

## California Nightmare

*Dead Cities: A Natural History* by Mike Davis. New York, NY: New Press, 2002. 288 pp. \$26.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Alex Lichtenstein

Mike Davis stands out as one of the most original thinkers on the current intellectual scene — part social historian, part urban theorist, part cultural critic, part apocalyptic environmentalist seer. Best known for *City of Quartz*, his 1990 tour de force portrait of Los Angeles, Davis possesses an uncanny ability to capture the intricate workings of contemporary urban political economy. In his work, the abstractions of capital flow and urban design decisions have a concrete impact on the everyday world in which new immigrants and dispossessed working people struggle for dignity. Not since Carey McWilliams wrote about Southern California in the 1930s and 1940s has a social critic so unerringly captured the tension between radical social possibility and rampant capitalist greed that has shaped the region's social history and urban ecology.

*Dead Cities*, a collection of Davis's essays from the last decade, offers the opportunity to trace the evolution of his thinking since the appearance of *City of Quartz*. Recently, Davis has turned his attention from the urban to the natural landscape, turning away from the social disasters of disinvestment, so-called urban "renewal," and the assault on working class communities that characterized the remaking of L.A. in the 1980s, to face the ecological crisis gripping the urbanizing American West ("ecocide in Marlboro Country," in his telling phrase). Bringing these newer concerns together with his older work, these essays allow us to take the measure of Davis's cultural critique and to evaluate the dire pronouncements that characterized his previous efforts to "excavate the future" of southern California.

The sledgehammer prose that made Davis so much fun to read in situ holds up less well over time; some of his essays have become historical artifacts rather than the precise inventories of disaster they seemed at the time. Davis's imagination is currently captivated by what he terms "neo-catastrophism," the notion that sudden, cataclysmic events can rupture the fabric of social and natural history. In retrospect, this apocalyptic feel is what always gave Davis's descriptions of L.A.'s past and his prognoses of its future so much power. Ten years down the road, however, the sky has not yet fallen. One can't help but wonder how the past decade has borne out, or refuted, his early writings' millennialist vision of imminent urban collapse and social anarchy.

For example, Davis proclaimed in a 1990 essay reprinted here, that "the social costs of [L.A.'s] downtown growth

will rise steeply in the next decade." But though the assertion could easily be measured, there is no indication whether it proved correct. Similarly, the giant sinkhole that opened at the intersection of Hollywood and Vermont in 1991, described then by Davis as "the biggest transportation fiasco in modern history," has been paved over and now anchors a trendy mixed commercial, residential, and ethnic enclave, which Davis doesn't acknowledge. And his brilliant 1992 "autopsy" of L.A., which charted the racial and class resegregation of the city in the wake of Reaganism, cries out for an update that notes the recent (thwarted) attempt of the San Fernando valley to secede from the city, or recent signs of genuine grassroots renewal of the labor movement. In general, a bit more self-reflection on Davis's part, historicizing the context of these essays, as well as updating their significance a decade after the L.A. riots, would have made *Dead Cities* a stunning achievement. Now it stands mostly as an inventory of Davis's uneven oeuvre.

That said, there is no one else so able, with a few telling anecdotes, to capture the social and ecological blindness that afflicts the avatars of urban development in the American West. "Las Vegas," Davis argues convincingly, "demonstrates the fanatical persistence

lived at a beach, spent their nights in a coffee house, or went to an elite university," Davis recalls. Yet despite such class resentment, he and his friends still caught the wave of "the possibility of free time and space beyond the program of Fordist society" that was "the vital cultural substrate of the sixties."

In the end, it remains difficult to match this brief glimpse of an alternative history of California with Davis's relentless pessimism about the possibility of a humane urbanity. Yet, in one of the closing pieces in *Dead Cities*, Davis examines the imaginative fiction of urban destruction, post-apocalyptic narratives of flowers blooming from the ruins of modern London. So too, from beneath the rubble of Los Angeles's failed dreams, perhaps hope and renewal may still sprout.

## Xtremely Fabulous PreFab

*Xtreme Houses* by Courtenay Smith and Sean Topham. New York: Prestel, 2002. XX pages, illustrated. \$29.95 paperback.

*Prefab* by Bryan Burkhart and Alison Arieff. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2002. 160 pages, illustrated. \$39.95 hardback.

Reviewed by Janet Moore

"We are all architects," boldly proclaim Courtenay Smith and Sean Topham at the start of their new book, *Xtreme Houses*. The authors explain that although they really are not architects, they have shaped various abodes to meet their individual needs throughout their lives. This, they conclude "makes us architects along with everyone else who has made a decision about the place they call home."

With this introduction *Xtreme Houses* launches into a clever and interesting foray into the world of on-the-edge architectural design, focusing on houses that challenge traditional methods or attempt to solve problems. Similarly, in *Prefab*, Allison Arieff and Bryan Burkhart examine how the "prefab" market has enlarged from mere Quonset huts to include creative, customized and often upscale options. Both books reveal some of the architectural community's current solutions for social ills such as homelessness and overcrowding. They also discuss how consumers are using technology to take a more hands-on role in the architectural design of their abodes — even the prefabricated models.

Because the books cover similar topics, they occasionally and predictably overlap. Both highlight Rotterdam-based architect Kas Oosterhuis to illustrate how clients can customize prefabricated modules over the Internet. His web-savvy clients become virtual co-designers of their own "Variomatic Houses" by using his interactive web site. They can personalize their prefabricated dwellings by

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"Las Vegas," Davis argues,  
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 of human settlement."

