Editorial: In Defense / Indefensible ... 2
Op-Ed: In Defense Of The Drought, Rob Berry ... 2
Synthetic Turf, Ian Besler ... 3
Natural Orders, Wendy Gilmartin Interviews Artist James Benning ... 6
White Light: On Vincent Lamouroux’s Projection LA, Steven Chodorowski ... 8
Ugly Buildings, Wendy Gilmartin ... 9
Utopia Mytopia, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon ... 14
First they came for our almonds. It wasn’t too tacit approval; it was a blatant attempt to siphon off the drought-proof Stautoches. Solomon reminds us of the offenses of Good Design. Within the visceral hideousness revealed to us in the downward wrongness through-out, there’s also a revealing of our perception of that object onto which our worries, cynicisms, and diffidence play out. We may not be indefatigable defenders of the indefensible, but we are surely sliding with bad taste for now ... and mostly hoping for a good read.

The campaign, complete with a cartoon mascot known as The Drop, is the public face of a set of more extensive guidelines and mandates issued through an executive order from the Mayor’s Office in October 2014. The executive order, to be strict, establishes guidelines on water efficiency and the reduction of usage and waste, an increase in local sources, and a decrease in our reliance on imported supplies of water at a municipal level. These goals, framed as an emergency drought response, seek to create a “water wise” city, but fail to offer a vision of this new version of Los Angeles: What will it look like? How will it work and perform? Will we even want to live here? Without such a vision, we have to assume the city as we know it will be preserved.

Perhaps it’s time to give up our vain defense against the drought and instead rally around it. The drought seems less extreme and daunting when positioned as a lasting and knowable condition rather than a catastrophic and anomalous event. The drought is not an exception or an emergency, but the new normal. We should embrace the drought as commonplace; we certainly don’t need another impending doom to add to our ecology of fear.

In this drought-positive context, we should take advantage of the creative capital of L.A. to propose responses that refract our notions about how we live these conditions that come with our current way of life. Recent conservation efforts, as evidence of the coming of thought as a source of further entrench long-standing rifts: rural vs. urban California; standing riffs: rural vs. urban California; growing demands on water and urban green infrastructure. Amidst the drought, the Los Angeles Times ran a piece on gardeners washing their vehicles less frequently, or not filling swimming pools.

For Californians, that means not another impending drought to add to our ecology of fear.
Material Performance and Convincing Synthetics

Early versions of artificial grass were available prior to the development of AstroTurf by chemists at Monsanto in the mid-1960s. The first patent filing for the ubiquitous name-brand product notes that “A) Attempts to make artificial grasses have been made during the past several years” but asserts that the most were only intended for decorat- ing lawns. AstroTurf was the first product to make a claim for an effect beyond the merely cosmetic. Research and development in synthetic polymers and stitching techniques made for a surface that could withstand heavy ath- letic use and outdoor installation, and promised performance characteristics “comparable with those possessed by natural turf.”

To a certain extent, the development of artificial turf mirrors many facets of American culture in the 20th cen- tury, and persuading the database of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for the product reveals as much. Through the late 1940s and into the ‘70s, when synthetic turf was just becoming commerci- ally viable, technological specifications often focused on the wants and needs of middle-class American suburbanities. Perhaps no other recreational activity in America has been so closely associated with middle-class aspira- tions and professional ambition than golf. And because of the comparatively small size of the ball in play, the tech- nical challenge of engineering the per- fectly performing span of simulated grass was of significant consequence to the play. The patent filings for art- ificial turf reveal the focused atten- tion that inventors and engineers were willing to devote to every aspect of the product performance.

Additionally, there are patent filings for cigarette burn-proof artificial surf- acing and systems meant to simulate the challenges of the putting green for those who couldn’t make it to a well- manicured golf course. The use of art- ificial grass in stadiums and fields took off through the 1970s, following its use as a replacement for natural turf at Houston’s Astrodome.

But artificial turf both bene- fited and suffered from societal and cultural trends that existed around it. Astroturf entered the market at a time when American confidence and enthu- siasm for chemistry and technology were surging. In the 1960s, synthetics, plastics, and polymers promised mid- dle-class lives of ease, security, and comfort. But artificial grass soon had to contend with a national sentiment that became far more critical of technology, chemicals, and their implications. The 1970s saw revelations over the effects of dioxin, in use by American forces in Vietnam, the burning of toxic Love Canal, and industry efforts to con- ceal deaths associated with asbestos.

