

## Reyner Banham, Mike Davis, and the Discourse on Los Angeles Ecology

July 14, 2015 By [Jonathan P. Bell](#)

### eco-

- Of or relating to the habitat or environment.

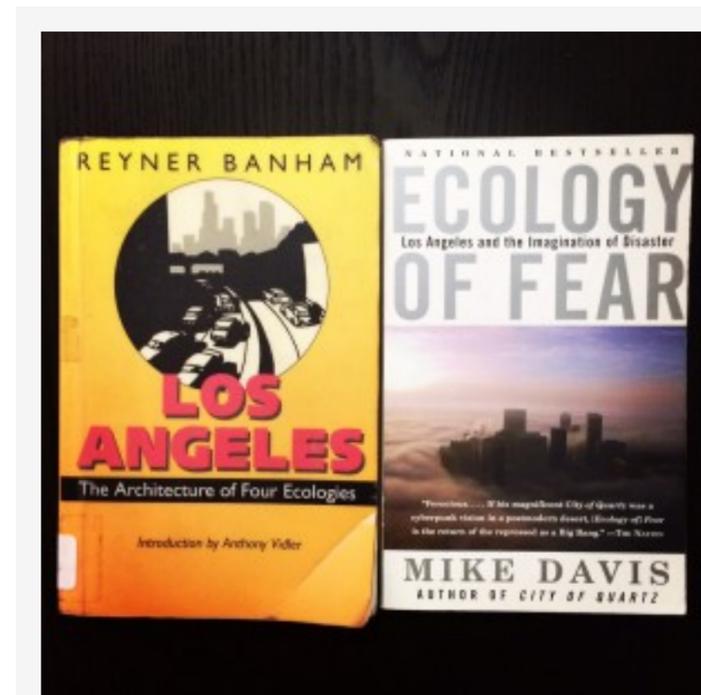
### -ology

- The doctrine, theory, or science of a subject.

### ecology

- Branch of science concerned with the interrelationships of organisms and their environments, especially as manifested by the natural cycles and rhythms, community development and structure, interaction between different kinds of organisms, geographic distribution, and population alternatives.
- The totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environments.

~ *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 1976



In these seminal manifestos, Reyner Banham and Mike Davis tackle the varying ecologies of Los Angeles [photo 1]

Prior to the 1920s, the definition of “ecology” was restricted to the scientific study of natural ecosystems. By definition, an ecology of cities was oxymoronic. Around 1925, the natural sciences lost the monopoly over the term “ecology” when sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess — having researched urban settlement patterns in Chicago — showed that humans exhibit similar behavioral patterns as animals in natural environments. Park and Burgess’ [concentric zone theory](#) posited that competition among humans for scarce land and housing led to a division of space into five ecological rings “in which people shared similar social characteristics because they were subject to the same ecological pressures” [1]. Their concentric zone diagram illustrated why impoverished people lived closer to the city center and the wealthy lived on the periphery: the area around downtown, rife with blight and crime, was the only affordable area for the poor, while at the periphery, the suburbs offered wealthy people the greatest distance from the volatile core. Park and Burgess called this process social ecology. Commenting on Park and Burgess’ theory, geographer Edward W. Soja pointed out that “the use of the term ecology was itself an abstraction, an almost metaphorical adoption of a natural science point of view and epistemology rather than a scientific analysis of the relation between the city and its natural environment.” [2] Indeed, the social sciences’ adoption of “ecology” proved to be a groundbreaking step for urban theory. The ecology of cities has become a legitimate concern for urban theorists seeking to produce richer interpretations of city life and city space.

## Introduction to L.A.’s Ecologies

Los Angeles has been the beneficiary of ecology’s epistemological shift. In two seminal manifestos, the late architecture critic Reyner Banham and the social historian Mike Davis examined the varying “ecologies” of Los Angeles, albeit from opposing perspectives.

