

Victorian Los Angeles: The Ghetto and The Glory

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The goal of this paper is to present a new approach to the study of urban life in Los Angeles, one that is "site-centered" and historical rather than touristic. The site in question is a Victorian house that has, at some point in its century-old history, been turned into a set of apartments. First, we reconstruct the motives for the building of this and other houses of the type. A profile of the early occupants of Victorian houses in Los Angeles leads into a discussion of the demographic changes that have acted on South Central Los Angeles from the 1950s to the present. Finally, a personal recollection from the author's childhood in the house is presented, as empirical but for subjective corroboration for the historical analysis of occupancy and house usage. We shy away from totalizing pronouncements, but a connection can be drawn between the diversity of residents in Los Angeles' old Victorian neighborhoods and the phenomenon referred in some of the literature on urban studies as the "city of the future:" a city of minorities, in which no single ethnic group predominates.

There are far fewer architectural histories than sightseeing books written on the subject of Los Angeles. The tyranny of the picture books is not only numerical but also ideological: most of the serious architecture studies ply the same picturesque, touristy terrain as the guides, hitting a series of high notes that seldom strays beyond the movie-friendly modernism of Richard Neutra and the Chemosphere, and the grab-bag of eclectic low art and consumer culture that is spanned by the Coca Cola Bottling Company, The Mayan Theater, and Simon Rodia's fascinating Watts Towers. This building "star system," perhaps not unexpected in its Hollywood environs, has had some curious effects on architectural discourse: in a city whose structure is so clearly dominated by commercial and popular forces, the everyday is fetishized, inspiring one writer to assert that Randy's Donuts may be the sufficient and necessary cause for the exis-

tence of the city of Inglewood (Parker, 35). This type of architectural snobbery, admittedly nourished by a wealth of interesting subject matter, presents considerable barriers to sociological or historical understanding of Los Angeles living: most Angelenos, for better or worse, have not spent any significant portion of their lives in the Coca Cola building or the Chemosphere.

Given the hostile environment in academic circles toward Los Angeles and suburban sprawl in general, alternate approaches to the study of Los Angeles are welcome. Reyner Barnham's notion of "ecologies," while presenting a spirited defense of Los Angeles as a *place to live*, does not entirely escape an easy fascination with the stomping grounds of the rich, namely "surfurbia," or beach estates. Charles Moore's definitive architectural guide, *The City Observed: Los Angeles*, explains the general method of reading the city. "Los Angeles is...a set of very

long streets or freeways or rides, and the places of interest are events along the way" (Moore, xiii). This is as shallow and unsatisfactory as the stereotype of the "valley girl." Needless to say, few Southern California residents construct the daily world around them, their work and home life, as a series of amusement park rides. What is needed is critical presentation of lived experience, and a local analysis of social and cultural forces that influence the way people live and use buildings. Following a historical analysis, the author will present such a biographical sketch for a particular Victorian house in South Central Los Angeles that he inhabited in the years 1993-1995, between the ages of 11 and 14. We will see how the evolving demographic of the area, particularly the heterogeneity of race, culture, and economic status, position Los Angeles as a "city of the future" (Jencks, 7).



View of facade of 2701 Menlo Avenue

Genesis of the L.A. Victorian

Roughly speaking, the urbanization of Los Angeles by English-speaking settlers began around 1850. Formerly a sleepy Law of the Indies town located not far from a mission (San Gabriel), Los Angeles rapidly outgrew neighboring San Diego, as land speculation and subdivision in the 1870s and 1880s attracted businessmen and farmers (Fogelson, 150-161). The “paper towns” of the speculators were hastily developed into tract housing, but the new settlers “were not enamored by and large with Mexican traditions, and few built adobe houses” (Gleye, 54). A rough and ready style of home architecture known as the Monterey, which combined simple wood post-and-beam construction with ranch openness, came and went; by the mid-1880s, residents demanded explicitly “urban” dwellings, which for most of them meant the mid-Victorian Queen Anne style popular in their home areas, the East Coast and particularly the Midwest.

The Queen Anne is a bourgeois paradigm, designed for conspicuous display of wealth. Cheap lumber from the north, cheap labor from the south, and inexpensive tracts of land allowed

Los Angeles homeowners to build larger, gaudier houses than they had back East: turrets, pedimented bay windows, cornices, and stucco friezes abounded. Italianate columns, wraparound porches, and “gingerbread” detailing were also common, though the composite, unruly character of these buildings dictated that the less costly the house, the fewer embellishments were assayed. Strange though it might seem, the Queen Anne is in a sense the original postmodern architectural style, dependent entirely on self-reference and recombination for its effect: “the definition of artistry in building was not to design new architectural elements, but to combine ready-made elements into...pleasing patterns” (Gleye, 57). The history of the Los Angeles Victorians is long and varied. There is something Darwinian about it: from their early disavowal in the 1930s, to urban renewal in the 90s, Victorians have been partitioned, remodeled, and demolished.

