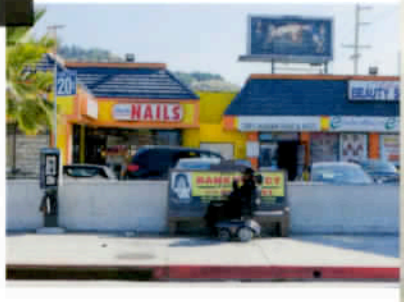
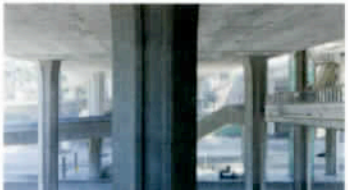
Conversations on Urban Speculation
in Los Angeles and Beyond

NO MORE PLAY

MICHAEL MALTZAN



Edited by
Jessica Varner



USC UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
HATJE CANTZ

been twenty-one or twenty-two years, does this city continue to hold, does it continue to be resonant in your work?

CO: I think the everydayness of the city and how I traverse it is still fascinating to me. I like the subtle and not-so-subtle changes that happen in the city—for example, watching yet another Metro line being built through Exposition Park and driving down Jefferson Boulevard, since I teach over in Culver City. I am a very habitual person: when I find a dry cleaner, I go to that dry cleaner and I develop a relationship with that dry cleaner. I have the same relationship with this place, and I cannot imagine it not being part of my every day. I will go somewhere and say, "Oh, wow, this changed." It is never unsatisfying on a visual level, whether I am photographing it or not, because I am always photographing it in my mind; there are millions of photographs that are made constantly that are never really made. That is just the way that I deal with the space and the way that I have come to be a part of Los Angeles.

CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Conversation with
Sarah Whiting

MICHAEL MALTZAN: EVERYONE HAS SOME RELATIONSHIP TO LOS ANGELES THROUGH THEIR OWN NARRATIVES OR INTERESTS IN THE CITY. I KNOW YOU HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT ISSUES OF THE CITY FOR A LONG TIME—CHICAGO, LOS ANGELES—BUT NOW YOU ARE LIVING IN HOUSTON. HOUSTON ACTUALLY HAS SOME SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS TO LOS ANGELES, BUT EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, TO THE CONTEMPORARY CITY. HOW HAVE YOU BEEN THINKING ABOUT CITIES, AND WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INTERESTED IN PLACES LIKE HOUSTON AND POTENTIALLY PLACES LIKE LOS ANGELES?

Sarah Whiting: I have to say it from the get-go: I am not an expert on LA. I have been there frequently, but often on family-related trips, so it is always a completely different way to be in a city: trips focused on nieces, as opposed to urbanism.

MM: Another kind of bubble. *[laughter]*

SW: It's funny you say that because, in fact, I am very taken by cities that can be understood as a series of bubbles that

are up tight against one other (and I see LA as one of these cities—Houston is definitely another). I don't like to refer to these bubbles as neighborhoods—I very much want to avoid reifying the neighborhood, which is always accepted (without question by the left as much as by the right) as the best unit. I'd like to see cities reimagined without resorting to this neighborhood default and the bubble, which is bigger than a neighborhood, offers a good start.

What I don't like about LA, which is the same thing that other people do not like about LA, is the amount of driving and the amount of space it covers, which is precisely the sprawl issue. And speaking as someone who doesn't drive much at all, I can attest that it is a real impediment.

Let me step back for a moment. My general interest in urbanism is in big things and how they fit in to a city. Questions such as, "How do you acquire enough land to insert something big in a city?" and "What does it do once it is there?" When I was an undergraduate, I researched the parks in Paris done under Baron Haussmann: the Bois de Boulogne, Bois de Vincennes, Parc Monceau, Parc Montsouris, and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont. Three were in the center of Paris, deeply embedded in the city fabric, similar to how Central Park was put in Manhattan. Questions arose about how the city absorbed that kind of insertion and what it did to the city, economically and politically—not to mention what it did socially and psychologically to Paris in the late nineteenth century.