Published in 1971, Banham’s [Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies](#) celebrated L.A.’s idiosyncratic built form and history. Defying critics who wrote off Los Angeles as a cultureless city without a history, Banham argued that L.A.’s four ecologies — the beaches, the foothills, the flatlands, and the freeways — made the traditional city obsolete. Twenty-seven years after Banham’s love letter to Los Angeles, Mike Davis responded with [Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster](#), an apocalyptic polemic chronicling what seems to be L.A.’s normative order of chaos. According to Davis, Los Angeles is ceaselessly on the verge of destruction, be it by natural disasters (earthquakes, firestorms, tornadoes), the human hand (the loss of open space, relentless suburbanization, gang warfare), or supernatural forces (alien invasion, God). In writing *Ecology of Fear*, Davis continued the project he began in *City of Quartz*, defying boosters who uncritically promulgate Los Angeles as the Land of Eternal Sunshine.

In many ways, these manifestos bookend the literature on Los Angeles. If Banham’s celebration reaches the apex of postwar pro-L.A. boosterism, then Davis’ cautionary tale ostensibly represents the harshest, most frightening critique of Los Angeles. [3] The apparent polarity between the works may suggest antagonism between Davis’ and Banham’s “ecologies” — in other words, the paranoia of Davis’ *Ecology of Fear* seems to cancel out all the good Banham found in L.A.’s four ecologies. But this interpretation would be misleading. In fact, reading the texts side-by-side, one sees a striking correlation between

their ecologies. Abstracting and adopting another term from the natural sciences, one sees [symbiosis](#) between Davis' and Banham's ecologies. The *Architecture of Four Ecologies* and the *Ecology of Fear* are two sides of the same "ecological coin," so to speak. They compliment each other in that one provides a counterpoint to the other. Thus, each of Banham's benevolent Four Ecologies has a darker, perhaps more realistic side according to Davis. Read together, Banham and Davis' ecological analyses provide the reader a holistic, sobering, and revealing alternative history of Los Angeles.

## *Four Ecologies and the Ecology of Fear*

### **Surfurbia**

The beach cities along the Southern California coast represent Surfurbia, Banham's first ecology known for surfing, sunshine, and suburbs. Banham begins his analysis by giving the reader Surfurbia's precise coordinates within the regional geography. Surfurbia "runs from the Malibu strip at the western extremity to the Balboa peninsula in the south, and is marked by a distinguished [modernist] building at either end: Craig Ellwood's [Hunt House of 1955 at Malibu](#), and Rudolph Schindler's epoch-making [Lovell house \(of 1926\) at Newport Beach](#)...". [4]



Craig Ellwood's Hunt House in Malibu [photo 2]

The coordinates are noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, Surfurbia transcends the Los Angeles/Orange County boundary. Banham's cross-jurisdictional definition of Los Angeles is one of the first to declare that L.A. neither begins nor ends at the city limits. As Banham argues, Los Angeles is a regional metropolis and more than a city-proper. Secondly, rather than defining Los Angeles according to traditional municipal boundaries, Banham uses two modernist landmarks to demarcate Surfurbia. As the seasoned Angeleno knows, the boundaries from city to city are oftentimes indistinguishable, with no more than a street sign announcing that you have left one jurisdiction and entered another. This is not the case for Surfurbia, whose boundaries are distinguished modernist monuments.

Banham's excursion commences in Malibu where the beach is noticeably private. To Banham this fact is not controversial since he contends the private shoreline resulted from the construction of large houses on small lots, which effectively prevented public inlets between the beach and Pacific Coast Highway. [5] Given today's [arguments against increasing privatization of public space](#), this claim could make Banham sound like an apologist for restrictive access. However, it would be unfair to assess Banham's argument using today's standards, for he does acknowledge that public access is important and notes that in the City of Santa Monica the beach is fully accessible. Indeed, the notion of accessibility is important to Santa Monica's history. Banham maintains that Santa Monica Canyon "is the point where Los Angeles first came to the Beaches." [6]

Since the first attempt to create a port in the Santa Monica Bay, Angelenos have been drawn to this ocean side community. The draw, he says, is the city's "distinctive civic atmosphere." [7] Continuing south, Banham crosses into L.A.'s Venice Beach community, then an aging beach hamlet lacking the sophistication (read: wealth) of Santa Monica and Malibu. Banham notes, with amazing foresight, that Venice has "the charm of decay, but this will almost certainly disappear in the redevelopments that must follow...". [8]. Moving past Venice and farther south along the coast, he traverses Manhattan Beach, Redondo Beach, and Hermosa Beach — the collection of surf cities from which the nomenclature of "Surfurbia" emerges. For it is here that Banham identifies the hallmarks of this first ecology: the boardwalk and the surfboard. As Banham says, "the concrete 'board-walk'... characterizes mile after mile of the true surfurbian shore." [9] He notes the boardwalk's inner facade of cottages, hotels, and restaurants; and on the outer edge, propped up against the seawall is the surfboard, the "prime symbolic and functional artefact of these beaches where California surfing began." [10] His description of the surfboard's role in Surfurbia borders on exaltation:

