

Hollywood menace: Los Angeles mid-century Modern

Dens of Vice

BY GABRIEL SOLOMONS

Introduction:

A third of the way into Thom Andersen's 2003 video essay 'Los Angeles Plays Itself', the narrator (Encke King) voicing Andersen's words turns our attention to the ways in which architecture – specifically mid century modern architecture – has been routinely portrayed with villainous associations by Hollywood film-makers since the 1950s: 'One of the glories of Los Angeles is its modernist residential architecture, but Hollywood movies have almost systematically denigrated this heritage by casting many of these houses as the residences of movie villains.' [Andersen 2003: 41mins]

Andersen collects examples from a number of films to support this theory, weaving together a series of convincing references that include houses designed by, amongst others, John Lautner, Richard Neutra, Douglas Honnold and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Although the Lloyd Wright Ennis house cited in the film (and used so effectively in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, 1982) is actually an example of Mayan Revival Architecture which utilised ornamentation more at odds with modernism's principles, the majority of Andersen's references highlight an intriguing precedent – and one which will be elaborated on with further examples later in this essay.

The houses used – from Neutra's Lovell Health House (featured in Curtis Hanson's *LA Confidential*, 1997) and Honnold's Del Rio mansion in Santa Monica (featured in William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.*, 1985) to Lautner's Chemosphere in the Hollywood Hills (featured in Brian De Palma's *Body Double*, 1989) and his Sheats-Goldstein residence (featured in The Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, 1998) – are all the homes of dubious, shady characters; crime bosses, killers and high class pimps. The original intent with which the architects looked to use space, sharp angles, materials and the surrounding environment to enrich the owner's sense of serenity and peace – aspects that will be discussed in further depth throughout this essay – are all inverted when seen in these Hollywood films. Space creates tension, angles protrude with menace, materials seem cold and distant and the surrounding environment seems to imprison rather than liberate.

It's interesting to note that many of the films cited in Andersen's essay conform to tropes and themes found in film noir, which had its roots in German Expressionism. German silent cinema of the 1920s and 1930s was notable for its stylized use of irregular, distorted angles in its set designs and

contrasting shadow/light to create tension - techniques which would influence classic Hollywood film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. Many critics also see a direct link between cinema and architecture of the time with strong elements of monumentalism and modernism appearing throughout the canon of German Expressionism, particularly in films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) which would in turn influence the work of Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*, 1941) and Carol Reed (*The Third Man*, 1949).

Expressionist architecture – which developed in parallel with expressionist film of the early 20th century was characterised by an early-modernist adoption of novel materials, formal innovation, and very unusual massing, sometimes inspired by natural biomorphic forms and sometimes by the new technical possibilities offered by the mass production of brick, steel and especially glass. Both Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were leading architects of expressionism and their influence on the 'International Style' helps to further substantiate the link between expressionist film, modernist architecture and criminality in film noir.

In order to better understand the reasons why film directors would use a particular style of architecture in service of their narrative, and why Los Angeles in particular acts as the perfect city backdrop for 'dens of vice', it's worth looking at the origins of modernism and the International Style.

Whether as a result of social and political revolutions or primarily driven by technological and engineering developments, Modernism was essentially optimistic, and pioneering European architects such as van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Gropius saw an opportunity to improve living conditions and the environment we inhabit.

An International perspective

The International Style as a term was introduced to American audiences in the early 1930s by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, a leading American architectural historian and Philip Johnson, the twenty-six year old son of a wealthy Cleveland lawyer. Their document 'The International Style' – a term taken from the title of Gropius' 1925 book *International Architecture* – was written for the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art's 1932 show of photographs and models aimed at introducing the work of Gropius and his contemporaries to New York, and would prove to be hugely influential in setting up a distinction between the European and American way of doing things. As Tom Wolfe would summarise in his essay 'From Bauhaus to Our House':

In Europe, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Oud—the four great “European Functionalists”, as Hitchcock and Johnson called them—were creating *architecture*. In America, even the architects who thought they were being modern and functional were only

engaged in *building*. Oh, there was always Frank Lloyd Wright, of course... and with a certain weariness Hitchcock and Johnson paid him homage for his work ... in the distant past ... and then concluded that he was merely “half modern.” Which was to say, he was finished and could be forgotten. (Wolfe 1981: 30)

Hitchcock and Johnson’s document, along with the emigration to the US in 1937 by van der Rohe and Gropius, would be instrumental in introducing this ‘international style’ to architects strongly associated with the Mid-Century Modern dwellings discussed below, and would help to popularize a particular brand of modernism in America that was more organic in form and less formal than its European counterpart.

