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Los Angeles : One Domestic Viewpoint

Annie Chu and Rick Gooding



Figure 1.

The image of Los Angeles: being on the edge of the continent, the extroverted city of image makers, where novelty supplants meaning. There is yet for those who choose to work here, a complex stew of initiatives and interests that compels one to stay and seek out her meaning.

As an enthusiastic visitor, Reyner Banham attempted to describe a structure of four ecologies in order

to explain Los Angeles. The longer we reside in Los Angeles, the more we realize that this network of small districts over 5,000 square miles is too vast to be characterized by any defined number of ideas.

It is this nature of her elusiveness that kept many of us rooted here to work in Los Angeles. As common in an intimate relationship, we find ourselves simultaneously repelled and attracted to the city's many facets. We are interested in sorting Los Angeles out; though the process, rather than the answer, is inherently more attractive for the long haul.

A first impression of Los Angeles may consist of the multitude of houses that form the underlying field of her urban landscape. The rich legacy of outstanding residential architecture from Wright, Neutra, and Schindler onward continues to be an attraction and resource. We interpret this resource as a legacy of experimentation spawned from wide-eyed immigrants rather than a tradition.

Whereas in New York an architect may start her career with a loft renovation, in Los Angeles the typical first commission is a house or house addition. For the beginning of our career, to design and build a small building relatively inexpensively was enough incentive to pull us back to the west coast.

Our first freestanding house is the Gabbert Peck House [opposite page]. It began from the site parameters of a compact urban lot (40 by 90 feet) occupied by an existing two-car garage in one corner. The house is located in the Ocean Park area of Santa Monica, close enough to the beaches to smell the salt air and benefit from the mild weather; yet far enough away from the ocean to feel the pull of commerce and traffic inland.

The requirement of the program is for every space to be able to extend outwards while maintaining the degree of privacy internally and externally appropriate for domestic spaces for the client. It seemed to be a reasonable request for a small house in this

climate. It is also a popular program for many Los Angeles houses. Our interpretation evolves into a house that moves between offering shelter, and questioning the existence of shelter by crafting different interpretations of opening and conditions of available light.

The threshold from the street consists of a low fence, a row of tall bamboo, a gravel path, and an overhanging plane at the front door. [Fig. 1] The sequence is both open and private in response to the house as a neighbor and as an abode.

Upon entry, to the right, is a small work room with one corner window and a pair of glass doors leading out to the front yard defined by the translucent bamboo walls. The room leads inwards into a bathroom with the only internal door in the house. The window in the bathroom zips open the space between the top of the wall and the ceiling. One is acutely aware of the outside through this slit opening in this confined space.





Figure 3.

From the entry, to the left, is a cove defined by cabinets [Fig. 3]. This is the kitchen, which has its front wall taken over by windows, the upper horizontal slit framing only the bamboo, and the lower one a view of the front yard. Another tall side window stretches from the countertop directly to the ceiling, collaging the domestic objects on the counter, like fruits, onto the tree canopy in the sideyard.

A fiberglass-clad wall obscures a stair to the upper level area [Fig. 4]. Three steps, across the width of the space, lead down to the living and eating areas [Fig. 5]. Here the space opens up on one side by large glass doors along its entire length onto a patio [Figs. 6]. The indoor and outdoor living spaces together occupy almost the entire width of the lot. The living space continues to open to the outdoor view with a glazed

corner, terminating the momentum of the large glass doors that unite the indoor and outdoor living spaces. The back side of the indoor living space is a thirteen-foot-high wall with one linear skylight along the top.

Proceeding up the stairs, the half-way landing offers a dual view [Fig. 7]: down towards the living space and up towards the high windows atop the



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

stairs. The upper level space consists of an area for sleeping, a semi-defined space for storage, and a long, linear bathroom punctuated by clerestory windows around the front corners. These windows again split open the space between the top of wall and the ceiling, and offers a view of the sky.

The operable window in the shower looks toward the rooftops, opens to

the breeze and a small glimpse of the ocean on a clear day [Fig. 8]. The window is a separation between the wall and the ceiling once again, causing the experience in the shower to be ambiguous as external or internal.

In the sleeping area, one introverted corner window helps to define a sitting area. This is the diagonal opposite of the extroverted corner window in the



Figure 7.



Figure 6.

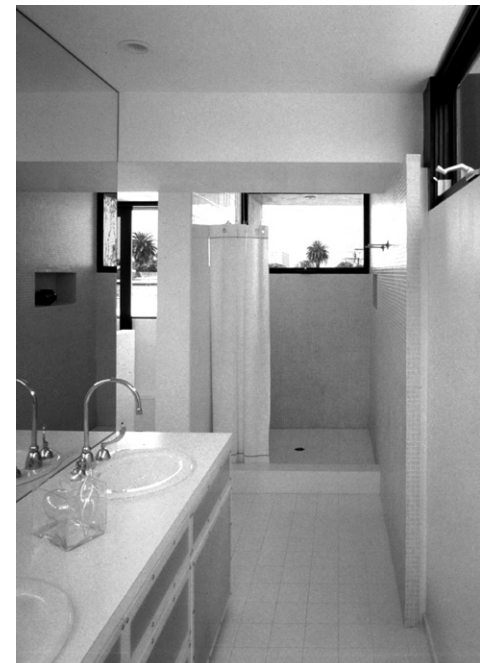


Figure 8.

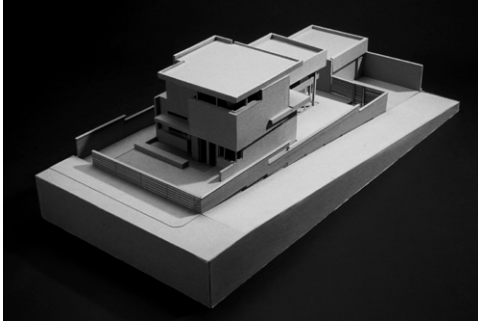


Figure 9.



Figure 10.

lower living room. While the living room corner helps to expand the interior outwards, this upper window becomes a curio cabinet framing the eccentric conditions of the neighborhood across the street. The city is brought into the bedroom for close up inspection.

The final release of space from the sleeping area is a pair of bi-parting glass doors: one leaf retracts into the wall, and the other leaf slides over the space of the stair landing in front of the upper oceanside windows. Through the opening, one can step up to the roof top over the living room or find a perch in a balcony overlooking the living room patio below [Fig. 10].

The cumulative experience of moving through spaces with constant pull between the exterior and the interior heightens the awareness of living on the land. The ground plane becomes the only real constant; which is ironic in that the area is in a geological liquefaction zone. That is the nature of working in Los Angeles as well, where the geological, social, economic, and cultural flux defines

the next design program and invites new responses.

In *The Unknown Craftsman*, Soetsu Yanagi wrote:

“Freedom” is a word that is now being used rather too carelessly, and Buddhists prefer the word muge... which refers to the absence of that impediment or restriction arising from relativity. It means the state of liberation from all duality, a state where there is nothing to restrict or be restricted. Beauty then ought to be understood as the beauty of liberation or freedom from impediment.

In our loose interpretation of Yanagi’s words, an architect then has the freedom to be able to embrace expanded notions of site, program, and situations. Maybe it is again the elusive qualities of Los Angeles that will allow one to work without the restrictions of a tightly-bound context or the burden of a tradition. It is, after all, this implied freedom that fuels the city machine, transmitting the attractive force to its numerous inhabitants.



Figure 11. Living space as seen from the patio.