Our particular two-story house at 2701 Menlo Avenue, nestled between the major arteries of Vermont Avenue and Hoover Street near Adams Boulevard, was built around 1900-1905, on a parcel of 7496.8 square feet. (This date is an estimate, as the Los

Angeles Department of Building and Safety does not release records on previous owners of tracts; however, comparative analysis with published Victorians on nearby Adams Blvd, 27th Street, and Monmouth Ave, dating 1890-1900, support the late dating.) It was decorated in a plain Queen Anne style that testifies to both the eclipse of the Victorian taste and the rise of the simpler Craftsman bungalow. The high elevation, steep roof and window decoration ultimately place the house in a Queen Anne-Italianate convention, and imply a well-off but undistinguished owner, in contrast to the flights of decorative fancy found in the Adlai Stevenson House a few hundred feet away on Adams (Gebhard & Winter, 1994, 267-269). Besides the bay windows with floral decorations, the house is notable primarily for a semicircular window above the entryway, and a façade turned 90 degrees from the street, facing a narrow concrete alley. Most contemporary buildings in the neighborhood face the street, but the orientation of 2701 Menlo makes sense in the Victorian domestic sensibility of conjoined protection and privacy—the house and its owners symbolically turn their backs on the neighbors. The little alley is a microcosm, with the small stoop hardly visible due to high railings. The impression created in the resident, unrealistic perhaps, is that comings and goings are made more discreet.

As integral to the distinctive L.A. “street look” as the house architecture was the collection of practical concerns and city ordinances governing the growth of neighborhoods. In the 1880s and 1890s, communities grew around the twin stimulants of streetcar routes and water availability from the Los Angeles River (Kaplan, 67-70). The Menlo Avenue housing tracts were conveniently located within easy walking distance of the downtown-bound streetcar line on South Vermont Ave; furthermore, the founding in 1880 of the University of Southern California on an 18-acre site adjacent to Exposition Park (Gebhard & Winter, 1994, 277), a block south of Menlo Avenue, prompted a wave of middle-class building as a population of professors and recent alumni sought residence within walking distance of the university.

Mutations of the Victorian House and Street

In discussing initial development in South Central Los Angeles at the turn of the century, it is important to stress that the area was initially regarded as suburban and within a rather optimal distance of downtown, a good three or four miles away from the bustle and congestion, and yet easily accessible by public transit. Development of these suburbs followed pseudo-utopian strictures: the height of fences, walls, and hedges (usually no more than 4 feet), minimum home construction costs (ranging between \$2,000-\$3,500 depending on development), and bans on commercial buildings ensured a properly semi-rural, homogenous and sociable white populace (Fogelson, 154). Most of these regulations were renewed in perpetuity, meaning, for instance, that the block of houses of which Menlo Avenue is a subset still does not contain commercial buildings, although the economic and racial make-up of the neighborhood is more varied than it was at the time of development. Though architecturally unfashionable since at least the early 1910s, Menlo Avenue enjoyed several decades of sedate middle class existence. The sole omen of coming change was an increase in density, accomplished by the building of smaller Craftsmen bungalows in the inner lots (for example, down the alley from 2701 Menlo Ave). By the 1920s, two profound changes in the structure of metropolitan Los Angeles resulted in a major rethinking of the Victorian single-family homes on Menlo Avenue. These were, respectively, the population explosion and the rise of the automobile.

The catalyst for these changes was the University of Southern California, which rapidly became the economic epicenter of the neighborhood. Steadily increasing enrollment at USC throughout the economically vibrant 1910s and 1920s resulted in revisions of the general plan of the campus in 1910 and 1920 (Gebhard & Winter, 1994, 277). In a pattern that would become familiar in college housing, the university began building dorms and off-campus apartment buildings, but not enough to account for the net increase in the student population. As a result, several hundred USC students each year found

it practical to rent a room in the vicinity, an economic stimulus that many owners of Victorians found fortuitous, as the large houses (many with multiple entrances) easily accommodated boarders. But the crowding was hardly localized to the university: the economic boom of the 20s caused the city population to grow to 1,238,048 in 1930, double what it had been two decades previous. While much of the growth was outward (at 442 square miles, Los Angeles was already the largest city in the nation in area), the districts immediately outlying from downtown received a disproportionate amount of the population growth. This makes sense economically: between 1923 and 1931, the population within ten miles of the central business district grew 50%, but due to nearly maximal density and atrocious traffic, the number of people entering downtown L.A. grew only 15% (Fogelson, 153). Neighborhoods close enough to for convenient downtown access, yet not saturated, absorbed the newcomers like sponges, and Exposition Park was no exception.

