

Exploring the relationships between Los Angeles' mid-century *Case Study Houses* and David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* (1967) through Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986).



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Introduction

This paper will explore the architecture of Pierre Koenig as part of the Los Angeles mid-century *Case Study House* program (1945-1966), alongside David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* (1967), in relation to the civic and geographic topography of Los Angeles observed by Jean Baudrillard in his 1986 book *America* and explore how observations such as the 'absolute horizontality' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 2) and 'extensive banality' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 9) are reflected in these works from two decades earlier.

The above comparisons will refer to works made between 1945 and 1970, a time period termed the 'Second Los Angeles' (Hawthorne, 2016); referring to the post-war era up until the year two thousand, 'producing all those familiar stereotypes about cars and a shrunken civic realm' (Hawthorne, 2016). Between 1945 and 1966, the *Case Study House* program pursued the city's civic stereotypes with the intention of bringing 'Modernism to the masses' (Smith 2006, inside cover), proposing 'pioneering designs for affordable postwar homes' (Smith, 2006, inside cover).

Case Study House #22 — Stahl House



Figure 1: *Stahl House* (photographed by Julius Shulman)

The topography of the Los Angeles Basin is evident in the *Stahl House*, the building's canopy appears to protrude out into the landscape, following the same vanishing points as the freeways beneath. The rows of steel beams in the ceiling structure seemingly follow the same coordinated lines as the city blocks below, both producing a 'symmetry enhanced connection between the house and the land' (Head, 2017).

Seen in figure 1, there also appears to be a perpetual, horizontal expansion to the Los Angeles metropolis, 'a sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 53). Settled into the Hollywood Hills, the

Stahl House appears to reach for infinity, 'cantilevered out from the edge of the hill toward the horizon' (Ouroussoff, 2004), becoming an 'extension of the Los Angeles cityscape' (Head, 2017).

This concept of reaching for infinity may not just be earthbound, Baudrillard addresses Los Angeles as 'astral in its' reproduction to infinity' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 54). The concept of cosmic infinity may be evident in the *Stahl House*, the cantilevered living quarters *airborne* over the Los Angeles Basin; the buildings' trajectory not only destined for the freeways but the night sky too. 'Mulholland Drive¹ by night is an extraterrestrial's vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller's vantage-point on the Galactic metropolis' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 54).

The *Stahl House* 'used the entire city as part of the composition' (Associated Press, 2004), the building's 'entire spatial conception is governed by the illusion of flying over the city into an aerial field of twinkling lights' (Consgrove, 2006). This topography, unique to the Los Angeles Basin seems to echo in its' architecture. 'The irregular, scattered flickering of European cities does not produce the same parallel lines, the same vanishing point, the same aerial perspectives either' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 54).

The ground level urban landscape of the Los Angeles Basin can only move in one order, seemingly infinite in a horizontal direction. There is 'no elevator or subway in Los Angeles. No verticality or underground... no centre or monuments' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 118). This single-storey metropolis Baudrillard is referring to may be evident in the design of the *Stahl House*; with Koenig having designed the residence to only have one

¹ Mulholland Drive which has a similar view over the Los Angeles Basin as *Stahl House*.

floor, possibly reflecting the civic topography of Los Angeles as well as the distinct geographic, both termed 'limitless horizontality' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 54).

Case Study House #21 — Bailey House



Figure 2: *Bailey House* (photographed by Julius Shulman)

Observations in Baudrillard's *America* (1986) are also evident in figure 2, the *Bailey House* is another one floor build by Koenig, possibly reflecting civic concepts such as 'absolute horizontality' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 2), as well as Baudrillard's one-storey concept of Los Angeles; the city having 'no elevator or subway...' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 118) as discussed earlier.

The *Bailey House* also seemingly follows the civic and geographic topography of the Los Angeles Basin. Likewise with the *Stahl House*, the *Bailey House* also has parallel lines in the steel roof with intersecting supports, possibly resembling the urban blocks of the metropolis.

The *Bailey House* was seen as an economic build, assembled with factory made elements. The residence 'can be extended as a building [and] units can be added to

each end' (Jackson, 2020). This idea of the building expanding outwards and acquiring territory may be reflective of the recognisable Los Angeles sprawl, in the same way the city takes over peripheral arid land, adding to its' metropolitan area, Koenig's *Bailey House* can develop the surrounding land, increasing the size and space of the building in a horizontal direction.