The Gaze of the Patent Drawing

There’s a clear theme that emerges in these collections of pat- ent filings, claims, and drawings: an increasing fidelity with which artificial turf attempts to depict real grass. The inventors’ engineering efforts seem squarely focused on reproducing, to an almost reverential extent, every nuance and peculiarity of natural flora. The earliest patents describe the basic process behind manufactur- ing artificial turf: small pellets of nylon synthetic polymer, along with coloring- ing pigments (usually shades of green and yellow) and stabilizing additives are heated and extruded into thin, blade-like strands or ribbons. These long strands are then tufted and stitched through a thick backing, generally rubber or latex, and sliced to create the illusion of individual blades. The backing is then coated with adhesive and punctured for permeability. Over the years, technological advances centered on perfecting the turfing and structural methods behind the look of the strands, and synthetics and weavings more durable and resistant to ultraviolet degradation.

Astroturf and American Landscapes

Synthetic turf does more than simply reveal a discomfit with aspects of our employment that are false or artificial. It also exposes some disquieting relationships in how we think about nature, wilderness, and our domestic spaces. In his book *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Mike Davis writes about suburban lawns as spaces that reveal “the clear-cut, impermeable, but essentially imaginary boundary between the human and the wild.” Our homes provide us with a reassurance of boundaries, shelter, and safety. The grass that so characteristically sur- rounds the typical suburban home has a symbolic gradient between the wilder- ness of the outdoors and the comfort of the indoors. The lawn serves to soften the metaphorical edges of the walls of our histories, and to make this stark- divide between indoor and outdoor less visually jarring. Perhaps, when applied to the spaces around our homes, syn- thetic turf is a way to make the natural world more stable and predictable—to bring the wilderness under our control. The occasional imposition of an undesirable aspect of the wilderness—a wandering coyote or prowling cougar, say—disrupts the yard as a buffer space, as impenetrable boundary. “The ideal suburban home, if such a place might directly implicated in it,” Davis contin- ues. In this case, then, we might say that the artificial landscape could be seen as a more forceful assertion of the divide between indoors and outdoors, devel- opment and wilderness, civilization and nature.

Consider, too, how these unnat- urally bright green swaths funda- mentally change the ways in which we interact with the landscapes around us. Home ownership is a central com- ponent of the ethos of the American Dream. Therefore, much of our cul- tural meaning and identity is wrapped up in the imagery of the single-fam- ily home, residential neighborhoods, and the span of yards that punctuate them. Add to that the cultural values of self-sufficiency, independence, and do-it-yourself assertiveness, which for many Americans have historically been expressed through the care and atten- tion that we put into working on our homes and gardens.

The effort that many people devote to their foliage, flowers, shrubs, and bushes is a labor of nurturing and sustaining a collection of living organ- isms—the plant life that surrounds our homes. But opting for artificial turf changes much of this work into an effort to simply maintain something that was mechanically produced, not nurtured and grown. Instead of watering, edging, fertilizing, weeding, mowing, trimming, and cutting, the synthetic yard demands a type of upkeep that is less related to the ambition to nourish and encourage natural growth, but simply to maintain a product in “like new” condition.

Rather than cultivating a living thing, the focus of work becomes main- taining as much as possible the perpet- ual sameness of a factory-produced artifact. Artificial lawns are installed, occasionally brushed or sprayed clean, and eventually removed to make way for a replacement covering. The typical life span for an artificial lawn is 25 years. In many cases, the turf may be subject to a product warranty, or to some other guarantee of satisfaction.

Turning a natural span of lush, grassy turf into an artificial consumer product notes the effects perfectly on the ambition of the very yardwork that it makes redundant. The yard, after all, is a space where wilderness is tamed, brought under strict control for the appreciation of the property owner. The American lawn is a public display of control, sta- bility, and ambition. The more fussily agonized and exquisitely finished the detail, the more the property owner’s mastery of the landscape is asserted. Vietnam, the burying of toxic waste at Love Canal, and industry efforts to con- ceal deaths associated with asbestos. The more the property owner’s mastery of the social and professional realms of life.

