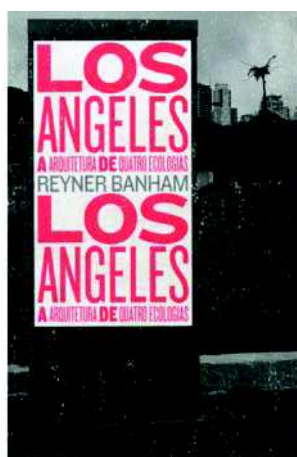
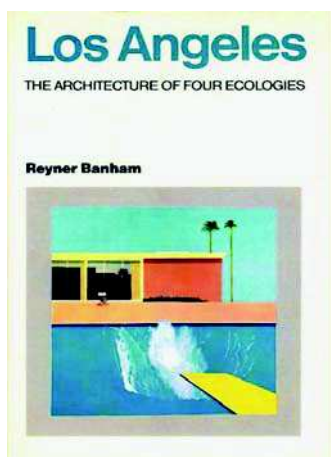
because at that point the theoretical and practical leadership was under dispute after the official closure of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1956.

After discussions that became historical, both resulting from the strong criticism and the late recognition of the book, the first Brazilian edition of this book still makes sense. It helps us to understand the more decisive attributes of the so-called contemporary metropolis, and today an important distinction should be done: the book arrives in Brazil as a classic, and no more as a vigorous provocation as intended by his author under the specific circumstances of the 1960s and 1970s.

¹ Slogan of the demonstrators of Watts district in 1965. Epigraph of the book *Los Angeles – a arquitetura de quatro ecologias*. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2013.

² Firth edition: BANHAM, Reyner. *Los Angeles – the architecture of four ecologies*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971. Brazilian edition: *Los Angeles – a arquitetura de quatro ecologias*. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2013.

³ BANHAM, Reyner. “Sant’Elia” in *Architectural Review*, 1955 and “Futurist manifesto” in *Architectural Review*, 1959.



Cover of the first edition of the book (1971) and the Brazilian edition (2013)

To an author with the formation and temperament of Banham, the critical avalanche, especially the most exacerbated ones, seems to prove the appropriateness of his analysis. And in the core of such criticisms, especially of those coming from more orthodox sectors of the modern thinking, the target was not only the method used to address the southern Californian metropolis, but the author's disposition to so decidedly, and above all so creatively analyze Los Angeles, a metropolis with no qualities, the very negation of the urbanism fundamentals and of the urban planning under discussion at that moment.

⁴Banham (2013, p. 4).

Both anti-modernists, who fought the set of principles defined in the Athens Charter, and those searching for reinvigorating the theses of functionalism, united to denounce the undesirable urban traits of Los Angeles and, by extension, the huge misconceptions of the author when interpreting them. It was clear that Banham was being judged for a double offense: for dedicating himself to a city with no qualities, and even worse, for doing that showing urban attributes capable of being regarded as attractive. In other words, as architect Anthony Vidler summarizes in his great preface to the 2000 edition, for his most exalted critics, Banham had abandoned his intellectual commitment to join the procession of the dreadful LA admirers.

It is unnecessary to find out what was most decisive for the book originality, whether the very uniqueness of the addressed object – the Greater Los Angeles – or the enviable methodological freedom forged by Banham to penetrate and analyze it. Today, half a century after his adventure, what matters is the seminal result of the examination he did, and his enormous intellectual disposition to launch into that endeavor. The use of the world ecology to name the four parts comprising his object of study indicates the ambitious objective of articulating all the dimensions he sees as essential in his analyses:

*[...] no urban agglomerate was ever produced by such an extraordinary mix of geography, climate, economy, demographics, mechanics and culture [...]*⁴.

The awareness of his endeavor forced the author to face the challenge of creating a new analysis method if he wanted to remain in the position to accomplish his objective. Starting with the very unconventional structuring of the book, he embarks on a narrative method free from academic standards, offering to the images, produced by himself or by reputed photographers, an analytical and not only illustrative role, exhibiting them in order to support his theses, passages of his field work. An aspect that could theoretically be seen as trivial, but which became a topic very much explored by his critics, was the decision made to implement his research plan: he lately learned to drive a car to be able to move inside his four ecologies. Every Banham's attitude before his study object indicated a genuine disposition to produce a creative approach, which because of that became very stimulating to the reader.

Aware of the impossibility of facing Los Angeles with the conventional critical instruments, of defining and approaching the city's architecture with traditional methods, Banham expanded concepts and took them to a level he saw as adequate to his work. After making his methodological and narrative choice, he also interrogates, as if he was dialoguing with his most reluctant readers:

*Historical monograph? Can this old world concept, so much academic and loaded with precedents, have the aspiration of embracing such a unusual human phenomenon as the city of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de la Porciúncula – also known as the Internal Combustion City, Surfubia, Smallville, Aerospace City, Land of Systems, and Factory of Dreams of the western world? [...]*⁵.

With this demanding examination of his own urbanism researcher and historian work and of the architecture, Banham sought in the book by Paul Valery, *Eupaline or – the Architect* originally published in 1921⁶, a note about the effort the historian should make to recognize what is effectively new in what he proposes to observe. And, his alert for the danger of rejecting the inscrutable, launching him “into the ocean of the unknown”. Aware of the importance of exposing what he saw as new and original, he assumes with conviction and with no arrogance whatsoever:

*[...] when most of the observers registers monotony and lack of unity, and, inside monotony, confusion and lack of variety, it generally happens because the context escapes them; it escapes for being absolutely singular and exceptional, and not for presenting convenient comparison terms*⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶ VALERY, Paul. *Eupalinos ou o Arquitecto*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34, 1996.

