

Interior cities:
learning from the medieval walled-city for a future Los Angeles urban
typology

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Abstract

Contemporary Los Angeles, ultimate poster-boy for the distended urban condition, has a secret fetish for fixed big boxes, fantasy castles, gated communities, residential compounds and finite horizons; fragments of medieval city echoes appear through the endless fabric of the city floor (**figure 1**). The archetypal sprawling city can often be found worshipping the contained and feeling out the edge.

Emerging amongst a backdrop of ongoing global challenges - flat-lining cultural ubiquity, infinite data clouds and environmental neuroses – comes a New-Romantic Urbanism, the protective and defining walled city as a recurring construct of the human condition.

Keywords walled-city, hinterland, new-romanticism, interiorities, binaries



figure 1 – Los Angeles, a walled-city fetishist (Berenika Boberska)

1. AN URBAN QUANDARY: LOS ANGELES, THE UNWALLED CITY?

Possibly the most often quoted city in discussions about car-born urbanities that are best consumed at 30 miles-an-hour and up, LA's reputation for a never-ending, uninterrupted ocean of low-rise urban fabric precedes it (**figure 2**). But for every pure element, seeds of its own undoing are contained within, and if the pure archetypal Los Angeles is a consistent blanket of relentless ubiquity, contamination has been rife with non-compliant figures in this landscape. Within the sprawling carpet there are always fragments of intense containment - film studios, mega storage facilities (**figure 3**) and gated communities.

Meanwhile as first world cities across the globe navigate contemporary concerns and reimagine new self-imposed limits where greater densification is the unchallenged aim, Los Angeles seems unwilling to stand by as a victim of its own cliché.

Christopher Hawthorne, architecture critic for the Los Angeles Times and professor of practice in the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College, describes a current very distinct twenty first century moment called the 'Third Los Angeles'. According to Occidental College's website as at April 2015:

'The First Los Angeles, as Hawthorne defines it, stretches roughly from the city's first population boom in the 1880s through 1940 when the city, growing at an exponential pace, worked to establish a coherent civic identity. In the Second Los Angeles, covering the period from 1940 to the turn of the millennium, the city pursued a hugely ambitious experiment in building suburbia. Today, Los Angeles is undergoing major shifts and facing new civic challenges -- its cultural center is migrating from west to east, major investments in public transit are challenging the dominance of the car, and multi-family residential architecture is gaining in popularity even as climate change threatens to make the region drier and hotter.'

But if the general world stereotype is still of this 'Second Los Angeles', even that cliché has been largely misunderstood by those on the outside looking in. Urban theorist Rayner Banham and novelist Raymond Chandler, firmly rooted in this twentieth century iteration of the city, understood the subtleties from the inside, and recognized a duality that existed even then. In his seminal book on the city, 'Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies', Banham states: *'The world's image of Los Angeles (as opposed to its images of component parts like Hollywood or Malibu) is of an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with ticky-tacky houses clustered in indistinguishable neighbourhoods slashed across by endless freeways that have destroyed any community spirit that may have existed, and so on... endlessly. Statistically and superficially this might be a fair picture if Los Angeles only consisted of the problem areas of the City proper, the small percentage of the total metropolis that urban alarmists delight to dwell upon. But even though it is an untrue picture on any fair assessment of the built structure and the topography of the greater Los Angeles area, there is a certain underlying psychological truth about it – in terms of some of the most basic and unlovely but vital drives of the urban psychology of Los Angeles, the flat plains are indeed the heartlands of the city's Id.'*ⁱ

Chandler too is absorbed with the city's psyche and the oscillation between the open and closed. Alain Silver proclaims: *'Chandler's Los Angeles is a city of looming monoliths, endless alleyways and outlying suburbs, teeming with illegal activity, all linked by wide boulevards and miles of expressways. The city of angels and its environs provided the endless physical and moral sprawl of Philip Marlowe's private investigations...'*ⁱⁱ



figure 2 – cliché of the never-ending city of light (Peter Culley)



figure 3 – abrupt aggregates (Berenika Boberska)

2. A BINARY OF WONDER: AN EARLIER CLEAR-CUT URBANISM

To better understand this ambiguity, perhaps it helps to look back at more distinct urban conditions. Earlier on in our history a clearer line between the civilized world and its savage exterior was easier to chart. ‘Community’ as an idea was on some levels a practical one, born from a need to pool resources in opposition, perhaps, to the threats and mystery of the wilderness beyond. An ongoing dialogue with the untamed nature outside the ramparts provided rich pickings and opportunity, but could be terminated easily by repairing back to the safety of organized society, drawing up the bridge behind (**figure 4**). On a very basic level, a fence to keep unwanted visitors - both animal and human - outside of the ‘camp’ helped to define and necessitate that line. As populations and economic wealth grew, these edges were strengthened and eventually fortified.