The popularity of the automobile grew concurrently with the population. A "Greater Los Angeles" of dispersed, automobile-served communities was perceived by both planners and locals as ideal, and it merged with "progres-

sivist anger against the privately owned streetcar lines" (McClung, 192) to create a outlying meta-city whose populace had to adjust to pre-automobile settlement patterns. The Exposition Park suburb, for one, adjusted to the demand for housing in two ways: by tearing down many of the old Victorians, whose diffuse lots no longer made profitable use of the soaring property value, and putting in Beaux Arts apartment buildings (particularly along main arteries like Adams and Hoover), and by modifying and renting out the Victorians in their entirety. As Fig. 2 suggests, a steady demand throughout the 1920s for two-family dwellings and an escalating need for multi-family units could not have been satisfied entirely by the unsystematic apartment construction (Fogelson, 152). The Victorian houses must have been more efficient to rent than to tear down; certainly the addition of several exterior doors and corresponding hallway walls to turn 2701 Menlo Avenue into a four-apartment unit must have been a smaller capital investment than would have been required to tear down the house and build an apartment building of equivalent capacity on the premises.



View of 2701 Menlo Avenue facing street

Victorian in the Riot Era

The conditions of semi-urban population density, augmented by a steady population of college boarders, made property in the Exposition Park neighborhood of Menlo 2701 quite sought-after, and prompted transformation of the Queen Anne house into a de facto apartment complex. The owners may well have lived in a smaller, more intimate bungalow in the vicinity; chances are good that they would have owned and operated several such houses in the area to students and young white professionals commuting to city offices. The Depression and World War Two may have stymied growth to some extent, but the population and industry of Los Angeles grew steadily through the 1930s, and the area was not particularly hard-hit. The status quo of a predominantly white neighborhood of heterogeneous age and occupation would have continued unabated through the renewed economic growth of the city in the 1950s and 1960s, were it not for the momentous events that transpired in nearby city of Watts in 1965.

The Watts riots influenced Los Angeles race relations for the three decades that followed; they also had a marked impact on demographics in much of formerly white South Central Los Angeles. Watts had been predominantly black since the migrations of the 1950s, during which rural blacks from the South settled in Watts and Compton, searching for temporary residence while they sought employment. As Elizabeth Poe wrote in the thoughtful post-riot meditation "Nobody Was Listening," "Though nearly a million dwelling units have been built in Los Angeles County since 1940, no more than 1.4 percent of these new houses are available to minority groups." Rather than an outbreak of sub-white savagery, as was believed by most commentators, the turmoil embodied desperate direct action by frustrated wage workers who saw no way of escaping urban poverty, which they had hoped would be temporary. As Reyner Banham argued, Watts had been strategically located in the days of the railroad. The freeway made the town both commercially and socially marginal (Banham, 155).

The Watts Riots were decisive in the white flight that saw many white residents unaffiliated with the

University leave their Victorian houses in Exposition Park, either to rent them out as absentee landlords or to sell them on the rapidly depreciating market. The attendant dip in housing prices allowed Latino families which had previously been confined to the Barrio east of Downtown to settle closer to their workplaces, renting houses and apartments along Menlo Avenue. Black movement from further south in Central Los Angeles occurred at a lower rate; the Exposition Park neighborhood borders a predominantly Hispanic area of Los Angeles (Jencks, 26-30). (The charts are based on 1990 census data.) The ethnic heterogeneity of the area, with no group forming a majority, has been a feature of Exposition Park since the late 1960s. To observe the dynamics of this heterogeneity in the present time, we turn now to a (necessarily subjective) account of my childhood in Los Angeles.

Life in Apartments A and D

On April 29, 1992, at 3:00pm, four police officers on trial for the beating of Rodney King were acquitted by an all-white jury in suburban Simi Valley. Forty-three minutes later, a store clerk in middle class Hyde Park threw a rock at a white motorist, inaugurating days of looting and arson. Racial frustration and material envy prompted some of the violence, but essentially the riots were born of the same sense of political helplessness that had sparked the Watts Riot nearly thirty years earlier. Yet the 1992 riots were a brand new beast: "the first multi-ethnic uprising, the first civil disturbances led by several minorities [Black, Hispanic, Asian] trapped in inner city poverty" (Jencks, 84). (The racial tensions during the riots, particularly Black-Asian antagonism, are more complex, but for the scope of this essay, I address the riot as a pan-ethnic violent protest against urban disenfranchisement.) I did not know this at the time, but I did notice that the video store at the corner of Hoover and Adams was burnt to the ground. At the time, we lived in an apartment building for USC staff on the corner of Adams and Portland Street, across from the Second Church of Christ Scientist, the green dome of which defines the southbound skyline as seen from the Santa Monica

Freeway.

