

reviews

architectural populism

LOS ANGELES: *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. By Reyner Banham. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England. Allan Lane, Penguin Press. 1971.

A book we missed when it first appeared and now available in paperback (Pelican)—a shame we missed it, too, for it could have been compared to *Learning From Las Vegas* (reviewed XIV, 1). The two are similar in that they seek to learn to “read” kinds of architecture which have not for the most part made it into formal histories.

I suppose that I am somewhat prejudiced in favor of this book because Banham’s feel for Los Angeles is closer to my own than is anything else I’ve read about the city; in trying to explain why it is that I like a place we’re supposed to dislike, I find that I use arguments analogous to those in this book. But Banham has the advantage of knowing the history, and, unlike Venturi, Brown and Izenour in their treatment of Las Vegas, he takes the time systematically to summarize for us the somewhat surprising way the town developed. Comfortable clichés about automobiles and shapelessness turn out not to be really true.

Unlike the Las Vegas book also, this one is beautifully produced. When Banham wants us to see the influence, say, of Sullivan and Wright in buildings made of materials alien to the Chicago tradition, and in settings unthinkable in Oak Park, he presents plates which say what needs saying, so that we connect Moorish turret or cave-like door not only with the palm trees which stand in front but with the Auditorium Hotel, the Prairie Houses and the Transportation Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition. I confess to having been puzzled, until seeing this book, by praise I had seen for certain Angelino architects. *The Architecture of Four Ecologies* makes relationships clear; it’s the best thing of its sort we’ve ever had.

Quibbles: some are very minor. Banham buys some pop sociology and psychology notions rather naively (“territoriality,” for example, in Chapter 8), though generally he thinks for himself on the basis of good evidence. He does a few bad things stylistically, producing, for instance, a couple of those embarrassing sentences in which you write “both” and then list three items. He even gazes into what the *New Yorker* likes to call a “clouded crystal ball” to predict that Los Angeles (which, although it does *not* owe its shape to the automobile, now depends thoroughly on cars) should be called “a solution for other cities to contemplate.”

On a couple of occasions Banham also backs away from those interest-

ing anomalies the analysis of which often makes a good book wonderful. Having described for us how Watts came into being, how the old electric railroads shaped Los Angeles, how they served Watts well, how the freeways tend to have been shaped by railroad routes and how Watts today, paradoxically, has no freeway service, he fails to interconnect these things, to chew on them a bit. Finally, although this is not a "popsy" book, it does suffer from the author's apparent unfamiliarity with large-scale modern cultural studies of the United States. When he says

Los Angeles cradles and embodies the most potent current version of the great bourgeois vision of the good life in a tamed countryside, and that, more than anything else I can perceive, is why the bourgeois apartment houses in Damascus and the villas of Beirut begin to look the way they do.

he knows whereof he speaks. But his analysis would be immensely richer were it informed by familiarity with good American Studies works on the nature of the dream: I think of Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and especially Warren French's *The Social Novel at the End of an Era*, which, after all, traces pastoralism to Los Angeles in the heyday of Hollywood screenwriting.

For all that Banham fails to see how useful his material could be for us, however, this is an excellent book. It would be fun to teach in conjunction with Russell Lyne's *The Tastemakers*.

SGL

THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND CALIFORNIA POLITICS, 1880-1896. By R. Hal Williams. Stanford, California. Stanford University Press. 1973. \$10.00.

This first-rate analysis of the Democratic party in late nineteenth-century California shows that political behavior in that state does not fit the traditional interpretation of the "Gilded Age" as an empty period between Reconstruction and Progressivism. Williams demonstrates how reform-minded Democrats in California made a concentrated and at least partially successful effort to resolve the problems resulting from urbanization, industrialization, immigration and agricultural change. He also effectively refutes the widely accepted view put forth by George Mowry that the Southern Pacific Railroad dominated the state politically during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The rejection by the California Democratic reformers of the party's traditional gospel of states' rights, limited government and decentralization led to worsening friction with conservatives such as United States Supreme Court Justice Stephen J. Field and Grover Cleveland's national administration. When the President disregarded their demands for patronage, increased coinage of silver and lower tariffs, California Democrats in 1896 repudiated Cleveland and rallied behind William Jennings Bryan.

There is little to criticize in this study. The major weakness is the author's failure to apply the new quantitative techniques to California voting behavior. It is nevertheless important to the growing reassessment of the "Gilded Age" in American history. No longer can one regard the 1880s and 1890s as a dismal period in which nothing of consequence took place. In California at least, the roots of twentieth-century Progressivism lay in the late nineteenth century.

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THE UNITED STATES: 1789-1890. By William R. Brock. Ithaca. Cornell University Press. 1975. \$15.00.

This is one in a series of volumes examining "the sources of history" and "the uses of historical evidence." It is not a comprehensive bibliography of source material dealing with nineteenth-century America but instead a survey of the various types of material available and a description of their value and limitations. Brock divides his work into four parts, discussing the use of evidence in the four areas of economic, political, social and intellectual history. He concludes with a comment on the narrow perspective of American historical scholarship and proposes greater emphasis on comparative history.