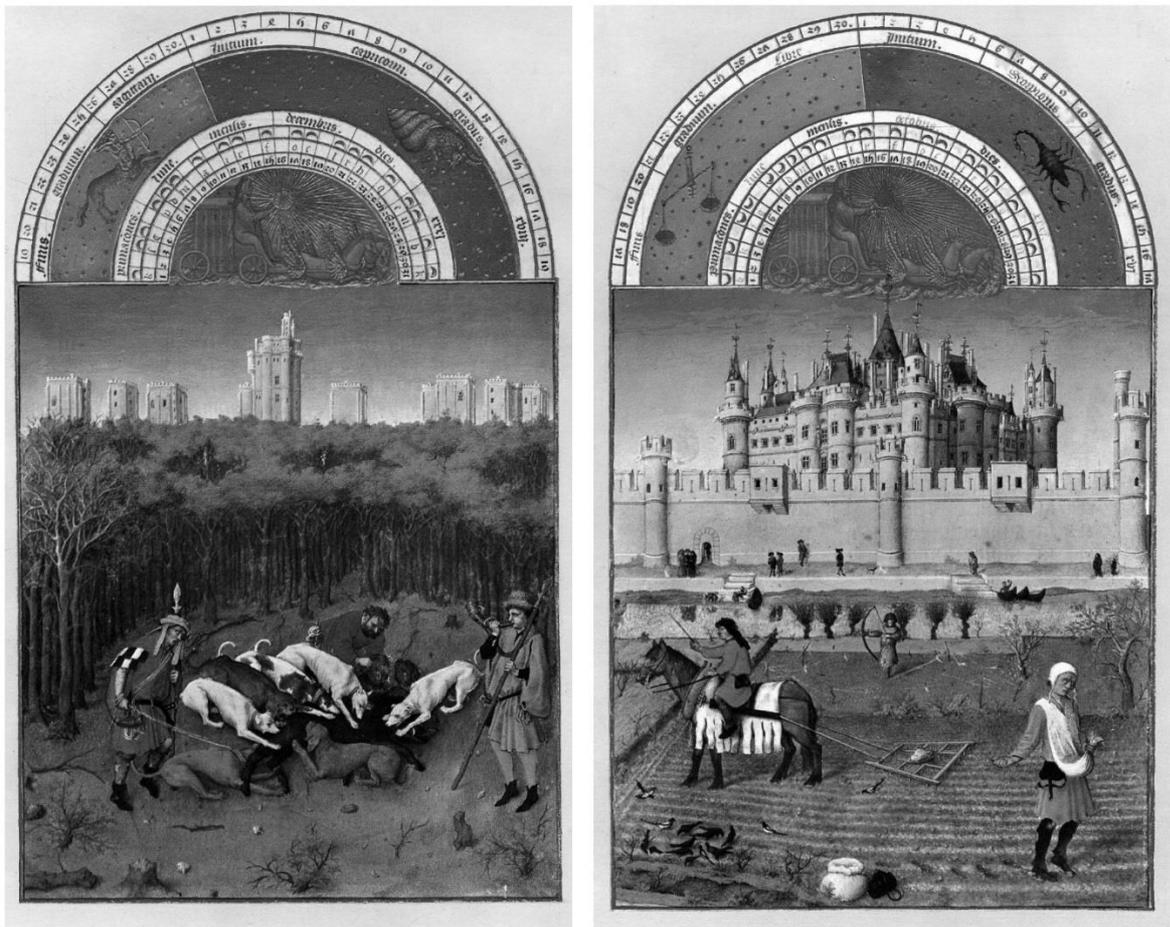


figure 4 - The Limbourg chronicles, a feudal walled-city and the three natures: the wild, the cultivated landscape and the garden. Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, Limbourg Brothers, c. 1412 and 1416

Meanwhile, this thickened city wall became its own sophisticated architectural typology, in many cases inhabited now for specialized functions (**figure 5**).