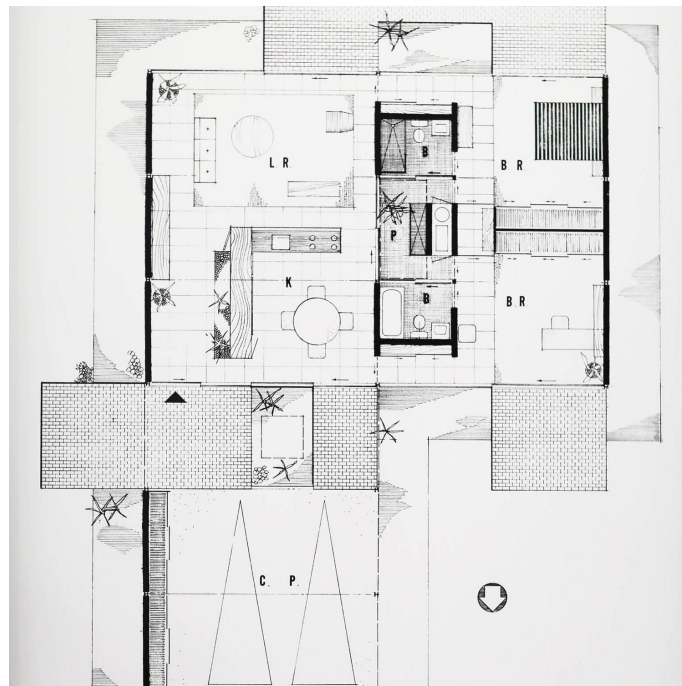


Figure 3: *Bailey House* floor plans by Pierre Koenig

As seen in figure 3 (a floor plan of the *Bailey House*), there is a carport (labelled C. P.) conveniently connected to the residence, in close proximity to the main road; allowing easy access to the freeways and serving 'the city's distinctive, car-mad mid-Century architecture' (Dickson, 2020). The automobile and freeways could be seen as an imperative part of Los Angeles, a 'gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 55). Not only does Baudrillard refer to the freeways as possibly being a ceremonial ritual for the everyday Angeleno, they also appear to be an

intrinsic part of the civic topography of Los Angeles, 'not a way of negotiating the city; [but] "a way of being" (Starr, 1977, p.160, as cited in Litchfield, 2010), becoming part of the 'psychotopography: a dynamic interrelationship of emotions, landscape, and the individual' (Litchfield, 2010, p. 3).

As this 'psychotopography' (Litchfield, 2010, p. 3) of Los Angeles appears to encompass the automobile and freeways, the car is presented as necessary for the city and seemingly becomes a requisite part of the mid-century architecture; becoming a migrating section of the home. The carport becomes the starting point for the auto, where it takes off to explore the vanishing points of the freeways on the distant horizon.

David Hockney



Figure 4: *A Bigger Splash* (1967) by David Hockney

David Hockney arrived in Los Angeles in 1964, towards the latter part of the *Case Study House* program, during the peak of the ‘Second Los Angeles’ (Hawthorne, 2016). His California inspired works, particularly *A Bigger Splash* (1967) are reflective of this mid-century era, both in architectural aesthetic and colour pallet.

Hockney ‘immortalized the intense sunlight and sensuousness of L.A.’s domestic bliss in unmixed, ultrasaturated colors’ (Zara, 2018), painting scenes that appear desolate, with the only sign of life often being that of the property owner. This is typical of Los Angeles housing, exemplified by the *Case Study House* program, where the civic identity of the city was (and to some extent still is today) shaped by the automobile and

private residence. 'The modernist single family house perched on a hillside was really where the dream of the Second Los Angeles was created' (Hawthorne, 2016).

Hockney's pallet appears to add vibrancy to a domestic setting, his 'paintings of commercial buildings silhouetted against azure skies' (Martin, 2017). The private residence and swimming pool depicted in *A Bigger Splash* is 'seductively hedonistic' (Martin, 2017) as well as being equally banal. The painting seems to represent Los Angeles holistically, the city epitomises the 'banality of the deserts, in the equal desert-like banality of a metropolis' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 9). If *A Bigger Splash* has a comparable banality to that of the desert, or the metropolis that is Los Angeles, then why are Hockney's swimming pool paintings idealistic in their aesthetic? 'American banality [will] always be a thousand times more interesting than the European' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 94).

Hockney's painted scenes have also been described as 'stage sets' where 'the art, furniture and plants all serve as props' (Whiting, 2011, p. 864). The idea of a 'stage set' is evident in *A Bigger Splash*, from the absence of breeze in the trees and unoccupied chair. While there may be activity suggested by the *splash*, the built scene appears statuesque. These 'props' in Hockney's domestic depictions possibly influenced by the wider deceptiveness of Los Angeles, with what is presented as fake in the city being indistinguishable from that which is *real*.

Disneyland [as a district of Los Angeles] is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 13).

As mentioned above, Baudrillard (1988, p. 54) writes of Los Angeles as being 'horizontally infinite in every direction' and interprets the landscape as 'astral in its' reproduction to infinity'. Here, Baudrillard could also be alluding to the boundless opportunities in Los Angeles; 'infinite in every direction' could suggest the breadth of prosperity in the city; 'absolute horizontality' (1988, p. 2) and 'absolute freedom of the freeways' (1988, p. 5) possibly a metaphor for not only a freedom to roam but a freedom in a profession or way of life. This could be evident in Hockney's migration to Los Angeles, where he describes the city as a 'promised land' (Sotheby's, 2020) and 'found his adopted hometown infinitely thrilling' (Wick, 2017).