⁷ Banham (2013, p. 2).

⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

This thesis-phrase is in the first chapter, which beautiful title – “In the rear-view mirror” – gave rise to lots of controversy, being interpreted in different ways, according to the convenience of the critics. However, he himself offers a good clue to understand his choice. While he drives along the freeways, he looks to the rear-view mirror in the hopes of finding the “lights of history”, of finding an answer to a question posed to every sincerely investigative and creative author: “which should be the route?” What means to say: which should be the best way to produce this analysis without belittling, or even destroying, through a wrong method this total object that is the Greater Los Angeles? His question is careful and searches for an alternative answer, because he already clearly foresaw the path he didn’t want to walk on, under the penalty of failing in his mission, that is, of establishing chronological trajectories, both to talk about the city and its architecture. In his opinion, such plan would be boring, and even worse, would reveal nothing. It would end up in observations and comparisons with other metropolises and their architectures, already a thousand times described, nothing adding to the urban reality he had in front of him and that he was about to enter.

To escape from such a failure, Banham imposed himself the task of capturing and distinguishing the most evident aspects of what he called the local language. Accomplishing this goal, his analysis starts by recognizing that regarding architecture and urbanism, in Los Angeles movement reigned. And that, added to this primordial attribute, there was a relation between the vast geographic extension and the urban history, although very recent and sparse, which for him, a typical European intellectual, became a disturbing piece of information. Almost as a lament, he observes:

*A city of 180 squared kilometers, but with no depth, where rare areas are more than seventy years old [...]*⁸.

And also,

*[...] Los Angeles is the instantaneous architecture in an instantaneous urban landscape*⁹.

Such observations justified his pursuit for a proper method to approach this permanently moving world, in which history, according to his observation, has not yet created permanent landmarks. Upon defining the four ecologies that organize the structure of his narrative, Banham faces the territory of the metropolis from each of them to attain the essence of the whole – the Greater Los Angeles – which, according to this thesis, functions simultaneously and instantaneously. The coast and its beaches, he has identified them as Surfurbia; Santa Monica mountains are the Foothills; the central valley gained a Freudian and unexpected classification – The plains of Id; and finally the whole freeway system that crisscrosses and makes the other three ecologies to vertiginously communicate to each other: the Autopia.

When using the concept of ecology to identify the four urban universes of his analysis, Banham remains consistent with his thesis. The four human ecologies comprised by the urbanized territory of the Greater Los Angeles are demarcations that create the script of analysis that, and this is very important, would be free from hierarchical or chronological determinations. The mapping of each of the four ecologies guarantees by itself the comprehension of the territorial, spatial and cultural dimensions of the Greater Los Angeles. The result is the creation of an analytical path that allows him to approach the four ecologies *pari passu*, preserving the principle of simultaneity and synchronism among them.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 53.

The precedence of the human ecology over architecture needs to be understood within the scope of the Pop culture, which is also a strong intellectual commitment of the author, because for him architecture, while a human artifact, originates from the relations established between the natural and the artificial universes. Each of his ecologies is run through, observed, narrated and recorded in images that Banham produces and sends as syntheses. Thus, in surfurbia the surfboard is so much intrinsic to the way of life of that place as a gondola that navigates in Venice's channels. Likewise, the simultaneous presence of a Frank Lloyd Wright's chapel, of the Gamble House, of the Californian bungalows of Echo Park, of the off-shore platforms, and of the municipal piers throughout the 110 km of white sand beaches make surfurbia a unique place, a paradise that all the other metropolises of the world could envy.

However, before moving forward to his other ecologies, Banham dwelt over a comprehensive and indispensable topic for his analytical method: the urban structuring of Los Angeles watershed. In the chapter "The transportation palimpsest" the reader is taken, according to the author, to realize the danger of accepting superficial interpretations about the urban structuring of cities, and in particular of American metropolises. And, we can, by extension, also think of the Latin-American ones, because they have many traits similar to those of the southern Californian metropolis. The thesis created to construct this chapter, which strongly echoes throughout the book, is the following:

The urban spreading of LA, so uniquely homogeneous and sparse, which was capable of absorbing the monuments of the freeway systems without suffering major tensions, originates from prior means of transportation and from the accompanying land use patterns. The freeway system is the third or fourth diagram of transportation drawn on a map that constitutes a complex palimpsest of movement systems in the watershed¹⁰.

His argumentation is organized around the historical evolution of LA watershed occupation, highlighting the essential relation between public transportation and the business, and particularly, the land interests. The “little history” is relativized here, because his narrative starts with the dirt tracks run by the ox carts around the pueblo in the 1860s, until the arrival of the powerful tracks of the Southern Pacific – SP, which 20 years later launched the bases of the future super-metropolis.

The arrival of the South Pacific is decisive to the relation between urbanization and mass transit. An aspect especially highlighted by the author is the emergence of a metropolitan way of life that the strong presence of the two thousand kilometers of railway created in Los Angeles watershed. The daily commuting of people allowed by the presence of this efficient transport mode was intense, with very different motivations. This phenomenon anticipated a manner of society activities organization described by the concept of metropolitan scale everyday urban life.