Leaning on the sea-wall or stuck in the sand like plastic megaliths, they concentrate practically the whole capacity of Los Angeles to create stylistic decorative imagery, and to fix those images with all the panoply of modern visual and material techniques — and all, remember, in the service of the preferred local form of noble savage, pitting his nearly naked muscles and skilled reactions against the full force of the 'mighty hulking Pacific Ocean.' [11]

The landscape abruptly shifts beyond these Surfurbian cities. In Palos Verdes, the prominent promontory topped with "exclusive residential suburbs" disrupts Surfurbia's boardwalk urbanism. While in Long Beach, Banham says the shoreline could be mistaken for a European waterfront save for the oil rigs clumsily encased behind decorative screens. The Surfurbian city then reemerges in Huntington Beach, "the loosely developed surfer's paradise" across the Orange County line. [12] Here is where Banham finally aims a critical eye at this first ecology. Taking aim at the excessive defensibility of the faux-Italian Huntington Pacific apartments, he remarks, "[I]t is literally perched *on the shore*, is surrounded by a wall and is guarded by a uniformed *cop*. If it heralds the subdivision of the shoreline... into a series of fortified private segments, it is a sorry portent for surfurbia." [13] This is one of the few times Banham and



Rudolph Schindler's Lovell Beach House at Newport Beach [photo 3]

Mike Davis seem to agree.

## Surfurbia rebuttal



Private beach in Malibu [photo 4]

Like Banham, Davis assigns L.A. its own unique boundaries. This is especially true when he writes about Los Angeles beaches, which extend ostensibly from Santa Barbara to San Diego. But Davis paints a much darker picture of Surfurbia. Restrictive access to the beach is the consequence of developers' tenacious land grab efforts during the open space debates of the 1920s. In contrast to Banham's whitewashed take on Malibu, Davis argues that developers set out to privatize public space, especially beaches, in order to maximize profits at the public's expense. As early as 1928, "barely half an inch of publicly owned beach frontage was left for each citizen of Los Angeles County." [14] The tactic of restricting beach access is particularly evident in Malibu, where reactionary residents have denigrated beach access advocates as "radicals" and equated their advocacy to unconstitutional property seizures. [15] Unlike the laid back paradise depicted in Banham's Surfurbia, L.A. beaches by Davis' account are a battleground with overt class and racial overtones.

Up and down the coast there are more ominous trouble signs. Surfurbia is also prone to Nature's wrath. During winter, heavy rains wash an assortment of deadly snakes from adjacent hills into the ocean and the waves bring them back onshore in droves. This can be a frightening scene for an unsuspecting visitor to Surfurbia; expecting to find fun in the sun, the beach goer literally risks walking into a snake pit! Davis equates these snakes to mythological messengers from an angry Gabrielino Indian god, sent "in times of ecological crisis... (as) the avengers of

transgressions against nature." [16] Nature's revenge is a theme throughout Davis' book, and Surfurbia is a prime location for her wrath against L.A. The book opens with a description of the Hawaiian Kona storm system that hits L.A.'s coast at least once a decade. According to Davis, the storm "carries several cubic kilometers of water, or the equivalent of half of Los Angeles' annual precipitation." [17] One particularly powerful Kona storm in 1995 brought enough rain to flood much of the South Bay. But torrential rain is little in comparison to the [seaside tornadoes, called waterspouts, that frequently hit Surfurbia](#). As early as 1937, beach goers reported waterspouts in the Santa Monica Bay "swirling half a mile offshore, amid crackling lightening and rumbling thunder...". [18] These waterborne twisters have largely gone unreported in the mainstream, booster-backed media, despite the fact that they have wrecked much havoc onshore.

