

In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas proposed that "Manhattan's architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion". Los Angeles requires a different formulation. Here the paradigm is one of "dilution". This kind of supply-side architecture has two characteristics. From the air, the urban—actually suburban—growth looks remarkably homogeneous: miles upon miles of single-family dwellings arrayed across the landscape in orderly, spacious plots. At street level, there is stylistic chaos: a basic wood-frame structure includes a hodgepodge of decorative elements slapped on the front to suit the owner's eclectic taste. A survey of the eccentric revivalist styles of Los Angeles architecture would include Japanese pagoda, French chateau, Persian palace, and the fantastical "storybook architecture" with its gabled roofs and leaded windows. Los Angeles offers a collection of the ersatz.

Architectural integrity is a slippery concept, where the genuine reproduction is often good enough. Nonetheless, contrary to appearances, there is an authentic architecture, a building style specific to the place and time of the city's founding. The Spanish, who owned what was then called Alta California (1769–1821), brought with them adobe construction methods to build their religious missions and bureaucratic outposts. This style had a more lasting effect in the desert southwest, most famously in Santa Fe, New Mexico, home to a marvellous Spanish colonial courthouse with adobe walls many feet thick that still today sets the architectural tone for that city. Adobe construction was less ideally suited to Southern California's seismic activity and torrential winter rains. The few existing remnants of L.A.'s first tradition have been largely consigned to irrelevance: they are designated by the state as "historic landmarks", visited perhaps by school groups and history buffs who follow small, dirt-coated highway signs to these so-called "living monuments to California's past". What is authentic has here been reduced to the historical picturesque. A simulacrum of the adobe tradition, however, can be seen in

nearly every neighbourhood thanks to the red-tile houses developers have described, since the 1920s, as "Mission style homes". In the last century, Los Angeles architects developed a second authentic architecture. Southern California Modernism found its own voice as a distinctive, laid-back dialect of the International Style's elevated vocabulary. Contemporaneously, Frank Lloyd Wright built his concrete-block houses in the manner of monumental Mayan temples. The results of this 20th century experiment did not find a wide audience. Modernism failed in L.A., or vice-versa, and today the city doesn't quite know what to do with the handful of genuine Modernist houses that remain. Some, like Wright's Hollyhock House and the classic Case Study Eames House, have been carefully restored and opened to the public as landmarks—placed in vitrines, as it were, like the earlier church missions. The more glamorous of these modernist icons have been turned into cinematic celebrities. Wright's Ennis House provided a backdrop for the dystopian fantasy *Blade Runner* while John Lautner's Harvey Aluminum House doubles as the lair of a porn mogul in the offbeat comedy *The Big Lebowski*. The authentic, in this instance, has been subsumed by the cinematic picturesque in a peculiarly Angeleno way. The habits and proclivities of the movie industry—its extravagant imagination and constant flux—have been, I believe, a constant factor in shaping Los Angeles's attitude towards the built environment. Film sets are fungible fantasy creations, to be stripped, refitted and re-constructed according to the needs of the moment or the whims of the person in charge. Houses are hardly less provisional. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, the original superstars, built a faux baronial manor that became, at the heyday of their popularity in the 1920s, one of America's most famous houses. In the late 1980s, Pia Zadora bought Pickfair and gutted the house, rebuilding it to satisfy her idiosyncratic vision of Old World glamour. And so it continues up to the present day as members of the film community,

representatives of an influential economic élite, continue to rebuild earlier buildings to suit their whims. (Building permits to "remodel" a house require that only a portion of the original structure be preserved.) & Williams, a successful design firm, perhaps how fluid the distinction between cinematic fantasy and architectural reality can be. The firm's two principals worked as Hollywood designers until a rich movie star, delirious with their stage settings, hired them to build an Andalucian palace in the Hollywood Hills. Architecture in L.A., it would seem, has cut loose from the rigors of academic tradition with its historical and theoretical considerations.

In such a flux of fantasy and impermanence, architecture becomes something like an extemporaneous exercise. As Amir Zaki's digitally manipulated photographs of Neutra houses slyly imply, Los Angeles homeowners give themselves license to whatever bit of the original house no longer suits their purposes—even if that means undermining the very foundation of a building's original architectural integrity. That a recent landmark such as Thom Mayne's 2-4-6-8 Studio can become the Sale House. Johnston Marklee Architects suggests that a building in Los Angeles will achieve immortality as a "classic", a complete and finished work shaped by the unique choices of its creator. Of course Mayne himself, a former Sixties architect, is skeptical of any architectural practice that claims to produce authoritative solutions. He has described his work as a process that acknowledges the provisional nature of the "finished" building. It's a stance that seems particularly well suited to Los Angeles, where architecture fitfully strives to make a definitive statement but succeeds only in improvising on the temporary contemporary.