MM: Since you do speak so much about scale of the city and big city plans, Los Angeles is a big city no matter how you define it. It is the second largest city in the United States, with an economically powerful metropolitan population. In fact, it is the fourteenth largest regional area globally, yet the city has never had a big plan. In many ways, Los Angeles has been constitutionally averse to larger plans. Is that, in your mind, a problem for a city like Los Angeles? Or is the lack of that plan at the same time essential to its identity in your mind?

SW: I think the lack of that plan is essential to its identity. It is also an issue in Houston; there is no comprehensive plan and no zoning. I think you can see it as a problem because it may be one of the reasons why there is no psychological legibility to the city. Or—and this is where I am going to put on my optimism pin—you can see it as an

opportunity. Okay, if you don't have a comprehensive plan, is there a way of understanding the city? And does that actually allow a way for the city to develop more productively than if it were prescribed by a plan? Personally, I think that the comprehensive plan is an interesting tool—not necessarily negative, but an opportunity in its own right.

Both LA and Houston have pockets that are too big to be neighborhoods, and yet they are not completely autonomous cities. It might be less true in LA, where the small areas are either scaled to be neighborhoods, or scaled to be cities. For example, Santa Monica is obviously a city unto itself and has its own identity. In Houston, you get districts, not incorporated cities. And *district* is not the best word either, but I'm still trying to figure out what the best word is for understanding the scale of these bubbles. It is difficult because they actually have specific identities. One in Houston is the Texas Medical Center, which has thousands of cancer specialists. It is the biggest medical center in the world, adjacent to Rice University and to the biggest city park.

You have these big districts that are characterized primarily institutionally, comparable to the scale of infrastructure. They cannot be cut off from the rest of Houston, yet they act as separate districts. Houston and the Medical Center are codependent. This bigger scale presents questions as to how we resolve the primary issues politically, socially, and also economically, and how we resolve society at that larger scale without having to break down the scale of the town.

MM: First, in regard to the parks in Paris, you might argue that those parks are in some ways more autonomous entities. You can dispute that parks are different partially because they are landscape, in contrast to the built environment, and also because they are very carefully circumscribed.

SW: Yes, in fact, the parks are at a scale at which you actually cannot comprehend their contour. But each one is autonomous as a park while also connecting to very different adjacent parts of the city. These are big insertions in the city that act as islands but also as connective tissue.

As a comparison, urban campuses act almost at the scale of the city. Rice University in Houston is three hundred acres. It is similar to the Parisian parks because there is a real sense of its border, even though it is only marked by hedges.

The edge of the campus is marked by a trail that people run or walk on and by hedges that run the three-mile circumference of the university. It is also bordered by the Museum District, the medical district, Hermann Park, a small commercial area, and a residential area. All of a sudden this one thing—Rice's campus—connects these separate districts. You may be able to map it, but when you are in it, it is really too big to get a sense of the whole.

The Medical Center and Rice University are interesting because they do live autonomously. They are big enough to generate their own economies, and they do not depend on the neighborhoods around them, but their physical positions create very particular possibilities for those neighborhoods.

MM: Los Angeles has many places that hold the same conditions that you are talking about. Those parks or districts are very often at the same time seam, threshold, and border.

SW: Absolutely, and unfortunately we have valorized the kind of heterogeneity and small-scale juxtaposition in urbanism as in Jane Jacobs's formula. It seems people think the best idea in urbanism is a neighborhood. I think larger scale juxtapositions are far more interesting and applicable to contemporary cities.

It scares so many people off when you have something that is really big. The original World Trade Center towers in Manhattan were extremely interesting in relationship to the street grid. After the towers came down, there was an almost universal reaction to restore the small street grid. I believe that we're finally far enough away now from urban renewal that we can start to go back and think of the big scale again without being frightened of the problems that came out of it.

