

RE: American Dream

An Incomplete Project:

Towards A Recontextualization of Modernity and the Urban House Prototype in Los Angeles

Central Office of Architecture

Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash.¹

—Morrow Mayo, Los Angeles

Los Angeles has seen unprecedented and rampant exploitation by hegemonous political and economic forces which dissolve the public realm of the city into a seamless horizontal experience of bankrupt formal gestures devoid of value either urbanistically or architecturally. Greed, in the form of the capitalist machine, combined with the concept of *rampant frontierism*², have left Los Angeles in the hands of extraordinary rapists who control and continuously exploit the city toward solely speculative (financial, political) ends. This violence has left in its wake slums and decaying neighborhoods, victims of the continuous interruption and erasure of hierarchy as the measure of a legible and sentient experience within the grid of Los Angeles. Nostalgia for the specific myth of its own fictitious past creates a pervasive and amplified dementia which vividly portrays the misery and blasé³ of the contemporary urban experience. Los Angeles, lacking an awareness of its own essence,⁴ lies directionless, forever folding in on itself as directed by hegemonous forces, resulting in a pervasive homogeneity.

Morphologically, Los Angeles is a complex hybrid; its unstable and shifting



Film still from *Mon Oncle* (1956)

form exists in a flux somewhere between the traditional European city model of fabric and corridor streets, and the Modernist conception of the city as object-buildings in the park. The traditional city is primarily an experience of spaces defined by continuous walls of building, arranged in a way that emphasizes the figure of the void and de-emphasizes the building volumes. The modernist conception, espoused by Le Corbusier, is phenomenally an opposite model: it is one of discrete three-dimensional objects floating in space, amplifying their autonomy and individuality while defying gravity. Los Angeles, existing in that zone which simultaneously suggests and denies either or both of these mod-

els, posits perhaps a third alternative, that of the post-city. The condition of the post-city is characterized by the co-existence of contradictory and incompatible elements, causing an irresolvable aporia. Experientially, the post-city is described as an inability to make, and an indifference to, constructed relationships, rendered thin through an infinitely expanding and accelerating web of non-hierarchical traced paths. The previous definitions of city are superseded; the possibility of a totalizing portrait is eliminated, rendered inconceivable and inappropriate.

It is impossible to say precisely when one can begin to speak of the existence of two distinct and bitterly conflict-

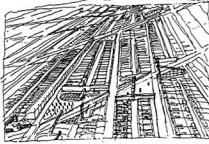
ing modernities. What is certain is that at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization—a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism—and modernity as an aesthetic concept.⁵

—Matei Calinescu

Five Faces of Modernity

Calinescu describes a conception of modernity polarized by the irreconcilable opposition between the sets of values corresponding to (1) *The objectified, socially measurable time of capitalist civilization (time as a more or less precious commodity, bought and sold on the market), and (2) the personal, subjective, imaginative durée, the private time created by the unfolding of the "self."* The latter identity of time and self constitutes the foundation of modernist culture.

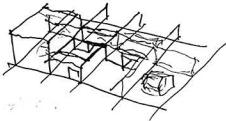
The current pluralist condition of the postmodern has left Los Angeles in the unstable state of an urban palimpsest, a metropolitan text undergoing erasure and layering in such a way as to become the equivalent of a multiple-exposure photograph: ambiguous and open for multiple-readings at best, entropic noise at worst. A post-existentialist value system confuses the loss of the first principle, the reliable and definitive reference point (and for better or worse, a source of the collective will)



