

REASSESSING RUDOLPH

Paul Rudolph: The Late Work by Roberto de Alba. Princeton Architectural Press, 2003. 224 pp. \$40.

Reviewed by David Hay

The late Paul Rudolph, as famous and as prodigious an architect as there was in the 1960s, lived long enough, unfortunately, to see his works fall from favor and his reputation decline. This view of Rudolph still prevails — as someone who did his best works in the 1960s, first as a strict Modernist designing houses in Florida, then as more of an Expressionist building large-scale works in the Northeast.

But a closer examination of what Rudolph attempted in the last 20 years of his life (he died in 1997) throws this assessment into question. By the '80s and '90s, though Rudolph had not become a Postmodernist, he had long cast off the shackles of strict Modernism. In fact, he expanded his concept of expressive architecture in ways so imaginative and complex they defied easy and immediate comprehension. That many of these groundbreaking works were built in Southeast Asia made it even harder for Rudolph to receive the recognition he deserved.

Fortunately, the new book *Paul Rudolph: The Late Work* examines Rudolph's later accomplishments. If anything, the book is too modest. At 8"x10" many illustrations and drawings, the format in which Rudolph was an acclaimed master, are best read with a magnifying glass. For a handsomely illustrated introduction, I recommend Tony Monk's *The Art and Architecture of Paul Rudolph*, published in 1999. But that book unfortunately is out of print, and de Alba's volume offers consolations for its small size: Architectural historian Robert Bruegmann makes a carefully argued introduction to de Alba's descriptive writing, and the publication is of particular interest to Texans since several of Rudolph's later, more complex works are in the state.

The architect was a favorite of Sid Bass, who at Yale took architecture classes from one of Rudolph's former associates, Vincent Scully. In 1970, when Bass and his then wife, Anne, built their home in Fort Worth, they chose Rudolph. In the late 1970's Bass again selected Rudolph to design the City Center complex in downtown Fort Worth. The Bass House, one of the most magnificent if underappreciated

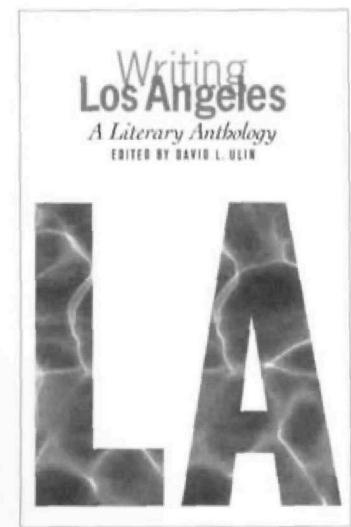
homes in the country, shows how Rudolph came to excel during this period: He was able to more successfully and elegantly link his forms together, creating exceptionally open spaces on the inside while eschewing the formal rigidity of traditional Modernism on the outside.

Inside the Bass House, according to de Alba's text, "twelve levels of living spaces of various dimensions are organized into four main stories." There are actually 14 different ceiling heights. Thanks to the shifts in level and scale all about them, the rooms feel more expansive and airy than their measured volumes.

Its exterior is monochromatic. White enameled steel beams frame floor-to-ceiling windows and additional white porcelain-enameled aluminum panels provide privacy. Like many of Rudolph's works from this period, its overall form is highly detailed, busily so. As a result, it is not easy to read. The forms expressively move above and about themselves: Balconies stretch out way beyond walls, overhanging roofs have open rectangles carved out to allow light to filter to the level below, and so on.

Rudolph went even further with his own Manhattan triplex in the late 1970s. Shown as it was then in de Alba's book, it remains even today, in its stripped-down form, a good introduction to life inside a late Rudolph structure. During a visit over a year ago, I found that moving between levels — or the individual rooms on each floor — required concentration. Rudolph never seemed concerned with the connecting spaces. Yet in each major social space, I was thrilled by the extraordinary sense of expansiveness, due in large part to the elimination of visual or structural barriers between each level. To enhance this effect, he installed translucent plastic panels, and even Plexiglas floors between the floors.

Paul Rudolph: The Late Work details this ability to create shifts of space and form in larger structures, showing seven skyscrapers Rudolph designed between 1969 and 1994, four of which were built. Also featured are two homes in Southeast Asia, including a luxury triplex in Hong Kong. Never constructed but shown here in drawing and model form, it is a spectacular aggregation of small volumes, attached to tall columns with such visual looseness that the structure, concrete sheathed in reflective aluminum, resembles a box kite. Not only are individual living spaces cantilevered out to the hilltop air, but so are two of the swimming pools.



