

A strand that links many of our great buildings is the architectural concept of compression and release—an arrangement of space so that as you move through it, worlds unfold. A cathedral’s low foyer makes the worship space beyond feel even more vast; the banking hall’s columned grandeur makes doing business with tellers down below at once intimate and charged. Far from being jarring, intense contrasts bring each side into focus all the more.

So it is with the relationship between California’s built and natural terrain.

To be sure, the physical landscape around us plays the starring role: those mountains and beaches and forests and creeks are at the core of the vaunted California Dream that, elusive and infinitely variable though it might be, entices one generation after the next, with different cues for different cultures. But pause for a moment to think: would Point Reyes be so mystical, so uniquely alluring, if it weren’t a convenient Eden within forty miles of San Francisco’s towers and the bungalows of the Oakland hills? Similarly, the blue perfection of San Diego Bay is heightened by the Hotel del Coronado’s impossibly white swirls—just as the exotic rigor of Tehachapi Pass holds your memory because of the tight-packed subdivisions that crowd in abruptly as you begin your descent into Los Angeles.

The sensations aren’t all rhapsodic; forces of nature can seem especially harrowing in light of the architectural stakes: imagine San Francisco’s Coit Tower snapped loose from Telegraph Hill by an earthquake, or the Spanish make-believe of Santa Barbara shaken fiercely into dust. Fire and mudslides claim Malibu homes. “Wracked by floods, droughts, and earthquakes, in terms of safety Los Angeles might just as well be perched on the simmering upper slopes of Vesuvius,” wrote *The New Yorker’s* Brendan Gill, one of many outsiders who have lingered on the apocalyptic in describing what they see stretched along

the Pacific Coast, “but it doesn’t matter: nothing is as outrageous and everlasting as a dream.”

So our structures provide shelter, yes, but also a context for understanding what California might mean. They are manifestations of the state’s different facets, the forms its image has taken over time, embodiments of why people come here and the lives they strive to create. And, as this long overdue collection shows, they’re a source of inspiration for writers to describe and critique the larger social realm.

One enduring strain of Californian design—real and imagined—is utopianism, the sense here that anything is possible not just in terms of personal lifestyle, but architecturally and urbanistically as well. This is true literally in the case of Edgar Chambless, who, we’re told in a florid 1914 *Sunset* profile by Milo Hastings, was a “half-blind” inventor who “built the blocks of civilization into new playhouses of the mind” by conceiving in elaborate detail the notion of a continuous house that, if it were to stretch and snake three thousand miles, could house the state’s entire population of the time. The idea initially came to Chambless on the long-gone Angel’s Flight funicular in Los Angeles, Hastings recounts, and his intent is not to mock; he’s intrigued by the potential of a scenario where, among other things, all necessary food could be raised within three miles of “this ultra-urban civilization of the endless house.”

Far-fetched? Not in our age, when the locavore movement gains strength with each harvest. And no more so than the plastic-tubing houses of Ernest Callenbach’s 1975 novel *Ecotopia*, in which families happily fashion “foam-type moldable plastic” into spaces as long or narrow or tall as desired: “the fact that walls and ceiling merge into one another can make for unease at first, yet it is snug and secure too.” And Chambless’s vision was a foretaste as

well of the supercharged work of Zaha Hadid, winner of the 2004 Pritzker Architecture Prize, the profession's highest honor.

Besides, think of all the fanciful worlds that in California exist: the Los Angeles homes drawing inspiration from Hollywood stage sets, the picture-book bohemia of Carmel-by-the-Sea, the crazed and scavenged exuberance of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, which, in Robert Duncan's wonderful poem "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," live as:

the great mitred structure rising
out of squalid suburbs where the
mind is beaten back to the traffic, ground
down to the drugstore...

This is a deft dismissal of all those other California buildings, the mundane and dreary and overbearing ones. Duncan addresses in passing what other writers have dwelt on: a strain of *anti*-utopianism, the conviction that things have changed and not for the better, and from here it will only get worse. Herb Caen made an art of this in the 1960s and '70s, writing column after column on "The Vertical Earthquake"—or, in the column reprinted here, the "Edifice Wrecks" of developers and politicians and how "soon all will be new, bright, shiny and soulless." At this instant, I'll wager, someone is writing or saying the very same thing.

The purpose of this anthology is not to unspool a chronological history of the state's architectural landmarks, or to present a full roster of the designers who have mattered most. There are flavorful profiles of Frank Gehry and Bernard Maybeck—two imaginative iconoclasts born sixty-seven years apart, each absurdly romantic in his own way—but no reference to San Francisco's accomplished George Kelham of the 1920s or Santa Monica's ever-provocative Thom Mayne of today. The Golden Gate Bridge is rendered in loving

prose, and the restored mission of San Luis Rey—but not the Transamerica Pyramid, or the State Capitol, or the City Beautiful extravaganzas of San Diego’s Balboa Park.