LOS ANGELES: AERIAL VIEW OF SITE INTERVENTION AND ENVIRONS



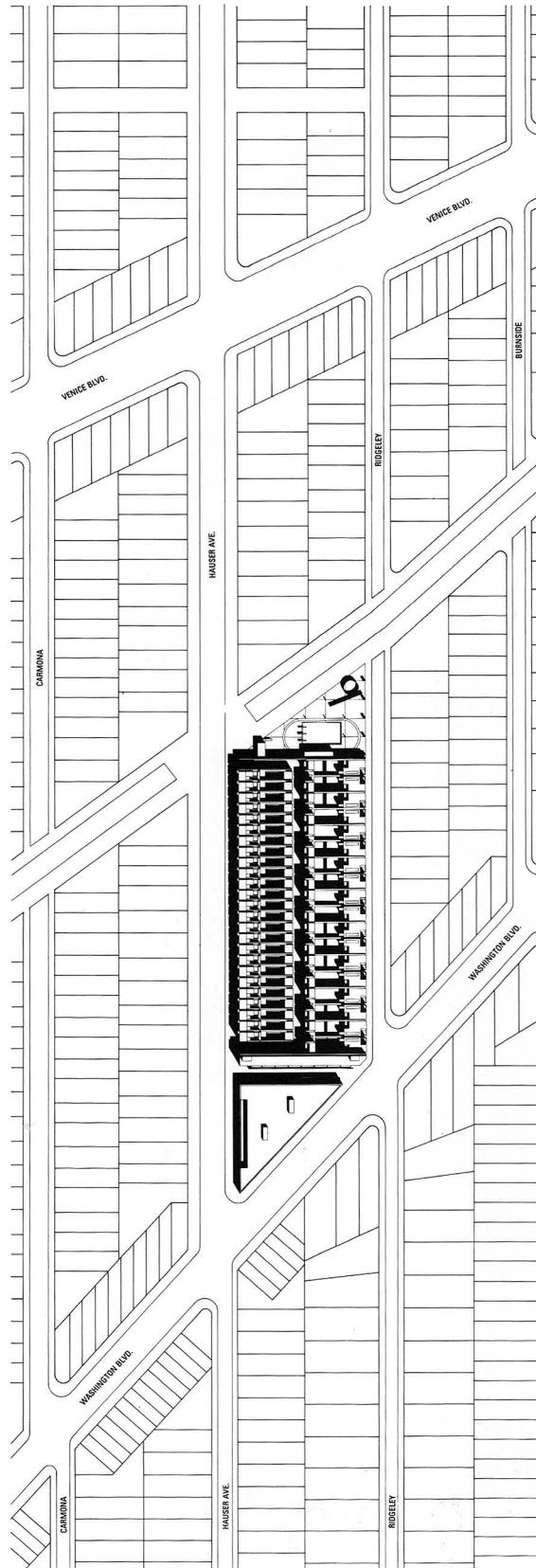
PRELIMINARY MORPHOLOGICAL DIAGRAMS



PRIMARY ORDERING DIAGRAM

While many spectacular building sites exist in Los Angeles, most of the land is characterized by unremarkable conditions. Large zones are devoid of any perceivable geographical features thus encouraging the repetition of a simple unsophisticated house type ad infinitum.

The site for this project is a nearly flat block bounded on all four sides by different conditions. To the south is Washington Boulevard, a commercially zoned street which becomes a major thoroughfare during peak commute hours. Hausser Avenue, on the west, is a well used secondary street travelled by motorists trying to avoid the parallel traffic clogged primary streets. On the east is Ridgely Avenue which terminates at the north end of the site where it is crossed by the Ballona Creek. Once a natural creek, the Ballona Creek is now a concrete walled flood control channel but still retains the intrinsic value of an identifiable geographical feature.



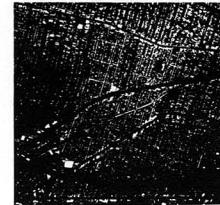
VICINITY



200 ft. / 60 m



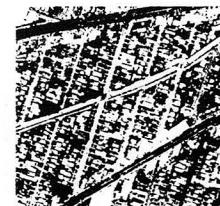
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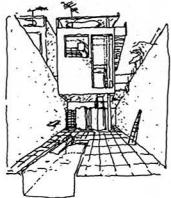
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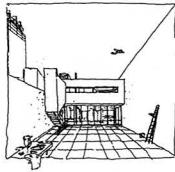
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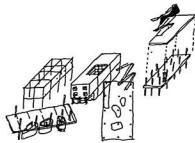
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ALLEY UNIT FROM COURTYARD



RIDGELEY UNIT FROM COURTYARD



LE CORBUSIER: THE FIVE POINTS

The solution combines three different units each of varying size and each responding to its location within the block. The living area of each type of unit is located on a different level to minimize unwanted views into neighboring units.

Hauser Unit

Lot size: 22' x 108' - three bedrooms
The forty foot height of these units is a response to heavily used nature of Hauser Avenue. The height yields two benefits: the protection of the interior of the block and the reinforcement of a strong street edge. These lots are accessible from both ends. Cars must park in the garage off the alley, above which an additional room is located, while pedestrians may enter from Hauser. The living space is on the first floor and is open to the courtyard and the master bedroom is on top.