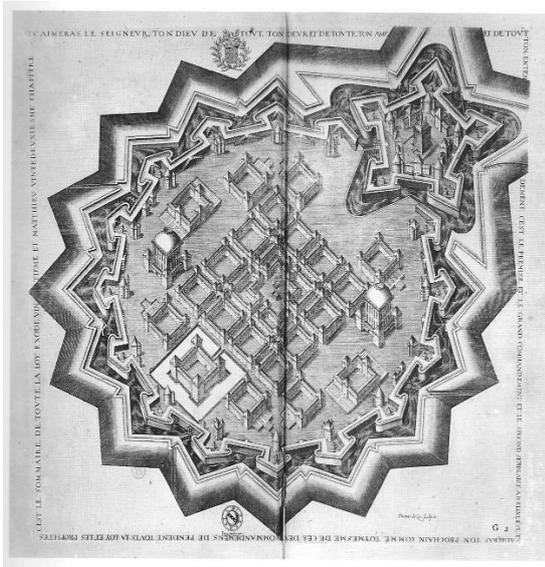


Figure 5: Ideal City Plan by Jacques Perret, 'Des Fortifications et Artifice, Architecture et Perspective', 1601, from the *Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, Reserve des Livres rares*.

We see a Russian doll of inner systems within outer ones to form the ultimate controlled citadel as a geometric organism, with explicit hierarchies and identities. While protection from the outside world is clearly a major driver, the daily experience of the inner world is also a significant consideration in a self-referential mode.

So beyond practical needs, these interior communities also afforded an insular retrospection, a canvas for culture and worship, more controllable and pliable than the surrounding territories.

But this carefully balanced construct of orderly restraint teetering on the edge of dangerous beauty and savage wilderness also provided the inevitable path towards transgression. Romanticism relies on the moment of rupture between opposites - the planes meet the Emerald City, the crowd versus lone figure - and so the interrogation of and obsession with the edge became the territory of the sublime; the city is suddenly transported to mythical lands of the imagination.

It seems this poetic discordance of separation and furtive connection is a pervading obsession that reoccurs in contemporary romanticisms.

3. ERODING THE WALL: EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK AND THE NEW HINTERLANDS

At certain moments in history the walled city becomes the victim of its own success. The romantic desire to transgress the boundary, coupled with a growing human custody of the world beyond the wall, seems to have led to a breakdown of the binary. The industrial revolution exerts too great a pressure on the contained city, instead finding major sites of productivity on the fringes, or even requesting entirely new population centers in alternative locations. The rate of city expansion moves the swing from rural to urban life and a reduced economic reliance on exterior agricultural landscapes kick-starts the sprawl typology, the accepted facet of twentieth century cities, and on the face of it, the ultimate walled city aggressor. *Modern* thinking, with its call for transparency and cleanliness, reacts harshly to stifled cities now overwhelmed with unplanned occupations and disease-ridden densities and generates a new order that is dominated by permeability, employing wide boulevards, open plazas and radial transport systems that ruthlessly push through previous hermetic territories. The complete rethink of medieval Paris, as implemented by the Napoleon-directed Haussmann plan, is one of the most radical adjustments, where landmarks and vistas that

look beyond, now triumph over previous intricate introspective orders (**figure 6**). Meanwhile nature becomes idolized in different ways within the city as the dwellers move further from the real thing, with new 18th century landscape movements ranging from the Picturesque to the formal.



figure 6: Medieval Paris makes way for clarity and outward looking gestures (Charles Marville)

We see a death of the binary, the wall now replaced with a new wide but thin crust of housing and industry, which goes on to define itself as *suburbia*. And so we see the emergence of the *hinterlands* – the ‘back lands’ of the city - in its own way the replacement of the forest, untamed too, and with an inherent disregard for containment and order. Satanic mills sit alongside the civic and the residential, the savage mixed together with the gentile. The flood plains of Los Angeles - a young city lacking nostalgia for an earlier mode, and coinciding in its heroic development with that of the automobile - became a fertile setting. But the hinterlands took root, too, in the world’s oldest cities, such as JG Ballard’s adored Shepperton, spiraling around Heathrow, seemingly a world away from the gated City of London with its Roman and medieval origins.