I was eleven; my sister was six; and we lived with our parents in a two-bedroom apartment. When we moved to 2701 Menlo Avenue a year later, the more secluded locale had nothing to do with our decision: the cost of rent at the USC complex had risen from \$800 to \$900, which with utilities and mandatory cable, totaled over \$1000, or more than half of the Pop family's monthly income. (As teaching assistants, my mother and father earned \$10,000 a year each.) Apartment A at 2701 Menlo Avenue was in a comparative state of disrepair, and was not furnished, but rent was only \$800, and we expected further relief when family friend Cornelius Hoffman would move into the smaller of the two bedrooms, several months into the lease. My sister and I shared the voluminous living room: besides a television by the bay window and a salvaged couch, we had set up mattresses in opposite corners of the room, and desks for both of our schoolwork. A narrow kitchen and smaller bathroom did not comfortably satisfy the needs of five residents, but the master bedroom my parents shared was considerably larger than their previous room, and was the only room in the house with a fireplace.

Daily routine at 2701 Menlo Avenue was strangely isolated from the street outside. The bay window had thick blinds that were kept drawn during the day to keep out heat. Behind the house, we locked our bikes to water pipes servicing the house, which did not prevent them from being stolen over the two years we lived there. The interior proved to be warm in the summer, cool in the winter, and durable enough during the Northridge Earthquake of January 17th, 1994, in which the only damages suffered were surface cracks in the street-facing wall, which were never repaired.

We lived in Apartment A for the duration of the 1993-1994 school year; when Cornelius moved to a new apartment on 27th Street with his wife (recently arrived from Romania), we moved a couple of feet to the right to Apartment D, the first-floor right wing of the building, whose windows faced the innermost bungalow. The apartment was smaller and presumably cheaper. Again, the master bedroom was the only room with a fireplace; unlike Apartment A, there was no hallway

connecting the living room to either of the two bedrooms, suggesting to me that the apartment was an annex not in the original plan of the house. This suspicion gains credibility when I recall the rainfall that frequently leaked through the living room ceiling, indicating that the room was not in fact directly below the second floor Apartment C.

Relations with the neighbors in 2701 were likely to be as close or distant as with neighbors further down the street: my parents got to know those who were their own age, while we knew the college students primarily by appearance. I played with the Latino kids across the street at times; but I did not know them well, because they did not attend 32nd Street USC Magnet School, as I did. Parking on the street was scarce, and only the one or two houses on the street had their own garages. People were friendly; they hung out on porches in the evening, and re-parked cars whenever a closer parking space opened up. Three houses down Menlo Ave. toward Adams, an empty lot about three parcels across made for an interesting playground until it was fenced in our second year

there; the house to the right of the empty lot was abandoned, with boarded-up windows. During the summer, an ice cream truck plied the street, turning the kids in a chorus of satisfied customers.

The Future of L.A. Victorian

If my two years living in a Victorian house in Los Angeles did not add up to a cohesive experience, maybe this is because my age and immigrant status precluded me from knowing the history of my house and my area. I had never been so “out of context” growing up in a Romanian urban environment. Indeed, the experience of life on Menlo Avenue was full of contradictions: I remember thinking it unsafe for my grandfather, on a visit from Romania, to go for a walk down the street in my crime-prone neighborhood, yet I walked home from school with my sister nearly every day. The neighborhood was in fact safe, unless one was a male in late adolescence. Within the house, I wondered why the walls were so tall

while there was not enough horizontal room to go around.

I knew even less about the other people living on the street: whether they had been born in Los Angeles, if not where they had come from and how they had arrived to live their lives in such indifferent proximity to me. At any rate, it seems clear that without knowing it, I was living in what Charles Jencks, in the daringly speculative *Heteropolis*, calls the “city of the future”: a city where there are only minorities. No single ethnic group, no way of life, no profession dominated the place I lived (Jencks, 7). The urban greenery Jencks describes, the varied fauna (opossums, raccoons, squirrels), the plurality of vegetation and human habitation were all there. The Victorian house was not born into a pluralistic tradition, but by hook and by crook—by modification and subdivision and lengthy decay and recycling—it has served as a meeting ground of cultures. Its future may indeed be open to combinations we have not foreseen.

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