These images provide a sobering counterpoint to Banham's benign Surfurbia. Whereas Banham sees the beach as a place of unrestrained pleasure and endless summer, the beach according to Davis is yet another danger zone in ever-volatile Los Angeles. Moreover, the location of Surfurbia seems to amplify existing racial and class differences and environmental hazards which Banham conspicuously leaves out of his analysis. The [Oakwood section of Venice](#) offers an example of what happens when race and class divisions collide with Surfurbian gentrification. Low-income, mostly African-American residents of Oakwood are being priced out of the neighborhood by similar exclusionary interests that run Malibu. This process has displaced many longtime families that for decades made this place a community. However, this process might be an example of perverse poetic justice in the making. For if Davis' predictions of the climatic danger come to pass, the elite who are gentrifying Oakwood are setting themselves up for disaster by moving directly into the path of the next Kona storm.

## Foothills

The hillsides encircling the greater L.A. basin represent L.A.'s Foothills. Banham's coordinates for this second ecology are nearly as precise as those for Surfurbia. Taking the L.A. River just north of downtown as the starting point, the western foothills run from Silver Lake, over Beverly Hills and to the Palisades. To the east, they encompass Highland Park, Pasadena, Sierra Madre and Monrovia. In the South Bay, the communities of Palos Verdes and Rolling Hills define the southern foothills. Remarking on southwest L.A.'s Baldwin Hills area, Banham offers a rare political statement when pointing out that this planned development wrongfully supported "restrictive covenants in the title deeds which exclude Negroes and Mexicans." [19] What unites these dispersed hillside communities is their planning typology — or perhaps, the lack thereof. "That is what the foothill ecology is really all about: narrow, tortuous residential roads serving precipitous house-plots that often back up directly on unimproved wilderness...". [20] Up these winding streets, particularly in the Hollywood Hills, Banham discovers recognizable movie locations, hidden modernist landmarks, and ritzy castles. These are sites almost always hidden behind ubiquitous screens of laurels that afford

"instant privacy, essential to the fat life of the delectable mountains." [21] But amidst this network of fancy hideaways, Banham sees the seeds of the area's demise: "In so far as this ecology is threatened it is threatened by its own desirability more than anything else; a desirability attested by the appearance of small two- or three-storey apartment blocks balanced awkwardly over impossibly precipitous pocket handkerchief sites...". [22] The rush to develop the remaining hillsides has largely led builders to take the topography for granted. Sometimes, the site constraints inspire novel architectural works, such as

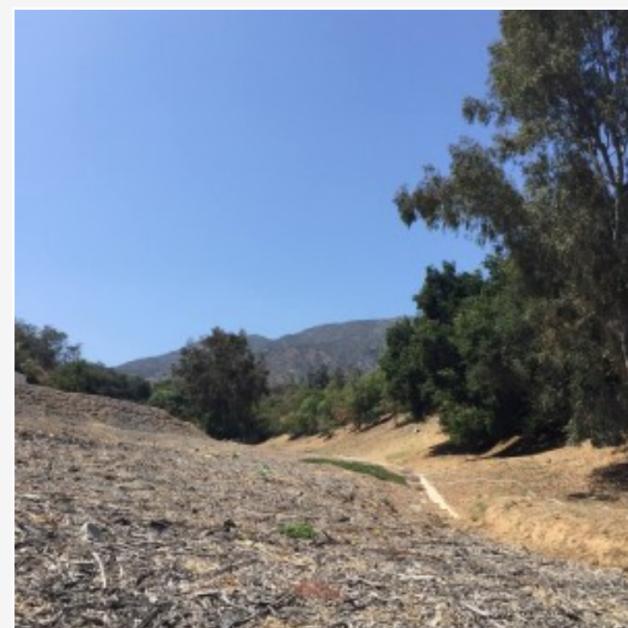


John Lautner's Chemosphere House in the Hollywood Hills [photo 5]

John Lautner's famous UFO-looking [Chemosphere House](#) perched atop a concrete pillar embedded deep into the forty-five degree Hollywood Hills. Other times, the slope presents too great a challenge for impatient builders. As Banham notes, "the un thought-out solution — if solution it is — simply takes a standard developer's tract-house and perches it in mid-air on steel uprights..." [23] And when impatient developers are not suspending homes in mid-air, they are bulldozing the hillside in an effort to level, grade, and develop the Foothill ecology as if it was a ground-level suburb.