4. THE LINGERING FASCINATION: ECHOES OF THE WALL IN CONTEMPORARY LA

As instructors at Woodbury University in Burbank, CA, in an architecture department that is keen to focus on Los Angeles as a laboratory for contemporary thinking, we have found that not too far beneath the surface, the wall continues to make its presence known. Both in the reality of actual site mappings and via hypothetical proposals there is a recurrent consideration of the walled city as a possible urban protagonist. We watch student interests as a useful barometer of current preoccupations in the new generation of urbanists, and in separate undergraduate thesis classes in 2015 for example, we find two students who look at the walled city typology as a potential way forward for Los Angeles in the 21st Century. One, Amanda Clay (Boberska studio), considers the evolution of a typical gated community, sitting as it does within the hinterland of San Fernando Valley, where a strengthening of the perimeter conversely incites an incubation of local trades and cultural exchanges. Here the thickened and habitable wall becomes an active membrane, and instigator of transgressions, ultimately leading to a radical transformation of an uber-private gated community into a new public space (**figure 7**). Mo Bensasi (Culley) considers the impact of bringing

real life inhabitants of the city into a coexistence with the contained environment of fiction-making Paramount, the oldest and largest film studio compound in Hollywood (**figure 8**). A commentary on the escapist psychological needs of city dwellers alongside economic real estate pressures to create intense mixed-use scenarios, this investigation looks to a similar real world 2013 proposal for Pinewood Studios in UK.

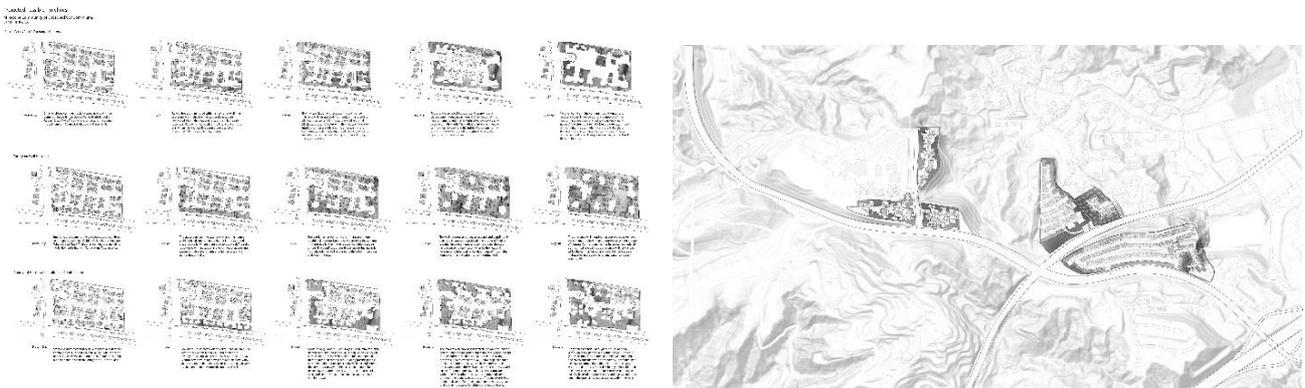


Figure 7: 'Siege mechanisms' of a thickening wall: Amanda Clay, San Fernando Valley, CA



Figure 8: Walled City of Paramount: Mo Bensasi charts proposed community within the studio wall

On a more orchestrated level, for a shared vertical studio of graduate and undergrad architecture Woodbury students in summer 2013, we set an extreme scenario: Los Angeles in 2035 has, as a stress response to a series of dramatic but undefined climatic / societal / political / geographic shifts, relearned the benefits of the self sufficient walled cities of our medieval pasts and developed a whole network of them throughout the basin. Unlike the gated communities - already a prevalent housing-only typology in Southern California - the walled city format welcomes and requires all aspects of heterogeneous daily city life, both physical and psychological, to exist under one roof: production and waste eco systems, commodity exchange, a flourish of arts and culture, public space, a place for both civic life and transgressions, uncertain outcomes and chance encounters. The given site – an aircraft hanger in Santa Monica - itself is interesting as an early twentieth century Southern California big box vernacular typology, open to re-use as the residential Georgian terrace has been in London, and a preexisting example of the figure in the sprawl. Students stratified the building into production and commerce in an intense lower zone, with living and recreation intertwined but also

rising up into the forest-like space frames of the upper environments. Issues investigated in architectural terms ranged from food security to clean air ventilation systems, physical navigation to illusionary methods of escape, and performative perimeter walls to reconfigurable skylscapes, programmable sunsets and interior weathers; so this imagined micro-city responded, much as we've seen in the real life historic examples, to both practical and psychological needs. Overall, the research studio discovered constructible utopias, gritty, but at once optimistic, moments of extreme density within the ground scraping city (**figure 9**).



