

**ТЕМА НОМЕРА:
СВЯЩЕННОЕ: ПОНЯТИЕ И ФЕНОМЕН**

Ivan Strenski

**THE STRUGGLE TO MAKE SACRED PLACES
IN THE SECULAR SPACE OF LOS ANGELES**

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**БОРЬБА ЗА СОЗДАНИЕ СВЯЩЕННЫХ МЕСТ ИЗ
СЕКУЛЯРНОГО ПРОСТРАНСТВА ЛОС-АНДЖЕЛЕСА**

В статье рассматривается топография Лос-Анджелеса (США), а также анализируется природа трудностей, связанных с попыткой систематического ее исследования. Различая пространство (space) и место (place), автор констатирует, что Лос-Анджелес парадоксально не является местом, т.е. пространством организованным и радикально отличным от окружающего. В немалой степени это проявляется в отсутствии доминирующих над городским пространством религиозных сооружений, единство города обеспечивается скорее системой скоростных шоссе. В связи с этим стратегия оформления сакрального пространства религиозными институциями, содной стороны, предполагает дробление городского, преимущественно неинтегрированного пространства на множество кластеров, и с другой – намеренно «не соответствует» духу места, в силу его отсутствия. Более того, сооружения образуют замкнутые миры, существующие на полюсе пространства, противоположном все пронизывающей сети дорог. Таким образом, в Лос-Анджелесе религиозные сообщества не осваивают, но формируют священное пространство, причем исключительно в соответствии с принятыми и формирующимися в них представлениями.

Los Angeles architect, Charles W. Moore, is perhaps best known for his interests in the design of gardens. His work on these carefully fashioned places led him to develop the theme of a "sense of place." I have found much of what Moore has written particularly applicable to the arguments I shall make in this paper about the difficulties for a city like Los Angeles to establish a sense of place.

At first, it may seem odd that a sense of place should present any problems at all for such a distinctive city as Los Angeles. Not calling Los Angeles a "place" may seem particularly odd, especially to those who live elsewhere. Everybody knows where Los Angeles is, what Los Angeles is - or so those from other places think. There are probably more, or at least as many, confident generalizations uncritically applied to Los Angeles as to any other US city: the smog, the traffic, endless summers, the land of fruits and nuts, pop culture vulgarity run wild, Hollywood, and so on without end. Everyone knows Gertrude Stein's reaction to the California landscape, namely that "there was no there, there." More accurately, she had a California city in mind - namely Oakland. This what the great poet and historian of Los Angeles architecture, Reyner Banham, refers to as Los Angeles being simultaneously "Anywheresville/ Nowheresville"¹. By this I mean that Los Angeles lacks a sense of "place," in general, a fact that bears on the existence of sacred places. Thus, what is true of "place," in general is just as true of "sacred" place. Further, in the secular domain, Los Angeles is "space," even sometimes considered, just "space." Instead of being a "place" at all, LA, instead, is the home of many "places," sacred or otherwise. Thus, applied with a twist to LA, one can turn Stein's phrase to say of Los Angeles that "there is no here, here," or alternatively that "there are many heres, here."

¹ Banham R. Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies. London, 1971. P. 172.

But, the very distinctiveness of Los Angeles as an inviting physical and psychic “space” was precisely what militated against its having a distinctive sense of place. On the other side of LA’s great sense of space was its distinct lack of a sense of “place.” In its own way, this great sense of formlessness militated against LA’s enchantment. Comparisons come readily with the magical landscape of San Francisco, with its glittering bay, ringed with distant hills, and shrouded in frequent fogs. That space and place seemed to pull Los Angeles in opposite directions seems, in turn, to have spurred a series of struggles to establish “places” of sacred power. Prime exhibits of this effort are the new Roman Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, The Skirball Cultural Center, Hsi Lai Buddhist temple, Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, the Los Angeles Temple of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, and others to be discussed.



The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels (photo taken by John O'Neill).