In view of such aspects essential to the metropolitan organization of LA, Banham moves forward to a crucial point of view:

[...] the land sector was one of the two factors that has dismantled this master piece [the Pacific Electric Railway] of the rapid urban transit¹¹.

Effectively, the intense and speculative commercialization of land alongside the railway ended up definitively affecting its functioning, gradually worsening the quality of services. The excess of intersections, level crossings, and even pedestrians, slowed down the operations and ultimately jeopardized the performance of the whole system. The path was opened to the alternative that had already started to insidiously present itself, and as we know, with no way back: the replacement of the network on tracks by the network on tires. Under those circumstances, there was the birth of much more than a solution for Los Angeles, as well as for all the North American metropolises, also comprising the whole South American continent, and decisively the metropolis of São Paulo, an urban destination outlined by the consolidation of the so-called “automobile age”.

Likewise he has described and analyzed the role of railways, especially the Southern Pacific (SP), in the organization of LA, the overwhelmed way Banham saw the new system of freeways that has replaced the railway is constant in the countless criticisms he received. He fearlessly states, as someone always ready to assimilate new ideas, especially those authorized by technical innovation, to have been fully gained by the broad curves of freeway intersections:

[...] the broad curved interchanges, the intersection of San Diego and Santa Monica freeways, which immediately convinced me that the freeway system of Los Angeles is in fact one of the major achievements of mankind [...]¹².

And also:

[...] it is a masterpiece, as a drawing in the map, or as a monument outlined against the sky, or as a kinetic experience when we run it in high speed¹³.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 63.

¹² Ibid., p. 68.

¹³ Ibid., p. 68.

There is no doubt, the monumental freeway system of LA has seduced the historian and critic, but also the engineer. And, in a third precious diagram of the book, another layer of the LA palimpsest is launched. It is clear at this point of his analysis that the geometry of the freeway network has definitely buried the traditional functionalist criteria of the urban organization.

It is on this important chapter where Banham supports his careful analyses, but it was also to his categorical opinions that the strongest critics to his book were done. His total adherence to the “American auto-mobility” pattern, which associates urbanization sprawl to total automobile dependence, set him apart from architects and urbanists, who in the context of the 1960s saw in the low density urban expansion one of the most serious urban problems, a deviation to be fought against through large scale planning. His excellent insights and his analytical capacity shown in other chapters of the book were useless to mitigate the attacks. His fine analysis that points out the important precedence of the railway in spatially structuring and organizing LA was overshadowed by how overwhelmed he was with the powerful freeway system.

On the other hand, it is difficult to explain why Reyner Banham ignored throughout the book the wave of accusations, with strong reaction in the American press, against an action with many and lasting consequences known as the GM Streetcar Conspiracy. This was a holding led by General Motors, including Firestone Tires, Standard Oil of California, Phillips Petroleum, and Mack Trucks, which central aim was to replace the public railway transport systems by the automobile-based individual transport. The accusations originated from the strategic action of purchasing and quickly and entirely dismantling the streetcar and railway systems in at least 25 American cities, making the big American cities totally dependent on the automobile. The accusers’ positions were backed by many members of the society, both in the media and in the academy, producing a huge wave of protests and articles that permeated the specialized literature, since the 1960s¹⁴.

Like Los Angeles, other important American cities, such as Saint Louis, Baltimore, and Oakland, had similar experiences. About 25 American cities witnessed the quick disappearance of long and efficient railway systems, urban streetcars and suburban trains, to allow the birth of freeway systems intended to the individual transport. The GM Streetcar Conspiracy initially targeted American cities, for soon proceeding toward new targets.

An example of the reach and strength of such action was the city of São Paulo itself, whose local government hired in 1950 the freeway father Robert Moses for a study resulting in the so-called Moses Plan, which at that time had become an important ally of the action led by GM. In the case of São Paulo, in addition to the freeways on which the private transportation would run ensured by the automobile, the plan coordinated by Moses to the biggest Brazilian metropolis proposed the immediate purchase of 500 GM buses¹⁵.

¹⁴ SNELL, Bradford. *The Streetcar Conspiracy*. How General Motors Deliberately Destroyed Public Transit. Available at: <<http://www.tompaine.com/history/2001/09/10/index.html>>. Accessed in: Sept. 2016. SNELL, Bradford. *The truth about American Ground Transport – a reply by General Motors*. United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly. Washington, D.C., [U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1974.

¹⁵ MEYER, R. M. P. *Metrópole e urbanismo*. São Paulo nos anos 50. (Doctoral thesis). São Paulo: FAUUSP, 1991.

After this impacting chapter, Banham resumes the exploration of his ecologies. In the chapter “Ecology II: Foothills” there are already fully consolidated residential nuclei. Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Palos Verdes, among others. His perception of the type urbanization flourishing there is soon revealed:

*[...] in any map showing the income distribution of the region: the topographic and financial contours show a nearly exact correspondence between each other. The higher the location, the bigger is the income*¹⁶.

Before a human ecology inspiring in him a strong feeling of “lost glory”, but still “immensely desirable”, the author narrative is done based on his experience as a citizen who was under the influence of the American culture, of a way of life built on the foothill, exported to the whole world by the American movie industry.

*This life of comfort and delight is well known worldwide, in any place where television reruns old movies. It is the actual and fictional life, of the classic Hollywood years*¹⁷.

