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Learning from Los Angeles

PETER J. LARKHAM
School of Planning, University of Central England, Birmingham, B42 25U

Several recent books provide reason for an extended review of aspects of the development and history of Los Angeles.* This city is so prominent particularly in the entertainment media that it is often seen (from outside the USA at least) as the archetypal American city, which gives rise to many misconceptions. There is a great deal still to learn from Los Angeles.[1]

First, this is a large and sprawling city, whose form owes much to the early adoption of the private automobile. Of course, this has led to the significant decentralization and familiar suburban sprawl with, for example, the suburb of Beverly Hills growing by 2486 per cent and the city having a population increase of 114.7 per cent during the 1920s. It is important in the light of the books reviewed here to recognize that 'since Los Angeles's core-city problems did not begin to compare with those of many older, highly centralized cities, local planners appeared justified in the belief that their most exciting opportunities for future planning lay in more remote areas'.[2] This strengthens the popular view of US cities as unplanned and, although there is an element of truth in this view, it obscures the fact that Los Angeles is equally a result of long-term conscious planning decisions.[3] Likewise, the concentration of architectural and cultural critique of the city has tended to focus on the unusual or the already-famous (the latter more for their occupants than necessarily for their architectural quality). Banham did give an historically-rooted architectural critique that covered what, for want of a better term,

* C. Mulholland, *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xxi + 411pp. 7 maps. Plates. Bibliography. $35, £22 hbk.
G. Hise and W. Deverell, *Eden By Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. ix + 314pp. $17.95, £11.50 pbk.
E.J. Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity. Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department 1900–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xiv + 358pp. 11 tables. Bibliography. $45 hbk.

1 I have adapted my title from the classic study, R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

2 M.S. Foster, 'The Model-T, the hard sell, and Los Angeles's urban growth: the decentralization of Los Angeles during the 1920s', *Pacific Historical Review*, 44 (1975), 459–84; see also R.D. McKenzie, 'The rise of metropolitan communities', in *Recent Social Trends: The Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends* (New York, 1933).

3 G. Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles. Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (Baltimore, 1997).

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was the LA 'vernacular', while also having concern for issues such as water resources and recreation planning directly relevant to this essay.[4]

Finally, there is the issue of the city's complex socio-economic and cultural history. The impact of globalization, exploding urbanization and the city's social struggles are traditionally, but very lucidly, charted by Keil in Wiley's 'World City' series.[5] In this context, some iconic works have set the city on something of an intellectual pedestal, to such an extent that there are criticisms about the domination of social science by Los Angeles-inspired critiques and case studies! Davies' *City of Quartz* is the key icon, a closely-observed and partisan insider's view of the social, political and economic power struggles that have shaped the city.[6] This is a multi-faceted critique, with a strong historical basis, of the production of a modern and then postmodern architectural and urban space that marginalizes the poor and provides little or nothing for the disadvantaged (including the many ethnic groups), thus exacerbating the crime, corruption and riots also familiar from the mass media. It is an unmissable exposé of the myths of this particular city. Scott and Soja's compilation reflects the argued iconic status of the city in the broader development of urban theory and critique.[7]

This is the context for the city, and for the books under review. The period covered by these books is approximately from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. A good historical introduction to this period, albeit an older work, is Fogelson's *Fragmented Metropolis*, which conveys much of the fragmentation – physically, socially, economically – of the city at this time.[8]

Chronologically we begin with Mulholland. This is a scholarly biography of William Mulholland, who 'presided over the creation of a water system that changed forever the course of Southern California history, and in so doing he became the focus of a controversy that has never died' (p. xiii). That the author is Mulholland's granddaughter does not seem to have unduly coloured her scholarship, even if some of her value judgements are interesting: he was 'a fine-featured, handsome man' (p. 5), and she is fiercely critical of the errors and omissions in some of the earlier and influential studies of the watering of Los Angeles. Her own work is grounded in thorough and extensive primary research in contemporary media, archives and Mulholland's own 'recently uncovered' office files.