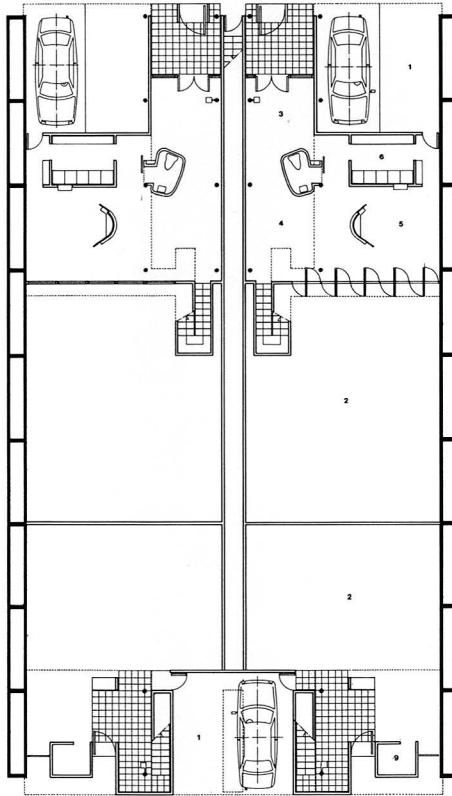
Ridgeley Unit

Lot size: 33' x 80' - two bedrooms
Ridgeley Avenue is a relatively quiet street due to the Ballona Creek which crosses at the north end and bars through traffic. Units on Ridgeley are lower in total height but still provide an interior double height space as do all the units. Entry is through a small court of Ridgeley and the living space, which occupies the ground floor, maximizes openness to the courtyard. The bedrooms are located above on the first floor.

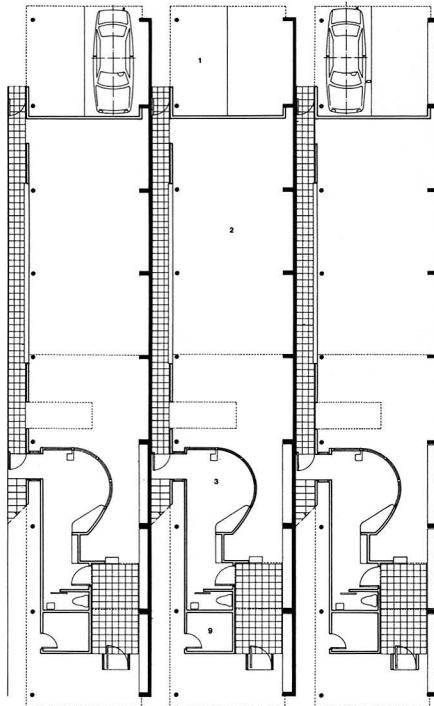
Alley Unit

Lot size: 33' x 42' - one bedroom
These vertically organized units are distributed along the Ridgeley side of the alley. Garages are shared by paired units. Pedestrian access from the street is maintained by way of an elevated semi-private walkway. The living space is a double height volume at the top connected to a sleeping porch by an exterior stair. A bedroom is provided below the living area.

RIDGELEY UNIT



ALLEY UNIT



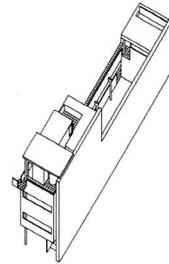
HAUSER UNIT

GROUND FLOOR PLANS

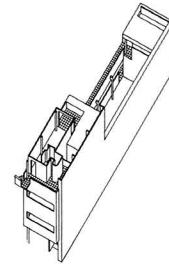
1/8" = 1'-0"