MM: Since post–World War II, freeways have been the big scale characterizing Los Angeles. It continues to be the one cohesive urban gesture that—when viewed from the air, through maps, or even while traversing the city—stands out from the sprawling fabric. The larger districts that you are talking about: would you categorize them as more comparable to large-scale infrastructure?

SW: Not exactly. When I think of the freeway, I see a network as opposed to a district—a big-scale insertion in the city. Networks create a completely different set of relationships as opposed to the singularity of the districts to which I am referring. But perhaps our idea of infrastructure should

be reconsidered. In the contemporary debate, you could possibly say there are cultural infrastructures and institutional infrastructures, and they might be ways that cities can offer an identity to other structures in the city. If the larger-scale cultural and institutional amenities are linked in some way, whether it is formal, economic, or through the politics of city boards, it could almost be even more powerful than a network of freeways. The current-day cultural city has not capitalized on cultural infrastructure as a new model of productive urbanism.

MM: Interesting, cultural infrastructure. In our conversations, we are trying to understand what role infrastructure might have in a much broader way and what role it might have in the future. Los Angeles is gaining a lot of momentum in more traditional forms of infrastructure. High-speed rail is emerging, light rail lines are expanding, and bicycle lanes are even gaining momentum. Los Angeles is moving toward becoming a connected city physically, but perhaps we are thinking of infrastructure too narrowly. Can you explain further about how you define cultural infrastructure or perhaps give an example?

SW: The Near South Side Plan of Chicago, which was a plan that was formed from about 1946 through the sixties, was essentially a grassroots effort that stemmed from two institutions: the Michael Reese Hospital and the Illinois Institute of Technology. They both needed to figure out how to build their campuses on the Near South Side of Chicago, one of the biggest slums in North America during the late thirties. They formed the organization called the South Side Planning Forum to plan the seven-square-mile area of Chicago just south of the Loop, calling it the Near South Side Plan. The proposal included institutions such as the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, a series of significant black churches, and the Chicago Housing Authority. The collective was essentially an assembly of self-interested organizations: cultural, institutional, and commercial. Each institution was connected by board members and vested parties with a certain degree of overlap. Those with a pessimistic view might say they were all nefariously interconnected, but if you look at it positively, you could say that through self-interest, they all fed off of one another, creating a new model for urbanism and cultural infrastructure.

Looking at the model today, it is not just the institutional connection, but larger districts like the medical district

in Houston that operate at the same level of cultural infrastructure. They create a new overlap and feed off institutional collaboration in a productive way for the city.

MM: Infrastructure generally connects horizontally, but in a deeply separated city like Los Angeles, you begin to see many different strata in that sprawl—social strata, cultural strata, historical strata, and economic strata. Very often a group or a set of people will move against that horizontality into another stream, interweaving in the city. For example, education in Los Angeles: as families move up economically into the middle class, they move almost immediately from the infrastructure of the public school system to the private school system.

SW: Exactly. We all have to acknowledge the significance of economic relationships, political relationships, and social relationships as they define our city. It is not anti-formal, absolutely not! In our profession, there is generally a split between people who will only talk about form and people who will only talk about politics and economics. We're now at an interesting moment because if infrastructure is a connector, then you have to acknowledge it exists on all registers.

MM: Do you think that in Los Angeles there is the possibility for this new type of infrastructure to step away from its formality, maybe through technologies such as social networking?

SW: I think that Los Angeles does have informality already, like Houston. Both cities strangely feel like small towns. In another words, it feels like there were five families that dominated the founding of Houston. They founded all of the original institutions and remain a significant presence in the city, resulting in informality that stems from the city's familial origins. We could complain about the "small town-ness," or we could understand that the founders and institutions construct a public sphere that isn't purely seated within government.

MM: Right, which isn't necessarily wrong. Perhaps it more accurately reflects the capitalist city.