As digital design and fabrication technologies play a greater and greater role in the production of the world around us, platforms for 3D printing, scanning, and online distribution of 3D files suggest the pos- sibility for more engagement with the general public and the designed objects that characterize our everyday lives. We might imagine the lawn as no longer a space of clear distinctions and boundaries, whether between drought or flood, indoors and outdoors, or real and fake. But at least we can derive some comfort in the knowledge that the patent drawings for “Fake Grass” will probably look amazing.
Filmmaker and artist James Benning’s latest film, Natural history (2014), screened at the MAK Center’s Mackey Apartments & Garage for Architecture and Urban Design last summer. The 74-minute film features public areas of the museum but also, more significantly, staff conference areas, locker rooms, mechanical ducts, cluttered office desks with a phone ringing that goes unanswered. The secret life of spaces when we’re not coffeemakers, locker rooms, machinery and offices in the museum but also, more significantly, staff conference areas, which was celebrating its 125th anniversary, changed my thinking about the museum’s service spaces and the decision to privilege those. They’re places that maybe don’t get into a design magazine, but they’re still a place.

I’m interested in hearing more about the museum’s service spaces and your decision to privilege those. They’re places that maybe don’t get into a design magazine, but they’re still a place.

Wendy Gilmartin: Could you tell me about natural history?
James Benning: It’s set in the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, which was celebrating its 250th anniversary. The director of the museum likes my work. He had invited me there five or six years ago to look at the storages spaces, and I was intrigued that nine-tenths of the top rooms. I was very intrigued with the idea of classification and how natural history museums collect things over time and then classify and name everything. Naming everything is a way to control things, but it’s also understandable because it’s a way to communicate, to talk about things too.

Over two weeks I filmed every day at the museum from five to ten hours a day. I would get really tired after four or five hours because I had to make decisions and observe at the same time. I was overcome by the exhaustion of that.

And I mean collections in themselves are obsessive. In the last five or six years, a lot of my work is trying to understand obsession through looking at other artists that were very obsessive. I found that too in the Two Cabins project, with Thoreau and Kaczynski, who had certain obsessions too. All this started to work into my own ideas and philosophies.

I used my own classification system to suggest ways of putting all the things that I would film in a box, and it wouldn’t be the classification systems of naming, but it would come from what I finally decided was the number pi, and it needs a counterpoint that’s the short section, and then there’s a longer duration, which I’m more interested in because I think through observation you learn, and it takes time to learn. Those quick observations aren’t very useful.

I’m interested in hearing more about the museum’s service spaces and your decision to privilege those. They’re places that maybe don’t get into a design magazine, but they’re still a place.

JB: I could write it down for you so you can see exactly. The average amount of time that somebody looks at a painting in a museum is about nine seconds, so that’s the short section, and then there’s a longer duration, which I’m more interested in because I think through observation you learn, and it takes time to learn. Those quick observations aren’t very useful.

WG: I’m interested in hearing more about the museum’s service spaces and your decision to privilege those. They’re places that maybe don’t get into a design magazine, but they’re still a place.

JB: I really liked the older part of the building with the pipes and all that. For me, that’s the most fascinating part of the whole building, where the utilities are kept and kind of hidden, but they’re needed not only to heat the whole building, but all of these different rooms of storage have different kinds of climate control. And that causes the rooms not only to look different, but they had different sounds. I was interested in this piece becoming as much about sound as about image. In fact, I felt that all of the movement in the film comes from the sound, hearing the air in the room changing and different machines that might be humming or clicking. All of that interested me as part of architecture, too.

WG: I really picked up on the sound while watching the piece and other qualities of the space too, the light qualities of the space and the sound qualities of the space and the traces of how people have used the building in the long, long shots. You stand back and let the audience consider that stuff.

JB: The sound suggests an off-screen space. You might hear people working in a room or two away, or through the walls. And then I think there are two or three people in the film that accidentally stumbled into the frame. I like that surprise of actually some humans that are there.

WG: So, I was thinking a lot about the Two Cabins project when I watched natural history. I feel like both projects highlight spaces that are seen as insignificant, but there’s obviously a lot of significance there, because Kaczynski’s cabin was disassembled and shipped to the courthouse to prosecute him.

JB: To prove he was crazy.

WG: I again come back to the back-of-house spaces you privilege in the film. They seem insignificant to most people, but quite significant to you, like the structures in Two Cabins, and I suspect that’s why many architects are drawn to your films and your work. Are we reading into that?

JB: Oh, not at all, because the whole Two Cabins project really didn’t start as a project at all; it started as construction. I wanted to build something and, I wanted to build a house, so it was very much about architecture to begin with. And then I said, Well that’s silly, I’m too old to build a house, and then I thought, Well I can build a small house, and Thoreau’s cabin came to mind immediately—the quintessential small hut that he lived in for two years, two months, and 2 days, and where wrote this beautiful text.