Given L.A.'s tendency toward rapid urban development, the suburbanization of the Foothills seems a forgone conclusion, an inevitable outcome in this land of de facto urbanization. But what differs most strikingly between piecemeal and hyper development in the foothills is the scale of the resulting projects. As Banham points out, "(T)he customary methods of working and designing did not alter the profiles of whole hills, exalt valleys, or make waste of places plain, in the way that large-scale mountain cropping does." [24] The problem is magnified where foothills are prone to landslides because of poor run-off and ground-level undercutting. With this point, Banham — in another rare instance — gives a bit of credence to those L.A. naysayers who warn of the city's impending demise. Given the dangers of rampant Foothill development, he says: "(I)t becomes difficult not to entertain apocalyptic queries about how some of these developments are going to settle down — and where! Such large-scale triflings with the none too-stable structure of an area of high earthquake risk seems more portentous as a direct physical risk to life and limb than as a lost ecological amenity." [25] Of course, the apocalyptic demise of L.A. is the central myth Davis explores in *Ecology of Fear*.

## Foothills rebuttal



Foothills above Bradbury in the San Gabriel Valley  
[photo 6]



Malibu fire in 2007 [photo 7]

Davis too is concerned about the threat of natural disasters, though his take is much less circumspect and cautionary than Banham's. Davis flatly denounces the relentless development of the Foothills as an affront to L.A.'s already vulnerable natural environment. And in response to rapid Foothill urbanization, Nature is fighting back. According to Davis, the Foothills are the scene of annual firestorms that should (but do not) provide arguments against large-scale hillside development. Malibu, not coincidentally, is a favorite inferno locale. "The rugged 22-mile coastline is scourged, on the average, by a large fire (one thousand acres plus) every two and a half years, and the entire surface area of the western Santa Monica Mountains has been burnt three times over this century," says Davis. [26]

Moreover, Davis points out that in three decades five firestorms wiped out over one thousand luxury homes, sometimes striking the same unlucky homeowners twice. [27] Yet even after the [1993 Malibu firestorms](#) caused over \$1 billion in damage, stubborn residents clung to and defended their vulnerable view lots. The county's response to these recurring firestorms and angry residents demanding more fire protection has been to mistakenly endorse the policy of total fire suppression. While this tactic may appease residents, Davis says it "has been a tragic error because it creates enormous stockpiles of fuel" for additional and inevitable fires. [28]

And if firestorms are not dangerous enough, the Foothills are home to the threat of indigenous wild animal attacks. The L.A. region's rugged perimeter geography, coupled with rapid foothill development, explains the number of attacks occurring annually. "First of all, metropolitan Los Angeles, now bordered primarily by mountains... rather than by farmland as in the past, has the longest wild edge, abruptly juxtaposing tract houses and wildlife habitat, of any major nontropical city... Second, this is primarily a mountain edge..." [29] In recent years the attacks have become more brazen and commonplace, suggesting that the animal kingdom is fed up with L.A.'s willful destruction of Nature. The roster of real and imagined attackers includes mountain lions, black bears, coyotes, plague-ridden rodents, African bees, and [chupacabras](#), the mythological bloodsucking creatures from Latin America that captured the city's attention ten years ago as quickly as they disappeared back into folklore.

Both Banham and Davis display sincere concern about over-development of the Foothills. By Banham's account, foothill urbanization is inevitable and should be conducted at a cautionary pace by skilled builders who possess enough design savvy to know how to "do it right." On the other hand, Davis' leads the reader to believe that virtually no foothill development is safe considering the imminent danger of fires and beasts lurking in the laurels. Perhaps neither account is right, so much as they are "revealing" — that is, both accounts reveal the inherent vulnerability of L.A.'s Foothill ecology.



