

Sculpting Space in Laurel Canyon

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LIFE IS CONCRETE

—Frank Lloyd Wright in a letter to Rudolph Schindler, June 3rd, 1920

Six years ago I fell in love with a longhaired video game writer who was working on a project in New York. He was based in LA, a city I'd only passed through on a childhood trip to Disneyland. He glowed whenever he spoke about his treehouse, a hillside bungalow in Laurel Canyon where he'd lived for seven years. I was finishing up a dissertation on visual poetics and bouncing between cities and libraries, so when he proposed we move there for a bit while he worked on a new game I didn't have to think too long before I answered yes.



The Canyon Treehouse (lower left), photo courtesy of author

Five years and innumerable fellowships and games later I'm still living in the hillside bungalow in Laurel Canyon. Giving directions to our house is always a challenge; there is no mobile reception on the property so visitors must rely on previously texted instructions: *Go up the steps past the first house, bear right past the fish pond and the second house, walk through the doorway under the bougainvillea and up to the fire-pit, go past the Buddha statue, through the*

second doorframe, then walk all the way up the steps to the bungalow at the top of the hill. Even when they don't get lost, most visitors arrive at our doorstep exhausted.

While much of the Hollywood Hills is dotted with multi-million dollar mansions, our treehouse retains the spirit of the 1960s when Laurel Canyon was the communal backyard for a handful of up-and-coming musicians: Jim Morrison, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Crosby, Stills & Nash, Frank Zappa, and The Mommas & The Papas. Today our carefree landlord, who built our treehouse and lives on the property, uses the middle house (whose living room has a stage) to host live music parties that often last past sunrise.

Hippie music has Laurel Canyon famous, but the neighborhood's geography also encapsulates a central paradox that gives LA its distinct character. Turn north off Sunset Boulevard to head up Crescent Heights and you leave the bustle of West Hollywood—its billboards, comedy clubs, pastel hotels, salacious fonts, and strip malls—to ascend a winding road between two rugged hillsides. These hills are in fact part of the Santa Monica Mountains, a transverse range with oceanic sediments and rock ranging from twelve to twenty million years old. Mudslides can be a problem, and it's not unusual to see a hillside house encircled with orange tape in the rainy months, signaling that the inhabitants must stay on the street-side of their house until the land has drained.

Laurel Canyon is an uncanny limbo of metropolis-woods. Parking is a constant Angeleno nightmare, but here the danger is not only scarcity but brushing into tufts of poison oak as you leave the car. At night I use a white noise machine to combat the whirr of traffic—but also to drown out the howling coyotes. Missing pet posters are unfortunately a regular occurrence. Twice I've encountered a scorpion in the bathroom. Antlered bucks, raccoons, owls, lizards, mountain lions, and snakes have all made their cameos around and in the house. Meanwhile celebrities and suits mill around The Canyon Country Store or

Pace, the trendy Italian restaurant at the bottom of the hill. In this curious admixture of rustic and flash, Laurel Canyon emblemizes the “anti-urban” feel of LA.

Spend a few days in New York, New Orleans, or Boston and the city will reveal its character all too gladly. But LA’s variegated population densities and mixed bag of environments and vibes elicit only a swirling impression. Like a stoned guy at a party, LA stands obliviously in the corner gyrating to music and snacking on corn chips. You don’t know what he’s about—and aren’t sure you want to start the conversation. It’s a funhouse mirror capable of reflecting back to you whatever fantasy or nightmare you are determined to find (or avoid) in that moment.

This protean feel led the urban theorist Edward Soja to dub LA *Flex City*. And in this LA is actually probably more *American* than any city out east: it exports an image of beach bliss and Tinseltown but deep down it’s the Dream Factory—a stolen land that newcomers inflect and infect with their hopes and fears. If philosopher Henri Lefebvre was right in asserting that place is co-produced, a natural space that accrues shared meanings over time, then Los Angeles creates its unique sense of place by never allowing a consensus, asserting in every moment its right to be conceived anew. There are as many LAs as it has inhabitants. For most Angelenos, our sense of the city is shaped by whatever we dream about while driving through it—music blaring, windows down. It’s not where we are that captivates us but the places we will go.

