

Birmingham:
The Architecture of Two
Ecologies

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Views of Birmingham¹

On my first visit to [Birmingham] I was conventionally prepared for almost anything except for what it really looked like – a quite beautiful place.

Nathan Silver: *New Statesman*, 28 March 1969

Now I know subjective opinions can vary, but personally I reckon [Birmingham] as the noisiest, smelliest, the most uncomfortable, and most uncivilized major city in the [United Kingdom]. In short a stinking sewer...

Adam Raphael: *Guardian*, 22 July 1968

To be able to choose what you want to be and how you want to live, without worrying about social censure, is obviously more important to [Brummies] than the fact that they do not have a Piazza San Marco.

Jan Rowan: *Progressive Architecture*, February 1968

Whatever glass and steel monuments may be built downtown, the essence of [Birmingham], its true identifying characteristic, is mobility. Freedom of movement has long given life a special flavour there, liberated the individual to enjoy the sun and space that his environment so abundantly offered, put the manifold advantages of a great metropolitan area within his grasp.

Richard Austin Smith: *Fortune*, March 1965

In [Birmingham] people think of space in terms of time, time in terms of routes... and of automobiles as natural and essential extensions of themselves... [Birmingham] has no weather. It rains during February but when it is not raining it is warm and sunny and the palm trees silhouette against the smoggy heat haze sky.

Miles: *International Times*, 14 March 1969

[Birmingham] has beautiful (if man-made) sunsets.

Miles: *op. cit.*

1 In the Rear-view mirror²

This report takes Reyner Banham's 1971 book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*,³ and re-situates it forty-four years later in Birmingham, England. It engages with Banham's text in both form and method from a number of different positions; inserting, as Anthony Vidler described in his appraisal of Banham in *Los Angeles*, "one into the other in a kind of montage."⁴ These positions stretch across the past and present, across different sites and situations, and, Vidler continues, "instigate pauses for reflection and reviewing; as if the historian were circling around his objects of study, viewing them through different frames, and different scales, and from different vantage points."⁵ This report wants to know what Birmingham becomes through Banham's Los Angeles; and in turn, what we might understand of Banham, his Los Angeles, and his method, through Birmingham.

The book defines four ecologies for understanding Angeleno architecture: Surfurbia,⁶ Foothills,⁷ The Plains of Id,⁸ and Autopia.⁹ It documents four specific typologies of Los Angeles architecture: Exotic Pioneers,¹⁰ Fantastic,¹¹ The Exiles,¹² and The Style That Nearly.¹³ In addition there are four chapters on the history of Los Angeles: In the Rear-view Mirror,¹⁴ The Transportation Palimpsest,¹⁵ The Art of the Enclave,¹⁶ and A Note on Downtown.¹⁷ These are followed by a conclusion: An Ecology for Architecture.¹⁸

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ecology as “a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments.”¹⁹ Banham borrowed the word to describe the wider setting, or pattern of relations, in which works of architecture were found. It was, as Vidler said, Banham’s “experience of Los Angeles between 1965 and 1971 that encouraged [him] to expand the narrow notion of ‘environment’ as a single building into the wider frame of ecology.”²⁰ The contexts of the mountains, plains, beaches, and freeways were used to situate architecture, from works by Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles Eames, to hamburger stands and the Watts Towers.²¹ These contexts provided the descriptive framework for how architecture (in its widest sense) existed at a local level, as well as within the urban form of Greater Los Angeles.

This report shifts the definition of ecology twofold; firstly it transposes two of Banham’s ecologies – The Plains of Id and Autopia – on to a new site, using them as a lens through which to understand two positions of urban experience in Birmingham. Secondly, it shifts his definition of ecology from describing the context within which works of architecture were found, with a view to understanding Los Angeles; to describing the historical context of Banham, his method, and the book, with a view to understanding Birmingham. In this report, therefore, the term ecology is used in the Banham sense: reusing and resituating his L.A. ecologies in Birmingham; and in a new structural sense:

relating to the context in which Banham and his methodology are reframed in this report. The structural ecologies here describe the pattern of (inter)relations and positions between Los Angeles and Birmingham; the motorway and its hinterland; and the historical moment of Banham in 1971, and this report in 2015. Therefore, the structural ecologies specific to this report are: the book itself; Banham's Los Angeles of 1971; the Birmingham of the recent past; the Birmingham of today; the critical discussion of Banham's method; and the critical discussion of this report's method. Each of these ecologies provides a descriptive framework for understanding Banham's Los Angeles, his method and approach, as well as their use within the urban form of Greater Birmingham.

In this report two of Banham's Los Angeles ecologies – The Plains of Id and Autopia – are overlaid in Birmingham around Spaghetti Junction, where the M6 and A38(M) meet. These two ecologies have been chosen as they illustrate the close layering of urban experience in both Los Angeles and Birmingham: a layering that occupies the same site but with markedly different points of view. These ecologies are a palimpsest of speed, position, and different mental states; of all of Banham's L.A. ecologies they present the most pronounced contrast in the closest conceptual and physical space. The layering of urban experience found in these ecologies in both L.A. and

Birmingham mirrors the layering of method, text, site, and ecology in the structure of this report.

The Plains of Id in *Los Angeles* refer to the flatlands between the hills and the ocean; they make up the everyday city that provides the yin to the yang of the other ecologies. In the book, Autopia refers to not only the physical space of the freeways, but also the mental state of consciousness that freeway driving induces, as well as the situatedness, or lack thereof, in relation to the driver's surroundings. These same qualities make up the Plains of Id and Autopia when transposed on to Birmingham.

Specific sites in Birmingham are identified within these repositioned ecologies, and will be discussed using Banham's methods firstly from memory, and then in the present day. This is not simply a transplant of Banham's work on to Birmingham, but a multiple layering of method, position, site, and text on to Birmingham, using Banham's Los Angeles as a template. It looks at Banham, L.A., and Birmingham in "the Rear-view mirror,"²² and aims to explore the positionality of the writer in 1971 with the reader of the present day. It reflects on the spatial slippage of resituating the historic L.A. of the book in to Birmingham.