A Space without Place

But, why has there been such a struggle to achieve a sense of place? The reason for this lack of a sense of place has to do

with Los Angeles being regarded mostly as a “space,” or of it having “no urban form at all in the commonly accepted sense.” Without an urban form, hierarchically set out, LA began its existence lacking many of the features of separation that are preliminary to the separation of sacred form profane¹. What gave Los Angeles its appeal to English-speaking settlers was its being such blank canvas upon which anyone, any industrious entrepreneur, for instance, could work their will. The open sense of untrammelled freedom to do as one wished was mirrored in the broad open landscape of what is commonly and aptly called the “LA basin.” Indeed, if one includes the suburban bedroom counties of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino, the space known variously as “Los Angeles”, “The Los Angeles Basin”, or “The Southland,” Los Angeles slightly exceeds South Carolina in area, and is only 10% smaller than the state of Maine. Yet, despite its occupying a great “space,” Los Angeles resists being a “place.”

Indeed, part of the reason so many have come is because Los Angeles promised to enable them to make their own “places” - in this vast “space” that is itself not a “place.” As we will see, this opened the floodgates wide to an influx of religious entrepreneurs. But, why do I say Los Angeles is not a “place”, when people from all over the country and world are so confidently convinced it is? Let’s start with some human geographical reasons why Los Angeles is not a “place.” For one thing, Los Angeles is not “place” because it is not conceived to have marked “edges”². Is “LA,” Los Angeles “County,” or does the name include the neighboring “bedroom” counties of Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and even Ventura? Or, maybe “LA” is the “Southland, or just “SoCal”? Los Angeles is not really felt to be bounded, unless one considers

¹ Ibid. P. 75.

² Moore Ch.W. *Toward Making Places // You Have to Pay for the Public Life* (Keim K., ed.). Cambridge, 2001. P. 88-107.

the contiguous and increasingly grander ranges of the Santa Monica, San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains a northernmost “edge.” Even less a marker of bounded place is the open western horizon of the limitless Pacific. As the largest expanse of water on the planet, covering nearly half the globe, it hardly feels like an “edge.” As if by some bizarre inverted symmetry, to the east, the arid counterpart of the Pacific, the shifting sands of the Great American Desert, likewise hardly counts as an “edge.” Finally, to the south, what some regard as a peopled desert, the endless suburban sprawl of bedroom communities, extends what Reiner Banham called LA’s “Plains of Id.” In its geography, then, Los Angeles is unlike “New York” – by which people mean the island of Manhattan, the perfection of a modern moated urban environment. Nor, is it like Paris, whose arrondissements snail tightly round the Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower. Less again like Amsterdam is LA, with its canals radiating out in concentric semi-circles from its hub. Nor, does Los Angeles offer the riotous intersection of Asia and Europe, Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara that makes sense of Istanbul as the once, and perhaps future, New Rome, true center of the world. Because it is, thus, fundamentally unbounded, this “space,” loosely referred to as “LA” struggles, hopelessly, I suggest, to become a “place.” In order to thrive in this particular human geography, LA’s contemporary signal religious institutions have struggled to make “places” where a sense of “place” was simply unavailable.

Beyond its sheer size, I say that no sense of “place” may be possible for LA, in part, because of what architect, Charles W. Moore, said about how “place” is created. For Moore, a “place” is established by “taking possession of a portion of the earth’s surface”¹. If one were inclined to express this in Eliadean terms, this would, of course, spaces exist, places need to be created.

¹ Ibid.

How is this possible, given LA's physical geography alone? And, how would one even know that one had done so across such a boundless terrain? And, by what methods? At least since the great railroad barons, like Henry E. Huntington, has anyone even - octopus-like - attempted to ensnare the entire basin in their tentacles? Well, yes, LA's freeway system has. But, it only did so by building over the network of routes laid out by Huntington's Pacific Electric Railway system. More about freeways shortly.

The general challenge of making place out of space seems to have especially disadvantaged religious architecture from fulfilling one of its more salient functions. There is no piece of Los Angeles religious architecture that can be said to "take possession" of LA's space - to make Los Angeles a "place." No religious center has ever focused or organized the metropolitan area into a "place" in the way Jerusalem's Temple of Solomon, Paris' Notre Dame, Rome's Vatican, New Rome's Hagia Sophia, Moscow's St Basil's or Mecca's ka'aba have. One reason is the vast topography of LA. Another, less obvious, but still critical, is the religious pluralism of Los Angeles that militates against creating any such single religious focus. With virtually no ancient Spanish or Mexican mission church to function as such a hub, outside the remote Mission San Fernando, across the Santa Monica mountains and Hollywood Hills from the original Mexican settlement, and with successive waves of Protestant and Jewish immigration crowding in one upon another, converting the profane space of Los Angeles into some "place" - sacred or not - seemed an insuperable challenge.