While other émigré architects such as Richard Neutra (a contemporary of van der Rohe and Gropius who studied under the influential European theorist of Modern architecture Alfred Loos in Vienna) would infuse their work with a combination of styles including the Dutch De Stijl and Japanese minimalism as early as 1927, it wasn’t until the mid-to-late 1930s that the International Style really took hold and exerted its full influence.

Émigré architects and designers arrived in the US at a time of intense growth, when World War 2 was creating significant demand for innovative products and housing solutions. The choice of many to settle on the west coast had much to do with the benign climate and informal living of California – both of which afforded them an opportunity to develop a new brand of modernism sympathetic to the surroundings yet rooted in European sensibilities.

From its inception, the movement had its detractors however and critics were quick to address the threat which European minimalist domestic living posed to traditional American values. As Elizabeth Gordon, then editor of the popular *House Beautiful* magazine wrote in her April 1953 editorial—‘The Threat to the Next America’:

There is a well-established movement, in modern architecture, decorating, and furnishing, which is promoting the mystical idea that “less is more.” . . . They are promoting unlivability, stripped-down emptiness, lack of storage space and therefore lack of possessions. . . . These arbiters make such a consistent attack on comfort, convenience, and functional values that it becomes, in reality, an attack on reason itself. . . . For if we can be sold on accepting dictators in matters of taste and how our homes are to be ordered, our minds are certainly well prepared to accept dictators in other departments of life. [Gordon 1953: 286-287]

Gordon’s concerns about these ‘dictators of taste’ coming just a few years after America and its allies had fought to preserve freedom and democracy against tyranny of another form, was

understandable and similar sentiments would be expressed by the architect Robert Venturi in 1966. Venturi famously attacked Richard Neutra's missionary-esque zeal of clean precision in his book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" labelling Neutra's International Style brand as as 'a form of aesthetic oppression... Its rigid geometry symbolized its inability to embrace the realities of life, its inevitable messiness.' [Venturi,1966:18]

This 'inevitable messiness' of real life was a theme that the Los Angeles architecture critic Nicolai Ourousoff would return to thirty years later. Reviewing a retrospective of Richard Neutra's work in 1997, Ourousoff observed that whereas the architect's houses '...once suggested a perfectly ordered world, one where the curtains are drawn back to reveal children playing quietly on soft rugs, chaste couples sipping cocktails, where the curling smoke from a cigarette dissolves into a beautiful dreamscape', We now know that '...behind these large plate-glass windows couples cheat, kids do drugs, and cigarettes can kill. In an age where the layers of privacy are constantly being stripped away, Neutra's houses have become more like emblems of voyeurism.' [Ourousoff 1997, *Los Angeles Times*].

Ourosoff proceeds to draw parallels between this 'perfect compositional order of the work and the imperfection of life' by citing the use of Neutra's Lovell Health House in *L.A. Confidential* as perfect casting – owned as it is by 'refined peddler of porn' Pierce Pratchett (David Strathairn): 'The house's slick, meticulous forms seem the perfect frame for that kind of power. Spanish revival just doesn't have the necessary bite.' Here, Ourossoff is clearly referring to another villainous house from the movies – the Spanish Revival home of Phyllis Dietrichson and her husband in Billy Wilder's noir classic *Double Indemnity* (1944). In further comments of the Spanish revival style in his short critical review of the film from *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*, writer Jez Conolly points to the numerous portents of imprisonment that abide in this 'California Spanish house everyone was nuts about. In comments on the film's protagonist, Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson, he writes: '...the bars of the wrought iron staircase that Dietrichson sweeps down to greet Neff that first time, the ball-and-chain of her anklet that we see in close-up, the light filtering through the venetian blinds. In every sense Neff is a dead man walking (and talking – his confessional Dictaphone recording is the narrative's framing device) and the Dietrichson house is as much a mausoleum as it is a jailhouse.' (Conolly 2011: 14).