1. GARAGE
2. COURTYARD
3. ENTRY
4. LIVING
5. DINING
6. KITCHEN
7. BEDROOM
8. BATHROOM
9. STORAGE

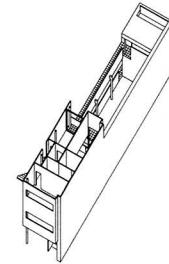
ROOF



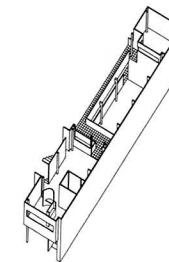
THIRD



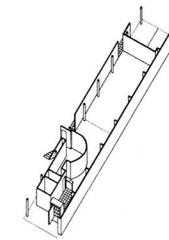
SECOND



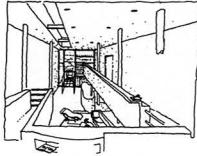
FIRST



GROUND



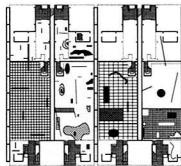
HAUSER UNIT



RIDGELEY UNIT INTERIOR FROM BALCONY

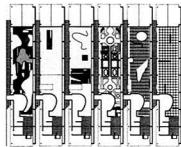


RIDGELEY UNIT INTERIOR FROM ENTRY



COURTYARD SCRIPT: PERMUTATIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

The courtyard becomes the potential site for the projection of the individual's need and desire for the manifestation of myth and ritual.

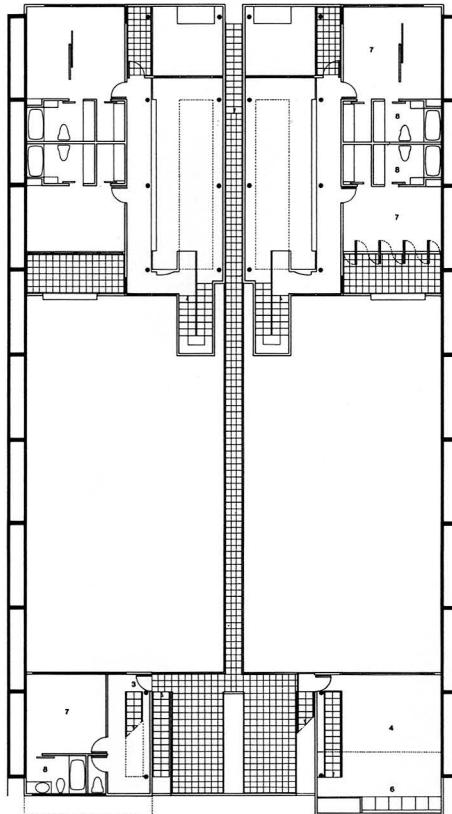


Structure, infrastructure and circulation are planned to achieve efficiencies made possible by the transformation to higher density. With regularization of the house plans come economies in providing the required services. Points of connection can be reduced in number.

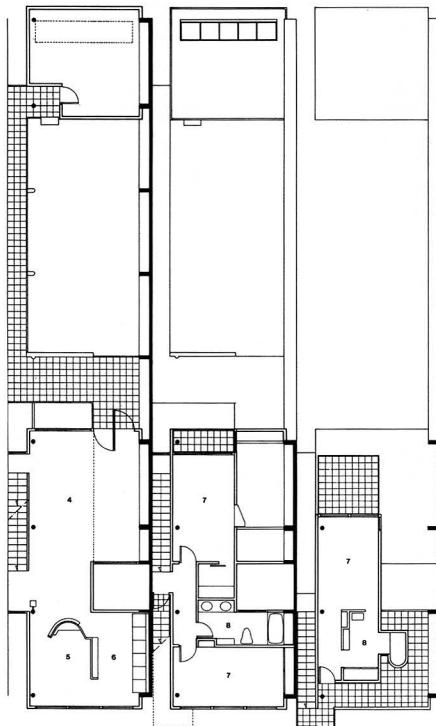
A system of walls containing the water, gas and electrical services and also providing structural support crosses the site. Alternating with these walls are rows of columns which raise the units and liberate the ground.

The courtyard and the columned space beneath the units provide for different types of outdoor activity. The courtyard is a private contained space removed from the chaotic condition of the city.

RIDGELEY UNIT



ALLEY UNIT



HAUSER UNIT

FLOOR PLANS

FIRST

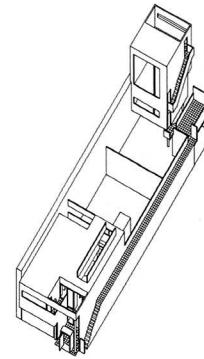
SECOND

THIRD

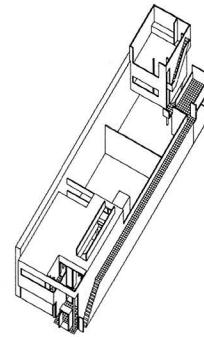
10' x 12' 0"