Mulholland took his first job with the Los Angeles Water Company in

[4] B. Gill, *The Dream Come True: Great Houses of Los Angeles* (London, 1980); R. Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London, 1990; 1st pub. 1971).
[5] R. Keil, *Los Angeles: Globalisation, Urbanisation and Social Struggle* (Chichester, 1998).
[6] M. Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, 1990).
[7] A. Scott and E. Soja (eds), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1996).
[8] R. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles 1850–1930* (Berkeley, 1993; 1st pub. 1967).

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1878, when the small but growing settlement was already having water supply problems. Ditches and small reservoirs were usual, and the first cast-iron pipe had been laid only a decade earlier. Much of the water undertaking was by private company, and contractual disputes with the municipality were common. It is not to overstate the case to suggest that, without the large-scale water abstraction and storage projects chronicled here, Los Angeles would be only a minor town. His career ended with the collapse of the Saint Francis Dam in 1928, hours after he had inspected it and declared it safe. This was 'the greatest man-made disaster in the history of California and the greatest American civil engineering failure in the twentieth century' (p. 319) – over 450 deaths resulted.

In 24 chronological chapters, Catherine Mulholland charts not only a conventional biography, but also a history and critique of contemporary civic administration and business, civil engineering and urban growth. Mulholland the engineer designed and managed a water supply infrastructure for a fast-growing but dispersed city, and there is an interesting tension between water supply and demand – and, as the city became still more urban in nature it demanded yet more water. Mulholland's most often-quoted comment was 'here it is – take it', uttered as the first water ran in the San Fernando aqueduct. Yet 'he could equally well have been referring to the land of the valley itself, except that the big operators had already moved in without waiting for the water'.[9] Further tensions existed between the water supply companies and the city officers. And the developing technology and civil engineering is also chronicled, with some interesting human stories. For example, there is the (perhaps apocryphal) story that Mulholland likened a new Holt traction engine to a caterpillar, leading to the generic naming of such track-laying devices (p. 168).

This is a well-structured and fluently-written volume, packed with detail and evidence of painstaking scholarship. It is of particular interest not only in exploring the personality of Mulholland himself, but for its wider messages in unravelling the complexities of providing the largely unseen services for urban places at that period, and for its perspective on the history and growth of the city.

Hise and Deverell advance us to 1930 and the commissioning by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce of a large-scale report on *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region* by two very prominent landscape designers and consultants, Olmsted Brothers and Harland Bartholomew and Associates. The authors contribute a 56-page introduction setting the context for the main part of the book, a facsimile reprint of the report itself.

There has been a surge of interest in the planning documentation of

[9] Banham, *Four Ecologies*, 72.

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the early part of the last century; this is not the first facsimile reprint. There is also considerable recent interest in the Olmsteds and their activities (listed on pp. 62-3, n. 99). Yet, as Hise and Deverell chart, there are peculiarities with this document despite its later influence. Despite the expense of commissioning the consultants, and initial aspirations of circulating several thousand copies, less than two hundred were actually printed. Few copies are known to survive; mostly in research libraries (p. 62, n. 98). The recommendations met with concerted opposition, and yet the report's principles have considerable resonance for current planning in a society having so much more focus on leisure and awareness of sustainability.

The Introduction is a suitable context-setting. It seeks to chart the development of the city and of its societies, and review the context of plan-making. The authors aim 'to analyze the planning process, to make transparent the somewhat shadowy and therefore suspect practice by which individuals and agencies with authority identify those ''problems'' the ''experts'' will address, how ''solutions'' are generated, and the way in which the public resources necessary for implementation are accumulated and assigned' (pp. 6–7). In this they succeed. The involvement of private individuals in interesting the Olmsteds, and in seeking to fund large-scale planning reports, is charted. The process of report production is reviewed. And the sad saga of the report's stifling is explored: the problem lying not so much in the physical proposals for parks, parkways and so on, which were generally sensitive to landscape, ecology and public sentiment; but in the mechanisms proposed for their creation, funding and management. The city had been cautious of large-scale private works and public taxes; in this respect there are similarities between the commentaries on institutions and approaches in both this and Mulholland. It is also an interesting commentary on public participation in planning; although, of course, only a very limited, influential, wealthy and vociferous 'public' was involved. After much discussion, in March 1929 the Chamber's Director said, 'If you want to kill this thing, let's kill it. Let's not let it die a long death … Let's kill it now and get it out of the way … Let's kill it and get a vote on it.' This political direction, and the stifling of wider debate through the limited publication, was the downfall of the plan. Yet this led to a shortfall of recreation areas as the city expanded after the Second World War, while the report's analysis and recommendations remained largely valid, indeed forming the basis of region-wide investigations in the 1960s and 1970s.[10]

