

driveways in front of countless individual homes and the car as another kind of interior. Driving down the off-ramp and slowing down the car, Banham wrote in the first paragraph of "Autopia," how he frequently observed girls tidying their hair, which he took to mean that "coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors" (Banham, 2001, p. 195). In this scenario, the transplanted domestic act as a routine at the freeway's off-ramp signals a new spatial configuration of the motorized metropolis that is no longer bound by the static confines of the traditionally zoned city. What emerges in its place is a mobile metropolis, for which Banham already imagined computerized automation for self-driving cars in its next stage of development. For the time being, however, driving the freeway was at once a private experience and a public and communal event, which Banham even idealized as democratic urban transport. Obviously, what captivated him was the freedom of movement, smoothness of connectivity, and possibility for technological extrapolation. But the public domain of the freeway, though shared by many, was not quite as democratic as Banham wanted the reader to believe. After all, mobility comes with affluence, and Banham's excitement over car travel seems to willingly omit that car-based individualism was not granted to all.

One fellow affluent traveler on Banham's cruise through the city was the heroine of Joan Didion's novel *Play It as It Lays*, a fictional character for whom the freeway becomes a rare act of autonomy. The book follows the protagonist in her compulsive freeway driving as a kind of remedy for an otherwise unfulfilled life. "She [had] to be on the freeway by ten o'clock ... If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum" (Didion, 1970, p. 16). Didion's novel, with a title that resembles Banham's favorite mentality of "doing your thing" and published one year prior to *Los Angeles*, gives clues as to what Banham might have meant when referring to "a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical" (Banham, 2001, p. 197). (Fig. 3 & 4) Perhaps Banham had Didion or her character Maria in mind when he

Fig. 3 Joan Didion leaning on her Corvette Stingray. ©Photograph by Julian Wasser, 1968, Courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

Fig. 4 Reyner Banham leaning on his renal car. Film still from *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, 1972.



spoke of locals and their spiritual connection to freeway driving. In fact, Didion (2009, p. 83) later made a distinction between driving the freeway – something anyone can do—and participating in it: “Actual [freeway] 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.”²

Clearly, Banham was in Didion’s orbit, which she makes explicit when citing from his book about the freeway’s capacity to expand one’s feeling of being alive (Didion, 2009, p. 83). And, when Banham talks about the ability of locals to find a heightened mystical awareness in driving, Didion answers: “Indeed some locals do, and nonlocals too” (Didion, 2009, p. 83). Possibly encouraged by Didion, Banham even utilized the metaphors of driving for the structure of his book, by placing the first and last chapters in the “driver’s seat.” Entitled “In the Rear-view Mirror” and “Towards a Drive-in Bibliography,” the first looks backward at ways of writing history in order to be able to move forward, while the last appears to look forward as it proceeds through an annotated bibliography. But the ultimate expression of the all-encompassing nature of driving comes with his TV début in the BBC documentary that spelled out why and how *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. (Fig. 5) The 1972 film, a guided tour through Los Angeles by Banham himself, allows the movement of the car and the photographic imagery of the camera to coalesce. He revisits the neighborhoods that were covered in the book, meets artists like Edward Ruscha who before provided illustrations, and interviews Angelenos who “do their own thing” and embody the freedom that Banham relished.

For much of the film, Banham appears behind the steering wheel, guiding the car from location to location and in dialogue with the fictional “Baede-Kar” – a tribute to Karl Baedeker’s early travel guides –that in the film appears in the form of a recorded narration through the car’s stereo. Here, the architectural historian is the *Man with the Movie Camera*, to quote a much earlier Russian cinematic experiment in which the cameraman was shown equally often in front of the camera and behind it. Similarly, Banham – who sometimes films and at other times is seen filming – constructs a cinematic essay; a testimony to the “vision in motion” that enabled him to access the city that he “love[d] ... with a passion that goes beyond sense or reason” (Banham and Cooper, 1972). This introductory sentence to the film puts the final scene into perspective. As Banham cruises at the end of the day toward the ocean, the travel guide gives one last piece of information, namely that the spectacular colors in the sunset come from the pollution in the air. “Enjoy it! The best of it doesn’t last long,” the gentle voice on the cassette tape tells and Banham adds that this plastic fluorescent spectacle is “the greatest exit line any city could ever have” (Banham and Cooper, 1972).