1. GARAGE
2. COURTYARD
3. ENTRY
4. LIVING
5. DINING
6. KITCHEN
7. BEDROOM
8. BATHROOM
9. STORAGE

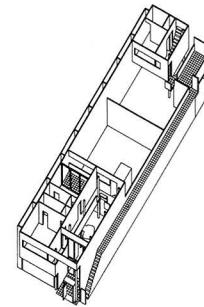
ROOF



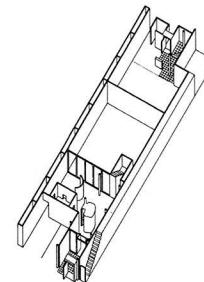
SECOND



FIRST



GROUND



RIDGELEY / ALLEY UNITS

with that of a solipsistic narcissism, symptomatic of a pathology brought on by the forces of late-capitalism. It results in a vacuous condition that resists coherence and falsely relieves responsibility to any larger, collective conception of the metropolis. Radical privatization, the ideology of consumption, fear of boredom and the need for escape leaves contemporary metropolitan Los Angeles with a misconception of plurality and chaos as freedom.⁶

Conditions within the instability of the modern urban condition are juxtaposed and played for their theatricality in Jacques Tati's 1956 film, *Mon Oncle*. Monsieur Hulot lives in a penthouse above a typical, quaint, French *place*, where he has daily encounters with his neighbors. Hulot enjoys rotating his bedroom window in order to reflect sunlight into a neighbor's window, blinding a noisy pet parrot. His relationship to the city is one of exteriorization and interaction, situating Monsieur Hulot within both a morphologically and demographically stable part of the city. At the same time, in another part of the city Hulot's well-off sister lives within a walled modernist compound where life becomes one of separation and repose from the experience of the city. The everyday experience is radically internalized resulting in an amplified response to its contained site. It is our assumption that one cannot play both sides in this scenario; housing in the city cannot simultaneously contain both of these conditions without contradiction. Radical privatization⁷ on both the corporate and individual level has all but ended the need/desire for actual public space in metropolitan Los Angeles. Actual space in the unstable capitalist metropolis,⁸ displaced by technological advancement and consequent alterations in socio-cultural phenomena, has been replaced with collapsed space.⁹ The circumspect form of simulated space and communication networks exemplify the rapidity of transformation, organization and

simultaneity of communications, as well as the city's accelerated tempo of use, eclecticism, and the fetishism of technology.¹⁰ These side effects of modernity, if not problematized, reduce the artistic experience of architecture to a pure object (an obvious metaphor for object-merchandise), where the criterion of economic obsolescence overrides all others.

Faced with the reality that orgies of construction during economically ripe times have made a mess of our urban life, it seems imperative to stop and reflect through the critical act of the project itself, opening a window of critical optimism amidst the neglect and disinvestment that has plagued entire urban sectors. The critical architectural response must be one of opposition to the lack of discrimination in terms of Los Angeles' own essence or awareness in becoming, accepting the inherent contradictions of time and place, but responding to them in a manner which adds hierarchy, and hence legibility to the experience of the city.

This work stands as a substantive contribution toward the establishment of a praxis regarding architectural interventions¹¹ within the grid of Los Angeles. It does not argue for the final form of the city, but instead postulates, given a critical reading of the situation based on certain criteria. Judgements can then be made and directed toward a meaningful architectural intervention. The work is a hypothesis about the ordering of events, countering hegemonic political, social and economic tendencies, and proposes with fixed and measured results a tenable model of future proposals for housing fabric within the city. Under such circumstances, what is needed is not the naive and nostalgic simulation of 'the front porch' but instead 'housing' as a proposition which reveals its own true presence based on values that critique the existing paradigm of both the structure of the individual dwelling and the morphology of the city. The

formal and conceptual continuity of the intervention transcends its functionalist origin and becomes part of the memory of the city itself as it is traversed by both time and experience. The totalization of the block reinforces its ability to resist the shifting of the hegemonous forces which surround it. As an unexecuted project, the proposal seeks to free itself from specific zoning restrictions, the residual of archaic codes, in order to show that with sober thinking and analysis, the problem of housing can be resolved in architectural form. Its representative form is meant to embody a coherent expression of our beliefs regarding the status of the role of architects working within a critical framework.