SW: In the US, there is an obligation for philanthropy because of tax benefits, but also because of commitment, which means that networking isn't purely for self-gain.

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Los Angeles / Iwan Baan
17_Malibu
18_The Grove
19_Americana
20_Universal City Walk
21_Universal Studios
22_Jewelry District
23_East Los Angeles

But maybe I am too optimistic that large-scale philanthropy has big benefits.

MM: No, it is not so much that it is overly optimistic. But the challenge for Los Angeles is the control of cultural infrastructure, which is held by very few individuals.

SW: Right.

MM: There are still many layers and levels of intense culture throughout the city, and a key factor of infrastructure is connection. The question is how you could connect that broader infrastructural network to the cultural network that controls a great deal of the funding.

SW: Exactly, though I would say one thing to keep in mind is that the physical infrastructure that we are talking about isn't quite as democratic as it might seem. It was typically driven (no pun intended) through poorer neighborhoods; and also, access to physical infrastructure was not always equal, either, even though we would like to believe it is a public amenity. But nonetheless, it is true that there is generally greater access to physical infrastructure than there is to cultural infrastructure. In Washington, DC, all of the museums are free.

MM: Los Angeles generally has paid entrance to cultural institutions.

SW: It gets back to the topic of access.

MM: Well, you can say that access to infrastructure in Los Angeles in many ways relates to the city's organization of separated classes and districts. But within that access is the collective public subject. The community as a whole is often more anonymous than the larger organism of the city.

SW: Well, the collective public subject is the audience for the city. The subject is always understood to be singular (if you think of the subject being, say, a museum-goer, viewing an art object), and historically, that subject is not only singular but is typically male and bourgeois. What complicates theorization of the contemporary city is that, in order for the city to operate, it generally has a subject that isn't so controlled or so clearly identified. We have to figure out some way of talking about the public. And this is also the problem of the term *community* because you can't talk about it as if it's a singular thing that we all

know. The terminology of the collective public subject is an attempt to always be reminded that it is a heterogeneous, collective body as opposed to a singular body.

MM: In the idea of the collective public subject, it seems to necessitate or at least relate to an idea of open or public space. Is that potentially the forum of the collective public subject?

SW: That's an interesting question: if there is a space for the collective public subject. I think that, for me, is again why institutions are so fascinating. They are at once public and private. For the most part you can go onto a university campus or onto a medical campus. They may have restricted hours of accessibility and restrict certain stereotypes, but for the most part you can wander in. The leakier, more accessible the ground plane of an institution is, the more interesting it is in contemporary society compared to the traditional public space of, say, plazas and streets.

MM: The questions of whether the space for the collective subject can occur, where it might occur, and how you produce access, are where you begin to build cultural experience in the city. It is the alter ego to a separated contemporary city. What, then, is the potential experience of that future of collective experience? Are we really looking for a higher level of integrated experience between cultures? It seems like one of the fundamental issues for a city like Los Angeles.

SW: I think that is where we have to begin experimenting. Jürgen Habermas's idea was that there were spaces and media in the city that are made for the public realm. I think that if you understand the collective public subject as participating in a kind of conversation, the question would be: how does that work, and where in a contemporary city does that occur? Is it something that is mediated, which means that one should focus on different media? Is it something that has to be created spatially? I think it has to be fostered on many different levels. If you create a public space, there is a good chance that you'll get five people in that space who are either listening to an iPod or talking on a cell phone, so they won't necessarily be brought together. And so how can we deal with that challenge—spatially, formally, and with media?

MM: One side of it would be that what we can hope for is a collective experience. In Los Angeles, our collective experience tends to be

a space where there are many of us having simultaneous but not interconnected experiences, such as on the freeway, in a movie theater, or even at the beach, where we are all together, looking in one direction. It produces one kind of a set of connections, but does that experience need to create a higher level of conflict or connection, true two-way conversation?