Chupacabra mural [photo 8]

## Plains of Id

The flatland communities comprising the bulk of Los Angeles represent the Plains of Id, the Freudian-esque “heartland” of L.A. in which the city’s primal development urge originates. In Banham’s words, “These central flatlands are where the crudest urban lusts and most fundamental aspirations are created, manipulated and with luck, satisfied.” [30] This is lust for subdivisions and suburbanization. Banham’s analysis begins in the [San Gabriel Valley](#). Taking Foothill Boulevard east, Banham backtracks the march of suburbanization to its roots in eastern L.A. County in the area of Azusa-Duarte. It was here in 1851 that Henry Dalton first began subdividing his *rancho* into individual farm plots in the course of producing the Duarte township. The subdivision of the plains soon spread west as settlers migrated to L.A. via the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads. Banham credits railroad expansion as the primary facilitator of plains development. As railroad lines extended north and south, new opportunities for suburbanization emerged. According to Banham, Orange County and the San Fernando Valley were borne out of expanded railroad lines (and, of course, [controversial water provision tactics](#) for City of Los Angeles proper).



Historic Duarte [photo 9]



Dingbat apartment in Venice [photo 10]

Aside from an occasional urban monument that might distinguish one suburban plain from another (the Watts Towers, for example), Banham says the landscape tends to disappear into “an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with ticky-tack houses clustered in indistinguishable neighborhoods, slashed across by endless freeways that have destroyed any community spirit that many once have existed...”. [31] This portrayal of the plains explains the unbridled lust for development: what else is there to do but grow? But suburban development does not always translate into beautifying the plains. To a large extent, plains development produces a confusing and mediocre built environment. For example, while perusing the San Gabriel Valley, Banham finds that a “substantial four-lane highway will apparently stop at a white fence and a grove of trees,” throwing off the traveler’s locational awareness. [32] While in West Los Angeles, Banham identifies his proverbial [dingbat](#) architectural typology — that ubiquitous two-story apartment building with a bland street-facing facade, uninspired architectural detailing, and required on-site covered parking spaces tucked under rectangular overhanging bedrooms propped up on thin steel pipes. [33] Despite these complaints, Banham concludes that suburban “anomalies” are the very reason why the suburbs should be celebrated as a distinctive L.A. ecology. The expansive

flatlands that beckoned a steady flow of East Coast and Midwestern settlers were essential to the formation of contemporary metropolitan L.A. Furthermore, he says, “this undistinguished townscape and its underlying flat topography were quite essential in producing the distinctively Angeleno ecologies that surround it on every side. In a sense it is a great service area feeding and supplying the foothills and the beaches...”. [34]

## Plains of Id rebuttal

While Banham provides a cogent critique of the plains’ physical design, he conspicuously leaves out any analysis of the ecology’s underlying sociopolitical problems. This omission might be warranted when he writes of tumbleweed suburbs like Duarte, but marginalized and impoverished suburbs inhabit the Plains of Id, too. Take Watts, for example. Banham directs some attention to this community for its celebrated [Watts Towers](#) and strategic location in the regional transportation grid, but he fails to offer an analysis of its political climate. This is despite the fact that Watts had erupted in rebellion only six years before Banham published his manifesto. How can the [1965 Watts Uprising](#) go unmentioned in this analysis when the rebellion itself sprang from the particularities of the local ecology? The Watts Uprising was the product of mounting urban inequalities that included aversion towards community development in Black communities. The subdivisionist lust that drives the plainspersons’ desires must have a flipside, like the desire to disinvest when communities lack amenities and resources to sustain profits. According to Banham’s sanitized portrayal of suburbia, dingbat architecture is the major concern, not inequality. Davis vehemently challenges this oversight.

Davis’ turbulent portrayal of suburbia counterbalances the benign sociopolitical environment of Banham’s Plains of Id. For Davis, the suburban development process has more insidious consequences. Suburbanization has robbed Los Angelenos of the last remaining vestiges of open space. He says, “While the population of the Los Angeles region grew by 45 percent from 1970 to 1990, its developed surface area increased by 300 percent.” [35]

One of the results of this massive suburbanization campaign has been the increasing privatization of public space. On one hand, privatization affords users a sense of safety given the [array of security technologies deployed to monitor users’ activities](#). Thus, privatization in the interest of safety is a growing trend



Watts Towers [photo 11]

in downtown as well as the suburbs. But as Davis argues, it is a myth to think the suburbs are safer than downtown. From the dusty roads of Lancaster to the sleepy streets of Orange County, the plains are ground zero for what Davis describes as a “low-intensity” urban race war between neo-Nazi skinheads and unsuspecting minority groups. [36] Since the 1990s, increasing out-migration of ethnic minorities to once all-white suburbs has fueled this growing but under-reported war. This brings us back to Watts, the myth of the inner-city as the epicenter of crime, the ever-present problem of racism and blight, and the fact that the “truth” about the plains has been downplayed or ignored in popular media. Juxtaposing Banham’s and Davis’ critiques of suburbia, the dingbat is of little concern if Los Angelenos are facing the threat of violence simply because of their skin color.