The universe of gated communities, which after half a century since the observations made by Banham in the 1960s/1970s became the main residential typology in metropolises of the entire world, were fully embodied there, on the foothills of Los Angeles, being the quintessence of the so-called American dream. And already exhibited all of their main attributes: guaranteed privacy and comfort, far from restless downtowns, socioeconomic unit from the tip of the pyramid, and at last, ensured autonomy of movement because of the entire dependence on the individual transport.

It is interesting to remember that Banham, before dedicating himself to the book, hosted a series of four radio documentaries for BBC – BBC’s Third Programme in 1968, which soon after were published as articles in the Listener magazine. In one of those documentaries, the issues addressed in this chapter of the book received a much more critical title: “Beverly Hills, too, is a Ghetto”¹⁸. Although the use of the world ghetto has disappeared from the book, its meaning in the segregated universe remained:

*[...] The Rolls-Royces are still in front of the Blacker’s house in Pasadena, and the Ferraris still make sharp curves in Palos Verdes as if they were especially designed for that; the Continentals are still exhibited in the front patio of the Bel Air Hotel, and the hoofs of the thoroughbred horses still trot in Mandeville Canyon [...]*¹⁹.

However, despite the importance given by Banham to the typology of high-end communities, the destruction of the foothills natural environment is the core of his analysis in this chapter. The profound alteration of the foothills profile because of the use of radical earthmoving systems was the rule in the occupation of the foothills ecology when they became more popular. The action called “large-scale mountain cropping”, described by the author in the beginning of the 1970s, had, nearly three decades later in the late 1990s, a new and pungent description in the book by Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*²⁰, in the chapter which title announced a melancholic and poetic exposure of the predatory process that has struck the foothills: “How the Eden lost its garden”.

¹⁶ Banham (2013, p. 78).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁸ NORTON, Pat. *Psychogeography and the end of planning*. London: Blackwell London, 2006. p. 7.

¹⁹ Banham (2013, p. 83).

²⁰ DAVIS, Mike. *Ecology of Fear*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.

Although not very directly in this chapter dedicated to the foothills, Banham addresses central issues of the prevailing urban debate in the 1960s. The causes and effects of the suburbanization process experienced by big cities became the Gordian knot of the urban planning and the urbanism. In the 1950s and 1960s, according to the information available, America experienced its bigger suburban expansion²¹. The problems associated to the urban expansion pattern (sprawl), especially the waste of buildable land and the resulting rocketing rise of the land and urban services prices, the increase of commuting time, the loss of the sense of community, and the city in mono functional, low density and highly autonomous environments, became very present in American metropolises, and in all the others to where this model spread²².

The incursion into the explored territory under the title “Architecture II – Fantastic” is directly associated to this set of issues and has opened to Banham, a cultural critic, enthusiastic member of the Pop movement, a great opportunity of observation and synthesis. His interest in the vernacular expression of architecture has created a branch of analysis with many interesting developments. Many times sliding toward irony, which is also a feature of the Pop, he focused on the relation between modernist rationality and the fantastic architectonic production he found in the roadside. The so-called “roadside civilization” was approached based on a theoretical structure that became a paradigm for countless essays and books with anti-modernist features, and which fed the post-modern theories a decade later.

Upon examining the buildings and ads composing the roadside civilization, Banham shows to be particularly inspired. In his description, we find the seeds of the discussion opposing function to fantasy. The symbolic buildings, a kind of talking architecture, which he passes by alongside the freeways, are for him the result of the triumph of fantasy over functionality. The surprising analogy he sees between the distribution of the parts of a “*hamburger served on a plate*” and the organization of the buildings composing the roadside civilization is the highlight of his intellectual disposition before what he regarded as effectively new:

The way in which the symbolic and functional parts of the hamburger served on the plate were discriminated, separated and exhibited is very analogous to the design of most of the buildings where such hamburgers are sold. Nothing of this bullshit of integrated design; each part is separately designed and highlighted: the architecture of symbolic assemblage²³.

In the 1980s, already under the hallmark of the post-modern architecture, Banham’s approach in this chapter became a reference, gained several readings, and inspired many forms of artistic expression. The way how he registered and interpreted the roadside architecture has forged the appearance of new sensibilities he proposed to analyze cities and metropolises. To mention just one, perhaps the most famous, we had the innovative *Learning with Las Vegas* by Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour, published only five years after *Los Angeles – four ecologies*, in 1976.

²¹ HALL, Peter. *Cities of Tomorrow*. [United Kingdom]: Blackwell Publishers, 1993. p. 294.

²² Ibid., p. 297.

²³ Banham (2013, p. 93).

Saying goodbye to the roadside civilization, where he largely performed his writer talent and the critical sense, Banham focuses on the huge and challenging plain of Los Angeles. Another great diagram opens the chapter to show the conjugation between the road communication axes and the flat portions of the city. In the chapter's title, he tries to emphasize disciplinary intersections: "Ecology III: The Plains of Id".