At the time of its publication *Los Angeles* represented a shift in the writing of architectural history, with Banham stating in the opening chapter of the book that this was not to be a standard

architectural history text, that it would “deviate from accepted norms of architectural histories of cities.”²³ It was, according to Vidler, “an entirely new kind of architectural history, one that would take architecture as equal to, if not a secondary response to, the ecological conditions of urban settlement.”²⁴ *Los Angeles* didn’t fit with the conventional monographs of cities, either in structure or subject matter. Banham questioned whether “such an old-world, academic, and precedent-laden concept [as a monograph could] claim to embrace so unprecedented a human phenomenon as this city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels of Porciunula.”²⁵ Banham had joined writers such as Esther McCoy²⁶ in, as he described, her “one-woman crusade to get Southern California’s modern architectural history recorded and its monuments appreciated.”²⁷

The city might have been an unconventional muse, but Banham deemed it to have “a comprehensible, even consistent, quality to its built form, unified enough to rank as a fit subject.”²⁸ His study of L.A. was, according to Nigel Whiteley in his biography of Banham, an ‘other’ or ‘radical’ architectural history due to the fact that “the form was more sympathetic to the content... it would take a more inclusive view [of what architecture could mean] than conventional histories had.”²⁹ The book repositioned the way L.A. was received in the wider world. It shifted, Vidler noted, the way one “looked at a city like Los Angeles,”³⁰ and as Robert Venturi stated, “for people of culture and taste, Los

Angeles didn't exist before Reyner Banham."³¹ Los Angeles' moment had come; Banham had reframed L.A. as a city to be enthralled by and to be seduced by, though not all shared his enthusiasm.

Los Angeles was published, as Whiteley said in his comments on Banham's development of the book, "at the end of a period when the city was receiving serious attention as a city from the younger and/or progressive members of the professions of architecture and town planning."³² For an architectural historian practising in, what Rosalind Krauss termed "the expanded field"³³ – concerning "an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organisation of work that is not dictated by the conditions of a particular medium"³⁴ – Los Angeles was the case study to end all case studies. Banham presented his expanded take on architecture within what he called the "topographical and historical context of the total artifact that constitutes Greater Los Angeles;"³⁵ as it was "this double context that binds the polymorphous architectures into a comprehensible unity that cannot often be discerned by comparing monument with monument out of context."³⁶ This 'double context' is important for this report in Birmingham, relating not only to the relationship between the topographical and historical context of L.A., but also to the relationship between transposing Banham's ecologies – the Plains of Id and Autopia – in Birmingham.

For Banham history was, as Whiteley noted when referring to Banham's approach, "not something 'academic' but alive and vital, and part of its vitality came from its human concerns and relationships."³⁷ It was the uses and users of a place that added to its architectural meaning, as well as the connectivity between them; in *Los Angeles* architecture was, as Vidler described, "equal to, if not a secondary response to, the ecological conditions of urban settlement."³⁸ *Los Angeles*, he continued, "intended to take a new approach by examining the whole fabric and structure of an urban region."³⁹ Vidler goes on to state that *Los Angeles* began to explore the "potential for architectural history to join historical geography in order to explore the full implications of 'ecology':"⁴⁰ including, but not limited to, the built, the natural, the technological, the climatic, the cultural, and the demographic.

Banham's study of Los Angeles took urban architecture and its context as a characterisation of a city; a characterisation all the more apparent with the years that have passed. This report is interested in the same: on how an idea of a city takes hold, and in turn, how this idea changes and shifts through different layers of urban experience. It is concerned with points of view of the city from different positions and routes, and how one 'city' might be seen from the position of another. It asks how these representations can create new 'cities', new myths, and new realities. It is a fantastical rereading of an everyday site. It takes a

hypothetical Los Angeles of the past and makes it material through the act of rereading in Birmingham.

Birmingham, like the Los Angeles of 1971, is not a city that gets “the attention it deserves – it gets attention but it’s like the attention that Sodom and Gomorrah have received.”⁴¹

Birmingham is much maligned and misunderstood, and this study begins to explore whether that is due to a state of consciousness induced by the city’s roads. It looks in detail at the perspective of the city from different roads, at, as Vidler said in his critique of Banham’s L.A., “the city in movement and at itself [the report] in movement.”⁴² It asks whether Birmingham’s motorways end up editing Birmingham itself out of the picture.

Birmingham’s post-war love affair with the car created, like Los Angeles, a brave new world of auto-centric city experience; one where, as Banham described, “the freeways... fixed [it] in canonical and monumental form, much as the great streets of Sixtus V fixed Baroque Rome, or the *Grands Travaux* of Baron Haussmann fixed the Paris of *la belle époque*.”⁴³ Banham described the freeways of Los Angeles as “a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it.”⁴⁴ This report looks at this ‘kinetic experience’ on and off the freeway, attempting to discover a point of view with the freeway always in, or at the edge of, the frame.

Beyond the situated spatial experience of exploring Birmingham's *Id and Autopia*, this report is also concerned with the text itself: using the book as a site to explore how Banham's writing, structure, and method performs in relation to its new site in Birmingham. It is concerned with the rhythm of the original book and its form; Banham's voice and writerly style; his own history and how that influences his position as a critic; his mode of address and the construction of narrative; and how this approach creates something new when reread in Birmingham. This 'something' is not just Birmingham, and not just Los Angeles, nor is it just a transplant of Banham. It is, as David Harvey defined, a "time-space compression,"⁴⁵ one that interrogates site, method, and form. It opens up a way of reading the city from another's eyes, an architectural history written in, as Vidler said, "a moment of widening horizons and boundaries."⁴⁶ Just as Banham did in L.A., it wants to understand Birmingham anew.

This report is interested in the culture of the city, indeed in the culture of two cities. One of these cities is experienced solely through a historical representation of Los Angeles via Banham's writing, the other through physically immersing ourselves in Birmingham: seeing it, moving through it, feeling it. This report takes an approach of 'doing' architectural history through the act of physically being somewhere and responding. This methodology situates itself alongside Situationist ideas of

embodiment in the city; of understanding, as Guy Debord said, “the sudden change of atmosphere in a street, the sharp division of a city into one of distinct psychological climates”⁴⁷ (as cited in McDonough, 1994). It is interested in the conceptual layering of text and site, as well as Barthes ideas of reader and writer; and how these (inter)relationships shift our response to the text.