In contrast to this, Neutra's Lovell Health House is diametrically opposed. Appearing both in day and night-time scenes, the open expansiveness of the space and the split level linear form of the house lends itself well to the multi-layered, nuanced narrative of this modern film noir.

Photo_1: Detective 'Bud' White approaches the residence of Pierce Pratchett with suspicion

Once again however the appropriation of the physical space to suit particular cinematic ends is inconsistent with the architect's intention. The Lovell Health House - the first great manifestation of the International Style in southern California - was built and completed in 1929 for the physician and

naturopath Philip Lovell to ‘act as a kind of manifesto for natural living, and it also became a center for radical left-wing political meetings in the 1930s.’ [Andersen 2003: 41mins].

Neutra’s belief that the human environment needs to address the senses was informed by the writing of experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, particularly his most widely known work, *Principles of Physiological Psychology* written in 1874 – which placed great emphasis on linking body and mind, the physiological and the psychological.

In her introduction to Taschen’s 2006 monograph of Neutra, Barbara Lamprecht elaborated on this philosophy, which the architect later defined as “biorealism”:

Neutra accepted the hypothesis that the human genetic code evolved on the savannahs of East Africa with its open plains interspersed with groups of trees. That hypothesis had dramatic consequences for his designs... The theory provided a rationale for why people need physical contact with nature, even why they need to see the horizon. Embracing such a hypothesis was also one of the reasons Neutra went not just to America but specifically to warm, freedom-loving southern California. [Lamprecht 2006: 9]

A similar fate is accorded John Lautner’s Sheats-Goldstein residence in The Coen Brothers’ *The Big Lebowski* (1998), which is home to pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara). Supposedly located in Malibu, the house is actually on Angelo View Drive high in the Hollywood Hills with enviable views across the expanse of Los Angeles. Completed In 1963 and growing from the hillside, the house’s most striking feature is a slab of concrete folded like paper which is lightened by triangular coffers to form the roof. The living room was initially separated from the outside by a simple curtain of blown air but, as seen in the film, glass was finally used for both security and insulation. Lautner’s house is a prime example of what Frank Lloyd Wright termed “Organic Architecture” that derives its form as an extension of the natural environment -- and it was originally built for Helen and Paul Sheats, an artist and doctor respectively, and their five children. Lautner’s early career was spent as apprentice to Lloyd Wright at Taliesin (Wright’s School of Architecture in Spring Green, Wisconsin) from 1933 to 1938 where he developed a respect for the “total concept” and methods for integrating a house into its surroundings; of creating an organic flow between indoor and outdoor spaces. Although interviews reveal that Lautner had little regard for the International Style and its leading architects, many of his residential homes seem to retain a stripped back minimalism more attuned to European modernism than the prairie monumentalism and ornamentation most associated with Lloyd Wright.

Photo_2: Jackie Treehorn is at home in John Lautner’s Sheats-Goldstein residence

Whether situated in Malibu or the Hollywood Hills, the Sheats-Goldstein residence is not the sort of place that the laidback and slovenly Dude (Jeff Bridges) would frequent, being far more at home in his ramshackle Venice Beach bungalow.

It could be argued that the Coen brothers are as much at odds with modernism as their central protagonist if you consider that all of the film's 'villains' have some association with the trappings of 'streamlined', minimalist excess, from Jackie Treehorn's home and the leather Le Corbusier chairs found in Maude Lebowski's loft apartment to the album cover of the fictional band (and villainous trio of nihilist thugs) 'Autobahn' that is an homage to Kraftwerk's 1978 album *The Man Machine*.¹ These objects 'of desire' and their superficial, malicious owners act as stark contrast to the Dude and his band of bumbling sidekicks, adhering as they do to a more earthy and liberal way of life. Their clothes, cars, homes and habits are aligned far more closely to the average American's value systems, which positions them as the 'heroes' against the oppressive conservative 'villains'.