The unfolding evolution of the city cell or dwelling can be seen as the history of evolving a model for habitation. Le Corbusier's proclamation, "The house is a machine for living in,"¹² demanded a paradigm shift away from what was clearly in his mind an outdated and wholly inhumane condition of life for modern humankind. It is a misreading to understand Le Corbusier's proclamation as one of supporting the machine aesthetic. It was clearly a demand for culture to come to grips with the logic and perfection of "a problem clearly stated" and the necessity of architecture and lifestyle to reconcile themselves with technology. The white villas, then, must be critiqued in relation to the active adaptation of the individual to technological reality and the new spatial conditions that such a reality imposes. Our intention is to reinvest space in the condition of Modernity; space which has been occluded by the aforementioned polarity in Calinescu's definition of Modernity. In order to escape the commodification of the 'house' as a fetishistic autonomous object, as exemplified by the Case Study House program in Los Angeles in the late 1950's, we choose to focus on the morphology of the block and the house type as integral

parts of the fabric of the city.¹³ We believe in the tangible and clear achievement of the Modernist project recontextualized, which leads to the belief that it is far from bankrupt in its various contemporary manifestations, and that through our own comment we have progressed far from its Euro-centric origin.

The idea of 'context' is seen conceptually as an equation where the value of the existing structure of the block is weighed against the value of the proposed intervention. The intervention exists as a critical discourse on urban housing and its relation to the city; it embraces the grid¹⁴ as a basic organizational language in order to manifest a legible diagram that counters the intolerable situation which surrounds it.

Densify or Die

The need to densify housing will bring about certain changes. Open space in residential quarters must be devoted either to streets or to real human activity instead of useless side and front yards. In order to achieve more density, buildings must have smaller footprints and consequently push upwards.

The increase in density will require a shift from the current definition of suburban space by trees, shrubs and low fences to an urban definition of space by buildings, courts and high walls. While increases in density will result in decreased use of the car, the car and house will remain inextricably linked.

The form of the American Dream embodied in the single family detached suburban house is irreconcilable with the necessary increase in population density and the potential for a quality urban experience. A new type of urban house must develop which retains the most important aspects of the American Dream: individual home and land ownership and the preservation of private space.

1. Morrow Mayo quoted in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, Los Angeles, New York: Verso, 1990), 319.

2. Central Office of Architecture, "Los Angeles and the Curse of Bigness," Offramp (1989).

3. "The essence of the blasé attitude (towards the city) consists of the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as in the case with the half-wit, but rather, that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other. This mood is the faithful subjective reflection of a completely internalized money economy...all things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. All things lie on the same level and differ from one another only in the size of the area which they cover." "Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff, (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409–424.

4. See Heidegger's lecture, "The Question Concerning Technology." His definition of 'essence' shows that it potentially connotes that it does not simply mean what something is, but that it means, further, the way in which something pursues its course, the way in which it remains through time as what it is. It also must be understood as "presencing" or "coming to presence" which gives the word a context-reference to time and becoming. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger states: "Modern Technology too is a means to an end. That is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control."

5. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces Of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).

6. Calinescu observes: "However, on a much larger social plane, today's 'pop hedonism,' cult of instant joy, fun morality, and the generalized confusion between self-realization and simple self-gratification, has its origin not in the culture of modernism but in capitalism as a system that, born from Protestant work ethic, could develop only by encouraging consumption, social mobility, and status seeking, that is, by negating its own transcendental moral justification." 41–42. He adds: "It is impossible to say precisely when one can begin to speak of the existence of two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities. What is certain is that at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization—a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism and modernity as an aesthetic concept. With re-

gard to the first, bourgeois idea of modernity, we may say that it has by and large continued the outstanding traditions of earlier periods in the history of the modern era. The doctrine of progress, confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time (a measurable time, a time that can be bought and sold and therefore has, like any other commodity, a real calculable equivalent to money), the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success—all have been associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern and were kept alive and promoted as key values in the triumphant civilization established by the middle class. By contrast, the other modernity, the one that was to bring into being the avant-garde, was from its romantic beginnings inclined toward radical anti-bourgeois attitudes. It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion."

7. Tafuri, in discussing the state of the twentieth century capitalist metropolis states: "Of course, chaos is a datum and order an objective; it is sought within it. It is order that confers significance upon chaos and transforms it into value, into Liberty." Manfredo Tafuri, *Architec-*

ture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1976) 96 (author's emphasis).