The report dealt with an area of some 1,500 square miles, 40 municipalities ('cities') and about two million inhabitants. By the standards of its time this is an extremely large-scale study, well illustrated, extending

[10] M. Davis, 'How Eden lost its garden: a political history of the Los Angeles landscape', in Scott and Soja, *The City*, 160–85.

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to 178 pages (including index).[11] It is a compelling read as a period planning document, even if one is unfamiliar with the city and region. It is a good example of how thoroughly outside consultants actually could explore an area, identify the key issues and propose workable solutions. That these were not seen as politically workable is another matter. Its reprint is very welcome for planning historians.

And yet there is a little frustration that Hise and Deverell say little about the mechanism of the reprint, save that this was a process 'akin to urban archaeology' in that 'our endeavor required fieldwork in order to locate the original artifact, bring it to the University of Southern California's digital imaging center, and create a facsimile' (pp. vii–viii). Is the facsimile reproduced at the page size of the original? I feel that it is a reduction, given the difficulty in reading some of the maps – and, of course, these maps are vital to a full understanding of the proposals. Why is it reprinted on grey-tinted paper? Although this makes locating the reprint text within the volume easy, it makes reading its text more difficult. Has this scanning process actually screened the original? For some of the original faint diagrams have totally broken up (Plate 2) and some of the photographs have lost some of the crispness that one would expect of this period. And why was *this particular* copy (with the ownership stamp of the Los Angeles County Regional Planning Commission Statistical Division) selected, when it does have quite a number of (admittedly individually small) marginal annotations, underlinings and other evidence of use? Are there no more pristine copies extant?

The volume ends with an interview of Laurie Olin by Hise and Deverell, which functions as a senior planner/designer's retrospective evaluation of the Olmsted-Bartholomew Report. This does also give us new material, for example on Olmsted's working practices; and some hints on the importance of the Report as seen by professionals in the following decades. Yet there is no explanation of why Olin himself should be interviewed (Hise and Deverell simply credit someone else for suggesting it and setting up the meeting). Even so, this is an informative and interesting end to the volume.

In all, the three segments of this volume do say something new about this Report itself, about the practices of commissioning and carrying out such reports, and on the politics and personae of Los Angeles at that time. With the Mulholland volume, this is another worthy exploration of the processes of creating built form, but one that has reviewed a process and type of space (recreation and parks) too often overlooked by urban morphologists. Hise and Deverell accurately comment that 'the unin-

[11] For a contemporary comparison one might see the much smaller and spatially limited English landscape study by the Earl of Mayo with the equally influential planning consultants, S.D. Adshead and P. Abercrombie, *The Thames Valley from Cricklade to Staines. A Survey of its Existing State and Some Suggestions for its Future Preservation …* (London, 1929).

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tended but nonetheless critical legacy of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan is how it reveals the form and meaning, the very definition, of urban space as the product of an ongoing contest. As in other contests, power is not distributed equally' (p. 55).