Before a huge territory cut by very long ways, in which the building typology and the urban morphology are repeated with no much variation, the image Banham tries to convey of his third ecology is its unlimited aspect. Since the Id concept-word comes from the field of Freudian psychoanalysis, the author tries to qualify the historical process of stubborn and voluntaristic subdivision of the plain's land, intended to the endless pursuit of individual profit. What he wants to emphasize is very clear:

It is in those central plains that the most abominable lust and the most fundamental urban aspirations are created, manipulated, and luckily, satisfied. If the history of Los Angeles is a history of unscrupulousness and of the pursuit of profit in the subdivision of land, from the initial division of Spanish titles until the final subdivision into the currently occupied land lots, the plains are the most spectacular stage of such events, where the most tricky sales techniques were developed, and where the most psychotic forms of land appropriation (the armed extreme right-wing activists of Orange county, willing to shoot any survivals of a nuclear attack) stain the beautiful dream of the urban farm over which most of Los Angeles was built²⁴.

In the history of plain land occupation, since the division of Spanish property titles, when LA was only a pueblo, until the subsequent subdivision of land when the railway added new contents to the urbanization shape, we have a very familiar story. It is almost entirely similar to the urbanization processes of many American and South American cities, built under a strong speculative economic pressure.

The arrival of the Pacific Electric that allowed the everyday urban life in metropolitan scale, and its subsequent replacement by the freeway network in the 1960s, very well synthesized in the expression transportation palimpsest, gains a key element in this chapter. The exchange of the tracks by the asphalt has introduced, according to Banham's observation, a key issue to the urbanism: if on one side the amazing railway system adapted itself to and took advantage of the plains, the freeway network imposed its technical and constructive logics to the surfaces, promoting huge earthmoving, redesigning the topography according to its needs. This is a very relevant aspect of the process, and leads the author to reaffirm his enormous admiration by the new system, and to observe that the freeway network, when crossing the plains, became "*the biggest visible human artifact*". It is exactly why it was pointless to expect Banham to present the new system in a criticizing way, as some of his critics expected. He saw the relation between the plains of Id and the freeway network crossing them as follows:

[...] instead of following the landscape, they started to create the landscape. For miles and miles, on the plains, the freeways are visibly the

*biggest human artifact, the only disturbance on the surface involving earthmoving [...]*²⁵.

In a clear day, gazing the metropolis from a balcony of the Griffith Park Observatory, from where Los Angeles is exposed to the observer as an eloquent urban spectacle, Banham looks to a place and a topic that could not be missing in his book. Observing the south side of the metropolis he is categorical when stating that this is “one of the major urban panoramas of the world – and one of the scariest ones”, composed of the immense board of parallel and endless avenues, a geometry launched over the valley floor of drained creeks. From there, he witnesses the existence of the physical and social dimensions of what he calls the “true territory of Id”:

*Its full dimensions, and the total absence of quality in most of the human environments it crosses, almost inevitably define it as a region of problems like Watts, which is a few miles to the east of the middle point of the Normandie Avenue axis*²⁶.

And more:

*One of the reasons why the big Plains of Id are so scaring is because it is there where Los Angeles looks more like other cities: anywhere/nowhere*²⁷.

The social problems of this part of the metropolis were evident since 1965, and already belonged to the history of the urban violence: Watts Riots. For five days that anywhere/nowhere burnt in flames accompanied by the insurgent voice of its residents: “burn, baby, burn.”

Not by chance this battle cry is amongst the eight epigraphs selected by Banham for his book. However, it is the keen interpretation of facts, the analysis of the urban segregation process experienced by this so emblematic district, which interests the most in the view of the author, who was asked to have a much more critical posture regarding that dreadful metropolis. Without making use of sociological analyses, very influential in the 1960s and 1970s, Banham, who in more than one passage of the book criticizes them very roughly, pursued a clearly urbanistic approach, i.e. using elements of the functional and territorial organization, to present his interpretation for the dark fate of Watts district.

Going back to the transportation palimpsest, in the fourth chapter, Banham very clearly describes the historical trajectory of the Watts district, based on its privileged position in the urban context, when the railway was installed in the plains of LA, back in the 1870s. Looking to the map of the Pacific Electric Railway network²⁸ again, it is clear that Watts had a strategic position within the railway mesh, and functioned as one of the most important rail junctions of the whole, urban and interurban, system. According to his description, it would be difficult to imagine a place so privileged in terms of mobility and accessibility as the one occupied by Watts. He recognizes the presence of some ecological disadvantages, as for example, the lack of water. However, as it is well-known, this is a disadvantage very fairly distributed in the whole metropolitan territory of LA.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 62. See map n. 30.

To Banham, the replacement of the railway for the freeway system met different requirements, both of technical and urban nature. While the definition of a railway mesh, gradually installed since the 19th century, has had the aim of creating a net interconnection between the downtown, the foothills and the beaches, trying to promote a “*unique and comprehensive whole*”, the logics of the freeway trajectories had another principle: it tried to connect distant places, although not caring about the unification of several urban sectors it crossed. Banham’s analysis shows that the fate of Watts was outlined at the same time when the last connections of the railway were deactivated, in the early 1950s. Effectively, in his opinion, no place in the entire Los Angeles was – strategically – so poorly situated after the spread of the freeways throughout the plain as Watts. And he laments:

*Whatever are the other evils of Watts – today, a black point in any map of disadvantages –, its isolation in relation to the transportation networks certainly contributes for its misfortune*²⁹.

Being removed from the flow of communication meant a territorial ban inside the internal combustion metropolis of the district of Watts, in Banham’s interpretation.