Rudolph's high-rises have none of the decorative touches associated with Postmodernist towers of the period, but they refuse to be monolithic boxes. To achieve a sense of human scale relative to nearby buildings, cars, and people, his skyscrapers are elevated off the ground at their bases. The towers above exhibit his trademark plays with volumes — often to the point that the tower appears to twist. These structural moves occur from floor to floor, as floor plans on one floor shift from those of a floor below.

Although such moves are in evidence in Rudolph's City Center complex in Fort Worth, they're masked by the all-glass exterior, unusual for the architect. The shifting is more exaggerated in his Bond Center Office Towers in Hong Kong and the Dharmala Headquarters in Djakarta. His finest achievement, outdoing many similar precepts used by Le Corbusier in Indian high-rises, is the Colonnade Condominium complex built in Singapore in 1980. The building is an aggregation of two-story apartments placed in a shifting pattern throughout the tower. Each has a balcony or room cantilevered out from the tower and shielded from the sun by an exterior wall. Although not constructed as pre-fab units as Rudolph wanted, the building remains a thrillingly executed example of a high-rise whose building forms still could be well repeated, thus lowering its cost. Its treatment of environmental factors such as the sun is similarly pioneering. But details apart, it stands out, like many of Rudolph's designs from the period, as a compelling and daring achievement — not bad for an architect generally assumed to have been in decline.

CITY OF ANGLES

Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology. Edited by David L. Ulin. Library of America, 2002. 880 pp. \$40.

Reviewed by Alex Lichtenstein

Sprawling, kaleidoscopic, exotic, dark, thrilling, offbeat, edgy, campy, glittering, glamorous, gay (in both senses) — these adjectives might in equal measure be

applied to the city of Los Angeles and to the writing it has spawned, now collected in the marvelous anthology, *Writing Los Angeles*, a justifiable addition to the Library of America's literary classics series. Editor David Ulin effectively captures the spirit of a very particular place in his wide selection of journalism, essays, fiction, poetry, memoirs, and diaries, spanning more than a century of Southern California letters.

To attach writing to geography or region implies both writing from a location and writing about a place. These two criteria mark the irreducible core of Ulin's choices. The best seamlessly meld these approaches, serving simultaneously as dispatches from an unfamiliar land and markers of a distinctive literary style, written in their own patois even as they manufacture it. No reader will come away from this collection of writings unconvinced that L.A., perhaps more than any other American city, can lay claim to its own literary sensibility, one deeply rooted in the region's unique urban geography.

Part of this effect derives from the ceaseless "newness" of L.A., not just because of the city's constant self-reinvention, but also because Southern California was new and strange to many of the people who came there and wrote about it, whether from somewhere "back East" or from Europe. Certainly some of the most interesting writing in this book comes from the latter "fraternity of refugees," in Jan Morris's phrase: Christopher Isherwood, Simone de Beauvoir, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Bertolt Brecht, Gavin Lambert, Salka Viertel, David Hockney. But on the domestic side as well, some truly great writers, posing as exiles, seem to have found inspiration in L.A.'s ambience: William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and F. Scott Fitzgerald are represented here, and their contributions do stand out for their high literary quality.

Nevertheless, as in all anthologies, some editorial choices inevitably appear idiosyncratic. The excerpt from Nathanael West's dark novel of Hollywood life, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), consists of a short description of a film studio lot

and the shooting of *Waterloo*, but none of West's sensibility of foreboding dissolution. John Fante, justly described by Ulin as the poet laureate of "Southern California's nameless, faceless citizens," is represented by a rather solipsistic account of a writer's struggle to make it. Work by Mike Davis, catastrophist of L.A. as eco-social nightmare, is limited to the prologue to *City of Quartz* (1990), a book with many more interesting sections; Davis's *Ecology of Fear* (1998) is nowhere to be found. Of the 77 authors represented in the anthology, barely a dozen are women, which strikes even someone averse to this sort of counting as underrepresentation (though Ulin grants Joan Didion a generous 26 pages). Chester Himes, Walter Mosley, Charles Mingus, and Art Pepper (a white interloper) evoke the sights and sounds and smells of Central Avenue, the warm-beating cultural heart of black L.A. in the 1940s and 1950s. But only a handful of selections reflect the importance of L.A.'s Hispanic and Asian-American populations or the explosion of a veritable U.N. of ethnic literary cultures in southern California over the past three decades.