SW: Or even of exchange, just plain old exchange. Oddly, all of the examples that you listed do not force you to have an opinion or an exchange. One of the more surprisingly public arenas in the US is the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles]. We are all forced to sit in a line, we are all treated exactly the same, and the level of bureaucracy is something that we can all respond to and complain about. It is a common denominator that leads to a surprising amount of exchange. Think of the security line at the airport. When bureaucracy inconveniences everyone equally, it actually fosters genuine exchange.

Part of the question is, even if you create a possibility for exchange, oftentimes there won't be much opinion put on the table. So how do we provide that opportunity? I am not thinking just architecturally, but as a teacher running a school: how do you encourage people to have opinions and learn how to exchange them in a productive way? It ends up being the biggest challenge for the twenty-first century.

So what role do architects have in *public exchange* and *public interaction*? Is it that we create places and spaces for those exchanges? Is it that we contribute to those exchanges? We don't want to say we should create traffic jams on the highway in order for people to have an exchange; that's not an effective way of dealing with the problem. But if media now is so streamlined and individualized so that everyone's listening to their Pandora as opposed to listening to a radio program, how do we get the people to interact and have a collective experience again?

MM: The problem leads us back to, and puts a great deal of pressure on, the idea of a cultural infrastructure. Maybe you have to find ways to teach people to reconnect to a debate before that debate is produced by the cultural infrastructure.

SW: Right. In order for it to be spontaneous, it first has to be taught. One of our possibilities is to encourage the construction of institutions—whether they are cultural,

commercial, or educational—and to encourage that the possibilities of exchange and interaction are built into them. Perhaps through cultural infrastructure in the metropolis, architects can have a role again in forming relationships on many different levels, from the scale of politics to the scale of the individual.

URBAN LANDSCAPE

Conversation with
Charles Waldheim

MICHAEL MALTZAN: EVERYONE HAS SOME RELATIONSHIP TO LOS ANGELES THROUGH THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES OR INTERESTS IN THE CITY. I KNOW YOU HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT ISSUES OF THE CITY FOR A LONG TIME—WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO LOS ANGELES, AND DO YOU HAVE ANY GOOD STORIES OR A PAST WITH THE CITY?

Charles Waldheim: LA is a laboratory and a place of urban research for me. Part of why I think LA is such an interesting laboratory right now is that the basic dynamics are still in play. We will continue to spread horizontally, and we will continue to be automobile-based. We will have both edge conditions and increasing density at the center. It is all in play. I think of LA as the most interesting city in the world for contemporary cultural production.

MM: In talking with Sarah Whiting, we discussed cultural infrastructure as the combination of institutions, philanthropy, and design, which can address much larger questions and problems in cities. It creates a mechanism potentially to deal with the void urban planning has left, as a way of taking on the city. Los Angeles and cities like it have created such a dynamic urban environment as a result of the lack of planning. People might disagree, but it's been a laissez-faire, make-with-it-what-you-will landscape. In that void, design at the level of landscape and architectural projects has created the contemporary city.

Cities have grown as an accumulation of a series of projects producing a smaller-scale ecosystem. We are at a point in Los Angeles where there are so many increasing pressures on the city—such as density, economics, geography, and transportation—that the inevitability of

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-Sarah Whiting

architecture, design, and landscape to drive the city into its future may be at a critical moment, while urban planning in some form needs to be more present in the city. My question is: what form do you think planning should take now in a city that has been antagonistic to it?

CW: I do think cities look the way they do by virtue of history and economics as much as anything else. We know, even in a highly regulated environment, that if you have enough capital, everything is an exception. Post '68, planning has been built the way it has in North America to resist change. It has not been terribly effective in the places where change is happening, which makes it a bit of a dead end. Urban design is similarly caught in a kind of cul-de-sac because designers can only imagine hallucinatory density in a post-automobile city. The idea that we are all going to get out of our cars—really, that's the best we've got?