With Banham’s *Los Angeles*, the passionate confidence in conditions of the existing city reached new heights. Yet, he made no



Fig. 5 Film stills from Reyner Banham and Julian Cooper, *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, 1972. Image on the lower right shows Reyner Banham in conversation with Ed Ruscha.



Fig. 6 Edward Ruscha, "Parking behind Wilshire Boulevard" in *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). Published in Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), in the chapter "The Transportation Palimpsest," fig. 31, 67.

attempt at intentionally suppressing the negativities of the city, but rather engaged in an intense search for its potentials that could offer a revised mentality about urbanization and a new directive for urbanism. Los Angeles provided the terrain in which Banham tapped new ways of thinking about the city – ideas that emerged explicitly from the forces and dynamics of contemporary urbanization and were highly critical of planning. The movie, for example, follows Banham from an overlook on Wilshire Boulevard to a lecture at the University of Southern California, where he declares that Los Angeles breaks all the rules of planning and yet it works nevertheless. (Fig. 6) On the one hand, Banham agreed with conventional planners in their belief that Los Angeles could not have survived without planning; on the other hand, he asserted that "conventional planning wisdom certainly would destroy the city as we know it" (Banham, 2001, p. 121). For Banham, planning had failed the contemporary city and a new attitude toward urbanization (rather than design of the city) was needed. He found this frame of mind in Los Angeles's frequent and blatant cancelations of planning and in the urban ingenuities that emerged from those; a notion that he would also utilize in the UK through the collaborative efforts of Non-Plan, one of the most provocative assaults on planning.

In 1969, Banham had joined the architect Cedric Price, the urban planner Peter Hall, and the editor of the social affairs magazine *New Society* Paul Barker in the formulation of a manifesto that opposed top-down, State-directed urbanism and controlled, bureaucratic planning. The group's hostility against planning tapped into a larger post-war rethinking of modernist tendencies that questioned imposed ideas of organization and ideal scenarios of a city's workings. Early on, the British Townscape movement studied and embraced the heterogeneity of historical city centers, ideas that further developed through the anthropological tendencies of Team 10 and the urban pluralities celebrated in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs.³ "Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom" followed Banham's insights on Los Angeles and issued the provocation: "what would happen if there were no plan?" (Banham, Barker, Hall, and Price, 1969, p. 436). The authors proclaimed that the conservatism of planning, disguised as good intentions, made decisions for how other people should live on the basis of preconceived value judgments. As Barker (2000, p. 5) would later recall, "we wanted to startle people by offending against the deepest taboos." To this end Banham, Hall, and Price each took a section of the British countryside and imagined it as extensions of Los Angeles, with low-density, automobility, advertisements, and sprawl.

A mentality that Banham first detected in views of local Californians toward Los Angeles, now played out on the other side of the globe: "let it swing and see what happens" (Banham, 1968 August 22). The emblematic terrain of Los Angeles provided lessons for a new kind of urbanism. (Fig. 7) While all authors were credited for the entire text, Banham's writing focused on the so-called "Constable

Country,” named after the Romantic landscape painter John Constable and known for its old coach villages, rolling farmland, and ancient woodlands. Banham described it as the “most sacred of English sacred scenery,” because its idyllic nature served as a reminder of Britain’s pre-industrial past. Deploying the Non-Plan mandate and envisioning the lifting of planning restrictions in this area, led Banham to a scenario that would upset the established order through the introduction of the frenzied landscape of entertainment and commerce from Los Angeles. He imagined how the tall trees in the region would absorb massive one-story commercial buildings that are only announced through large signage.

Banham was clearly intrigued by the dramatic juxtaposition of rural countryside and commercial buildings and signage that simultaneously questions established norms and invents a new urban ecology. In fact, this new terrain of large buildings, individual homes, and signage amongst the rolling woodlands hovers between conventional forms of city and suburb—a quality unsurprisingly similar to the conditions in Los Angeles. While previously, this “countryside and its villages ha[d] ... the perfect ecology for retired officers and gentlemen,” Banham’s projection densifies the region, so that one can imagine how country homes would sit next to big signs that float above tall trees, which, in turn, surround parking lots that front the commercial buildings in the “rolypoly countryside”(Banham et al., 1969, p. 440). The introduction of these utterly different architectures into the protected and picturesque landscape was partially inspired by Wilshire Boulevard and its business towers, inserted into a sea of suburbia. The short manifesto of the Non-Plan, however, is no simple importation of a foreign scene as a vehicle to intensify the countryside, but rather the result of the extrapolation of tendencies that existed already but were currently held back by planning.