Once I had the Thoreau cabin built and I had been doing these replicas of outsider painters I was finding myself very obsessive in trying to understand their obsession and, in turn, my own obsession. Then I hung some paintings in the Thoreau cabin and thought, This isn’t just construction problem anymore, it needs a counterpoint. I was moved by Kaczynski’s writings—or at least infuriated by his writings—and I tapped into his complaint that the left was over-socialized, which I thought was really interesting, and how that over-socialization brings about ego and troubles within those kinds of movements, which one can see happening in Russia now with the political art group Voina, Petr Pavlensky, and Pussy Riot. They used public media as a device to actually make political change, but it also brought about celebrity.

Documentaries on HBO …

Yeah, then they’re all fighting against each other, and that’s a conflict. As I did more research, I realized that Kaczynski and Thoreau were much closer together than far apart. It wasn’t a binary system at all; it was something that was kind of packed together. And then of course, in replicating two cabins, one from Montana and one from Walden Pond in Massachusetts, I had these two different locations, two different kinds of cabins. Kaczynski’s is based on the number pi, and I used two classification systems at the same time, a short classification and a long classification, so the number pi is 3.1415926535 and, as I said, it goes on forever. I used the first 53 numbers after the decimal point. Those would suggest a length. I would use 3 twice, first to describe a short length and then a longer length and the shorter lengths went between two seconds and nine seconds. So if the digit was 1, it would be two seconds, if it was 2, it would be four seconds, so the first digit is 3, so the very first shot in the film is six seconds long.

WG: Do you have a chart with all that?

JB: I could write it down for you so you can see exactly. The average amount of time that somebody looks at a painting in a museum is about nine seconds, so that’s the short section, and then there’s a longer duration, which I’m more interested in because I think through observation you learn, and it takes time to learn. Those quick observations aren’t very useful.

WG: I’m interested in hearing more about the museum’s service spaces and your decision to privilege those. They’re places that maybe don’t get into a design magazine, but they’re still a place.

JB: I really liked the older part of the building with the pipes and all that. For me, that’s the most fascinating part of the whole building, where the utilities are kept and kind of hidden, but they’re needed not only to heat the whole building, but all of these different rooms of storage have different kinds of climate control. And that causes the rooms not only to look different, but they had different sounds. I was interested in this piece becoming as much about sound as about image. In fact, I felt that all of the movement in the film comes from the sound, hearing the air in the room changing and different machines that might be humming or clicking. All of that interested me as part of architecture, too.

WG: I really picked up on the sound while watching the piece and other qualities of the space too, the light qualities of the space and the sound qualities of the space and the traces of how people have used the building in the long, long shots. You stand back and let the audience consider that stuff.

JB: The sound suggests an off-screen space. You might hear people working in a room or two away, or through the walls. And then I think there are two or three people in the film that accidentally stumbled into the frame. I like that surprise of actually some humans that are there.

WG: So, I was thinking a lot about the Two Cabins project when I watched natural history. I feel like both projects highlight spaces that are seen as insignificant, but there’s obviously a lot of significance there, because Kaczynski’s cabin was disassembled and shipped to the courthouse to prosecute him.

JB: To prove he was crazy.

WG: I again come back to the back-of-house spaces you privilege in the film. They seem insignificant to most people, but quite significant to you, like the structures in Two Cabins, and I suspect that’s why many architects are drawn to your films and your work. Are we reading into that?

JB: Oh, not at all, because the whole Two Cabins project really didn’t start as a project at all; it started as construction. I wanted to build something and, I wanted to build a house, so it was very much about architecture to begin with. And then I said, Well that’s silly, I’m too old to build a house, and then I thought, Well I can build a small house, and Thoreau’s cabin came to mind immediately—the quintessential small hut that he lived in for two years, two months, and 2 days, and where wrote this beautiful text.

Once I had the Thoreau cabin built and I had been doing these replicas of outsider painters I was finding myself very obsessive in trying to understand their obsession and, in turn, my own obsession. Then I hung some paintings in the Thoreau cabin and thought, This isn’t just construction problem anymore, it needs a counterpoint. I was moved by Kaczynski’s writings—or at least infuriated by his writings—and I tapped into his complaint that the left was over-socialized, which I thought was really interesting, and how that over-socialization brings about ego and troubles within those kinds of movements, which one can see happening in Russia now with the political art group Voina, Petr Pavlensky, and Pussy Riot. They used public media as a device to actually make political change, but it also brought about celebrity.