The anthology unfolds chronologically, the selections metastasizing like the expanding conurbation itself. This permits the reader to chart the expansion of L.A.'s distinctive culture, especially its mass youth culture that blossomed in the postwar period — hot rodders, surfers, movies, music, drugs. It also allows one to recognize the accretion of a sedimentary literary tradition in and of a place that staked its claim to modern urbanity largely by denying it had one. Not only do themes recur, but so do people (star of screen Greta Garbo, star of altar Sister Aimee Semple McPherson), places (Hollywood, Venice, Topanga Canyon), landmarks (architectural, like the Watts tower; natural, like Zuma Beach; and supernatural, like Forest Lawn Memorial Park), gay cruising spots (Pershing Square, immortalized by John Rechy in *City of Night* [1963]), weather (the Santa Ana winds), and literary culture itself.

Marc Norman quotes Louis Adamic on suburban anomie; Joan Didion invokes the apocalyptic vision of *Day of the Locust*; her husband, John Gregory Dunne, recalls Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*; Cees Nooteboom cites Reyner Banham on the glee of "Autopia." Helen Hunt Jackson's 1883 nostalgic evocation of the glorious past of the Spanish mission era opens the book; but later Carey McWilliams reminds us just how false to history this invented tradition really was. "The sacred aspects of the romantic past have been completely divorced from their secular connotations," McWilliams wrote in *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (1946), so that romanticization of the region's Spanish heritage went hand-in-hand with blatant discrimination and violence directed against its

impoverished Chicano descendants. If McWilliams retraced Helen Jackson's steps, only to puncture her pretensions in the name of social justice, Robert Towne, screenwriter for Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* (1974), claims inspiration from McWilliams' telling of the tale of the Southland's "water wars," written 30 years before.

Other bits of the anthology remind us that in the history of L.A. is written the history of twentieth-century American culture. At the dawn of the cinema age, poet Vachel Lindsey remarked of the "moving picture" that "it is thrillingly possible for [California] and the art to acquire spiritual tradition and depth together." Many L.A. writers were subsequently fascinated by the eruption of mass culture and the cult of celebrity on the nation's western edge — movies, yes, but also evangelical religion, advertising, suburbia, cars and freeways and drive-ins, art, music, homosexuality. L.A. always exuded the quest for spiritual satisfaction — either through religious or erotic ecstasy, through a hunger for images and manufactured entertainment, through the promise of hedonistic ease, or through communion with the natural environment that remains an inescapable presence in the region.

But the inverse of Lindsey's proposition served as fodder for writers as well. Just take H.L. Mencken's explanation for the wild popularity of a "commonplace and transparent mountebank" such as evangelist Sister Aimee. He reckoned that there were "more morons collected in Los Angeles than in any other place on earth." Edmund Wilson joined the chorus lambasting the titillating moralizers, who preached the gospel to transplanted Midwesterners eager to "get an intimate peek into the debauched goings-on of their neighbors, and at the same time be made to feel their own superior righteousness." To many literary observers, L.A. seemed a deep well of artificiality, a "huckster's paradise" in Ulin's words, a city of scams — medical, religious, real estate, oil — indeed, a scam itself. Were movie stars its quintessential figures, or were dirty cops, thugs and *pachucos*? — all rendered with that ineffable noir taint that clings to the hardboiled genre of Raymond Chandler, James Cain, Ross Macdonald, and James Ellroy, their modern inheritor.

So for all its glorifiers, in equal measure L.A. has generated "critics and debunkers" — Upton Sinclair, Adamic, McWilliams, West, Didion, and Davis stand out. What is striking about the literature of the dystopians is that they take up the same themes as the region's celebrators — the past (a myth rather than an idyll), the environment (unforgiving rather than gentle), the image-makers and boosters (hucksters rather than avatars of the future), and the exploitation of land and people (rather than fecundity and freedom and the blossoming of dreams).

Another tasty genre served up on this menu of disillusion is the "Hollywood novel," the exposé of the seamier sides of the movie business, dating back to Carrol and Garrett Graham's *Queer People* (1930), and finding its apotheosis in John Gregory Dunne's *Monster* (1997) (not excerpted here) with a stopover at West's classic *Day of the Locust* (1939). More touching still are the short stories derived from this genre: the stinging cynicism of Budd Schulberg's "A Table at Ciro's" (1941) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's sad, tremulous, beautiful "The Last Kiss" published only posthumously and perhaps the best piece of writing in the entire book. Most striking in this pre-feminist fiction is the clear-eyed bitter recognition of how easily Hollywood exploited and destroyed young women.