One might immediately retort, of course, that the freeways try to knit the basin into an integrated "place." Yes, the closest any thing comes to taking hold of Los Angeles may, in fact, be the successor to Huntington's inter-urban Pacific Electric Railroad, the famed "Red Car" streetcar system - is LA's freeways. Taken

as a whole, they constitute a kind of organic “monument.” Reyner Banham even considers that “the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place”¹. Yet, it is a monument to the value of individual physical movement and secular social mobility so typical of LA. This is not just to say that LA’s freeway system is “monumental,” given its many improbable, high wire act viaducts or the storied “Four Level Interchange.” Indeed, Los Angeles is short of freeway miles, in comparison to that of other major US metro areas. As “monument, LA’s freeway system better fits Charles W. Moore’s



The Four Level interchange as seen from above in 1959.

Courtesy, California Historical Society.

idea of something functioning to focus a society’s “agreeing upon extraordinarily important places” where it celebrates – one might even say, “obsesses” about – its “importance.” Indeed,

¹ Banham R. Op.cit. P. 213.

as Reyner Banham argues, “For miles across the flatlands, the freeways are conspicuously the biggest human artifact, the only major disturbance of the land-surface, involving vastly more earth-moving than the railways did”¹. And, as such, they emphasize the priority of movement, of restless secular striving, over against establishing a sacred Center. LA Freeways are conspicuously not pilgrimage routes, either, like the Rue Saint Jacques. Like the great Silk Road, the Freeways are not sacred, even as they may connect one sacred site to another, as indeed did the Silk Road. Mundane concerns, fraught with distraction and trouble dominate what is known on a daily basis about the Freeways. The attention to daily traffic conditions, while not unique, is perhaps like no other place in the nation. Immortalized in the opening segment of “LA Story,” Steve Martin shows how the canny Los Angeles commuter exquisitely times those precious open “windows” of traffic flow, how he navigates the urban folk terrain of alley short-cuts and sidewalks, all done to the thumping of “eye-in-the-sky” TV news helicopters flitting about overhead. All these speak of obsession – to Moore’s sense of “monuments” as expressing collective agreement about “extraordinarily important places”. But, what possible analogy with religious architecture might one make with the way the freeways at least begin to make a “place” of LA?

Not even the monumental character of many examples of religious architecture find analogies with the way the freeway system can be said to be “monumental.” True, the freeways serve a monumental function by taking possession of the whole of LA. But, not only does the analogy with religious architecture end there, it does not even begin. The collective, unifying monumental character of the Los Angeles freeway system gets immediately undercut by the individualism and mystic detachment of the freeway driving experience. As seen

¹ Ibid. P. 174.

from some god's-eye point of view, LA's freeway traffic seems more like the Big Bang – as if every car and driver is fast fleeing away from every other, and often at increasing rates of speed! What, therefore, makes this monument not feel at all like a monument – like a public place – is its embodiment of contempt for a “commons”. A freeway is just what I use to go where I want, when I want, as I want. It may as well be the private driveway of my house for all the identification as a public good it receives. In that climate of monumentality, I do not see how religious architecture fits.

Human geography conspires with physical geography, as well, to keep Los Angeles from being a focused sacred “place”¹. The past roots of present places have been effaced here. Los Angeles seems like all space and no time. Will anyone ever attempt to found a Museum of the City of Los Angeles? There's certainly enough history, unsavory as much of it might be, but paved over in concrete and asphalt to warrant the effort. Such an institution might remind us of seasonal streams that once flowed out of the Santa Monica Mountains, and watered the basin's forests of willows and live oaks. How many commuters along the Arroyo Seco Freeway (the world's first) appreciate that its many sweeping curves trace the dry streambed for which it is named? Beverly Glen Boulevard and Bundy Avenue in West Los Angeles, similarly, trace the meandering paths of ancient creeks draining the Santa Monica Mountains. Who knew? A city museum or another technology of memory could focus attention of the fact of LA's plaza was special. But, the importance of the old central plaza did not reside in its being a religious place. Primordial Los Angeles was centered round a military presidio, not a mission.