## Autotopia



Under the Four Level I-110 / US 101 freeway interchange in Downtown Los Angeles [photo 12]

The expansive freeway system that traverses Los Angeles represents Autotopia, the last, and perhaps most infamous, of Banham’s four ecologies. Here is where Banham makes his most controversial argument — that L.A.’s heavily trafficked, pollution-causing, [monolithic freeway system](#) is *not* a source of consternation, but rather a praiseworthy feat of planning ingenuity. More specifically, he argues that “the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.” [37] This often-quoted passage captures his argument that the freeways, despite their bad reputation, liberate the driver from the inefficient, congested streets that make up the traditional city grid. Here Banham opens much for debate. He wisely addresses the traffic stereotype early on. He does not deny that traffic is problematic in Autotopia, but he downplays its extent in comparison to European standards: “(T)he freeway system can fail; traffic jams can pile up miles long in rush-hours or even on sunny Sunday afternoons, but these jams are rarely stationary for as long as European expectations would suggest.” [38] He does not define the parameters of “European expectations,” nor does he explain why an Angeleno would use an international traffic standard as a comparison metric. Thus, we are left to assume that if gridlock is okay in London, it is okay here. This is an instance in the book where Banham’s quirky European viewpoint does not make for cogent criticism. The reader is left to believe that Los Angelenos have no business complaining about traffic in the land of eternal sunshine and

smog. While admitting that the effects of smog are damaging, Banham ultimately concludes that “psychologically or no, most Angeleno (drivers) are neither retching with smog nor stuck in a jam...”. [39]

Banham argues that traffic and smog should be of little concern given that Autotopia, externalities and all, symbolizes the All-American values of democracy and freedom. The freeway is about freedom of movement, freedom of leisure, and freedom of choice. And just like in any democracy, the citizen-driver has to learn the democratic ways. An important point he raises is that driving in Autotopia requires special skills and knowledge that are acquired only through time and applied study (i.e. driving around L.A.’s four ecologies). Driving is much like voting: both are adult rights-of-passage that require discipline, consensus, and consideration of another. Furthermore, driving is about self-reliance and free will, especially in comparison to public transit where “the price of rapid door-to-door transport on demand is the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey.” [40] Unfortunately, Banham does not discuss the bus rider or low-income worker who cannot afford a car, so the reader is left wondering how they fit into this hypothetical auto-democracy.

What is revealing in Banham’s analysis of Autotopia is the freeway’s implicit disciplinary order. For even the most free-flowing democracy needs a system to ensure safety and functionality. Autotopia has impressive disciplinary devices. First, Banham characterizes the freeway as a cyborg, a “man/machine system” requiring the driver to synchronize with the roadway so that both function properly. [41] By acquiescing to and becoming part of the technology of infrastructure, the safe and sensible driver inches closer to machine-hood. Second, the driver must obey the [plethora of road signs controlling traffic flow](#). Far from being simply letters and numbers affixed to metal, freeway road signs are symbols of regulation reminding the driver that “there is no alternative to complete surrender of the will to the instructions on the signs.” [42] Since functional operation is a primary imperative in Autotopia, the driver is expected to diligently monitor radio broadcasts to stay informed of accidents and traffic jams that might disrupt this well-ordered system. Given these disciplinary devices, it is no wonder that Banham predicts drivers in the near future would be cogs in L.A.’s robotic transportation network:

Thus a variety of commanding authorities — moral, governmental, commercial, and mechanical (...) — direct the freeway driver through a situation so closely controlled that... he will hardly notice any difference when the freeways are finally fitted with computerized automatic control systems that will take charge of the car at the on-ramp and direct it at properly regulated speeds and correctly selected routes to a pre-programmed choice of off ramp. [43]

## Autotopia rebuttal

While Banham celebrates the freeway network, Davis holds roadways and cars accountable as culprits in the obliteration of L.A.’s landscape. To be fair, in *Ecology of Fear* Davis makes few direct criticisms of the freeway, a surprising omission since one of the most familiar Los Angeles stereotypes is that freeways dominate. Nevertheless, Davis’ implicit criticism of Autotopia is palpable.