Los Angeles: described in its cheap artificiality by Christopher Isherwood as "perhaps the ugliest city on earth"; by Jack Kerouac as "the loneliest and most brutal of American cities" and "a huge desert encampment"; by Gavin Lambert as "a series of suburban approaches to a city that never materializes"; by Norman Mailer as "a kingdom of stucco, the playground for mass men." But as editor Ulin points out, L.A. is also probably still "the wildest, most natural of America's major cities." Simone de Beauvoir observed on her 1947 visit that "one feels that the most sophisticated city in the world is surrounded by indomitable nature." She concluded that she felt "if human pressure were relaxed for even a moment, the wild animals and giant grasses would soon reclaim possession of their domain" — a possibility taken up four decades later by nature writer John McPhee, in a terrifying excerpt from *The Control of Nature* (1989), describing the "chunky muck" of "debris flows" down the L.A. basin's mountainsides sweeping away everything in their path.

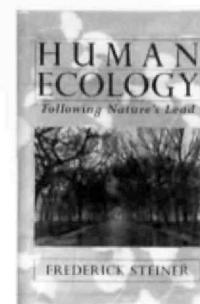
Natural disasters aside, as noirist James M. Cain remarks in his surprisingly fond evocation of the southern California landscape, "bringing water in by pipeline is still the outstanding accomplishment of man in this region." No greater symbol of this accomplishment exists than the diversion — theft, really — of the Owens River from its valley 250 miles north of the city to "make Los Angeles fertile, flush-friendly and be-pooled," in the words of film writer David Thomson. This is the ecological "crime" memorialized at the heart of the film *Chinatown*, and a recurring theme treated by several writers; indeed in many ways it emerges as something of the central literary trope for L.A.'s history and its relationship with the land, what one might call the region's "political ecology." Cedric Belfrage in his 1938 novel, *Promised Land*; Carey McWilliams, of course; Reyner Banham in his testament to the Water and Power Building as "the only public building in the whole city that genuinely graces the

scene and lifts the spirit"; and the closing tribute to the curves of Mulholland Drive by film writer David Thomson, all take this deeply compromised feat of social and ecological engineering as the template on which to sketch L.A.'s history and social character. "The road, the drive, the highway," Thomson concludes in words that might apply to the entire project of L.A., "all thrill to the way man has commanded natural power and beauty here and turned them into property or a story." And so might we thrill; this collection is a wonderful place to start. Strange as it may seem, after reading it through I think: Oh, how I want to live there!

LISTENING TO NATURE

Human Ecology: Following Nature's Lead by Frederick Steiner. Island Press, 2002. 256 pp. \$25.

Review by Rives Taylor



Only recently have American designers begun to address the complex relationship of nature and one of its components, humankind. In the last several years a

small but influential cadre of thinkers has also embraced the idea that sustainable human design must be based on that larger whole, the natural ecology.

Such a book is *Human Ecology* by Frederick Steiner, the new dean of architecture at the University of Texas, Austin. His subtitle, "Following Nature's Lead," concisely states his thesis: Nature's physical systems should serve as models for the design of diverse human landscapes.

"Landscape offers a scale where social and physical processes and patterns can become evident," Steiner writes. Landscape, as he describes it, is not simply shaped land; coming to terms with the landscape is the "essential first step toward sustainability." Steiner takes a firm stand that urban settlements can be sustainable — that is, that cities can minimize their adverse impact on the environment, doing damage only as fast as the earth can regenerate itself.

In the influential book *Biomimicry*, Janine Benyus, with a background in agricultural and forestry sciences, saw nature as a source of inspiration. Steiner goes further still, arguing that successful urban intervention is impossible without an intense appreciation of place and of nature's hidden order. At a minimum the designer must study what existed on a site before humans settled on it, and must clearly understand how nature continues to shape the city.

And how, exactly, does one understand such things? Steiner says you must

put them into context — a suitably complex context. He offers a notion of “hierarchy as a framework, a system of nested networks” that can serve as a tool to understand both natural systems and human culture (which is, after all, a natural system). Steiner’s version of hierarchy is at odds with the usual reductionism of academia — that is, the art of making simplifying generalities about complex systems. Instead, Steiner fights the uphill battle of constructing an academic thesis that does not run counter to the complex systems he describes. (Even the book’s own dust jacket emphasizes nature’s “hierarchy” as a simple organizing tool or lesson to be learned, as if this volume were the easy-to-digest, step-by-step instruction booklet that many design practitioners crave.)