This frame of reference builds on forms of urban criticism that take conceptual theories as a structure for conveying their ideas in a more literary than academic fashion. The work of Patrick Wright, Doreen Massey, and to a lesser extent that of Jonathan Meades and Patrick Keiller, have all played a significant role in this: weaving together autobiography, myth, politics, critical practice and the surreal. At its core, however, it comes back to Banham, stemming from his organising principle in *Los Angeles*: that an urban architectural history should be more than the sum of its architectural parts; that it is the cultural flotsam and jetsam, the hot-dog stands, the sidewalks, the underlying geology, the myths, and the people, that inform our understanding of a local culture and what makes somewhere what it is. Banham created engaging prose through critiquing a broad spectrum of urban artefacts. He remained enthusiastic and unrestricted about their traditional place in the architectural hierarchy. This democratic approach to unlikely and unsung objects of study became one of the key drivers in this report’s methodology.

Looking back in the rear-view mirror the road opens up. Let's see where it takes us, hopefully not stranded at Frankley services.⁴⁸

2 Los Angeles



1. Arroyo Seco Parkway, 1939 (photograph: Baron Wolman)⁴⁹

“Los Angeles does not get the attention it deserves – it gets attention but it’s like the attention that Sodom and Gomorrah have received, primarily a reflection of other peoples’ bad consciences.”⁵⁰



2. The view south from Griffith Park (photograph: Ted Organ)⁵¹

“It is, without doubt, one of the world’s great urban vistas – and also one of the most daunting. It’s sheer size, and sheer lack of quality in most of the human environments that it traverses, mark it down almost inevitably.”⁵²



3. Commercial non-plan on Sepulveda Boulevard⁵³

“What I have aimed to do is to present the architecture (in a fairly conventional sense of the word) within the topographical and historical context of the total artifact that constitutes Greater Los Angeles, because it is this double context that binds the polymorphous architectures into a comprehensible unity that cannot often be discerned by comparing monument with monument out of context.”⁵⁴



4. Freeway signs (photograph: Baron Wolman)⁵⁵

“The Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive
... a state of heightened awareness that some locals find
mystical.”⁵⁶



5. Mission San Fernando as it is now⁵⁷

“Like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original.”⁵⁸



6. Ontario: Euclid Avenue in 1883 (photograph: Security Pacific National Bank, Historical Collection)⁵⁹

“The city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life.”⁶⁰



7. Freeway-scape, drivers' eye view (photograph: William Bronson)⁶¹

“One can most properly begin by learning the local language, and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement.”⁶²



8. Intersection of Santa Monica and San Diego freeways (photograph: Julius Shulman)⁶³

[Freeway structures] “are as crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles as are dated works in classified style by named architects.”⁶⁴



9. Townscape of freeway-land⁶⁵

“The freeway system is the third or fourth transportation diagram drawn on a map that is a deep palimpsest of earlier methods of moving about the basin.”⁶⁶



10. Townscape in Bel Air⁶⁷

“The first time I saw it happen nothing registered on my conscious mind, because it all seemed so natural – as the car in front turned down the off-ramp of the San Diego freeway, the girl beside the driver pulled down the sun-visor and used the mirror on the back of it to tidy up her hair. Only when I had seen a couple more incidents of the kind did I catch their import: that coming off the freeway is coming in from the outdoors.”⁶⁸



11. Chaos on Echo Park⁶⁹

“There are other and useful streets, and the major boulevards provide an excellent secondary network in many parts of the city, but psychologically, all felt to be tributary to the freeways.”⁷⁰



12. Dingbat architecture of freeway-land⁷¹

“Yet this undistinguished townscape and its underlying topography were quite essential in producing the distinctively Angeleno ecologies that surround it on every side.”⁷²



13. Townscape in Watts⁷³

“The banks and cuttings of the freeways are often the only topographical features of note in the townscape.”⁷⁴



14. Eames House, Pacific Palisades, 1949, Charles Eames, architect
(photograph: Julius Shulman)⁷⁵

“A substantial four-lane highway will apparently stop at a white fence and a grove of trees.”⁷⁶



15. Intersection of Santa Monica and San Diego freeways (photograph: California Division of Highways)⁷⁷

“The Santa Monica/San Diego intersection is a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it.”⁷⁸



16. Transportation fantasy, Disneyland⁷⁹

“The freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.”⁸⁰

3 Birmingham

My journey began some time ago, when I first picked up the book. Now in Birmingham, I think back and I look forward. This chapter shifts between the recent past and the present day. It considers Birmingham's Plains of Id and Autopia in an experiential way, discussing the physical state of being in these environments, along with their stream of consciousness histories. Using Banham's methods, it reflects on the mental points of view that these sites and this method might open up.

The Plains of Id

The keys are in the ignition, the engine purrs and our journey continues. We negotiate road works, temporary traffic signals, and a topography of underpasses and flyovers. Motorway regulations begin. The BT Tower fades behind us in the rear-view mirror. Welcome to the Brummie Plains of Id.

As I remember it the Fort Shopping Park sat alongside the M6, just by the motorway as it headed from the edge to the centre of the city. I might have glimpsed the signage as I was driven past, perched upon a tower like a low-rent Brummie version of Seattle's Space Needle. When I was growing up this place seemed so exciting, so modern. It felt like America, all boxy sheds and only accessible by car. Looking back, it now seems so naff and generic. It could be any one of hundreds of edge-of-

town retail parks that dot the country. Pets At Home. Mothercare. BHS. Costa.

This is a place that recalls its own distinct history. It sat alongside Fort Dunlop, the main tyre factory of Dunlop Rubber and once the largest factory of its kind in the world. A little way down the road was Castle Vale, said to be the largest post-war council estate in Europe, although many lay claim to this title. Castle Vale (or The Vale if trying to sound threatening) was a no-go area when I was young. Rumours of unspecified peril, be they real or sensational, would seep out across the playground. “I’ll get the Vale on ya” was always the battle cry when trying to induce fear into the other kids at school.