Ironically, the distinct American spirit of this city—its refusal to bow to Europe, the celebration of open spaces that encourage dreaming—was grasped and defended early on by a European immigrant, a young Austrian architect named Rudolph Schindler. He proposed the term *space architecture* for a new era of house design. In an unpublished manifesto he reflects on the dwellings of our early human ancestors and declares modern man free from the limitations of traditional building materials. Instead of sculpting exteriors

with brick, stone, and wood, the space architect would begin by conceiving of interiors then using poured concrete to surround them. His terminology did not last (Google *space architecture* today and you will find articles about speculative construction on Mars), but he was hugely influential for modern architecture, especially in his adopted home of Southern California. Space architecture deconstructs our habits of perceiving ourselves in relation to our surroundings. This cognitive shift reflects an anthropological feat. At the time of Schindler's manifesto, ordinary people, for the first time, could view their home environments from an aerial perspective. *The discovery of space as a medium of the architect* wrote Schindler is particularly characteristic for the country of unlimited horizons at the time it discovered the airplane. Visionary architects, in manipulating spaces to reframe the places we live, turn us all into sculptors of multiple vantage points.



Living Room of the Leland-Fitzpatrick House, Photo courtesy of author

One of Schindler's masterpieces, the Leland-Fitzpatrick house, is perched on the southwest corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Mulholland Drive, just north of where I live. Its main rooms and outer balcony bridge overlook a steep, uninhabitable basin at the northernmost edge of the canyon. Like most of his houses, it melds exteriors with interiors. Rather than sculpting with brick or wood, Schindler used glass panes and poured concrete slabs, forming a visually permeable membrane between inside and outside. Ninety years have passed since Schindler built this house. The hills betray the browning of

drought and the smoothing of erosion. A row of birch trees now towers high above, but otherwise the land remains largely the same. Walking inside, one is struck by how the landscape acts as a broken fourth wall that broadcasts itself within the interior.

While he predated the hippies by at least thirty years Schindler was a hippy *avant la lettre*—or at least a rebel Angeleno. He was so unconventional in approach and manner that he had to solicit the help of his friend Frank Lloyd Wright to convince the California architecture board to give him a license. *He is an incorrigible Bohemian and refuses to allow the Los Angeles barber to apply the razor to the scruff of his neck* wrote Wright, *I believe, however, that he is capable of great affection and I suspect him of having more than ordinary talent as an artist.* (Wright was stingy with compliments but long on pontificating; his letters with Schindler span fifteen years and fill two large boxes at The Getty's Special Collections.)

Like most of Schindler's homes, the Leland-Fitzpatrick house makes use of a monochrome palette. He writes that Southern California's desert characteristics and slight seasonal variations result in *subtle transparent shades created by the light on greyish backgrounds*. If it weren't for their clean lines and sharp right angles, these houses might appear to be stone outcrops fusing into their hillsides.

Schindler's intentions to highlight perspective and reconfigure spatial environments resonate with the precepts of another movement: the 1960s Minimalist sculpture of Carl Andre, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd. Using ordinary construction materials such as wood, steel, and concrete, these artists assembled simple forms: rectangular blocks, planks, and L-shaped beams. Sculpture's previous preoccupations with texture, symbolism, and expression were trumped by shifts in arrangement, scale, and the position of the viewer.

Schindler's houses are famous for their consistent use of the L-shape—both in his floor plans as well as the shape of the overhangs and balustrades. There is something distinctively LA about this shape: it's the exit off the highway, the dream around the bend, the phase of life that you can glimpse but not yet inhabit. Schindler's right-angle obsession extends to his logo: composed in one continuous line, the block *R* and *S* appear as cornered hallways or a cube of concrete that has been sliced into tetrominoes.

Jose Dávila's work is often compared to 60's Minimalist sculpture due to his use of construction materials, L-shapes, and an emphasis on perspective. But in its historicity, site specificity, and calculated balance, his work evinces a nuanced understanding of how objects and people inhabit space that bears more in common with Schindler than any school of sculpture. His work balances senses of place as well as space, inviting us into the intricate dance between them. Exteriors fold into interiors. Materials seem to float. Impossible arrangements stir us with delicate harmony of natural materials and man-made tensions. We perceive ourselves as within a network of invisible forces, concrete pieces of a dissembled whole. By exhibiting his sculpture before Schindler's house, Dávila reminds us that place is a shifting interplay of natural environment, material affordances, social meanings, and a sense of presence in relation to where we've been or would like to be. He has the sensibility of a visionary architect, which is to say he teaches us to see things differently so we can let a new place in.



*Rudolph Schindler's manifesto, housed at
The Getty Library Special Collections,
Photo courtesy of author*