Documentaries on HBO …

Yeah, then they’re all fighting against each other, and that’s a conflict. As I did more research, I realized that Kaczynski and Thoreau were much closer together than far apart. It wasn’t a binary system at all; it was something that was kind of packed together. And then of course, in replicating two cabins, one from Montana and one from Walden Pond in Massachusetts, I had these two different locations, two different kinds of cabins. Kaczynski’s is...
project anything on it? Is the artist here? Can we go inside? Can anyone?
I turn to see a man approaching down the street, a guitar slung around his
neck. He’s humming before speaking
a word. He nods at me, others. Open
configuration, dangling chain, chest hair. His
hand moves down to strum something.
The fingers know what they’re doing, they’re practiced, they pianist
with his major chords. No thought’s too small to go straight to a
song, G to C and back to G again quick, “Oh man, rad, it’s all white!” And
then sings/strums: “White... White... White!” He pauses a split second before
singing “light.” Was it the right time to
rhythm? So soon? Is he a gaunt? Petty? Petty/Branson hybrid. (Richard/Tom/
Richard: ”I was talking to my friend
down at the Vons, you know, the one
on Alvarado, and well I don’t know him
really I just met him but he said I should
come down see this thing.”
A few Mississippis, and then: “I’m
Eddy.” “Steve.” He turns back toward the
white, toward the afternoon light, and
say, “I know, it’s pretty great, but—”
—and there’s always a but. “But
I just wanna bleed all over it!” No one
ears, or no one pays attention. I nod at
him, encouraging him. “Yeah.” With that,
that is emblazoned.

The thirst for blood becomes chor-
uses and home chords. Yeah, someone
should just bleed all over it,” says Eddy.
“Bleed, you know, for the pain of human-
ity. What if I just stripped down nacked
and threw myself on the barbed wire?
Or maybe that would be a bit too Jesus.”
Then cannies. Then ogles. Then splits.
I_speak to anyone, you know
but you’re a good listener? Hey—who’s
the artist! Do you know him? It’s not you,
It is? “No, it’s, um, he’s, a, French,
artist,” with the stress on the nationality,
perhaps distancing him from me, bob-
bling words over to him, failing to meet
perhaps distancing him from me, bob-
bling words over to him, failing to meet
that building someone painted all white.
Sunset, and now this thing—this event—
after new corner-curb construction on
no noticeable police. Pylons, tem-
casual banter mixed into the shepherd
walk but very gently, slo-mo, usually with

“Why’s the artist?” someone
asks her. “Oh, he’s in that green build-
ing over there,” says Eddy. “That building
from the Colonel, with
its vaulted skylight next to the leak
shingles as wall coverings and leaving
with mass-produced, everyday con-
structing out front remind us that Daniels
building-as-symbol style that typified
Postmodernist architecture 20 years ago.
With finlike windows for wings and a
red roof for the rooster’s comb, the chick-
ens makes Eddy, “then that would be radi-
ate his instincts with major chords.

White Light: On Vincent Lamouroux’s Projection LA

supposedly based on Thoreau’s, but
I don’t know. It has somewhat the same
form; its smaller and lowered ceil-
ing and smaller windows, which makes
sense in the harsher climate of Montana.

Doing the painting replicas, I
thought a bit about framing when I make
a film, how I find that frame. It also
comes from an idea of proportion
and again about the architecture, in a sense. I
was invited to an architecture confer-
ence in Hamburg and to a number of
architecture schools—SCI-Arc was one, and
I think another one in Blacksburg, Va. I was confused that they’d be inter-
ested in my work, but from then on it
became very apparent. I was dealing
with space in ways that architects think
about—and maybe about the politics of
the space.

What do you get out of these projects?
I make projects or films that
would take me to places I want to physi-
cally be in and then observe and under-
stand those places to put my life in a
large context so I could understand the
world in a better way. Being in the
museum, it’s a place of privilege to see
things that most people can’t see. But
the way it changes my idea of what edu-
cation is and how we quantify things
and how we try to control things, that
was very useful for me to be in that place.
It seems a bit self-indulgent, but I think if
you make yourself a better person, you
add to the world in a certain way—to
make pieces that will bring about some
kind of discussion and maybe even be a
little bit confrontational. I don’t believe
in everything Kaczynski’s done of course,
and I don’t believe in violence, but I un-
stand when he says it if our government
uses violence on a daily basis and we
don’t, we’re at a disadvantage. Kaczynski
ended up killing three people. My tax
dollars pay for drones that have killed over
3,000 people indiscriminately over
the last just four years. If people want
to make Kaczynski into the bogeyman,
they have to start pointing their finger at
themselves, too, if they pay taxes.