The use of Brent Saville's Astral House as home to shady villain Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda) in Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey* (1999) is another example of a cinematic den of vice. On a singular mission to avenge the death of his daughter, Brit hardman Wilson (Terence Stamp) is oblivious to the lure of Los Angeles's excessive charms, and on arrival sees only a set of corrupt obstacles to overcome as he kicks, punches and shoots his way toward Valentine who is holed up in a pristine walled fortress. Wilson's rough-edged English vigilante set among the sleek curves of Astral House—a dream home financed by the curator Maurice Tuchman and completed just before filming began—makes for a powerful contrast when the two face off for the first time. While not built in modernism's heyday, the house, designed by museum architect Brent Saville, incorporates the clean lines, alternating scale and minimalist expansiveness so common in the international style. The classic film connection between minimal interiors and emotional detachment is once again employed here, and – once again – the casting of such a house ignores the modernist philosophy that a building such as this was intended to liberate and enrich the lives of the occupants. Here Astral House acts as a prize possession, an ill-gotten gain of Valentine's shady drug dealings and criminal behaviour. The house protrudes perilously above the Hollywood Hills and likewise Terry Valentine's fate hangs in the balance, his life a ticking clock counting down to zero.

Photo_3: Wilson and Eduardo take in the view from Terry Valentine's lofty fortress

Looking out and looking over

The fact that so many of the homes discussed in this essay are found in the Hollywood Hills makes perfect sense when considered within the context of cinematic myth making. The familiar shot of a flat expanse disappearing into a (smoggy) distance or bed of twinkling lights beneath the stars has

appeared in many of the films cited so far, often seen from panoramic glass fronted buildings acting as veritable movie screens that appear to show its occupants everything the city has to offer. It's access to this view from John Lautner's Chemosphere that blinds the naive Jake Scully (Craig Wasson) to an obvious set-up in Brian DePalma's *Body Double* (1984). Situated on the San Fernando Valley side of the Hollywood Hills, just off of Mulholland Drive, the appropriately futuristic looking house was built for aerospace engineer Leonard Malin and completed in 1960. It offers a panoptic 360-degree view of the city and can be accessed by a funicular from street level or a bridged entrance from above. Scully's wide eyed ascent to the house in the film is his metaphoric rise to 'the high life' but the house's location and vantage point encapsulates the film's central conceit: 'that even when we think we see everything, we can miss what is right in front of us' (Zeller-Jacques 2011, *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*, 54). The house is a trap made of concrete, steel and glass – luring the surface obsessed protagonist into its clutches with luxurious interiors and the manifestation of an enviable lifestyle.

Photo_4: Jake is seduced by the trappings of a hilltop pleasure palace

Lautner's Garcia Residence at 7436 Mulholland Drive (completed in 1962) is another house that boldly juts out of the hillside with unimpeded views of the city below. Standing in as the South African Embassy in Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), the apartheid-era film once again sees L.A. detectives Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) up against a merciless group of bad guys, this time the threat coming from South African smugglers led with brooding menace by the country's racist, murdering ambassador (Joss Ackland). In one of the most memorable movie scenes to feature wanton destruction of a significant architectural site, Riggs – blocked from searching the property by claims to diplomatic immunity – ties a rope to one of the exposed pillars holding the house up, attaches it to his pickup truck and pulls the immense structure (actually a full scale model) down the hillside resulting in an epic series of explosions. Modernism comes crashing down to the wide-eyed glee and hysterical joy of an unhinged L.A. cop with nothing to lose. Further evidence that John Lautner is the architect Hollywood loves to hate or simply the case that modernist homes look great onscreen?

Both the Garcia Residence and Chemosphere resemble futurist visions of the kind seen in 'The Jetsons' – the animated cartoon show from the 1960s which was a distillation of every Space Age promise Americans could muster. The show's artists drew inspiration from futurist books of the time, including the 1962 book *1975: And the Changes to Come*, by Arnold B. Barach and borrowed heavily from the curvaceous, geometric 'Googie' aesthetic of southern California; a term first used in relation to a now defunct Lautner designed coffee shop built in West Hollywood in 1949. Googie encapsulated the futuristic design found prevalent in the post-war sprawl of Los Angeles and proved

popular among coffee shops, motels and gas stations that were all increasingly becoming reliant on a burgeoning car culture.

Beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles proper, Lautner's Elrod House – based in Palm Springs and completed in 1968 – also features a curved UFO-esque dome that sits atop an imposing but naturally harmonious sprawl of chambers and glass encased caverns. The house made a prominent appearance in *Diamonds are Forever* (1971) in a fight scene between James Bond (Sean Connery) and two of Ernst Blofeld's 'bodyguards' Bambi and Thumper. The highly sexualised and at times brutal encounter takes the viewer on an alternative tour through the main atrium of the house as various pieces of furniture are swung from, smashed or tossed about, culminating in Bond being thrown into the outdoor pool before he finally gets the upper hand. Bond villains on the whole opt for outlandishly designed lairs from which to plot world domination and in his piece 'James Bond: the Enemy of architecture', Steve Rose suggests that the archetypal Bond villain is not dissimilar to a modernist architect: 'He is usually on a mission to "improve" humanity by wiping out the messy status quo and replacing it with some orderly, rational utopia of his own design.' He goes on to draw further comparisons between evil and modernism in other Bond movies: 'Osato's spacious office in *You Only Live Twice* is rather Corbusier in Japan. Goldfinger's "rumpus room" is distinctly Frank Lloyd Wright, as is Hugo Drax's behind-the-waterfall lair in *Moonraker*, whose Mayan-patterned relief panels resemble those of Wright's Ennis House.' [Rose, *The Guardian*, 2008].

Modernism with a smoother edge

The penchant for casting LA's modernist architecture as homes for movie bad guys has waned somewhat in the past 10 years, and there is an actual reappraisal by Hollywood for the merits of the movement's sympathetic origins. Lautner's Schaffer residence, built in 1949, plays a starring role as home to a gay man (Colin Firth) grieving the death of his partner in Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009) and The Lovell Health House recently appeared with far less menacing associations in Mike Mills's *Beginners* (2010) as home to a retired museum director (Christopher Plummer) who reveals that he is gay. The fact that both of these films deal with themes of alienation and mortality, and feature fragile protagonists with love in their hearts seems to support the shifting perceptions of filmmakers in casting these homes in their films.

Photo_5: George contemplates the loss of love in Lautner's Schaffer residence

Ultimate confirmation of this new found favour for Modernism is evidenced by Tony Stark's Lautner inspired CGI Cliffside mansion in the *Iron Man* films (2008-2013) – home to a bona fide hero, scourge to evil-doers everywhere. Charlotte Nielsen, in her article 'From Psychopath Lairs to Superhero Mansions: How Cinema and Modern Architecture Called A Truce', suggests that our

changing relationship with technology could play a part: 'It could be that, with the advent of smart phones and wireless technology, that we now consider it *preferable* and not psychopathic – to live in houses without the traditional trappings.' [Nielsen, *Arch Daily*, 2012]. The downturn in the economy and the public desire for escapism into a 'monied, carefree world' similar to that experienced by audiences prior to the Great Depression is also proposed.

Conclusion

Whatever the case, it seems that LA modernist architecture has – for now – been granted a reprieve from its dubious associations in Hollywood productions, but I imagine it won't be long before we find a Blofeld, Treehorn or Pratchett like character peering coldly out of a mid-century glass frontage across the vast Los Angeles expanse while the rest of us exclaim 'wow, that's some pad'.

REFERENCES

Andersen, T. 'Los Angeles Plays Itself'. US, 2003, colour, 169 mins.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MLclGdq3V8

Conolly, J. (2011), 'Double Indemnity' in Solomons, G (ed) *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*. Bristol, Intellect

Zeller-Jacques, M. (2011), 'Body Double' in Solomons, G (ed) *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*. Bristol, Intellect

Kaplan, W. (2011). *California Design, 1930-1965 Living In a Modern Way*. MIT Press

McClung, William A. (2000). *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. University of California Press

Clarke, David B. Editor (1997) *The Cinematic City*. Routledge

Gordon, E. (1953), 'The Threat to the Next America' in *House Beautiful Magazine* (Volume: April)

Neilson, C. 'From Psychopath Lairs to Superhero Mansions: How Cinema and Modern Architecture Called A Truce'. *Arch Daily*, December 19, 2012 <http://www.archdaily.com/309220/>

Orousoff, N. (1997), 'A New Look, A Look Back' *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1997
<http://articles.latimes.com/1997/oct/24/entertainment/ca-46012>

Rose, S. 'James Bond, the Enemy of Architecture' *The Guardian*, November 4, 2008

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/nov/04/james-bond-architecture>

Venturi, R. (1997), *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, London: The Architectural Press

Wolfe, T. (1981), *From Bauhaus to Our House*. New York: Picador