Understandably, this scenario received mixed reactions. By proposing to resist the bureaucracy of planning and to free up local economies, the deregulating proposals of Non-Plan came with a host of problems, not the least of which was the euphoria with increased mobility and the apparent free rein of economic drivers. This distrust in planning and openness to the market is part of a longer lineage of ideas. The early philosophical writings of Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, for example, targeted teleological historicism as well as collectivist planning and economy because of its affinities to totalitarian ideology. For Popper (1945, p. 140), “... using a blueprint of society as a whole, ... demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and ... therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship.” And, while these ideas came under the auspices of preserving individual freedoms, they also set the stage for an embrace of free-market libertarianism as promoted by Friedrich von Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom* and the later *The Constitution of Liberty*.⁴ Indeed, the two ambitions – market deregulation and the proposed abandoning of planning – came dangerously close to one another in

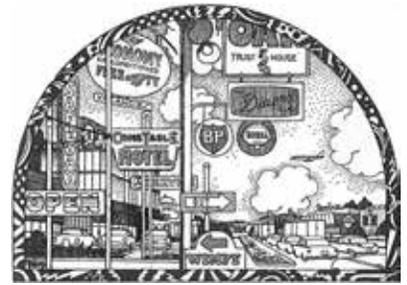


Fig. 7 Illustration of a new Constable Country. From Banham, Barker, Hall, and Price, “Non-Plan,” *New Society* (1969): 439.

their shared efforts to free environments of constraints (trade, on the one side, and urbanity, on the other).

And yet, it is also important to remember what in each case was to be deregulated and what was the ultimate goal of each intervention. To that extent, Non-plan's emphasis on local economies and regional trends is revealing; as many of these ideas provoked a reinvention of culture by uprooting established symbols. While for the members of Non-plan, generating a revolutionary momentum after the events of modernism was no longer an option, transgressions within urban culture provided a way to engage existing urban dynamics, by canceling established norms and extrapolating selective currents from within. While the anarchic tendencies of Non-Plan are often seen as an encouragement to the laissez-faire economics that take over when rules of planning are suspended, Banham seems to envision a new kind of architect as the producer of an environment that in its surreal radicality rivals the schemes of most avant-gardes of the 1960s. Banham's *Autopia* presents a reworking of the modernist utopia into a new kind of visionary that extrapolates from the existing city. Enthralled by the possibilities of technology and urban culture, his observations on Los Angeles (the city that is) would provide the ground for his scenarios in the UK (the city that could be) with the aim to project beyond utopian dreams. Unlike utopia's lack of place, Banham's *Autopia* is precisely positioned in the motorized city of Los Angeles – a localized utopia from where conjectures are drawn into regions of the immediate future, some of which we inhabit today.

This essay is partially based on research I conducted at The Getty Foundation in Los Angeles during the summer of 2016. I would like to thank the Foundation and the staff members at the Special Collections Library for the support I received during my stay.

1 → Vidler positions Banham's work on Los Angeles in the context of the larger spectrum of his writings and his search for a history of modernism.

2 → It is interesting to note, that Didion's essay was devoted to the measures that the California Department of Transportation had implemented in its attempt to streamline traffic—an attempt of which Didion was highly skeptical. During an interview with the planner Eleanor Wood, Didion realized that it was unlikely that she “could interest her in considering the freeway as regional mystery.” While the planners wanted a “rearrangement of people's daily planning,” Didion noted that the “rearrangement of people's daily planning might seem ... rather a great deal to want.” (84) This skepticism toward planning was shared by Banham, who in 1969 had already participated in writing the Non-Plan manifesto that speculated on possibilities of suspending planning in favor of spontaneity, modeled on Los Angeles.

3 → For the Townscape movement, see [Architectural Review 106](#) (636) (1949) and [Architectural Review 107](#)(637) (1950); for Team 10, see Smithson, (1962, pp. 559); and for the US context, see Jane Jacobs (1961).

4 → For a positioning of Hayek's work in the politics of Neoliberalism, see David Harvey (2005, pp. 19-63). For a thorough investigation of the relationship between Non-plan and ideological forces, see Simon Sadler (2000).

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