Steiner repeatedly explains that nature’s hierarchy is anything but simple, static, and predictable. Nature’s hierarchies are not the stable pyramids of military command charts; instead, they’re cycles, like a rolling wheel that repeats itself, never returning to precisely the same point but moving evolutionarily forward. Recognizing that human activity is part and parcel of nature, Steiner uses the natural loop cycle to describe all human technology, scientific study, and design endeavors.

He particularly focuses on historic divisions within the studies of economics,

ecology, and urban morphology/planning — disciplines artificially separated by the differing vocabularies of their practitioners, and by the focus of the disciplines’ investigations. That separation works against a holistic understanding. Steiner instead urges the study of “new ecology,” which instills “deeper understanding of interactions at various scales [and] holds the prospect for better, although more complex, approaches to resource management, nature conservation, and environmental protection as well as the arts of environmental design and planning.”

A proscriptive approach parleyed by an academic — the dean of a school of architecture, no less — might be dismissed as idealistic, or at a minimum, unattainable. Steiner attempts to limit such criticism with case study-like examples of student work as well as his own vivid personal experiences of dynamic but balanced human and natural ecologies. In examples ranging from Italy to Japan, he shows that effective, long-lasting human intervention was organized with regard to the natural order.

In an era when we rarely take the time to plan the consequence of our actions, *Human Ecology* renews the call for learning the big lesson from natural systems. Additionally, Steiner’s work adds another sorely needed and complete examination of the underpinnings of a sustainable design process. ■

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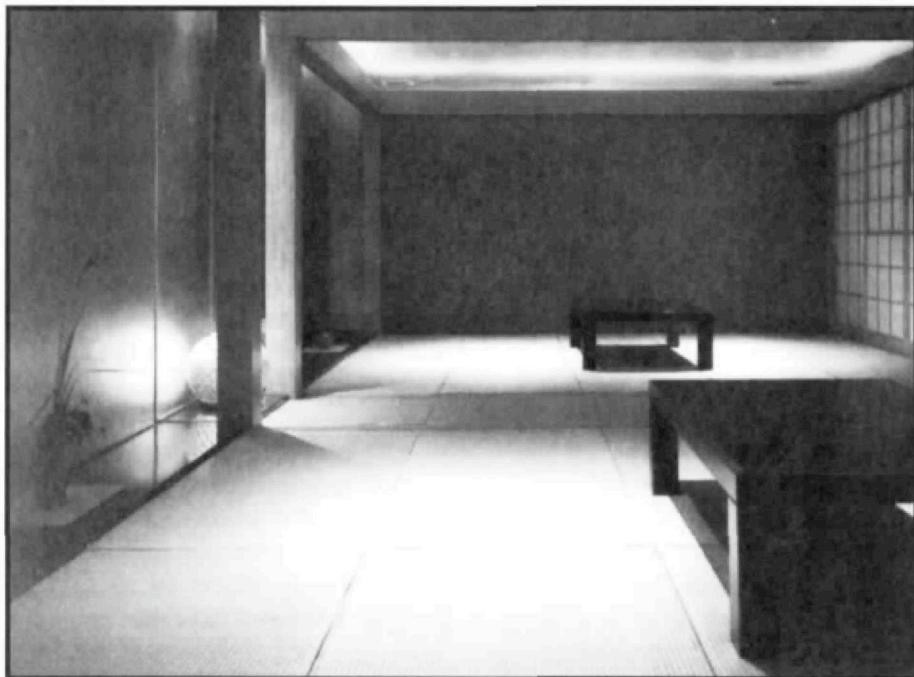
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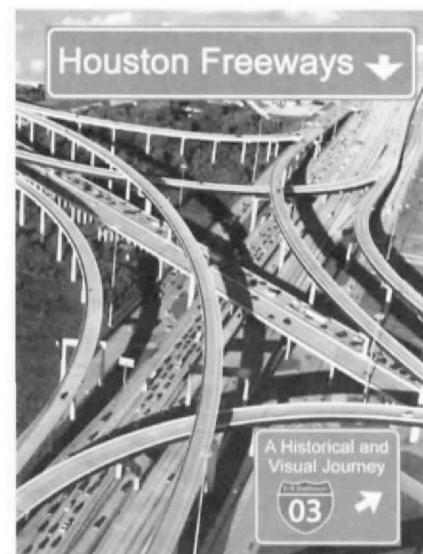
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