Landscape architects with an affinity for design culture have begun to fill the void of urban planning. It was a relatively new idea ten, twelve, fifteen years ago. And in Western Europe and North America, there were very few people who could speak for the public realm on design culture, and so the architects and leading design thinkers of the day on both sides of the Atlantic saw that they had space to play. All of a sudden landscape emerged as a medium that could solve any of these problems because it was flexible, it wasn't terribly expensive, it could have these environmental claims, and it could do something similar to planning. I think we are still in that moment, but we now have more than just two or three people thinking about landscape urbanism. We have a generation of landscape architects who are available, but I'm not terribly optimistic on the public sector side.

In this political context, we are still living in the era of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Irrespective of who is in the White House, we don't have education and health care as basic human rights yet, which means spatial considerations fall down the priority list, unfortunately. There are bigger problems to solve. And with all of the municipalities competing with one another for resources, the country seems at odds. Obviously, we should share resources and knowledge across watersheds and commit to regional planning, but I see planning on the defensive in almost every market that I look at. Even in New York City and Toronto, the success stories are from extra-agency mechanisms. Mayor Michael Bloomberg in New York does not go through the city planning bureaucracy to get the High Line done, and Mayor David Miller in Toronto does not go through the city planning

bureaucracy to get the waterfront rebuilt. Basically, design is being used to make a run around planning which is perceived to be incompetent, if not corrupt, and just ineffective somehow.

MM: In many cities, infrastructure has been the one place where large-scale thinking about the cities does exist for better or worse. Some are private infrastructures like the railroad, and some of them are more or less public at a kind of über-agency level—for example, Caltrans in California. But there is a radically different scale between those large connective elements and another grain of planning or engagement that could happen in the city.

CW: Among the reasons Los Angeles is important in my own understanding of cities is because it provides this other set of models. You know, the old urban models don't really apply here, and it challenges us to rethink the existing model.

When the discussion around landscape urbanism first occurred twelve or fifteen years ago, there was a lot of enthusiasm about infrastructure. There were the examples of Catalonia, Barcelona, the emergence of the Dutch and even the French examples. These super-large waterfront and transportation infrastructure projects in Europe put architects at coequal status with the engineers. Those projects in turn fueled enthusiasm on this side of the Atlantic.

Basically, I have a glass-half-full mentality. On one hand, I think it's true that infrastructure represents one of the last, best hopes we have of working in the public realm. It is a transdisciplinary effort. It's not just architects, it's not just landscape architects, and it's not just engineers, so it doesn't focus on municipal boundaries; therefore, it can deal with environmental issues. It can deal with programmatic and density issues that smaller projects cannot. It allows for larger regional thinking. So all of that's on the plus side of the glass half full.

On the other hand, I am cautiously pessimistic. In the broader political economy, we refuse to fund public works. Even the progressive left-leaning political figures who want to do the right thing in infrastructure often end up having it fall down their list of priorities over and over again. And after ten or fifteen years of enthusiasm for infrastructure as an intellectual topic, we have yet to see examples in North America come to fruition.

Infrastructure still represents the best hope that we've got, and perhaps Los Angeles could be the place where infrastructure gets played out in a more robust way. But I do not know what projects could lead the pack.

MM: The question is whether infrastructure has the ability to change. Infrastructural projects are generally enormous and executed in a narrow and focused range of time with strong catalytic effects—freeways obviously being one of those examples. Perhaps there is a way to redefine infrastructure so that it is a more iterative and accumulative idea that happens over a longer period of time.

CW: Absolutely, I agree completely. Accumulative and individual decisions organized around a single infrastructure could possibly change the city. Another option is to take a single-purpose infrastructure—both new and legacy infrastructure—and repurpose it or hybridize it. Right? If we hybridize, we could move the conversation away from single-use infrastructure such as the watershed, which is about taking water away quickly, and ask what else we would like infrastructure to be able to do. Or, if you were to look at transportation infrastructure and to then map water onto that, or vice versa. And then again, Los Angeles would be a perfect example for this work.