The Fort Shopping Park, however, was something new. It was a sign that this was a place in development, not just a dead-end suburb. It was on the up. The branch of Boots was enormous. It was so glamorous, with all its surface parking, freshly tarmac-ed roads, and multiplex cinemas, rather than 1950s precincts and bus stops. It was the first place I ever went and bought something from Topman, which was a coup at the time. It sat silently but confidently alongside the motorway, comfortable in its freshly clad genericism. It might have looked like any one of 100 different retail shopping parks, but it wasn’t. It provided the backdrop for hundreds of everyday histories to be played out. Instincts, desires, needs and wants.

“The area covered by this prospect makes it the area where [Birmingham] is least distinctively itself. One of the reasons why the great Plains of Id are so daunting is that this is where [Birmingham] is most like other cities: Anywheresville / Nowheresville.”⁸¹

A little way down the road you would find Aston, just off the motorway. The streets, business parks, and ordinariness of inner Birmingham (Fig. 17) spread out beneath, between, and adjacent to the Expressway. The motorway was ever present, a low hum behind the trees and overhead, but somehow it was always easy to forget it's there: out of mental sight, but not quite out of mind.

Aston originally grew as a parish separate to Birmingham proper. It had its own mention in the Domesday Book,⁸² before Birmingham boomed and swallowed it up. The area spread out on a plain beneath the motorway, gradually ebbing away into Perry Barr, Newtown, Nechells, and Witton at its edges. My Grandad grew up here, my Grandma just on the other side of Spaghetti Junction, although it didn't exist back then. My best mates went to school here, although I didn't. It always remained a disappointment to my Grandad, it was his alma mater.



17. Commercial non-plan on Lichfield Road

I went to see the Villa play evening games at Villa Park. I would run across the dark, empty expanse of Aston Park to get picked up on the other side. I would visit Aston Hall⁸³ by candlelight, seeking out the apocryphal scars of the English Civil War, where cannonballs entered through windows and open doors to leave holes in the bannisters of the grand staircase. This was somewhere whose sensitivity and nuance was disguised by a hotchpotch of industrial sheds, car yards, Victorian terraces, and more recent council housing. It could have been anywhere, but the important thing is that it wasn't. It was Aston.

“The world’s image of [Birmingham] is of an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with ticky-tacky houses clustered in indistinguishable neighbourhoods, slashed across by endless freeways.”⁸⁴

The image conveyed in the above quote may be an unfair one, but as Banham notes there is a “certain psychological truth”⁸⁵ to it. What might look indistinguishable is actually very specific. But how do you describe a myth? A feeling? How can you make visible the personal histories that architecture sees? The arguments. The break ups. The family reunions. The journeys to work and school that form traces across the urban map.

The motorway, with tower blocks and pylons closely following its course, divides the area. Complicated traffic signals, car-share lanes, and a myriad of islands⁸⁶ are scattered alongside the

remnants of industry and long, straight roads of Victorian terraces. These plains might be “basic and unlovely,”⁸⁷ but, as Banham noted, they remain the crucible of the city’s everyday existence, unremarkable but crucial to the city’s psyche. They, as he continued to describe, remain the “heartlands of the city’s Id.”⁸⁸

It was here in the Id, according to Birmingham planner and urban historian Gordon Cherry, that the “transport arteries of road, canal and rail made up the sinews of an expanding urban area.”⁸⁹ The growth of Birmingham into a manufacturing town was in no small part due to building on the city’s connectivity, a feature that remains to this day. The first ‘transportation palimpsest’ in the building of canals, Cherry notes, “exerted a major influence on the self-consciousness of both the town and the region.”⁹⁰ Birmingham became the focus, he continues, of the “interdependence of different parts of the West Midlands;”⁹¹ it became, like Los Angeles, a city defined by movement and motion.

Down here life exists almost blinkered to the high-speed traffic above. We can’t escape the motorway – the whoosh of the cars and vans and lorries – but it exists slightly out of sight (and site). As Borden notes in his writing on the nature of motorway driving, “the driver wants to go through the space, not to be aroused by it.”⁹² The Plains of Id permit inhabitants to do the

same. The high-speed road might be just overhead, but it doesn't actively interfere, it just exists as a presence.

This is despite the fact that inhabitants of these Plains use the motorways, as Meades said in his study of Birmingham, "in a way their designers can hardly have envisaged, not as trunk routes to London, Europe and the rest of the world, but as purely local amenities."⁹³ This locally specific relationship with the motorways signals a two-stage experience of the Plains of Id at different speeds. The users switching gear between two points of view, and at two different levels: one is never entirely divorced from the other, but rarely does the full relationship between these opposing positions become visible. Here, as Freud wrote in his comments relating to the psychological state of the psychoanalytic Id, "contrary impulses exist side by side, without cancelling each other out:"⁹⁴ the local and the national, the domestic and the industrial, the technological and the picturesque. This perspective is a codified cognitive understanding of place that inhabitants of the Id perform without giving it a second thought. They dart between the Plains and the freeways in the same breath, occupying two different worlds and positions without a second glance.

"Birmingham's bombazine conurbation"⁹⁵ stretches out before us, to use the terminology that Banham used in 1963 in an article in the *New Statesman*: "The Embalmed City" (as cited in



18. Aston as it is now

Whiteley, 2003). Not that we can see it in its totality, the horizon obscured. We are immersed in the city, without any real sense of how far it stretches or where it ends. We drive along the local roads, ducking in and out of the bones of the motorway on our way to the Fort. This is an area in the middle of England, the middle of the motorway network, but somehow remains unseen as it occupies an edge. This, as Whiteley noted in his comments on Banham's approach to writing about Los Angeles, is "a place *to* experience and a place *of* experience, rather than a series of architectural monuments."⁹⁶ A messy tangle of histories and development that can be seen to convey, as Whiteley described when referring to Banham's descriptions of L.A., "monotony, not unity, and within that monotony, confusion rather than variety."⁹⁷ The passing motorist in *Autopia* cannot get to grips with the contradiction of bombast and subtlety that the Id brings out.