I lean on a streetlight pole as the 2 bus
comes in, and when the door opens, I
catch a glimpse of the driver, pissed off.
No doubt from the commotion along the
route. First it’s new corner-curb
after new corner-curb construction
at Sunset, and now this thing—this event—
that building someone painted all white.

Ugly Buildings

Wendy Gilmarin
340 N. Western Avenue, Mid-City

Conceived at the tail end of the radial
‘80s by architect Jeffrey Daniels,
completed in 1990, this KFC fran-
chise epitomizes the blocky, color-
ful, asymmetrical, and never subtle
building-as-symbol style that typified
Postmodernist architecture 20 years ago.
With finlike windows for wings and
red roof for the rooster’s comb, the chick-
ened inside and corrugated metal
sliding out front remind us that Daniels
architectural sensibilities.

When they finally come to a stand-
still between freeway exits and begin to
look around, they’re met with the bare
back walls of parking structures, identi-
cal gray condescensions peaking up behind
highway embankments, and black-win-
dowless, soulless office towers. This
reliant landscape of blah is what
most visitors and many residents find
visually unappealing about Los Angeles.

Why is L.A. so ... ugly? they ask.
To the mountains,” we explore
our visiting friends and family. “The beach,
the hills, the Bougainvillea bushes,
Chavez Ravine—those aren’t ugly.” It gets an
Angeleno hot and itch-

4
Winter 2016 Newsletter

Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design

Steven Chodorowsky

I don’t have to, you know, like it, but I
like that I live in a world that’s so fuck-
ing advanced that they’d paint a whole
building white! I mean fuck! I don’t
have to like it! I don’t have to like him
he could be a total dick, and if he was a
dick I wouldn’t care, I respect his right
to make things white!”

“I hope he did this illegally,”
muses Eddy, ”then that would be radi-
cal.” I tell him, no, the city had foot the
bill. “Ah well, shit, of course.” He gets
distant. You could see him picturing hundreds of people stripping naked and
running upon chainlink—mass impale-
ment. Our Sunset Bastille.

As he turns to leave, back
the way he came, never getting closer to
the white than the bus stop for the 2, he
says, signing off, “If you come back
and see blood, you’ll know it’s me.”
unattractive. Those who dismiss ugly Los Angeles will snark at our traffic, overpriced restaurants, and attitude, too. And they’ll never uncover the meaning and reward to be revealed in the city’s messy stew of urban elements.

Los Angeles does have beautiful buildings. These are conceived by philantropic boards of directors and get reviewed by smart critics. They’re associated with high art and protected and preserved by conservancies. Beautiful buildings have had all their bugs worked out by teams of specialists who meet frequently to discuss any functional or formal issues through the course of construction and take the dog to the vet in ugly buildings.

Coasting through downtown, one takes in a visual index of a certain development type—the city core—where skyscrapers built in the 1970s and ’80s soar. Their glassy, steelly architecture symbolizes financial stability, capitalism, investment, permanence. Older towers from the 1920s and ’30s offer misticulous motifs etched in stone, arching entrances to ornate lobbies, and detailing in a style of elegant grandeur lost in building craft. Combined, these two types of downtown buildings provide Los Angeles its skyline and visual locus. But as one moves out from the city core in any direction—on Third Street, Mission, Central—the environment changes. The buildings out here symbolize something else entirely. This is the vast, horizontal mass of Los Angeles’s built ecology—a landscape of tacked-on siding and black glass, McMansions, yacht-worthy stucco apartments on tiny stalls, dumpy offices, monotonous parking structures, and sad strip malls. Out here among the lords of bad taste also lies the potential for a drastically different urban situation. Let the critics concern themselves with the architectural beacons of our contemporary times. Ugly buildings are really where it’s at.