My instinct would be that it would be necessary to have to go around any of the existing bureaucracy. Otherwise you would get the reaction: "We're the water guys, we don't deal with transit." Rethinking infrastructure would not be an easy task in the bureaucratic structure of Los Angeles or of any city for that matter!

I think we are very much back again at the problems of modernity; we still have mass culture and we still have millions of people in the metropolis. I would imagine we would want to focus on finding new models, and we would have to focus on models that incorporate automobility. New ideas about water, both on the production and consumption side. New thinking about where energy comes from and goes to. We do have some challenges, and there are certain persistent problems that are still ultimately design problems for the city.

MM: In terms of challenges, Los Angeles has the challenge of its infinite horizontality. Landscape has been the medium to take on the horizontal. But, arguably, in Los Angeles larger

landscape projects have been largely unsuccessful. There have been successful practitioners and successful intellectual moments in landscape, but, ironically, landscape has for the most part been absent as a real form in the city. Do you have any ideas as to why that might be?

CW: In the field of landscape there is a slipperiness of terms. Do you mean the stuff that was here before we got here, or the stuff that just grew up between the cracks? Or the stuff we designed? What you are asking about is the stuff we design.

If you look at Southern California, one of my questions has been: where is the leadership? And why hasn't landscape as a design medium been more present? On the other hand, in the lived experience of the place, how else could we describe it? It is a landscape. So if your definition of landscape includes billboards and beaches as a type of landscape, then of course LA is your medium. But if it's design culture, then it's lagging. It's not New York. It doesn't have the accumulation of capital and maybe the appetite of focusing the public realm in the same way. I think it's true that LA has less public open space per capita than most metropolitan areas.

MM: That's true, although if you look at the actual amount of open ground, we have plenty. In other cities, open land in the public domain is generally utilized as parkland. In Los Angeles, open space exists in a much more fragmented and dispersed way, in parking lots and underutilized yards. It aggregates itself in how you perceive it in a very different way.

CW: And the public space in LA is used, right? I mean the public realm: it's jogged and hiked upon and walked across and viewed from a car and viewed from an airplane. It's fundamental to the identity of the city. I question to what scale of transformation the open scattered parcels would aggregate to produce a larger landscape condition. It can't just be median planting and palm trees. I mean, nothing against palm trees or median planting.

MM: I'm starting an I Hate Palm Trees Club. *[laughter]*

CW: They are kind of shifty and unstable, and as an icon of the city, they are problematic.

MM: For me the only issue is their iconography. In Los Angeles palm trees stand to the outside

world as icons of the city and distill you to a cliché. Those mechanisms create an imbalance when you approach real issues in the city. Because when talking about landscape, people say, "Well, we have lots of palm trees." They give you a false sense of success.

CW: It reminds me of a conversation I had with Ken Smith last year when I was in Los Angeles. We spoke about how I was pleasantly surprised about how people at a cocktail party here dressed better than they would be in Manhattan. It puts to bed a certain set of mythologies in my mind about what Manhattan means and what LA means.

Part of that, having grown up in the suburbs myself, is fighting the stereotype that people in the suburbs have fewer friends, or they don't socialize as much, because there is less urban interaction. At one point in time, yes, the suburbs were more homogenous, but if you want the really good Thai food in Toronto, you don't go to the city center. It's in the burbs.

The idea that you need culture in the center or in the capital is a very old idea, and I think LA puts it to rest. In fact, you do experience culture, you do in fact have social networks, and you do in fact have family structures and friendships.