As we approach Fort Dunlop in the present day it now stands botox-ed to within an inch of its life: regenerated, revamped, and home to an exciting mixed-use development featuring a landmark Travelodge hotel. The dreams of a 1990s urban renaissance now feel like a lie, an exercise in spin; as if a branch of Tesco's and a designer kitchen outlet might answer the problems of a deprived area. Birmingham was wooed by what Meades called, in his series examining the repercussions of 1990s regeneration, the "brandwagon."⁹⁸ It became, he continued, an

“opportunity gateway,”⁹⁹ and with some success. Yet the neighbouring shopping park no longer has the air of optimism and fresh tarmac, rather it has the desperate air of windswept surface car parks, baked potato vans, branches of Frankie and Benny’s, and mega-box chain stores. Maybe it hasn’t changed. Maybe I have.

Leaving the Fort we weave along new dual carriageways with the motorway always on our right. Around sponsored roundabouts and industrial sheds, edging ever closer to Spaghetti Junction. There is a low hum in the background, the whirr of traffic, and the landscape becomes increasingly residential after we turn and drive underneath the motorway. Aston Park opens up to our left, crowned with a Jacobean mansion managed by Birmingham City Council Leisure Services. The road forks around Villa Park, past the Holte End, and underneath the rebuilt Trinity Road Stand.

Villa Park stands as an island within a sea of terraced housing. We watch the kids play football along the street decorated with period-detailed UPVC windows and bare hanging baskets. The long straight roads just to the south come to an abrupt end as they meet the motorway footings and gantries. We stop (Fig. 18). It’s one of the few moments when the two ecologies become apparent, blur, and coexist. We can actually see them both, see in to Autopia. They can see us in a flash. Those on the motorway

might not catch the details, but just before they rise onto the elevated sections of freeway to come, they become aware of Birmingham itself: the murky views of the everyday stretching out across the Id.

Autopia

Whichever way I approached it, the drive up Town was always a *Voie Triomphale*¹⁰⁰ of swooping flyovers and stout piloti. The robust concrete girders and elevated roadway could have been likened to gliding across the causeway to Venice, if I squinted hard enough. A parallel arrival to *La Serenissima*¹⁰¹ transplanted over a sea of industry rather than a brackish Adriatic lagoon.

“if there is a local language to be identified in [Birmingham], it is a language of ‘movement’.”¹⁰²

Surrendering to the infrastructure was all I could do here. The indecipherable machinations of free-flowing traffic, guiding drivers between the Lichfield Road (A5127), Tyburn Road (A38), Aston Expressway (A38M), and the M6 itself. North, south, east, and west. Heavy. Its nickname came from a local journalist, who described plans for the new motorway junction as a “cross between a plate of spaghetti and an unsuccessful attempt at a Staffordshire knot.”¹⁰³ The term stuck rather more successfully than its given name of Gravelly Hill Interchange.

I must have been driven over this intersection hundreds, if not thousands, of times. The familiar route from my parents' house, down Gravelly Lane, then Gravelly Hill and into a gentle descent, before climbing again towards the bowels of the beast. It was a rollercoaster I knew like the back of my hand, although I don't think I've ever been over all of it. Parts remained a terra incognita of what road links to what (Fig. 19).

“The freeway system... is the only secular communion [Birmingham] has. Mere driving on the freeway is in no way the same as participating in it. Anyone can ‘drive’ on the freeway, and many people with no vocation for it do, hesitating here and resisting there, losing the rhythm of the lane change, thinking about where they came from and where they are going. Actual participants think only about where they are. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over. A distortion of time occurs, the same distortion that characterizes the instant before an accident.”¹⁰⁴

Nuanced layers of urban development belied the vista that was set out before me. This was a transport interchange upon a transport interchange upon a transport interchange. The natural junctions of the River Tame, River Rea, and Hockley Brook were overlaid with those of the Grand Union Canal, Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, and Tame Valley Canal. Above this the Cross-City and Walsall railway lines converged, followed by the motorway overhead. Birmingham's very own

“transportation palimpsest”¹⁰⁵ charted the city’s infrastructural development with the passing drivers oblivious above.

This was always the main view of the city to those who passed it. Driving along the M6 from south to north, there was little else one could remember of Birmingham. The act of driving enforced, what Banham termed, a “complete surrender of will to the instructions on the signs.”¹⁰⁶ But these roads were not just “non-places,”¹⁰⁷ the term coined by French philosopher Marc Augé when describing that “if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”¹⁰⁸ Augé cites places such as “holiday clubs and refugee camps”¹⁰⁹ – sites that are temporary or are sites of transit – as examples of non-place; as well as places like airports, supermarkets, car parks, and the motorway. But what of non-places that *are* relational for a given group of their public? That *are* concerned with identity and history of certain publics.

There were two Birmingham’s at play here, the Birmingham *within* of locally rooted experience, that which corresponds to the everyday L.A. of Banham’s Plains of Id. And Birmingham *without*, the space where the placelessness of the motorway divorces drivers from the local context they were driving through, corresponding to the mental state of freeway driving



19. Intersection of A38(M) Aston Expressway and M6 motorway

discussed in Banham's *Autopia*. Here, the etymologies 'within' and 'without' are borrowed from the naming of wards in the City of London, denoting there whether the ward fell inside or outside of London Wall (the traditional boundary of the City). Here it concerns not only a physical space inside or outside of Birmingham 'proper', but also a mental one. They work in both local and national capacities, each operating within the exact same road space. That is, a real understanding where you are situated in time and space: one where you understand, and are attentive to, the city around you (the city 'within'/Id). Or, a sense of being in a strict state of transit (the city 'without'/Autopia), one where your positionality is focused on travelling between point A and point B. The motorway of Birmingham Without (*Autopia*) creates a closed conduit between A and B: a system completely divorced from its site.