Ugly buildings are the stock of the people, products of their culture and history. They’re kind of like us, in a way. They suffer from financial hardship, or they don’t deal with wear and tear well as they age. Some flaunt their ugliness. Some doff themselves up in gaudy, mismatched architectural accents like columns and spires and overly decorated copper drainpipes. Some are cloaked in gallons of beige paint so as not to stand out, or simply to disappear. Some are outfitted with intimidating spikes, fearful criminals or bird poop. These ugly buildings are contaminated with problems; they may be tragically out of the realm of the human scale, have weird materials stuck all over, are messy and unkempt, are a mishmash of ideas and colors. But they have something else going for them that the architectural gems do not: they are a stealthy, prolific army that no one ever notices or talks about. We drive past, walk by, work in, and the dog to the vet in ugly buildings. They are the background noise of the city. Ugly buildings don’t alienate potential participants in their assessment or mocking.

appealing to local governments, too, for their guaranteed return in local sales tax. Cities also increased fees on their own services, which usually didn’t require voter approval. Real estate developers, consequently, were skewered with delaying attempts at collected revenue and were forced to skimp as much fat as possible off their respective projects in order to ensure the biggest payback on their investment. This meant constructing as many units as possible, as cheaply as possible, to the very maximum of the lot’s lines. In general, land use planning and development continues to encourage revenue production as a first-order goal. Condos, office buildings, and shopping centers exist as instruments to this monetary exchange, disassociated from their surroundings—and never unprofitable. A century before Proposition 13, men such as civil engineer and water baron William Mulholland, land mogul Henry Huntington, and Los Angeles Times publisher Harry Chandler dedicated themselves to fueling a land-grabbing, money-making development machine in the city. This involved constructing many things cheaply and quickly, the extraction of resources to make these built things run efficiently, and then the luring of new residents to live and work in said built things. The repeated cycle of speculative booms and busts over the decades rendered the region’s buildings less as containers for people and more as real-estate investments, to be completed with all due haste. By the 1950s, these mini-cycles grew into a monstrous jugernaut, and in an already ingrained system of land speculation where anything goes, rules were tossed around because it is easy, swift, and colloquial. Los Angeles’ urban situation mirrors a suffering of formalism, invisible circumstances and the substructure of the twisted and nuanced political, historical, and economic landscape directly inform the city’s physical one, and behind each ugly building lies an ever-unfolding storyline about political leaders, land speculators, handymen, and cottage industries written in dirty beige stucco and mirrored teal glass.

Angelinos have always been proud homebuilders, liberal in their front-law watering and conservative in their tax giving. Unlike other cities that enjoy grand civic spaces, Los Angeles prefers the open space of its backyards, and when Proposition 13 passed in 1978, it allowed California homeowners to maintain a steady property tax rate on their homes (and yards), even when inflated housing prices soared and continued to peak through the ’80s. For local governments, however, Prop 13 was a death knell. The reductions in tax revenues spelled insolvency for some communities, and local governments quickly took aim at new construction for additional tax sources. New construction was counted as a reassessed property—and therefore could take on an initial property-tax hike. New shopping malls and retail centers became famous and seemingly unplanned “sprawl” (we’re actually more dense than New York’s five boroughs combined) is a contrived, if not routine, feedback loop of disposable building stock construction unfurling into the desert’s deepest reaches. Stop in any neighborhood and consider the corner convenience store or an apartment complex built after the postwar period. The building’s ugliness is merely a gateway to discovering this history.

Whether residents wanted it or not, Los Angeles never suffered or benefitted from a dictatorial planner’s iron fist—think New York’s Robert Moses or Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago. Without much master planning or handholding by powerful, centralized, bureaucratic agencies, building owners in Los Angeles are free to become mad creators of a Frankenstein’s monster of a building. On a broader scale, this frontier-like freedom spawns a region of misfit Quasimodos driven by quick renovations for a resale, a handyman’s bad hunch, a developer’s notion of status and wealth, or a bland corporate branding strategy—all consequences of the city’s persistent defiance against rules and good taste. Ours is a historically individualistic and corruption-ridden city. Los Angeles deliberately established a progressive political system in the 1920s under the 1925 charter and continues to be run by handfuls of councils and boards under the auspices of which any large-scale, impactful development projects stall or become watered down. Add an intentionally weak mayor (per the city’s subsequent charters), and it’s easy to see why a master builder never emerged in Los Angeles.
Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design

3712 Veteran Avenue, Palms

Here’s the thing: rent is high, jobs are difficult to get or keep right now, and on top of that, some struggling folks even have unlucky relatives or friends living on their couches. In general, living is hard, but it doesn’t have to be this hard. This sad, grey box box recalls the hideous public housing projects of Stalinist Russia or an experiment in minimalism gone awfully wrong. But hundreds of apartments like this one dot the streets for a reason. In the ’60s the city needed cheap, multifamily apartments that could be constructed quickly. Folks were moving to Los Angeles in horde. Low-cost, freeway-adjacent housing was a must, and developers compiled.