8. Fifty-percent of telephone numbers in California are unlisted; Pacific Bell, 1991.

9. "Capitalist development must negotiate a knife edge between preserving the values of past commitments made at a particular point in time, or devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation. Capitalism perpetually strives, therefore, to create a social and physical landscape in its own image and requisite to its own needs at a particular point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt and even destroy that landscape at a later point in time. The inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed in the restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes. This is the tune to which the historical geography of capitalism must dance without cease. Harvey, 1985, p 150." Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London, New York: Verso, 1989) 157.

10. "The superimposed layers of the recombinant image share the similar 'thinness' of Duchamp's infrathin. These layers exist in a collapsed (discontinuous) space time, that unstable plane where disparate elements are forced to co-exist. Phenomenally, this collapse results in the compression of experience." Central Office of Architecture, *Recombinant Images in Los Angeles*, Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urbanism, 1989.

11. Jean Baudrillard writes: "The proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it,

around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shoppers' funeral parlour, the supermarket, and lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success...everything here testifies to death having found its own ideal home." Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London, New York: Verso, 1990). In addition, Paul Virilio states: "Where once the polis inaugurated a political theatre, with its agora and its forum, now there is only a cathode-ray screen, where the shadows and specters of a community dance amid their processes of the disappearance of urbanism, the last image of and urbanism without urbanity. This is where tact and contact give way to televisual impact." Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext/Autonomedia, 1991).

12. Carlo Aymonino states: "The character (or meaning) of a city is related to the degree of overlaying of spatial and interpretive elements, to the point in which they become indispensable to each other. This indispensability may only result in a 'judgement' if one reinterprets each time all the elements in the game; and to reinterpret means to plan...from this view point, the problems of 'insertion' and the more generic one of the 'environment' do not exist any more. What remains is the problem of more or less formally completed architectural complexes and urban sectors." Carlo Aymonino, *L'edificio e L' ambiente; premessa alla progettazione*, 1967, Lectures at the Corso di composizione dell' IUAV, Venice, 20–21.

13. "The airplane is the product of close selection. The lesson of the airplane lies in the logic which governed the statement of the problem and its realization. The problem of the house has not yet been stated. Machinery contains in itself the factor of economy, which makes for selection. The house is a machine for living in." Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York, London: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 100.

14. "The house, the street, the town, are points to which human energy is directed: they should be ordered, otherwise they counteract the fundamental principles round which we revolve; if they are not ordered, they oppose themselves to us, they thwart us, as the nature all around us thwarts us, though we have striven with it, and with it begin each day a new struggle." Le Corbusier, *City of To-morrow and Its Planning* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1929), 15.

15. Foucault states: "Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Great Britain: Editions Gallimard, 1966), xx.

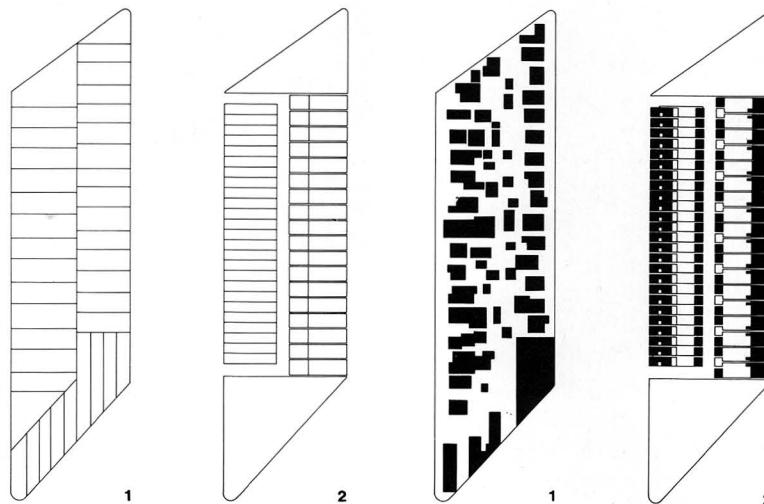


Figure 1: Current division of property ownership.
Figure 2: Reduction of lot size reduces land cost per dwelling.

Figure 1: Current disposition of dwellings results in wasted outdoor space.
Figure 2: Buildings are located at the perimeter of the site, maximizing usable outdoor space in the form of courtyards and clearly defining the street edge.