Regarding this point of view Augé continues to note that due to the conditions imposed by driving, and to a degree in being driven, that there is "a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he [or she] is contemplating or rushing through."¹⁰ The viewer is at once close and distant from the place he (or she) is moving through. This distance is what "prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully present in it."¹¹

These two publics are operating within the same city space, but

with wildly different positions. Their cars may be side by side, but their points of reference can be miles apart. One traveller could be looking ahead to the next motorway services or other specified point on the map; while the other traveller might catch a glimpse from the embankment of a friend's house, of their back garden, the local supermarket, or the roundabout they pass daily on the way to work. Glitches and triggers remind the citizen of Birmingham Within of their relationship with the Plains from their position within the non-place of Autopia.

“There is no alternative to complete surrender of will to the instructions on the signs.”¹¹²

As we drive into Town, the roads into the city centre present a wild geography of ups, downs, and dips into tunnels as we circumnavigate the centre. We could imagine we were at the Monaco Grand Prix, or even the Birmingham Superprix – a now defunct 1980s car race that took over the city's streets. These roads used to form a motorized barrier for those on foot, but are gradually being broken up. There remains a sludge of buildings of variable quality, 1970s office blocks and apartment towers that set new standards of luxury. The city stacked up, and knocked down again, waiting for the next wave of regeneration to show us the Birmingham of the future: a future that looking back, would already be over before the vision was built.

My brother and I would hold our breaths as we drove through the long Queensway tunnel, much to my Mum's distress. I wasn't sure we ever made it all the way. I doubt it. I would go past a car park – 'the Cage' – with its construction of red metal boxes and cantilevers. On past strip clubs and The Mailbox, the former Royal Mail central sorting office; now a re-clad and rejuvenated shopping centre with a Harvey Nicks. A remaining relic of the old Birmingham was Smallbrook Queensway, an elegant curve of concrete winding its way up to New Street Station and the Bullring, reminiscent of Bath's Royal Crescent if you looked sideways with some artistic license. If all of Birmingham's 1960s vision was this refined it might not be knocking it all down.

It dawned on me that the experience of this city from the driver's seat was a new one. I'd never driven here. I'd always been driven. Or got the bus. Or taken the train. I navigated the city streets on autopilot, but it was a strangely detached immersion into the urban. All concentration was on the road ahead and not the context of the road itself. It escaped me, although I could have tried to fill in the gaps from blurred memory. I learnt to drive so, like Banham, I could go back and see Los Angeles in the original. It turns out that I actually came home to do the same.

On the way home the train exits a long cutting just north of



20. Chaos on Salford Park

Spaghetti Junction, before breaking out underneath the motorway and weaving its way through the columns. It skirts the car scrapyards, workshops, and piles of building materials stored under the motorway kept for the never-ending maintenance work. It pauses by business parks, and domes used to store salt for the roads in winter. It moves calmly underneath the motorway; a moment that belies the throng of traffic above, remaining eerily detached from the plains below and the cars above (Fig. 20). It is here, and only here, that we can see and understand both ecologies at the same time. The in-between space acting as a positional purgatory, our sole view of Id and Autopia together.

4 An Ecology for Banham

Banham's *Los Angeles* was a product of the time in which it was written and published, with research carried out from 1965 and the book finally being published in 1971. There were numerous critiques of the book at the time of its publication, both from those local to Los Angeles and further afield. This chapter is a critical discussion of Banham's method, his position; and how that affects the reading of both Los Angeles the city, and *Los Angeles* the book.

At the time of its publication critics skewered Banham's blind enthusiasm for L.A., with John Donat noting in the *RIBA Journal* that the book "glosses too lightly over the social consequences of mandatory mobility, of pollution, poverty, race, and politics."¹¹³ In 1971 in *Architectural Forum* John Margolies questioned Banham's zeal, stating that other books on Los Angeles had "suffered from excessive negativism; but this one begins to fall apart because of its unbridled positivism."¹¹⁴ Banham's position as a European outsider in L.A. was examined; while concerns were also raised as to whether his enamour with the city would last. In 1972 T.S. Hines commented, in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, that if the ecology of traffic jams and air pollution was one that Banham had to experience "on a daily basis, as a matter of social and economic necessity, then his optimism would fade."¹¹⁵

There was resistance to Banham's polemic from the American intelligentsia, with Hines continuing to note that Banham's 'otherness' to his subject contributed to the feeling of "the author as voyeur."¹¹⁶ Banham's mode of critic-as-tourist only magnified this, and it is here that his position as an outsider, that of a European academic, became all the more apparent; with Whiteley describing this position in 2003 as the "restricted point of view of [a] relatively affluent, mobile, independent, solo, white-collar-professional, alert, fulfilled, (usually white) male."¹¹⁷ Despite the montage-like whirl of Banham's method, that which took L.A. in from a number of different perspectives, the one that endured was his own; complete with the baggage that that entailed.

The backlash continued in 1972 with art critic Peter Plagens writing in *Artforum* that Banham was nothing more than a "chic debunker of current anti-L.A. mythology ... who finds that L.A. is really a groovy place in spite of its evils and often because of them, if you know how to look at it right."¹¹⁸ Plagens continued to castigate Banham's 'otherness' as a European, his relatively recent love affair with Los Angeles, and the novelty that went with it, stating, "the trouble with Reyner Banham is that the fashionable sonofabitch doesn't have to live here."¹¹⁹

More recently in 2011, Christopher Hawthorne – the architecture critic of the *Los Angeles Times* – described Banham as

a “cultural interloper in the American West.”¹²⁰ However Hawthorne conceded that the “optimistic take on the city is not what makes the book worth revisiting;”¹²¹ it is worth revisiting due to the fact that, he continues, “its tone and especially its structure seem uncannily to reflect the spirit of Los Angeles itself.”¹²² Banham’s cocktail of architectural history along with “impressionistic reports on what it was like, in those days, to drift carelessly from one highway interchange to another,”¹²³ enabled him to interrogate the spatial promise of writing about what Hawthorne calls “a new sort of 20th Century city.”¹²⁴ A 20th Century city that was “liberated rather than thrown into chaos by its lack of planning”¹²⁵ and then, he continues, uses this liberation “as the vehicle for a fresh approach to writing architectural history.”¹²⁶