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of an environmentally and socially bankrupt system of human settlement," a system "stupefied by the ready availability of artificially cheap water, power, and land" — a system for which Los Angeles remains the template.

Ironically, while Davis's dystopian catastrophism merits an update, his "aging socialist's" heart still clings to stifled utopian possibility. In a thrilling essay, written just last year, Davis offers some autobiographical musings, describing the alienation and rebelliousness that animated white working-class teenagers in the southern California of his youth (circa 1960), and sparked a series of "teen riots." This was not the incipient New Left of Berkeley or Cambridge. "We seethed in jealousy against everyone who

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selecting from an online menu of room dimensions, construction materials, and the like. Oosterhuis' clients can order a scale model or a set of drawings of their planned house — and even apply for building permits — online.

Both books also look at the cutting-edge work of environmentally conscious Japanese architect Shigeru Ban. *Prefab* examines how Ban uses wooden bookshelves to support his Furniture House, making the 176-pound prefabricated shelving units the home's main structural support. Readers of *Xtreme Houses* will see how Ban actually supports his famous Paper House with large, inexpensive paper tubes of recycled cardboard.

Like Ban, many of the featured architects experiment with inexpensive, environmentally friendly building materials. For example, *Xtreme Houses* describes how London-based architect Sarah Wigglesworth incorporated cheap straw bales into her own house, fire-proofing the straw with lime and then protecting it from the elements with corrugated sheeting. Similarly, Michael Reynolds has helped clients from countries as disparate as Bolivia, Canada and Scotland to fashion used tires, bottles and cans into independent biospheres, or "earthships." Not only do these huts use discarded waste as construction materials, but they also maximize heat efficiency.

Some designers are even trying to create housing from abandoned metal containers. In *Xtreme Houses*, artist Vito Acconci turns six hollowed-out cars into a crazily stacked abode complete with a kitchen and bathroom. On a more practical note, in South Africa architect Michael Hoenes wires together surplus soda cans to create inexpensive modular shacks. Coated with anticorrosion paint and resting on a foundation of concrete-filled cans, the buildings cost a mere \$800, compared to the \$2,400 cost of a less-well insulated concrete-block hut. Similarly, "Global Peace Containers" addresses Jamaica's homeless problem by turning shipping containers into cheap housing.

Shipping containers occasionally also appeal to the upscale market. According to *Xtreme Houses*, the group LOT/EK altered one into an additional bedroom and patio for an existing New York penthouse. The Guzman Penthouse project thus managed to recycle an unwanted shipping container and simultaneously create additional housing out of a cramped urban space.

Like the Guzman Penthouse, Swedish civil engineers Annika and Hakan Olsson have experimented with prefabricated penthouses for tony London neighborhoods. *Prefab* explains how the luxury modules are assembled in Sweden, shipped abroad and then hoisted by crane onto London rooftops. Once plumbed and outfitted to the buyer's specifications, these units sell for upwards of \$4 million.

The units' magnificent London views supposedly justify their high price. It's no surprise that the Olssons also hope to try their luck in New York.

And then there's Stefan Eberstadt's solution to urban overcrowding for the less affluent set: the Rucksack House. Literally hung outside an apartment window by nylon straps, this plywood, aluminum and Plexiglas box gives apartment residents 80 additional square feet of living space.

Both books demonstrate that the niche market for portable private spaces is growing. *Prefab* shows a number of houses that are easily transported because they rest on stilts rather than permanent foundations. For a mere \$50,000, a purchaser can buy KFN Systems' "SU-SI" model; not only will a customized contemporary mobile home on stilts be manufactured and delivered in five weeks, but once unloaded from the truck, this dream home can be assembled in a mere five hours.

True to its title, *Xtreme Houses* features more outlandish examples of mobile housing, such as the inflatable "Instant Home" developed by Valeska Peschke. This Berlin-based artist carts her 150-square-foot vinyl house around on a truck, and blows it up in about two minutes. Thanks to its portability she has camped out easily in both deserts and parking lots.

Crossing into the fashion realm, Parisian Studio Orta invented "refugee wear" bodysuits that convert into tents. The studio's founder, Lucy Orta, is quoted as saying that "clothes are fully entitled to become architectural dwellings." In case several travelers want to turn their clothes into a communal architectural statement, her "Modular Architecture" model allows nomads to zip their individual suits into a single shelter.

And for those who just need a quick retreat from the world, the Parisian group P.O.D has created prototypes for retreat pods. Made of protective pillows, the pods can be packed away in a backpack, then easily inflated into a comforting, albeit temporary, private space.

So what inspires these architects to design such non-traditional dwellings? Sometimes it's personal experience, like that of Los Angeles architect Jennifer Siegal. Her stint selling hot dogs from a portable kiosk, as her grandfather had done, stimulated her "Portable House" design. Sometimes it's an architect's personal commitment to the environment and desire to solve societal problems. Sometimes it's the sheer challenge of taking a seemingly mundane concept like "prefabrication" and creatively stretching it. And sometimes it might just be to have a bit of fun. In *Prefab* and *Xtreme Houses* we learn that even unglamorous prefabrication, in the most "xtreme" case, can be far-out, frivolous, fascinating and, occasionally, pretty fabulous.



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