Admittedly, such a barracks history doesn't excite romantic reveries of chivalric “old Spain,” that produced Spanish Revival

¹ Harris C. *The Historical Mind and The Practice of Geography // Humanistic Geography* (Levy D., Samuels M.S., eds.). London, 1978. P. 123-37.

architecture and the fantasies of the nearby Ramona Festival. "Our" missions lie far over the hills from LA's old center, its plaza and presidio, in distant St. Gabriel and Mission Hills. Los Angeles even got no respect from the padres, who literally by-passed Los Angeles on their march northward. Yet, LA's unromantic history, perhaps unique in the nation, deserves to be told, because for all the sentimental nostalgias about the supposed religious foundations of our country, LA's old central plaza and presidio stood for an energetic secularizing spirit. Forget the folklore of swashbuckling gauchos, the anti-clerical energy of the revolutionary Mexican republic powered the expropriation of mission lands to form the great rancheros of the Los Angeles basin. A great pity then, that we lack visible reminders of those great rancheros into which the basin was subdivided by the anti-clerical zeal of Mexican secularizers. Instead of sanctuaries memorializing at least the pastoral culture of the rancho past, maybe we should be satisfied with the vagrant wild grasses that annually invade my garden, but upon which the herds of the great rancheros once grazed?

One will search in vain for traces of LA's original settlements by native folk or even by Spaniards, except for that tourist magnet, downtown's Olvera Street. And, here again, religion is disadvantaged. In any event, Los Angeles did not grow outwards from such an ancient center. It grew from all directions and none, ignoring any would-be central nucleus during its great period of characteristic growth from the late 1800's. A veritable Mexican theme park in the southland sun, this 1929 historical fantasy of Anglo do-gooders seeking to deploy at least two myths. One is the idea of a city growing outwards from this ancient nucleus; the other is the fantasy of well-domesticated Mexicans, modeled on the Pilgrim Fathers¹. Yet, for all the tenacity of both these myths, reality has had a salutary way of disenchanting them. Olvera Street can't even manage to stay

¹ Banham R. Op. cit. P. 78f.

alive after its souvenir hawkers put up their shutters at the end of a business day. Tourist-trapped amidst surging freeways, like some island in phantom time, those who love the history of Los Angeles can only hope for it to be finally swallowed in the ever denser traffic flowing round it.

There is much to be recalled here, as I have mentioned in passing but, regrettably, little will or imagination so to do. I have not even touched upon the vicious violent history of Los Angeles through most of the 19th and 20th centuries, but only because it lacks obvious connection to any sense of place. How to memorialize the Native American rebellions of the 1780's, the Chinese Massacre of 1871 or the work of Emma Goldman in the late 1800's, in terms of space and place? That kind of Los Angeles presents real problems because they do not seem to have natural links with the geography of LA, such as the boundaries of the great Mexican rancheros, still less its non-existent mission. Thus, to bring us back to space and place, without memory of the "roots" of "present places," we will continue to constrain LA's ability, slim though it may be, to achieve a sense of "place." Worse yet, once its "roots" have been unearthed, LA's founding reveals a snarl of commercialism, militarism and race hatred.

A Strategy of Place

What strategy would seem advisable for religious institutions in their efforts to take account of LA's human and physical geography? I am arguing that at least one conspicuous strategy has been for religious institutions to make what seems like exaggerated efforts to define space, to create sacred "places". In lieu of a general absence of a sense of place, historical or contemporary, to which one would try to attach oneself, religious institutions have made conspicuously mighty efforts to create "places", even in the general sense. Secular institutions understand this imperative. Los Angeles is uncommonly rich in

especially successful “places”: the Venice beach “boardwalk,” those people-friendly piazzas jutting out into the Pacific – the piers of Santa Monica, Venice, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach or Redondo Beach, Pasadena’s Colorado Avenue, site not only of the Rose Parade, but of a delightful concentration of people-friendly cafes, restaurants and such. Downtown Los Angeles offers the campus of the University of Southern California. It creates what some regard as a perfect collegiate environment – a central pedestrian walk, flanked by venerable, ivy covered Collegiate Gothic buildings. Should one want more proof of LA’s abundance of “places,” listen again closely to LA’s unofficial city anthem, Randy Newman’s “I Love LA,” for good list of “places” – actually street names! But, a list of “places” does not make a “place” of LA.