Banham’s *Los Angeles* was written in such a way that the chapters concerning his ecologies, typologies of architecture, and sections on the history of L.A., could be overlaid and inserted into one another. Anthony Vidler described this, in his comments relating to the book’s structure, as “a kind of montage that works against the narrative folio to instigate pauses for reflection and re-viewing.”¹²⁷ Vidler characterised this overarching arrangement as a means for the “historian/critic [to circle] around his objects of study, viewing them through different frames, at different scales, and from different vantage points.”¹²⁸ The structure of the book mirrored Banham’s method of movement through the city itself:

that you had to see L.A. in motion in order to understand it. Banham described that the chapters of the book were to be visited at the “reader’s choice or fancy,”¹²⁹ and that the reader should engage with the text “with that freedom of movement that is the prime symbolic attribute of the Angel City.”¹³⁰

This structure, according to Whiteley, “was a statement about a rejection of conventions [of textual sequence] in favour of possibilities.”¹³¹ Banham’s chosen arrangement of the book was, said Vidler, “part of his conscious attempt to reshape how one looked at a city like Los Angeles – an order forced by the unique form of the city itself.”¹³² As the book shifts between chapters on the ecologies of architecture and those on the architecture of L.A., it is undeniably complicated. But according to Vidler, this was Banham’s “attempt to irrevocably break up the normal homogeneity of architectural narratives and urban studies.”¹³³ Banham wanted, Vidler goes on to say, the reader to “engage with the city as it is, refusing to lower its gaze in the face of sprawl, aesthetic chaos, or consumerist display.”¹³⁴

Banham’s L.A. remained in the sunshine, and according to Whiteley, he was predisposed “to like Los Angeles – he wanted to love it.”¹³⁵ He wrote, Whiteley continues, about the city with “wit, and always with verve and enthusiasm,”¹³⁶ and “looked forward to [Los Angeles] as an experience to be anticipated and relished.”¹³⁷ This unbridled positivity belied a city that was, and

would continue to be, heavily segregated along racial lines. Banham's was a Los Angeles long before Rodney King,¹³⁸ before the 1992 South Central riots. An appraisal of the political landscape was a crucial omission from *Los Angeles*; one that would be addressed by more realist readings of the city in the subsequent years, not least by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz*.¹³⁹ Here began a historical shift, with, as Joe Day described in the foreword to the 2009 edition of *Los Angeles*, "neither Los Angeles nor Banham read now as they did in the 1970s."¹⁴⁰ Banham's sunsoaked reading of L.A. subsequently gave way to what Day called "a broader and more tonally nuanced spectrum of realist and fantastic readings of the city."¹⁴¹ An ever-evolving palimpsest of critique that Banham was just a layer in.

Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne named *City of Quartz* as "the most significant book on Los Angeles urbanism to appear since Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*."¹⁴² Davis's uncompromising prose describes an L.A. subsumed by tales of power and control; a prose that Hawthorne describes as attacking the dystopia of "rampant privatisation and gated-community urbanism"¹⁴³ set against the backdrop of Southern California at the turn of the 1990s. The L.A. binaries of Banham and Davis are now both historicised, representing particular positions at particular times. However Davis's argument is part of a longer resistance to European writers and architects extolling their views, on a

country that may not have asked for them. In their study of the architectural ‘special relationship’ between the US and the UK, Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr noted how the fleeting insights of Europeans visiting America offered nothing more than “guidepost cliché’s for Postmodernism’s Club Med.”¹⁴⁴ The context (and colonial attitude) to this cliché, they continue, was that “British and European writers felt not only did America need to be understood in terms of its supposed ‘otherness’ to Europe, but this understanding could only be properly perceived from the standpoint of the ‘Old World’.”¹⁴⁵

Banham’s L.A. might have been the sunshine to the realist noir of *City of Quartz*, but to assume Banham’s text was solely concerned with the fantastic would be a mistake. His writing might have been unconventional in structure, but it had a clarity that cultivated and engaged audiences beyond academia.

Whiteley noted that, in Banham’s columns for *New Society*, he “reaped the benefits of writing journalism for an intelligent lay audience;”¹⁴⁶ compounded by the fact he had a “distrust of any writing thought of as too academic.”¹⁴⁷ During this period at *New Society* Whiteley notes Banham’s “style did become more informal.”¹⁴⁸ Whiteley continues to describe Banham’s “ability to engage his reader by conveying a sense of both enthusiasm and immediacy through his vibrant prose.”¹⁴⁹ In the words of architectural historian Robert Maxwell, he was “a damned good writer,”¹⁵⁰ in no small part due to the fact that he was “bullshit free.”¹⁵¹

Banham's immersive and evocative writing style was never officially part of the New Journalism literary movement – indeed the term had not been invented when *Los Angeles* was published – but there was a structural common ground. It would be two years later, in 1973, that Tom Wolfe would publish *The New Journalism*,¹⁵² comprised of essays and short texts that described and demonstrated this style. New Journalism was an American literary movement of the late 1960s and 1970s that blurred the boundaries of traditional fact-based journalism with non-fiction writing. It included in its loose ranks writers such as Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and Gay Talese; who used techniques such as construction of narrative through different scenes, extensive dialogue, and a strong voice of the author within the story.

The movement shared with Banham a methodology that encouraged the writer to embed him or herself within their subject matter, an almost gonzo approach to writing. New Journalism was typified by its subjectivity, but when used along with scrupulously researched facts it could be a powerful mode of address; writing, as Tom Curran describes in Shomete's *Critical Response to New Journalism*, “journalism, or reportage, that reads like a novel.”¹⁵³ Although not part of this group Banham was certainly aware of it; he applauded, as Whiteley notes, Wolfe's “total, panoramic, wide-screen knowledge of his subject.”¹⁵⁴ It was this approach to knowledge, to realism, to

description of detail, and indeed to method, that situates Banham alongside Wolfe et al.