One of the recurring themes in Davis' analysis is that relentless suburbanization has destroyed Los Angeles. Suburbanization could not be accomplished without first supplying a conduit to transport anti-urbanites between the outlying bedroom communities and L.A.'s polycentric job centers. Hence, the freeway system was born. As suburbs continued to develop farther from L.A. proper, more freeways were needed to connect the periphery and core.



Aerial view of Newhall Ranch [photo 13]

Davis uses [Newhall Ranch](#) in Valencia to support his argument against freeway expansion. To build the proposed 70,000-person suburb developers proposed expanding Highway 126 to eight lanes. The project ultimately would consume a substantial amount of scarce open space, says Davis. Moreover, the development's proposed 25,000 housing units are to be built atop an agricultural flood plain that was home to state-protected endangered species that had to be relocated. [44] For more than 10 years activists have challenged Newhall Ranch's environmental impacts; nevertheless, last year the 2nd District Court of Appeal [reinstated the project's entitlement](#). As Davis argues, such an example of freeway urbanism is part of a larger development pattern that has obliterated L.A.'s shrinking natural environment. Furthermore, when considering L.A.'s freeway system and the additional street-level support facilities it requires, the impact of Autotopia is even more alarming. According to Davis, "The automobile (has) devoured exorbitant quantities of prime land. By 1970 more than one third of the surface area of the Los Angeles region was dedicated to the car: freeways, streets, parking lots, and driveways." [45] In total, he estimates that Los Angeles is currently submerged under three billion tons of concrete.

In summary, Davis rejects Banham's notion that freeways symbolize freedom. The freeway is more totalitarian than democratic. During the [urban renewal of Los Angeles](#), freeway development bifurcated neighborhoods and displaced families. Freeways are divisive. Freeway urbanism has been a primary mechanism in the erasure of the L.A. landscape. If one were to merge Davis' and Banham's interpretations of Autotopia, the freeway system would be an unforgiving disciplinary machine.

## Conclusion

This essay juxtaposed Reyner Banham's and Mike Davis' "ecologies" in order to articulate a more inclusive alternative history of Los Angeles. In the course of sketching out this history, several L.A. myths and stereotypes emerged. Looking at the two authors individually, their arguments seem to present one slanted perspective over the other, with either view justifying or debunking the hype. Such a reading offers limited critical analysis at best. A better reading is possible. By reading a synthesized Banham/Davis ecological analysis as outlined in this essay, the student of Los Angeles benefits from a holistic, sobering, and revealing perspective on the city. The Banham/Davis synthesis offers planners and policymakers a critical reinterpretation of L.A. city life and city space that can inspire new urban planning directions. By both authors' accounts, rapid urbanization underlies the formation of L.A.'s ecologies. The speed and intensity of development has produced positive, negative, and ambiguous consequences. While urbanization gave Angelenos the greater Los Angeles region comprising expansive transportation systems, limitless suburbs, secluded foothill enclaves, and cozy beach side cities around an historic and [resurging Downtown](#), it has done so at a cost to the natural environment. With this in mind, it behooves policymakers and planners to take another look at development plans currently on the boards with respect to the issues, critiques, and interpretations Banham and Davis present.

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## Notes

1. Nina Brown. "Robert Park and Ernest Burgess: Urban Ecology Studies, 1925," para. 1.
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#### **About Jonathan P. Bell**

Jonathan Pacheco Bell is a proud public sector professional with over 17 years of diversified experience spanning the fields of urban planning, architecture, and information/library science. Since 2006, Jonathan has worked as an urban planner for a large municipal planning department in Los Angeles County. He has extensive experience in countywide zoning enforcement and community planning in South Central Los Angeles. Jonathan received his M.A. in Urban Planning from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and studied political science and architecture as an undergraduate. He is currently completing an MLIS with an emphasis in public libraries through the San Jose State University iSchool.