Today, these same structures are home to immigrants, actors, and college students—the demographics of transience.

ParexLaHabra is Los Angeles’s larg-est stucco provider. Known locally as LaHabra stucco and established in Anaheim in 1926, the company today is a subsidiary to a group of international entities specializing in residential and commercial cement and acrylic-based finishing systems including EIFS—a product that most people refer to as stucco plaster. LaHabra stucco provides the thick and bumpy white or pastel-colored coating found encasing the majority of apartment buildings, hotel exteriors, and strip malls in Southern California and around the world. The easy, unmarkable uniformity and forgettable, depthless nature of the material makes it ubiquitous. It can essentially appear to be anything or nothing at all.

For the freewheeling methodology of urbanism and infrastructures like a homegrown aesthetic, the ugly power players still makes for a scenario in which the private sector can build whatever it wants. Ugly buildings are now poised to enable the next incar-nation of L.A.’s slow-motion makeover: one with mixed-up by-products, or a yet-unnamed hybrid, a shortcut, a parking structure that’s lived in or shopped in, an office park that’s a gathering area and a public landmark, or a manip-u-lated street facade that changes traffic patterns. Rethinking the psychological and physical space in the city through a reimagining of its most typical buildings is easy to conjure—just step out on the street and start looking.

This chapter can be found in the recently published anthology LAtitudes: An Angeles’s Atlas. Ed. Patricia Widakoski. Heyday, Berkeley California, 2015.

Winter 2016 Newsletter
Wendy Gilmartin

Design
Dante Carlos
River Jukes-Hudson
Stephen Serrato

This publication is made possible in part by a grant from the City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs
LA Forum PO Box 291374
Los Angeles, CA 90029
www.laforum.org
info@laforum.org

Membership
Membership helps sustain the Forum’s website, lectures, competitions, publications, and other events. By joining, you give support to the cause of architecture and design, while enjoying a stimulating year of Forum happenings.
To join, visit http://laforum.org/membership.

2016 Sponsors
Partners
California Arts Council
City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs
Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts
Los Angeles County Arts Commission
National Endowment for the Arts

Benefactors
Ariap	House & Robertson Architects	
W.K. Day Foundation

Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design

Contributors
Rob Berry is an architect. He is principal of Berry and Linne, an architecture and design practice based in Los Angeles, and former vice president of development of the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design. Berry teaches in the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California.

Ian Besler is a designer, researcher, and writer whose work explores relationships between interfaces, media, software, and cities. His practice is especially situated in user-centered design, fabrication, modeling, and iterative making. Besler’s background is in journalism and graphic design, and he holds a B.S. in news-editorial journalism from the College of Media at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and an MFA from the Media Design Practices program at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where he was the 2014 Milken Family Foundation Post-Graduate Design Fellow. Besler was raised in Chicago and is based in Los Angeles.

Steven Chodoriwsky is an artist, writer, and design researcher. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

Wendy Gilmartin is a registered architect, journalist, and partner at FAR fohn&rojas in Los Angeles. Gilmartin has helped realize notable public and private design projects in the region, including Grand Park in downtown Los Angeles, the 2015 AIA restaurant design award–winning Nobu Malibu, and an artists’ retirement community at the edge of the Salton Sea. She has written for LA Weekly, KCET’s Coagula Art Journal, the Houston Press, Glasstire Visual Art & Design, The Hollywood Reporter, and in the recently published anthology Latitude: An Angelino’s Atlas. Barbara Stauffacher Solomon trained first as a dancer in her native San Francisco. Then, as a recently widowed mother of one, she traveled in the 1950s to Switzerland, where she studied graphic design under Armin Hofmann. So assiduously did she absorb the master’s hard-line Modernist doctrine that even when she returned to America to work as a jobbing designer, she doggedly stuck to the rigor of Swiss design at a time when, as she notes, “psychedelic squiggles” were the norm. Despite her varied and inspirational career, she is best known for the epoch-defining Supergraphics she created for Sea Ranch in 1960s California.