Figure 5: *Stahl House* (photographed by Julius Shulman)

The *Stahl House*, seen in figure 5, has an ‘L-shaped plan’ that is ‘organized around a swimming pool’ (Smith, 2006, p. 69). This ‘organization’ is also evident in *A Bigger Splash*, the horizontal lines and ‘geometric monumentality’ (Martin, 2017) of the depicted residence is seemingly transcribed from the rectangular swimming pool; ‘the urban setting wraps around the pool’ (Hammer, 2017), the architecture appearing to serve the recreation.

Koenig’s *Stahl House* depicts a contained, secluded platform (and swimming pool) overlooking the Los Angeles Basin. Also evident in *A Bigger Splash*, the hidden terrace of the *Stahl House* connotes privacy, an exclusivity Hockney attained in his portrayal of Los Angeles.

The serene, flat surface of the swimming pool, seen in figure 5, seemingly attains an equivalent 'Los-Angelic modernity' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 2) to that of the basin. The swimming pool, like the architecture of the *Stahl House*, in accordance with the civic and geographic topography of the city.

Hockney has painted a sense of tranquility in *A Bigger Splash* that appears precedent in the *Case Study* residence, with an exception for the disturbed swimming pool. The *Stahl House* is so perfect, so peaceful; 'the villa is like a funeral home' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 30), nobody dares to make a *splash*.

The Los Angeles Affect

Observed through Baudrillard's *America* (1986), evident in the *Case Study* residences and depicted in *A Bigger Splash*, there appears to be an affect Los Angeles has on its' architecture and residents. It is possibly in the 'banality of the metropolis' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 9) or in the *hyperreality* of Los Angeles that the city obtains this seductive power. Studying *A Bigger Splash* has made apparent the idealistic aesthetic Hockney paints, and the subsequent portrayal of Los Angeles he creates.

A bigger splash was the culmination of a series of pool pictures conveying Hockney's highly selective vision of Los Angeles. In reality, the city was noted for its banal architecture, suburban sprawl, its traffic and freeways and its significant social problems. (Hammer, 2017).

Hockney's interpretation of Los Angeles, presented in *A Bigger Splash* appears to be one of lifestyle and idealism, and possibly overlooks the 'significant social problems' (Hammer, 2017) suggested above; Hockney may be painting the *simulation* of Los Angeles, and not the *real* Los Angeles. Moreover, according to The Burlington Magazine, 'A *Bigger Splash* was completed in Berkeley, where Hockney was teaching from April to June 1967, and not in Los Angeles' (Hammer, 2017). This is incredibly interesting in Hockney's portrayal of the city, painting an idealistic scene to the rest of the world in complete reminiscence of it.

For in reality it is not always sunny in California. You often get fog with the sun, or smog in Los Angeles. And yet you retain a sun-filled memory of the place, a sunny screen memory. (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 118).

Conclusion

There are many observations from Baudrillard's *America* (1986) evident in the mid-century architecture of the *Case Study House* program that are also depicted in Hockney's swimming pool paintings, both reflecting the 'Second Los Angeles' (Hawthorne, 2016). However, in recent years, there has been a civic shift in the metropolitan area, suggesting a new phase in the city's identity that has succeeded the 'Second Los Angeles' (Hawthorne, 2016).

The *Third Los Angeles*

The 'Third Los Angeles' (Hawthorne, 2016) is a contemporary model, surfaced in the 21st Century, suggesting the city is 'giving up the freeways and the sprawl in favor of a new kind of urbanism', one that suggests a 'new civic identity away from the private car, freeway and the single family house and the lawn' (Hawthorne, 2016). It has been more than fifty years since David Hockney called Los Angeles his home and thirty years since Baudrillard observed the civic and geographic topography of the city.

Architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne (2016) says Los Angeles 'no longer dreams of infinite expansion the way it long did, of growing its way out of every problem.' As Los Angeles moves into its' next civic phase, the 'Third Los Angeles' (Hawthorne, 2016) could suggest a city that is losing its' 'absolute horizontality' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 2) and is beginning to 'fold back on itself' (KNET, 2016). Alluding to the fact that the city has possibly expanded so much, it can no longer expand horizontally any further. A city that was termed 'astral in its' reproduction to infinity' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 54) has now become finite and terminable. Now, Los Angeles is looking to the skies; to a different axis for expansion.

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Images

Front cover: CSH #22, Stahl House by Pierre Koenig (1959-1960). Photo: Julius Shulman © TIME 100 photos.

Figure 1: CSH #22, Stahl House by Pierre Koenig (1959-1960). Photo: Julius Shulman © ArchDaily.

Figure 2: CSH #21, Bailey House by Pierre Koenig (1958-1960). Photo: Julius Shulman © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

Figure 3: CSH #21, Plan View of Bailey House (1958). Pierre Koenig © ArchDaily.

Figure 4: Hockney, D. (1967). *A Bigger Splash*. [Acrylic paint on canvas]. (TATE Britain).

Figure 5: CSH #22, Stahl House by Pierre Koenig (1959-1960). Photo: Julius Shulman © ArchDaily.