

# Four Ecologies Reimagined: Development in Los Angeles Comes of Age

By ANDREW J. STARRELS

NEARLY 50 years ago, British architectural scholar Reyner Banham embraced Los Angeles for its non-convention, identifying four separate identities – beach, foothill, flatland and freeway – that characterized its development. Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* is widely regarded as a classic component of the city's literature, mentioned with Raymond Chandler, Christopher Isherwood and other writers who defined L.A.

Banham did not dismiss Los Angeles for its stereotypical quirks; rather he idolized its superficialities – sprawling, sun-worshipping, car-centric and indulgent. Today's Los Angeles is undeniably and without quirk a major urban place. A vibrant and diverse resident culture in Downtown Los Angeles is but one example of a true renaissance, and mature urbanism thrives in other L.A. communities. The pattern and practice of development in today's Los Angeles reflects a maturation from the age of Banham's halcyon boosterism.

Development in Los Angeles now embraces infill locations and has largely abandoned sprawling dispersal into suburbia. Infill locations, especially those located near transit resources and often utilizing adaptive reuse opportunities, reflect both millennial demand and available opportunities. Adaptive reuse is particularly suited to housing, as large industrial or institutional structures are converted to multifamily residential. One such example is East River Group's repositioning of the former Sears shipping facility in Boyle Heights. The conversion of the historic building on Olympic Boulevard includes 345,000 square feet of retail space, 1,030 live/work units, 250,000 square feet of creative office space and a parking structure with 1,500 spaces. Taking advantage of small unit sizes and transit-based development incentives, the project is "affordable-by-design" and will provide a mix of housing and employment to Boyle Heights.

Using existing physical infrastructure to



Parking facility at Helms Bakery District.

provide housing in infill locations is not unique to Los Angeles, but in many transitioning urban areas adaptive reuse has invigorated communities and fostered more redevelopment. Moreover, a vibrant mix of new development and repurposed older uses lends permanence to communities and

Development approvals, including the under construction mixed-use project near the corner of Pico and Sepulveda Boulevards in West L.A., now disconnect the use of land from the automobile. Betting that future multifamily residents will not uniformly demand parking spaces, approvals

selves has also undergone a maturation. Unlike the sloping ramps throughout parking structures that once made alternative uses impractical, contemporary parking construction utilizes flat floors that can be converted to storage or commercial uses. Flexibility and functionality are further illustrated in parking facilities like the automated parking facility that developer Wally Marks has recently opened at his Helms Bakery District in Culver City. Efficiently built by Christopher Alan's Dasher Lawless Inc. to accommodate 200 cars in a fully automated structure that occupies nearly a third less space than a traditional garage, the AUTOParkit facility parks, stores and retrieves vehicles for office tenants while freeing up other space for retail parking or future development. The transportable pallets that convey cars through the structure could later be repurposed for storage, if the demand for automobile parking dictates.

The L.A. development community breathed a collective sigh of relief at the recent failure of "Measure S," but there remains little cause nor call for widespread celebration. Although voters cautiously embraced density, and resisted the fear-baiting of anti-development constituencies, the battles over growth will continue. The costs imposed by recent initiatives aimed at wage inequity and homelessness challenge some projects' viability. If imposed, "linkage fees" to enable affordable housing construction will further escalate construction and housing costs. Development will continue to be politicized and polarized, and issues of circulation, traffic and transit will frame the debate over growth. In this political and economic climate, successful development proposals are those with sound planning, disciplined economics and stellar design. Just as importantly, successful projects reflect a maturation beyond the Banham caricature, incorporating an urbanism focused on innovation and efficiency.

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counters the faddishness of earlier eras of Los Angeles development.

In a more enlightened way than Banham's celebration of the freeway ecology, contemporary L.A. continues to re-evaluate its relationship with the automobile. Development patterns now reflect increased use of transit, shared vehicle services and alternative forms of transport.

"decouple" parking from housing so that residents can choose between a parking space or a transit pass when they sign a lease. When and if residents do not use all of a building's parking, the landlord is free to market its parking amenity to other users, such as transit riders who commute from neighboring rail stations.

The construction of parking facilities them-

Andrew J. Starrels is a Los Angeles-based attorney and partner at Holland & Knight, where he oversees the West Coast Land Use and Environmental Group's practice in Los Angeles. He focuses his transactional law practice on a variety of issues surrounding the development and operation of commercial real estate. He can be contacted via [Andrew.Starrels@hklaw.com](mailto:Andrew.Starrels@hklaw.com).