So, while Los Angeles may suffer from a sense of “place,” it is brimming with distinctive “places” – places that typically stand alone and never connect to a larger whole. To be sure, the great majority of these stand-alone buildings never gave a thought to standing with another. They are the rule. But others have an iconic power because while they stand-alone now, we can easily see they were meant to be part of larger wholes, struggling in that way to inscribe some sense of place upon LA. They are ruins-in-the-making, architectural archipelagos, that once worked toward a sense of place in LA, what Reyner Banham calls the “unintegrated fragment.” They are worth a moment’s consideration here¹. One that immediately comes to mind is Culver City’s Hunt Hotel (1924), now the metro-sexually hip Culver Hotel. It seems a clear esthetic echo of New York’s Flatiron Building. Both great vertical wedges of steel, concrete and glass, stand at the head of slivers of intersecting avenues, like prows of landlocked ships. They suggest something about to follow their lead from the head of the street. A long file of sister structures, all attached in a seamless row, seem to have

¹ Banham R. Op.cit. P. 208.

been expected to follow in a harmonious unity. But, something happened. The march of buildings “fitting in” with their lead never materialized. Some visionary imagining a grand totality, filling an entire city block, never got round to finishing. Only a sad fragment of what might have been, remains bereft of a once promised wholeness.

This is also to say, on its other side, that the relative availability of “space” in Los Angeles makes it possible, until the fairly recent real estate boom, to acquire large tracts of land in which religious institutions can create their own “places,” their own “worlds.” This tendency may be better known from its secular counterparts, the totalizing worlds of Disneyland, the Farmers’ Market, Burbank Mall or Santa Monica Mall and its Third Street Promenade, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty (Roman) Villa, Universal City Walk, Knott’s Berry Farm and so on. Echoing these all-inclusive secular “places,” prominent, religious “places,” such as the new Roman Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints’ Los Angeles Temple, or Rick Warren’s campus-like Saddleback Church reflect a common logic of response to the challenge of how to manage space in LA. How does one successfully adapt to LA, where “space” abounds, but where an overall sense of “place” does not? Their answer has been to create “places”, and, moreover, places that virtually reflect contempt, indifference, or perhaps, just frustration with any attempt to fit into some overall sense of Los Angeles “place”. The best for which they can hope is to “take possession” of some subdivision of the earth’s surface made available to them by the real estate industry.

The reaction of religious institutions to the lack of a sense of place in Los Angeles seems to me perfectly reasonable. What would it even mean to “fit into” or “coordinate” with some Los Angeles sense of place? If one were to build a church in San Francisco, New York, Paris, Jerusalem, St. Petersburg, or even

Istanbul, one would (or should) know how to proceed. All these cities have strong senses of place. Even aside from municipal building codes, the particular senses of place of these cities would constrain the range of options open to any potential developer. And, although there are many ways to “fit” with a city’s sense of place (New York’s cup-and-saucer Guggenheim Museum), some even that would expand its sense of place, (I. M. Pei’s Louvre’s “Pyramid” entry way, or the Beaubourg/Pompidou Center) the idea of “fitting in” with prevailing modes of architectural expression would, at least, be factors affecting one’s choices. But, what are the “factors” related to a sense of place, limiting one’s choices in LA?

Even though the constraints of place do not challenge religious institutions, they, like any other, need to be in some minimal conversation with the space of LA. I here refer to such general aspects of space as climate, latitude and longitude, etc. the design of many religious structures “converse” with LA’s space by denying it. Examples abound of the many monuments to nostalgia and loss, typically of a backward-looking denial of where one is. Here, are those congealed heaps of Midwestern nostalgia, the many “little chapels on the prairie,” recalling the hope of recapturing the intimacy of the small-town, rural Midwest. Likewise, one finds other even more anachronistic structures, recalling the glories of past golden ages. The messages sent by the misty medievalism of venerable ecclesiastical Gothic or the liturgical splendor promised by the gilded onion domes of the Russian Orthodox. Likewise, the new immigrant pride in “roots” calls out from the soaring spires of the glazed minarets of Saudi endowed masjids, as does the pride in a great civilization leap out at us from the riotous energy of the dancing gods along the frieze-work of Hindu temples.

Nothing of this is new to most observant visitors to LA, or indeed to any large American city. We are mobile people, no

matter whether we have moved to Los Angeles from Minnesota or Mumbai. What I want to stress is that these efforts to recreate what was lost in settling here are religious agitprop. They need to be seen against a backdrop of conversation, often contentious, with the vacant space of LA. These churches, chapels, masjids, temples and such give voice to the immigrant's longings for the homeland and for recognition. How they yearn for the places from which we have come. But, how, as well, they broadcast the message that "we are here, we are proud, and we are as good (or even better) than you. They simultaneously would like to create in Los Angeles what they lost in coming here. But at the same time, they tell one and all that how they bring to Los Angeles something of demonstrable value.