Escobar's study of race and policing is a very different book, although it is clear that the author is as deeply involved and immersed in the topic of Chicana/Chicano studies as was Catherine Mulholland in her subject matter. He reviews the creation of the LAPD at the turn of the century as a 'professional organization' and clearly shows how, throughout the first part of the century, it targeted ethnic groups, particularly Mexican Americans. This led to the Mexican Americans becoming increasingly politicized, indeed forming a tight-knit community, rather than encouraging any form of broader community integration. In turn, the LAPD used the *fear* of ethnic minority crime to secure increased power and resources, and principally autonomy, from the city administration. This culminated in major riots in June 1943, the 'Zoot Suit riots', apparently incited by media reports of, or allegations of, Mexican American juvenile crime. Again, the *fear* of crime, rather than any balanced assessment of actual crime, was the key.

This is another thoroughly-documented piece of historical research, using a range of contemporary sources including media reports and, most interestingly, 'internal and previously confidential LAPD documents', all of which had to be reviewed 'to ensure that privacy and other confidentiality laws and policies were not violated by the documents' release' (p. xii). All in all this reads as a damning indictment of the LAPD as a whole, and of some individuals in particular. Of course it is equally clear that some Mexican Americans, particularly youths, did indulge in gratuitous violence. But this was not large-scale organized crime. Escobar's analysis of arrest statistics is interesting in this respect: '... the statistics raise as many questions as they answer. Do they mean that Mexican youths committed more burglaries but were less inclined to run away than the general population? Or do they mean that the LAPD monitored Mexican youths more closely for this kind of offense and were more protective of white youths who were on their own? ... it is entirely possible that the arrest statistics reflect as much the conduct, or misconduct, of the LAPD as they do the behavior of Los Angeles Mexicans' (p. 130).

What seems less evident from this study is any significant contextualizing of the Mexican influence in the city, and in the southern USA generally, during this period. How did the Mexican population of LA change over time? Where was it located? How was it politicized (on a scale larger than Escobar charts for this city)? There is little or no spatial awareness in this text, and yet spatial clustering, even to the extent of forming ghettos, underpins much literature on this topic and permits the outsider an increased ability to conceptualize what is happening. A

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simple map, as Banham gives for both Spanish and Mexican Rancheros, would be helpful.[12]

This book is a history, its most recent events occurring over half a century ago. But Escobar is extremely aware of the wider, and current, resonances of his critique of the LAPD. The 1965 Watts riots, and the 1992 riots following the beating of Rodney King,[13] are reminiscent of the 1943 troubles. They equally brought severe criticism of the LAPD's approach to minority groups.

Read in conjunction with Mulholland, and Hise and Deverell, this is a timely reminder of the fragmented and contested nature of the city's social, political and economic history. The previous volumes were focused on the experiences of a small, white and generally well-to-do elite, whose attitude to the Mexicans on whom Escobar focuses was dismissive, intolerant and, indeed, fearful. The LAPD was largely allowed to carry on its sometimes brutal, often illegal, activities. These are typified in the comment made by its chief, Steckel, reacting to criticism of the illegality of his 'dragnet' tactics: 'Suppose it is against the law, is that any good reason why it shouldn't be done? It's practical. It gets results' (p. 308, n. 53). This volume provides an interesting and informed counter to Banham's rather bland assertion that 'miraculously the city's extremes include an excessive tolerance. Partly this is that indifference which is Los Angeles' most publicised vice, but it is also a heritage from the extraordinary cultural mixture with which the city began'.[14]

In all, then, these three books have all added to our detailed knowledge of Los Angeles in the first third or so of the last century. The processes of urbanization, local politics and strategies of social control have been charted through detailed and diligent empirical work. Each has made its perhaps esoteric subject interesting and accessible to a broad readership. The University of California Press is to be commended on the consistently high standard of these volumes in terms of writing style, scholarship and production. We may, indeed, 'learn from Los Angeles' from this collection. Hise and Deverell do explicitly discuss the future lessons that could be learned from the Olmsted and Bartholomew report, while it is to be hoped that the water providers in today's time of scarce resources, expensive infrastructure projects and increasing concern for environment and sustainability, and the LAPD, learn from the actions of their predecessors.

[12] Banham, *Four Ecologies*, 28–9.
[13] For an insightful study of the King riots see M. Baldassare (ed.), *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder, Col., 1994).
[14] Banham, *Four Ecologies*, 25.

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