Intercalating, at times abruptly, the chapters dedicated to his four ecologies with others intended more specifically to the topics of architecture, not worrying to establish a very clear continuity, Banham subsequently did a historiographic review of the arrival of the architectonic modernism in the southern California in “Architecture III: the Exiles”. History and stories intersect emphasizing the cultural propensity of California to assimilate the European branch of modernist vanguards. Directly coming from the architectonic experience developed in Vienna and Wagnerschule, although through slightly different ways, he highlights two architects as the most decisive ones: Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra.

Schindler had studied for years in the Vienna Academy led by the very reputable Otto Wagner. On his turn, Neutra arrived after having spent some time in Berlin working with Eric Mendelsohn. With such prominent professional experiences, in the opinion of the author, both are responsible for the creation of the architectonic language of Los Angeles. Even after producing spectacular houses, a good example of Neutra’s adaptation to the culture of southern California is the unexpected design of the Garden Grove drive-in Church of 1962.

To close the chapter and to strengthen the modernist architecture nature of Los Angeles, Banham as an art critic sought in the work of the fine artist David Hockney a visual interpretation of what he called the “*local vernacular*”. The white houses of regular geometry, the basic plastered cubes, swimming pools of a solar blue, mark the atmosphere of Hockney’s paintings becoming the hallmark of Los Angeles domestic architecture. Likewise, although in another scale, Banham points out the work of artist Edward Rucha as the visual interpretation of the landscapes and the urban experience of Los Angeles.

In a new perplexing leap in the sequence of his chapters' topics, Banham returns to the metropolis and dedicates a short chapter to its downtown. In it, he makes very clear that he includes the topic of centrality just to deny it. With an impertinent phrase he clarifies in the chapter's title: "A note on downtown [...]", to which he adds "[...] because that is all downtown Los Angeles deserves". It is obviously another provocation of the author. But, in truth, in his thesis about Los Angeles there is no place to what is formally designated as the center of the metropolis, because it could not be assumed as the starting point for the metropolis urban expansion.

Despite the little interest shown for the downtown, Banham creates an interesting development of the thesis defended by him in the book. To him, Los Angeles is a simultaneously disperse and cohesive metropolis insofar as all of its territory, composed of the three human ecologies, is connected by the freeway system, itself the fourth ecology. Its parts – foothill, plains, coast and freeways – simultaneously developed – with the network organization pattern. It is this very simultaneousness of its parts/ ecologies development that removes from the downtown its attributes of centrality, eliminating from it any urban functions that could take part in the metropolis structuring. He emphatically challenges all the urban historians, defined by him as pueblocentric, who repeatedly conduct their urban development analyses of different cities and metropolises as urbanization processes which origin is the oldest downtown, and which expansion moves toward more distant areas, forming concentric rings. Harshly he affirms:

In what concerns the current everyday life of this 180-squared kilometer metropolis, most of which is contained within the central parallelogram defined by the freeways [...] could disappear overnight, with most of its citizens not even noticing that³⁰.

Leaving downtown to its urban insignificance, Banham departs to his fourth and last ecology. To address it, he expands the specific vocabulary of the book creating a new word to name the way of life developed in the universe of freeways: autopia! The merge of the words automobile and utopia indicates the place where the residents of LA – the Internal Combustion City – spent most of their time, where their spatial references are, where the distances separating the parts of the metropolis are calculated, the place par excellence of the metropolitan culture experience:

This everyday sacrifice in the altar of transportation is the common fate of all the metropolitan citizens [...]³¹.

Together, the private automobile and the public freeway provide an ideal – not to say idealized – version of the democratic urban transportation: the direct door-to-door commute when desired, in high speed and covering a large area³².

To mark the deep sense of the autopia as human ecology, the author quotes a piece of fiction, initially exhibited as a news story at the important magazine Cry California, where the routine of a family organized to live in a trailer incessantly running through the freeways of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 186.

³¹ Ibid., p. 190.

³² Ibid., p. 193.

LA is described. The fake news story was actually an anticipation of the identifiable way of life that would gain many followers³³.

The autopia analysis is done with a certain ambiguity. On one side, he seems to share the fascination of residents/drivers for the experience of running on the freeways, for how much it requires of concentration and skills, ending up “*a way of being alive*”. On the other, he registers the excessive traffic jams and how many times he saw car crash wrecks. However, the truth is that he sees in the conjugation between the private automobile and the public freeway an idealized version of the democratic urban transportation.

The book is closed with two short chapters. More than the accidental itinerary of the topics addressed in the chapters, seen as confused by many critics, those two chapters echo as extensions, and not as closures. In the first of them “Architecture IV: The style that nearly...” Banham resumes the issue of LA architecture specificity. Right away, he points out the importance assumed by Eames House of 1949, proposing an interesting topic based on the association of the residence design with the steel and plywood chair, both by Charles Eames. He saw in this association, and above all in the major success both works achieved, an important manifestation of an international recognition of the style produced in Los Angeles. He himself the editor of a specialized magazine considered that the importance assumed by Charles Eames’ designs outside the country were not only the result of his obvious qualities. To him, the divulgation of both works in the reputed magazine Arts and Architecture (1945/1967) under the editorial direction of John Entenza was decisive for Eames’ success.

Upon introducing the magazine and its editor, Banham was seeking to value the initiative that has created a brief and very fruitful episode of the architecture history in the 20th century. It was the Case Study Program proposed by Arts and Architecture through its editor John Entenza in 1945. The goal was to organize the architectonic thinking of the immediate post-war having the post-second world war house as the program. It was implicit that it was about houses aligned with the future of American residential architecture. According to the review done by Banham, those experimental designs have created a contemporary sense to the Case Study Program.