Figure 9: The Walled City of Airport Road: Woodbury University summer studio, 2013

But there are also contemporary examples of real world binary environments forming as we take another look at the city, after the crisis of suburbia. In the late twentieth century, the suburban model has been stretched to its limits, distended over such a wide distance, that we see crystals of a new typology begin to form where gaps and weaknesses appeared. These are forms of micro cities, defensible again, but embryonic in size. In Los Angeles, the reemergence of the 5 square mile downtown area, restricted on all sides as it is by a network of freeways – its own unique version of the Hudson and East River - is generally accepted to be booming. Largely abandoned for the utopian defocused model in the late 1930s onwards, in the last 15 years the population of this finite zone has already doubled to 52,400 people and is set to do so again in less time. The concentrated nostalgia of its historic past teamed with the practical advantage of being at the center of the, albeit limited, public transport system are further factors. Further afield, in economically disadvantaged Memphis TN, on a project that Peter Culley has developed early concepts for with his company Spatial Affairs

Bureau, a massive ruined Sears distribution warehouse is currently being re-envisaged as a ‘micro-city’, bringing online 1.5 million square feet of new space to a nebulous low-rise neighborhood, known for its empty store fronts and desolate parking lots. There appears to be a fascination with intensity and idiosyncrasy winning out over ubiquity. The deathly term ‘mixed use’ is a weak descriptor in this scenario that will include such diverse community aggregates as an outpatient cancer center, a charter school, a department of the local university, a hostel and a roof top farm, along with the a more predictable range of residential, recreational, commercial and arts uses.

Meanwhile, the corporate world is embracing a new type of technologically-advanced interior world, with the mega offices of global giants, the new feudal overlords, all focused under one roof. The long established tech grain of Silicone Valley is spawning two notable examples for Facebook and Apple. These scenarios are extreme in two important ways: i. essentially the protected interior is mono-cultural, and ii. there is a fundamental requirement to absolutely minimize porosity to the wider city beyond. So perhaps this version provides a cautionary tale.

In a December 2014 article, Rem Koolhaas calls for the need for transgression in cities and is critical of systems so over-monitored that this cannot occur. In addition, he notes: *‘if you look at Silicon Valley you see that the greatest innovators in the digital field have created a bland suburban environment that is becoming increasingly exclusive, its tech bubbles insulated from the public sphere. There is surprise that the digital movement is encountering opposition on its own doorstep.’*ⁱⁱⁱ

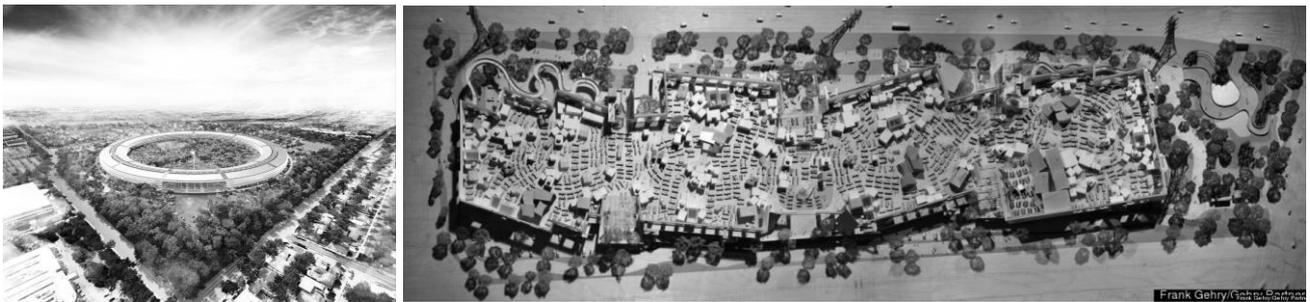


Figure 10 Left: Apple campus in Cupertino, CA © Foster + Partners, ARUP, Kier + Wright, Apple; Right: Facebook, Menlo Park, CA © Frank Gehry / Gehry Partners

