

### **What Can Fiction Teach Us about California Architecture?**

When selecting pieces for *Frozen Music: A Literary Exploration of California Architecture*, I received a wealth of suggestions about scholarly studies, essays, memoirs, travelogues, novels, and poems that reflect on compelling structures throughout the state. Ideas for suitable pieces came from experts in countless disciplines, as well as from the thoughtful and clear-eyed members of the Heyday staff. Over many months, I began to see that works of fiction told some of the strongest stories about California architecture. The stylistic invention possible in the novel or short story mirrored the artistry present in homes, public structures, neighborhoods, and civic monuments from Lassen County to San Diego. Fiction's fusion of imagination with observation turned out to serve architecture well.

What insights into the intersection of architecture with California's cultures do fictional works provide? A look at the four pieces of prose fiction included in *Frozen Music* offers a few provisional answers.

Romance in a Victorian vein dominates *Ramona*, an excerpt of which appears toward the beginning of *Frozen Music's* survey of architecture. Helen Hunt Jackson soaks her tale of Mexican California in abundant sentimentality but nonetheless presents a credible vision of community as Californians established it on the margins of indoors and outdoors. The novel's verandas, loggias, vines, and gardens embody a nineteenth-century American appreciation of Southern California as an ideal setting for lives of pleasure and leisure. Jackson imagines that those lives unfolded in and around buildings resembling Mediterranean villas. When flowers surrounding Señora Moreno's adobe homestead recall "a stone balcony full of growing musk"<sup>1</sup> back in Seville, the comparison of New World structures with Old World ones becomes explicit. However, *Ramona's* depiction of the disempowerment and anger of Californios following American annexation of the region

suggests that these lives and homes may not have neatly imitated the privileged circumstances of Europeans after all. Throughout this story, grievance intrudes upon beauty and conflict undermines repose. Jackson states of Señora Moreno:

It gave her unspeakable satisfaction, when the Commissioners, laying out a road down the valley, ran it at the back of her house instead of past the front....Her enjoyment of this never flagged. Whenever she saw, passing the place, wagons or carriages belonging to the hated Americans, it gave her a distinct thrill of pleasure to think that the house turned its back on them.<sup>2</sup>

In moments such as this, Helen Hunt Jackson allows her reader to see the practical, political import, in addition to the romantic appeal, of the architecture she describes.

John Fante's responses to architecture are, by contrast, representative of a darkly urban twentieth century. In *Ask the Dust*, catastrophe finds a fitting home in the buildings and streets of Los Angeles. The reality of earthquakes in this part of the world draws our attention to the variety of local structures: "The frame buildings could stand a quake. They merely shook and writhed, but they did not come down. But look out for the brick places. Here and there were evidences of the quake; a tumbled brick wall, a fallen chimney."<sup>3</sup> A manic, grotesque hilarity follows these architectural observations:

They wouldn't get me, they'd never catch me inside a brick building. I was a coward, but that was my business. Sure I'm a coward, talking to myself, sure I'm a coward, but you be brave, you lunatic, go ahead and be brave and walk around under those big buildings. They'll kill you. Today, tomorrow, next week, next year, but they'll kill you and they won't kill me.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside this comic view of the city, Fante leaves no doubt that an earthquake signals disaster, initially for buildings, but principally for people: "I saw it happen. I saw the dead carried out. I saw the blood and the wounded."<sup>5</sup> This threatening and ominous California

vigorously challenges the embrace of architectural fantasy in *Ramona*. Fante shows us the human consequences of failed architectural resilience.

In “Living in Plastic Tubing,” from *Ecotopia*, Ernest Callenbach prefigures our contemporary desire to create architecture that is in harmony with nature instead of at odds with it. Callenbach refers to modular construction and “integrated systems,”<sup>6</sup> evincing a concern for structural resilience that is normally the province of engineers, not novelists. Callenbach’s glimpse of the future returns even buildings made of synthetic materials to their origins: “Like all plastics manufactured in Ecotopia, the extruded houses can be broken up and thrown into biovats, digested by micro-organisms into fertilizer sludge, and thus recycled onto the fields from whence their materials came.”<sup>7</sup> This controlled disintegration offers a more hopeful prospect for change in architecture than the deadly, crumbling apartment blocks seen in *Ask the Dust*.

A chaotic kind of improvisation transforms architecture in “Skinner’s Room” by William Gibson. The density of Gibson’s account of additions and alterations to the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge surpasses anything in Callenbach’s futuristic construction practices or Fante’s freakish, disastrous Los Angeles. Through its accumulation of fragmentary scenes and views, “Skinner’s Room” attests to an architecture of collage. Makeshift places of business, for instance, produce endless commentary on the original form of the Bay Bridge:

The bridge’s bones, its stranded tendons, are lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, shooting galleries, pinball arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with damp-stained years of men’s magazines, chili joints, premises of unlicensed denturists, fireworks stalls, cut bait sellers, betting shops, sushi bars, purveyors of sexual appliances, pawnbrokers, wonton counters, love hotels, hotdog stands, a tortilla factory, Chinese greengrocers, liquor stores, herbalists, chiropractors, barbers, tackle shops, and bars.<sup>8</sup>

Gibson piles detail upon detail, heaping up divergent adaptations of a structure whose purposes have shifted. The acts of self-definition and self-preservation witnessed in *Ramona* and *Ask the Dust* seem circumscribed and precise in comparison with Gibson's jumbled assortment of builders doing what they need to do, architecturally or otherwise, to survive on and within their bridge.

Architectural resilience addresses situations successively personal, domestic, and communal. Fiction underlines the urgency of this "making do" by pointing to architecturally problematic times and places with a starkness and energy missing in many nonfiction accounts of architecture as adaptation.

#### Notes

1. Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1914), 18.
2. Jackson, *Ramona*, 16.
3. John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 102.
4. Fante, *Ask the Dust*, 103.
5. Ibid.
6. Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1975), 123.
7. Callenbach, *Ecotopia*, 125.
8. William Gibson, "Skinner's Room," in *Visionary San Francisco*, ed. Paolo Polledri (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1990), 155.