His comments are consistent with his theses already disclosed in his first book *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*³⁴,

*The Program, the Magazine, Entenza, and a bunch of architects have actually gave the impression that Los Angeles was about to offer the world not only independent works of architecture geniuses, but an entirely consistent style*³⁵.

To him, the consistent style is characterized by the predominant use of industrialized materials, especially glass and steel.

³³ In 2012, according to the statistics, 20 thousand Americans lived in trailers. Today, after 40 years, the trailers gained public and private parking areas fully equipped, in which the mobile homes designation was kept.

³⁴ First edition: *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. UK: London Architectural Press, 1960. Brazilian edition: *Teoria e Desenho na Primeira Era da Máquina*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1975. [Coleção Debates – number 113].

³⁵ Banham (2013, p. 204).

And, since nothing in this book is very conventional, in its last chapter we should not wait for a conclusion. There, the reader comes across an enthusiastic defense of the choice and pertinence of his object of analysis – the Greater Los Angeles – as well as of his work method. The author affirms to be sure that the southern California metropolis has generalizable attributes that should be analyzed and worked so that the other metropolises, actually nearly all the metropolises of the world, are equally described and analyzed. In a very vehement paragraph, he emphasizes his viewpoint that seems to have a right target, i.e., all the authors who with their works tried to demean the biggest Californian metropolis:

*Los Angeles threatens the intellectual inertia and the livelihood of countless architects, artists, urbanists and environmentalists, because it violates the rules of the urban design they promulgate with their works and texts, and which they teach to their students [...]*³⁶.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

Upon introducing the issue of urban densities and their corresponding structuring forms, Banham directly fights Le Corbusier, also quoting Jane Jacobs and Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, not to mention the whole Team Ten. Unabashedly, he criticizes all those who saw in the urban density a risk to the good functioning of cities and metropolises. In his opinion, they were all wrong in their theories about the ingredients that guarantee urban quality. It is interesting to observe that in the group mentioned by Banham there is no consensus about the ideal shape and organization of the cities. In that list, as we know, the points of view are very heterogeneous. Very different and even conflicting theses are put side by side.

The issue of urban density, which in these first decades of the 21st century is again a dominant topic for urbanism and urban planning, was included in the final pages of the book in a very interesting way. If since the last decade of the 20th century the concept of dense city is gaining passionate fans, as a counterbalance to blaming the low densities seen as urban dispersion, represented by the urban sprawl, it is necessary to recognize that in the analysis of the Greater Los Angeles made by Banham the low densities are not presented separately or negatively. The great emphasis given by him to the decisive role played by infrastructures in the urban organization highlights an essential aspect: in LA their four ecologies, coexisting in a relation of indissoluble systems, are responsible for the creation of a post-metropolitan urban organization, which is essentially little dense.

*[...] to produce an instant paradise, water must be added – and it should continue to be added. Once the scarce local resources are used, wasted and depleted, the water resources policy became a pressing concern, and even a decisive factor in defining the political frontiers of Los Angeles*³⁷.

And also:

*[...] however, a fertile and irrigated soil is useless if not accessible; transportation was the main factor to shape Los Angeles, after land and water*³⁸.

The above quotation, which could perfectly be in an urban planning compendium, is far from reminding us that the author himself, little before

diving into the Greater Los Angeles, has actively taken part of the publication called Non Plan. It was about a strong reaction against the urban planning practiced in the post-war Britain that, in his opinion,

*[...] extended a mantle of restrictions over all the built universe*³⁹.

The Non Plan text has all the ingredients of a manifesto in favor of a strong deregulation of the laws and rules governing the urban planning, seen by its authors as an action out of pace with the scientific and technical possibilities already in place in the society. The thought expressed in the Non-Plan was clearly related to the topics presented in the Futuristic Manifesto:

*[...] houses will last less than us. Each generation will have to built its own city*⁴⁰.

Drawing a parallel between LA – *the architecture of four ecologies* and some assumptions of the Non Plan, it is clear that it wouldn't be possible to the author to propose the replacement of a model for another. In the Non Plan, the idea is to open the way to information and needs resulting from the everyday life, to potentially include the technological transformations that affect the life in the metropolis, and not only proposing new territorial configurations. It is noteworthy that the publication of the New Society Magazine, where the viewpoint of the group was released in 1969, came with the following headline "Non Plan: An Experiment in Freedom".

Currently, there are those who point out inconvenient convergences between the topics defended in the Non Plan and the liberal postures regarding cities and metropolises. The governmental actions conducting urban renewal projects, multiplied in the 1970s and 1980s, were seen as an intense and worrisome advance of the urban *laissez-faire*⁴¹. Banham's quotation of a passage of the report 'A Regional Urban Design for the West Coast' by Herb Rosenthal adds more water to the mill of convergences when pointing out that "*insofar as the foreign cities grow they tend to look much more like American cities, especially Los Angeles*"⁴². Such similarity is attributed by Rosenthal, in that report, to the automobile-based way of life. However, Banham sought the quotation just to deny it, regarding this opinion as simplistic, mechanistic, and wrong. However, throughout the whole book, readers easily identify in Los Angeles traits of all the big metropolises of the contemporary capitalism. The strong denial of the author, supported by the historical process of Los Angeles development, does not take away the perception that many metropolises in the entire world, developed or not, from São Paulo to Lagos, or Tokyo to Mexico City, can also be called movement metropolises, or, internal combustion cities.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that few authors, amongst those who analyzed the southern Californian metropolis, analyzed it with more determination. Learning to drive a car, as Banham did, just to get to know the essence of its way of life, feeling "as a literate that learns Italian to read Dante in the original", is an unquestionable demonstration of intellectual dedication. Such disposition though does not make up for the fact that he did not explicitly address the fact that the implementation

³⁹ Cf. Anthony Fontenot. Notes Toward a History of Non Planning, in: *Places Journal*, January 2015.