And, what of LA's hands-down triumphant architectural agitprop - Spanish Colonial? What of the ubiquitous faux-mission churches of every denomination - and not just Roman Catholic. (What, as well, of the "horsey-set" secular counterparts, the dress-up caballeros/as who canter along Colorado Boulevard each New Year's Day to "honor the past" of "Old" California? (sic)) Are both somehow "real" connections with LA's past, because they evoke some ghost of LA's past, while the King Fahad, Saudi masjid or Malibu Hindu temple are mostly laments of homesick newcomers or assertions of their cultural equality? The secret of the romance of Spanish Colonial lies, of course, in its orientation to a totally mythical past and place. A creation of East Coast "Anglos," Spanish Colonial churches are fanciful ways of saying that "we" belong, even though we have nothing materially to do with the Spanish empire or the militantly anti-clerical Mexican Republic. Spanish Colonial architecture brazenly promises to represent the true Hispanic past of California, devoid generally of "Hispanics." But they also appeal to a mythical time when Los Angeles was a definite "place" - a part of the earth's surface

taken into possession by the chivalric “Spanish” caballeros/ as whom the Rose Parade’s riders seek to evoke. Similarly, despite really the lack of a mission in LA, Spanish Colonial architecture evokes the same mythical past when Los Angeles was a coherent “place,” organized into the great rancheros into which the Los Angeles basin had been divided, ironically, by despoiling the very missions and mission culture they evoke. This, incidentally, exactly parallels the cognitively dissonant spirit of neo-Gothic movement in English architecture. There, the distant beneficiaries of Henry VIII’s despoiling of the great monasteries “memorialize” in their neo-Gothic dream churches the very Roman Catholic Gothic world that the secularizing Tudors destroyed. Thanks, but no thanks.

And, as for “fitting in” with the esthetic of the “place” that Los Angeles might be, is there any sort of structure that could or would not “fit” into LA’s sense of place? What style of architecture could be constrained by a “place - really, just undefined “space - that has no sense of place? The high-brow answer is surely the International or Moderne style of Rudolf Schindler, Richard Neutra and others that has become a kind of staple on the Los Angeles cityscape. This architecture fits anywhere, because it deliberately eschews a closed sense of definition. Typically formed from a “cube”, modernism’s spare formalism and openness makes “fitting in” irrelevant, because cubes fit anywhere. At the other extreme, is LA’s low-brow answer to “fitting in”. LA’s kooky, eccentric, hyper-representational architecture ignores the whole concept of “fitting into” a prevailing esthetic, defining a “place.” The Brown Derby, Tail o’ the Pup hotdog stand - in the shape of a giant hotdog in its fluffy bun - or Randy’s Doughnuts, crowned with an immense cruller, all thumb their noses at “fitting in.” Between these extremes, a whole world of architectural adventures fills the Los Angeles landscape. In a way, they all

“fit” into LA, because the entire notion of “fitting” makes no sense in a space that lacks place.

Perhaps this is why some of the more conspicuous religious “places” blithely ignore any requirement to “fit in”? I mentioned two notable cases,

- In one sense, an up-market “cube,” the 2002 Roman Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, is just another box alongside others: (<http://www.olacathedral.org>)

- The 1951 Los Angeles Temple of the LDS, imperiously lords it over Santa Monica Boulevard from behind its spikey iron security fence: (<https://www.lds.org/church/temples/los-angeles-california>)



The Temple of the LDS, Santa Monica Boulevard. Photo by Piero Scaruffi.

But, others can be added as well, such as,

- Rick Warren’s 1980 Saddleback (Mega)Church and campus (<http://saddleback.com>), one of the largest in area in the United States.