5 An Ecology for Birmingham

This report develops a methodology using Banham and his Los Angeles as a new way to look at Birmingham. It explores positionality: that of the self in the present and recent past; of Banham and his position in 1971; and how, through an architectural historian writing about a different city as an outsider, I could re-view the city I know so well.

It takes Banham's journalistic approach to inform, refract, and question Banham's position as a historian; along with ideas rooted in critical spatial practice: taking a concept, plus a site, and making them material through a given process. It opens up a new space – what Banham might refer to as a “double context”¹⁵⁵ – for seeing and understanding Birmingham. This layering of ecology, of method, and of text, holds a mirror up to Birmingham, L.A., and Banham, in order to see each anew.

The “Rear-view mirror”¹⁵⁶ that resonates between these pasts and the present, connecting different locations and architectures, creates a space and time to rethink Banham, and in doing so has reimagined specific sites in Birmingham. It enables this report to understand both cities in motion: one through Banham's text, and the other through physically *being* in Birmingham. This act of movement focuses an investigation into ideas of “identity, difference, and subjectivity,”¹⁵⁷ as Rendell describes in her comments on situated criticism. It facilitates new ways of

“knowing and being,”¹⁵⁸ using “situated knowledge”¹⁵⁹ to understand and articulate a plurality of positions.

Regarding Banham’s own position, in terms of his trajectory through journalism, Peter Hall wrote in the foreword to *A Critic Writes* that “if other academics had come to research and teaching that way, would not academic writing be immeasurably better... and would not the academy be an infinitely richer and more interesting place?”¹⁶⁰ Banham’s approach to history was, according to Whiteley, not “just texts and scholarship, but about personalities, power, and position.”¹⁶¹ It took the rigour of academic thinking, and discussed it through accessible means to a wide public; it made theory ‘pop’, translating it in a witty, tangible, and engaging way.

But what would Banham make of the practice of architectural history today? Forty-four years on, Banham’s journalistic approach to academe may not seem so radical, but I argue that it continues to hold its own. Writers such as Rebecca Solnit, Patrick Wright and artist Patrick Keiller take similarly discursive approaches to practice. Their work covers a broad spectrum: with Solnit engaging with the city through movement (on foot); Wright immersing himself in a site as a means for wider social, cultural, and political critique; and Keiller engaging with infrastructure, history and narrative as a means of interrogating place. Would Banham champion these practices? Or would he

develop a more fractious relationship with this new generation? One comparable to the relationship he himself had with PhD supervisor Niklaus Pevsner.

I wanted to know what Birmingham would become through Banham's Los Angeles; and what I might understand of Banham, his Los Angeles, and his method, through Birmingham. By immersing myself in a close reading of Banham's method it has refined my approach to layering practice, method, form, and text. It has made me analyse my own research decisions, and then relate them back to the object of enquiry. It has made me take each layer of this method, each design decision, and each thread of critique, and refine them until they inform and converse with one another.

This process has helped me to understand how Birmingham disappears from view, but that ultimately this is no fault of passing motorists in Autopia. What may appear to be a mundane motorway environment actually transports one from a Plain of Id to a higher plane of mental focus. Eyes remain on the road, fixed on the journey ahead. It is less an editing of Birmingham on a personal level, and more a separate state of awareness.

The reading of these different ecologies and different points of view has only strengthened my sense that architecture is limited without its context. Without understanding what has gone

before, and the intricacies of everyday life in a given location, it is near impossible to understand the full implications of architecture: that the interrelationship of buildings and their environments is the site in which people make the place. It may be almost half a century since Banham expanded his take on both architecture and ecology, but this approach is no less valuable today.

Los Angeles and Birmingham historically share the dubious honour of, as Vidler put it, being “everybody’s favourite horrible example.”¹⁶² Yet despite first impressions the cities have more in common than one might think, with both creating an autopia historically seen as a cultural vacuum. Banham’s work has shown that when one looks closely at the detail of an overlooked city, cities like Birmingham or L.A., there is much of value to be discovered. The unsung architectures, overlooked geographies and everyday landscapes – on and off the freeway – are things to be celebrated, for they are the setting for a million different Birminghams to be played out on, cities that create, and relate to, our own stories.

“In architecture... the ill-defined city of [Birmingham] has a well-defined place of honour... Such a city is not one on which anybody who cares about architecture can afford to turn his back on and walk away without a word further. Such a very large body of first-class and highly original architecture cannot be brushed off as an accident, an irrelevance upon the face of an indifferent dystopia. If [Birmingham] is one of the world’s leading cities in architecture, then it is because it is a sympathetic ecology for architectural design, and it behoves the world’s architects to find out why.”¹⁶³

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- ⁵¹ Banham: 1973, 170-171.
- ⁵² Banham: 1973, 169-172.
- ⁵³ Banham: 1973, 138.
- ⁵⁴ Banham: 1973, 23.
- ⁵⁵ Banham: 1973, 218.
- ⁵⁶ Banham: 1973, 214-215.
- ⁵⁷ Banham: 1973, 167.
- ⁵⁸ Banham: 1973, 23.
- ⁵⁹ Banham: 1973, 166.
- ⁶⁰ Banham: 1973, 23.
- ⁶¹ Banham: 1973, 213.
- ⁶² Banham: 1973, 23.
- ⁶³ Banham: 1973, 90.
- ⁶⁴ Banham: 1973, 22.
- ⁶⁵ Banham: 1973, 174.
- ⁶⁶ Banham: 1973, 75.

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- ⁶⁷ Banham: 1973, 100.
- ⁶⁸ Banham: 1973, 213.
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- ⁷¹ Banham: 1973, 176.
- ⁷² Banham: 1973, 173.
- ⁷³ Banham: 1973, 172.
- ⁷⁴ Banham: 1973, 174.
- ⁷⁵ Banham: 1973, 224.
- ⁷⁶ Banham: 1973, 168.
- ⁷⁷ Banham: 1973, 89.
- ⁷⁸ Banham: 1973, 88-89.
- ⁷⁹ Banham: 1973, 128.
- ⁸⁰ Banham: 1973, 213.
- ⁸¹ Banham: 1973, 172.
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- ⁸⁴ Banham: 1973, 161.
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.*
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