

SPLIT VISION URBANISM: INVESTIGATING VISUAL CONNECTIONS IN LOS ANGELES

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ABSTRACT

Single-family residential zoning continues to be a key tool for carrying out planning policy in Los Angeles, and a praxis that instantly hampers design innovation from correlating suburban development with new socio-economic and cultural tendencies. An architectural ecology is, today, surfacing in Los Angeles, where generic suburban houses camouflage experimental practices that challenge the constraints of single-family residential zoning. Reconceptualizing the suburban backyard, these experimental practices pursue design intervention under the radar of planning administration to implement new forms and uses in Los Angeles. Drawing from such observations this design research project encompasses an on-going investigation at the intersection between planning praxis and experimental architecture. Questions include: How can we close the gap between DIY culture and disciplinary practices? How can architectural experiments advance the administrative process of city building? How can we correlate informal place-making and formalized design without compromising collective identities?

THEORY

Single-family residential zoning proclaims a singular outcome of suburban development, where forms and uses are regulated by universal principles rather than by site-specific circumstances (Dahl 2014). As zoning review praxis hinge on ocular inspections of the public domain, the concept of exposure has contributed to the notion of sameness that seems so characteristic for the experience of suburban Los Angeles (Dahl 2010).

With his 1978 project *Alternation to a Suburban House*, Dan Graham removed the façade of a suburban house and divided the interior space with a mirror. While previous scholarship has focused on the exposure of suburban domesticity, which was activated through the combined action of removal and reflection, *Split Vision Urbanism* focuses instead on the constituencies that remain hidden on the other side of the mirror. Hence, while Graham's mirror correlates with the generic form of suburban architecture to reveal a "public representation of conventional domesticity," it also reinforces the preconceived land-use arrangement of front yard and backyard, while camouflaging the informal and the secret activities of suburbia (Colomina 2001, 82).

The intersection between zoning review praxis and preconceived land-use arrangement produces a 'split vision urbanism' for architects to use when fostering innovation beyond the constraints of regulation. When the suburban front yards are characterized by series of façades, being upheld in compliance with the zoning code, the backyards become a territory for design experiments, where site-specific circumstances can initiate, aggregate, and articulate unorthodox procedures and maverick behaviors. Camouflaged by generic suburban houses, the spatial configuration of backyards provides a test bed for the implementation of alternative aesthetics, occupancies, and tectonics. Hidden from the public domain, this test bed points to unveiled potentials for suburban life and development.

METHOD

Reyner Banham once said that “the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life” (Banham 1971, 5). While Banham specifically referred to Los Angeles, various scholars – from Walter Benjamin to Venturi and Scott Brown, and beyond – have made similar claims for a generic understanding about the urban condition. *Split Vision Urbanism* builds upon this tradition of exploring the potentials of places and spaces in urban culture through movement.

While movement is imperative for data collection and analysis, *Split Vision Urbanism* takes motion graphics as both research platform and primary mode of representation. Strongly influenced by Ed Ruscha’s 1966 project *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, photographic montage is deployed to facilitate continuous views of the preconceived land-use arrangement of front yard and backyard. The continuous views are animated and juxtaposed through motion graphics to instigate a split-screen environment in which relationships of aesthetics, occupancies, and tectonics can be detected and evaluated through design research. Drawing from Stan Allen’s remark that “in montage, it is not the elements that are significant, but the space in-between that defines the potential depth,” the findings are elaborated through experimental designs, where architectural structures and immersive soundscapes combine to critically assess the potentials of fostering suburban places and spaces beyond the constraints of single-family residential zoning (Allen 2000, 27).

The disconnection between front yard and backyard seems to be explicit throughout the project, however occasionally challenged by overlaps of structure, sound, and text – and ephemeral fragments of vernacular designs – which combine to intervene in accord with site-specific circumstances. The research findings correlate with the overlaps to communicate contextual potentials for design experiments, where the DIY tradition implicit in backyard intervention may offer means to challenge the constraints of single-family residential zoning. Hence the dissemination of research findings through exhibition format, which is a platform that stipulates feedback from scholars and designers as well as from community members and local know-how. The counter-projection of findings from researcher to community is imperative for any prospect of advancing the administrative process of city building. While single-family residential zoning concerns itself with the distribution of interventions on a property, the distribution on a site may rather concern the community. When the concerns for design intervention move from zoning to community, the regulation of places and spaces goes beyond planning praxis to become and architectural exercise. Therefore, the disciplinary context for backyard intervention unfolds a

field of research, whereby architectural experiments on a single-family residential site can stipulate various formal relationships between the house and the intervention, and between the intervention and the site. With such relationships, the discipline of architecture can point to new ways of camouflaging experimental practices and, thus, propose new regulatory mechanisms beyond the constraints of single-family residential zoning.



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