J G Ballard offers a similar cautionary tale in regards to the hermetically sealed world of a self reliant miniature city, this time of the monolithic tower block: *‘Now that everything returned to normal, he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension. With its forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming pools, bank and junior school-all in effect abandoned in the sky - the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation... Curiously enough, despite Laing's efforts to detach himself from his two thousand neighbours and the regime of trivial disputes and irritations that provided their only corporate life, it was here if anywhere that the first significant event had taken place, - on this balcony where he now squatted beside a fire of telephone directories, eating the roast hind-quarter of the Alsatian before setting off to his lecture at the medical school.’*^{iv}

5. CONCLUSION: DISRUPTED DENSITIES AND THE NEW MYTHOLOGY

As the debate about how cities best develop for ultimate ‘sustainability’ continues, one school of thought calls for a consistent low-rise, high density model that is a self-styled happy medium of evil

extremes on either side: i. low rise low density where each city dweller gets a garden and place to park but the city never ends, and ii. the high rise mega city with its struggles for light and community. In his April 2015 article for Architizer, The Angry Architect writes: '*Ultimately, though, the natural desires of people encompass elements present within both urban sprawl and super-tall towers — so, is there a way of harnessing the greatest qualities of both conditions? Countless architects and urban planners are attempting to find that magic balance, and many have arrived at the same conclusion: that low-rise, high-density designs offer the best solution.*'^v But as Los Angeles (who's 'burbs' are predictably pictured in this article to represent the low density offender) is destined to become the United States' densest city by 2025, albeit it still way below the obvious European counterparts, how does an environment of oscillating typologies – dense containers in less dense granular solutions - stand up to criticism?

And aside from responsible urbanism, what of those vibrant moments at the intersection of culture and nature, the sublime and the imaginary that we remember in the classic walled cities of the past? When cities were still contained and protected, we created mythologies about the forests and its beasts and cautionary fairy-tales about the protagonists who dared to venture outside. Those same LA 'burbs', the modern hinterlands of agricultural land, cul-de-sac developments, solar farms, spoil heaps, endless fields of glass-houses, the eccentric landscapes of technology, infrastructure, and other things usually exiled from the city proper, which replaced the forest floor, now offer a new hybrid of wilderness and artifice. Just as the old wilderness was, the sprawl can be terrifying and beautiful; it is vast, expanding, yet strangely overlooked, not really occupied in a cultural, meaningful way. Ignore these rich Hinterlands at your peril since they form the necessary back of house, where as usual, the frontage is much smaller than what lies working furiously behind. They are an exponentially increasing territory, which is neither city nor nature.

So we see an emerging urban form that is two-fold in nature: Walled Cities and Hinterland – where the dichotomy is essential in order to exist and function. Essentially though, a porosity at the boundary is a requirement to allow this magic threshold to flourish, and rejects the hermetically sealed. A reinterpretation of the sprawl and also of the gated is required to achieve moments of the new sublime.

Perhaps now with the aid of isolated intense containers, the walled city fragments, we are constructing the setting for new mythologies, which help us to both understand and occupy these landscapes.

So if we agree that Los Angeles is the hinterland capital, and that there is emerging evidence of the walled city fetish within, perhaps we should watch it again as a laboratory for future urbanisms - a sort of pioneer amongst cities where its extreme megalopolis landscape begins to crystallize new solutions to sprawl through surprisingly pragmatic urban typologies that can become applicable in other distended cities worldwide. *The city of sprawl was a pioneer, and can also be the ultimate leader as it blossoms into its next iteration.*

ⁱ Rayner Banham 'Los Angeles The Architecture Of Four Ecologies' Harper and Row. 1971

ⁱⁱ Alain Silver, The Overlook Press, review of 'Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles', by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rem Koolhaas. "Rem Koolhaas Asks: Are Smart Cities Condemned to Be Stupid?" 10 Dec 2014. [ArchDaily](#)

^{iv} JG Ballard - The High-rise, p 7 , Harper Collins Publishers, 1975

^v The Angry Architect 'Build Up or Build Out? Spoiler Alert: The Answer is Neither', Architizer April 7, 2015