⁴⁰ Cf. Manifesto Futurista (1914).

⁴¹ Cf. Anthony Fontenot. Notes Toward a History of Non Planning, in: *Places Journal*, January 2015.

⁴² Banham (2013, p. 216).

of the fantastic freeway system was the result of a powerful governmental planning, entirely centralized, with national and international coverage. Although the process of freeway implementation started in the 1920s, it was in the 1950s that it gained momentum, the extension of freeways being multiplied by four in the American territory. The Federal-Aid Highway program (1956) led Los Angeles to be consolidated as an archetype of the movement city, the permanent combustion city, and the city as a freeway, as Peter Hall has greatly called it⁴³.

Those are the aspects addressed in the book *Los Angeles – the architecture of four ecologies*, which had the ambition of forging a new sensibility, as stated by Anthony Vidler⁴⁴, for the analysis of metropolises which history was outlined in the 20th century and that have an outstanding role in the 21st century. However, other aspects emerging from the book should be pointed out, after more than four decades of the observation and the analysis done by Banham.

In this perspective, taking the metropolis of São Paulo as comparison, we find some parallels. In Los Angeles as in São Paulo, the historical trajectory of the urban territorial expansion is directly related to a profound change in the public transport mode. In both cases, within a close period of time, their respective governmental bodies, responsible for the public transportation, have radically replaced rail-based mobility systems by tire-based ones. This is an indispensable fact to understand the urban history of those two metropolises situated in very distant places within the general picture of the contemporary capitalism.

It is an analogy that leads to other aspects of the two national realities in which those two metropolises are included. If, on one side, the starting point, both in the case of Los Angeles and of São Paulo, is the choice for the tire-based transportation system, the replacement process is closely related to the location of both in the field of the world capitalistic economy. Although in Los Angeles the replacement took place in the public transportation mode itself, because a transition was promoted from the mass transit to the individual transportation, based on the private automobile, there was a deliberate action of the central government to equip the territory, in large scale and with high technical efficiency standard, with the indispensable physical infrastructure – the powerful freeway system. The Federal-Aid Highway program has set the conditions to ensure the realization of the fixed infrastructure, both at the urban scale with the freeways, and at the interstate scale with the highways – for the entire American territory. In São Paulo, the replacement took place with an action led by the public authorities, which on one side kept the commitment with the mass transit, based on an extensive bus network, but on the other did it in a very contingent and incomplete way. The main convenience shown by the new mode was the rapidity and the low cost of implementation, especially when compared to the investments and time needed to combine the territorial expansion to a railway system. Considering the already mentioned relation before the expansion of the urban territory, in São Paulo its capacity to adjust to less favorable topographies, especially the steep ones, was decisive.

⁴³HALL, Peter. *Cities of Tomorrow*. [United Kingdom]: Blackwell Publishers, 1993. p. 831.

⁴⁴Cf. Antony Vidler in his preface for the 2000 edition, and also in the Brazilian edition of 2013.

⁴⁵ WHITELEY, Nigel. *Reyner Banham – historian of the immediate future*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002.

In the case of Los Angeles, the territorial expansion associated to the sprawl pattern combined to the freeway system, generator of the middle class suburb, is different in nearly all aspects, social to physical, typological to morphological, but above all in what concerns to the basic infrastructure, from that produced in São Paulo, responsible for the devastating peripheral urbanization and all of its developments.

When selecting Los Angeles as his object of study, Banham believed to have found, already fully realized, the radical metropolis. He recognized in the paradigmatic metropolis of the southern California the attributes so far theoretically defined. This choice was decisive, because it has masked the theories and imagery propositions of the Archigram group, and the proposals of the Plug-in City and of the Instant City, diffused in the 1960s, by the way with their important conceptual contribution, stimulated by the fight against the urban thinking that he saw as rigid and inappropriate. However, for him the Pop dimension of such proposals did not become true alternatives for the urban issues of the 1960s. His thoughts about urban issues translate in the motto: “*radical alternatives must be sought to face the orthodoxies still in place in the urban ideology*”⁴⁵.

The radical metropolis concept is associated to the notion of process in Reyner Banham’s work, in its broader sense, in which he believed to be an actual expanded field, which translates into the permanent appropriation of urban territories through the use of techniques and technologies already achieved or which are under development. The word ‘appropriation’ unfolds into other two, transformation and adaptation, both indicating the relation of the society with the territories which urbanization processes aim to create proper environments for the human activities. The vision of the metropolis as a work in progress, as agent and product of the historical process, is very disturbing for those that believe in the possibility of taming the urban growth only through regulations, rules and dogmas, and such simplification can lead to the intellectual inertia that Banham vehemently criticizes in his book.

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