And that’s fine: California is a different creature than Chicago or New York City, two locales where the civic identity is bound up in structural drama, skyscraping heights; “Disneyland must be regarded as the most important single piece of construction in the West in the past several decades,” architect Charles Moore argued with a straight face in his classic 1964 essay “You Have to Pay for the Public Life.” Moore at the time was involved in planning and designing the Californian icon of the decades to come: Sea Ranch, a landscape stretched across the remote Sonoma coast with a design that works hard to disappear, the most lauded piece of architecture there being a rambling collage of low-slung condominiums clad in weathered planks, windows angling for a view while courtyards offer outdoor space sheltered from the ever-present wind.

Sea Ranch also embodies what lies at the heart of California’s most inventive architecture: the quest to create places where we can settle as close to nature as possible, life flowing indoors and out, with a minimum amount of (apparent) fuss.

Once this occurred naturally, with tribes like the Achumawi, who would share a communal winter house (“which was really a sort of cave or cellar dug out of the ground and roofed over with sod,” we’re told by Jaime de Angulo in this anthology’s first piece). In *Ramona*, that sepia-tinged evocation of Mexican California, Helen Hunt Jackson dwells lovingly on an arched veranda from which spill vines alive with canaries and finches: “It must have been eighty feet long, at least, for the doors of five large rooms opened on it.” Fast-forward from 1884 to the 1940s and we meet the California designer who probably has shaped America’s built landscape more than anyone else, residential impresario Cliff May.

May's forte, like Frank Lloyd Wright's, was the single-family home; he also had Wright's flair for self-promotion, flying his own airplane and boasting of never having been a registered architect. But unlike Wright, he had no aspirations toward city making on a grander scale. May perfected the ranch house, with its breezeways and sliding doors and unencumbered rooms, adding suave drama along the way: "Rooms fold into one another and out onto terraces and enclosed patios," Brendan Gill wrote. "A true ranch-house of the nineteenth century was the main structure in a cluster of buildings that were flung up any which way...May has perfected an apparent randomness of plan that convincingly resembles that cluster and evokes the simplicities of an earlier, more hospitable, and (we may pretend) more affectionate time." These were houses built on the premise that change happens somewhere else, that here you are in control and at ease—which is why ranch houses spread far beyond California into regions much less suited to this version of the good life. The same thing happened with the rough-hewn look of Sea Ranch, part shed and part fort, which cast its spell on anyone who wanted to go back to the land yet also be in the intellectually stylish know. "I'd drive up a rise on some dead straight Kansas highway," Moore's then-partner William Turnbull told writer David Littlejohn, "and sure enough, there it would be: another Sea Ranch condo, out in the middle of the prairie where none of that stuff made sense."

In our new millennium, as a shared awareness of finite resources seems finally to be sinking in, adventurous design has moved away from individual houses for individual families. This won't come as news to anyone who has encountered the farthest-flung subdivisions in California, the ones with the highest foreclosure rates. Big-picture utopianism is back in style: the quest for sustainable design, architecture conceived with an environmental

sensibility. It's a shift going on across the globe; California's particular twist is to exult in the potential of what might be. Seize the day. Change the norms.

A pioneer in this field is Sim Van der Ryn—briefly the California State Architect in the 1970s, and ever since a proponent of “green” architecture so far ahead of the curve that even now he stands well outside the mainstream. In an essay included in this volume he describes how, when competing to design the headquarters of a purveyor of solar power systems, he pulled out a watercolor kit and “spent a day on the barren site...letting the site speak to me through my eyes and hands as I sketched.” What he heard would make the Achumawi and Helen Hunt Jackson happy: “Why not make the building truly invisible and adapted to the hot summers by using a sod roof, arbors to shade the south wall,” and ultimately, “leave the highway behind...and enter another reality?” He got the job.

Projects like this can seem an indulgent sideshow, wide-eyed California feeling good about itself. But then you see these principles, the long pursuit of making earth and building one, play out with a \$488 million budget and international acclaim in the California Academy of Sciences designed by Italy's Renzo Piano and covered by the world's largest living roof, a terrain of indigenous wildflowers that curves up and over the attractions inside—new hillocks in Golden Gate Park. “It's a landscape that witnesses what is underneath it,” Piano tells writer Karen Steen in one of the final pieces here, and with it the notion of “sustainability” gains a romantic tinge, none the less authentic for the fact that the setting is a forested park imposed upon sand dunes a century ago.

So as you read these pieces—straight profiles, science fiction, novelistic riffs, and historic surveys—don't look for a single grand story to evolve. That's not California, and it never has been. Our narrative is compression and release, high hopes and ominous fears, dutiful city building and idiosyncratic joys. Above all, buildings that represent the aspirations

or perseverance of a family, a culture, a class. And if you wonder what's coming next, you aren't alone. The story has only begun.