- The 1903 Hollywood First Presbyterian Church, perhaps the earliest example of this determination to find a “place,” when bucolic Hollywood only numbered 700 inhabitants, (<http://www.fpch.org>)
- The 1988 Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Buddhist temple in Hacienda Heights climbs the hillside of a suburban subdivision in three ascending terraces, grandly surveying the San Gabriel Valley as if a vision of the Pure Land itself: (<http://www.hsilai.org>),
- The 1981 Malibu Hindu temple is a perfect piece of South India at the western end of the San Fernando Valley: (<http://malibuhindutemple.org/>)
- The 1995 King Fahd masjid raises a magnificent blue glazed spire of a minaret high above the dingbat apartments and auto parts stores of nether Culver City: (<http://kingfahadmosque.org>)
- The Skirball (Jewish) Cultural Center in arid Sepulveda Canyon sits alongside an artificial creek of cattails and fish ponds: (<http://www.skirball.org>)

What these places have in common is their determined effort to refuse to “fit in” to a featureless Los Angeles space by creating “places” as total, all-inclusive environments. Typically, their interiors are impenetrable to the gaze of the profane world outside. In this, LA’s signature sacred places contrast with its signature profane places, such as its domestic architecture. Banham asserts that one of the things making Los Angeles domestic architecture distinct is its inward direction. It is typically penetrable – open to the elements and to available vistas, often from outside as well as in¹. By contrast with the LA’s signature domestic places, its sacred places strain to be all-encompassing, self-sufficient worlds, directed at tasks carried on within, but impenetrable to the profane gaze from without. These sacred “places offer not only venues of

¹ Banham. Op.cit. P. 57.

worship and meditation but also dining facilities, schools, and in some cases accredited universities, arts centers, counseling centers, meeting rooms, home care centers, located in often if not typically, in relatively vacant space, (“god-forsaken” (sic)) places. Yet, from outside, one would be hard pressed to divine the nature of the performance of any of these activities – the Los Angeles Temple of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints (“Mormons”) perhaps being the perfection of this dichotomy. In these days of concern about vandalism and security, their determination to “take possession” of surrounding space makes them either locate in remote areas on hillsides or hilltops (Hsi Lai, Saddleback, the Malibu Temple) or to erect forbidding barrier walls or fences against the encroachment of the chaos of city “space”. One wonders whether the new, bunker-like Roman Catholic cathedral, just off Bunker Hill, and sandwiched amid downtown freeways was meant to reflect the other street-unfriendly buildings of the Music Center, nearby? Its location and inaccessibility to the street contrasts it to its cozy predecessor, St. Vibiana’s. Similarly, the Mormon temple, sitting high above Santa Monica Boulevard, safely set back behind a vast open lawn and spikey iron fence, creates its own world, with no thought of communicating with the leafy Westwood neighborhood surrounding it. It surrenders to the inability of anyone making a place of LA, and instead fortifies itself and its community within a “place” of its own fashioning.

The same might be said for the new Westside Jewish Community Center (<http://www.westsidejcc.org>), walled off seamlessly from Olympic Boulevard, like many Jewish sites these days, largely to shield themselves from assault. The Skirball (Jewish) Cultural Center (<http://www.skirball.org>), far off in deepest Sepulveda Canyon creates its own self-sufficient world or “place,” by having taken possession of a remote hillside adjacent the 405 freeway. Theatres, restaurants,

cabarets, art galleries, museums all conspire together in a sylvan setting to make this one of the more successful ethno-religious “places” in the city. But, both the Skirball and Westside center need to be thought about against such elderly outposts of Los Angeles Jewish life like the Wilshire Temple (<http://www.wbtla.org>), located street-side right in the flow of Miracle Mile Wilshire Boulevard. Now, notably it too is moving in the direction of declaring itself a “place” amidst an increasingly hostile or indifferent post-urban “space” by the construction of the Karsch Family Social Service Center.

Given the changing nature of contemporary cities, and given the uncanny way Los Angeles has for setting trends in urban geography, one would not be surprised to see what I have described in Los Angeles occurring in other cities as well. A sense of place, often defined by some focal religious center – the Notre Dame de Paris, Istanbul’s Aya Sofia, Moscow’s St. Basil’s cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Vatican City, or even the old city of Jerusalem – gradually gives way before the relentlessly centripetal force of space. The incessant 24/7 circulation of automobile traffic erodes a city’s overall sense of place and, in turn, calls forth the need for “places” of retreat and meaning within profane space. As the automobile further overwhelms even the ancient cities of Europe and Asia, and even despite their best efforts at mass transit, the pressure upon all urban areas is the same. To the extent they do, and to the extent they become places struggling to take possession of space, rather than integral places themselves, they will begin to look and feel like the vast space known as “LA.”