

LOS ANGELES, The Architecture of Four Ecologies, by Reyner Banham.

Allen Lane, The Penguin Press. English price: 50s.

ARCHITECTURAL LOVE STORY~~Y~~

No one but a Londoner could love Los Angeles so much. East Coast Americans scorn it as being somewhat less interesting than San Francisco. It hasn't the tinsel glamour of Las Vegas now that Hollywood is dead. It hasn't even a downtown worth mentioning. Its own citizens are unimpressed. "Aw heck, there's lotsa picture-books about LA already!" said a hippie girl to Reyner Banham, seeing a camera around his neck. Australians generally find it the least fascinating of American cities, because it is so familiar. Three times bigger than anything at home, certainly, but with the familiar ingredients: flatness, sprawl, beaches — a land of surfboards, signboards, sun and single-storey houses.

But to a Londoner, or to the Londoner author of this book at any rate, these things have the fascination of unfamiliarity, and because he is a professor of the history of architecture and a devotee of pop culture at the same time, Reyner Banham has made a good book out of his devotion to his second city.

While most city planners regard Los Angeles as a disaster, a foretaste of the universal disaster which will overtake all cities about 1984 when cars will inherit the smog-choked lifeless streets, an inevitable rebel or avant-garde group acclaims it. They also recognize in Los Angeles a foretaste, but of an infinitely more appetizing kind. They see it as the first city created by and for the Age of Technology: Mobility City 1, symbolised by the magnificent reels of spaghetti where the ribbons of freeway cross and interchange.

One would expect Reyner Banham, a self-appointed but widely acknowledged P.R. Consultant to the Age of Technology, among whose books is Theory and Design in the First Machine Age, would be among the latter group. And one would be very wrong.

This book is quite unpredictable, even when one is buried deep in it, which happens soon after opening it, for Banham's writing runs like a 1971 model on an eight-lane freeway. It takes none of the conventional stances to Los Angeles. It is mainly an architectural love story.

Reyner Banham first met his love city about ten years ago. He is unspecific about the date, but it was about the same time as he first met Sydney and Melbourne and they had no such effect on him. It is said that he learned to drive a car just so that he could appreciate Los Angeles the way it was made to be appreciated: in motion. These days he leaves his University College, London, sometime every year to go to Los Angeles and teach for a time at UCLA or the University of Southern California.

There are certain predictable elements in the attraction of the city to him. Leaving behind traffic-bound, freeway-free London it is no doubt a great joy to spin out the miles on the sunny freeways, windows up against the smog and air-conditioner on. "The private car and the public freeway", he writes, "together provide an ideal — not to say idealized — version of democratic urban transportation: door-to-door movement on demand at high average speeds over a very large area."

He will not listen to the familiar criticisms of his love-object. Even on the subject of photochemical irritants in the famous smog, he writes "...for the concentration to be high enough to make the corners of my eyes itch painfully is rare in my personal experience."

He is a historian and an architectural intellectual, and this book displays each interest alternately in even balance. A chapter of pure geographical and social history is followed by one presenting the results of his treasure-hunting forays into the endless suburbs. He has collected numerous gems of early modern architecture, and happily he had his camera with him nearly all the time.

Apart from indulging an esoteric delight in discovery of anachronistic early buildings, Banham is here making the point that these buildings would have been in the modern architectural history books but for the fact that those books were mostly written by emigre Europeans to whom even Chicago seemed a bit too far west. (This, of course, is the story of our life, who are too far west even for Angelenos.)

Most architects will find the architectural chapters so delightful that they will coast easily in neutral over the historical chapters. Non-architects who just like history or Los Angeles are likely to spin along so pleasantly over the whole elevated trip that they will pass over the esoteric architectural bits without noticing, just as the favored Angelenos — and this book — glide above the misery of Watts without noticing it beyond the freeway's landscaped edge-strips.