MM: Los Angeles has been characterized in a very clichéd way as the ultimate sprawl city; the city has continued to grow and almost infinitely increase its footprint on the land. Sprawl will continue, more and more people continue to come to a city like Los Angeles, but it does feel like we have hit a perimeter of the city. It's not a physical limit to the city, but it almost feels like it is a psychological limit to the city, beyond which you are no longer really in conceptual Los Angeles. As a result, there is a drive to reconsider building and rewriting the city itself. We will never be New York, but there is a greater level of density within the city that many people, even ten years ago, would never have imagined possible. Do you think Los Angeles has reached the case limit of development?

CW: I think it is an interesting question, both practically and intellectually, as to where the limit is. And Southern California is defined by systems that don't have any obvious boundaries. On the one hand, it's a historical tragedy that

the great natural resources of Southern California were just trodden and sold. But at the same time, I am not going to get too misty-eyed. This is the reality.

Some people argue that certain psychological points like gasoline prices in dollars will be the limit, or hours of commute. But the basic conditions for continued sprawl still exist. Land prices are incredibly cheap, oil prices are still incredibly low, the students at the business schools are still being taught that the shipping costs of goods and supplies are essentially nil. As long as that is still true, I think sprawl is going to continue.

What I find interesting, then, is what can we provide on the urban design side. The models that we have seen, mainly on the East Coast, are built environments where the automobile is not accommodated. Then people get out of the automobile. But automobility is going to persist, so what mechanisms are available to incentivize density where it's possible? Because I think we now have enough models within landscape urbanism and within the school of geography out here where we know that destinations, walkable environments that are "urban," are not a contradiction within a field which is really automobilebased. Those things go hand in hand.

I am very fortunate; I can live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and walk to work. Overall, though, the majority of people don't have that option. The combination of housing prices, gasoline prices, and the lack of affordable and subsidized transit means you default into automobility. Within that, we should focus on models in which walkable environments are points of destination, so you can get out of the automobile.

Another reason that I favor this approach is that it accounts for a Disney Concert Hall downtown. Downtown has a certain character, and there are certain kinds of things that are appropriate and can be supported there because it's not Santa Monica, or Hollywood, or X, or Y. So the question is: how do you reconcile that character with existing communities, and which programmatic pieces go where? Downtown has been slightly overpromised, but it's also used, right?

> **MM: Downtown is currently a district of architectural icons; at the same time, its use has increased over the past five years.**

CW: The icons are an example that you need to have catalytic projects. It is not as though there is going to be a sort of urban design district, where everybody's cornices line up and we all move back to the nineteenth century. But you have a piece of architecture or two or three pieces that represent

change, that represent something culturally new. So the question would be: how do we orchestrate individual architectural pieces in that overall field? And how do we deal with the existing historical fabric?

> **MM: I think that's one of the fallacies of Los Angeles: that it has no historical context, that it is an instant city that began only after World War II. Another fallacy is that we have no landscape. But there is green throughout the city—it is just overwhelmed by the concrete and asphalt. We instead need landscape that can work at the level of large, public, almost infrastructural projects that create the public realm. Do you think it is even possible or useful to define landscape and landscape architecture in Los Angeles?**

CW: It is clear in my mind that LA and Southern California deserve and need thriving landscape culture. Compared to the size of its market, its landscape culture is relatively lagging in terms of the intellectual leadership and the relative capacity of the field. In part, that's split between people who do great work designing at the scale of the garden and people who do great work designing at the scale of planning. But I think that's shifting. You see a generation of shops now that are really led by design intelligence at the highest level in Los Angeles, and are at a comfortable enough size to be able to take on larger projects.

> **MM: Another contemporary debate in landscape architecture is about resources and their place in the city. It is a critical discussion because we are starting to reach the breaking point on some of those resources. I don't know how you begin to talk about such a large conversation.**

CW: I would rather keep the conversation on the more practical: what can we do about the city that we live in? Let's solve the problems. I think, increasingly, the best practices are pretty clear. We now have a body of ten or twenty years of knowledge through which we can list the top ten things that you should do in terms of resource management or carbon or water. Resources and best practices are no longer that mysterious, actually. I think the challenge is the scalability to broader markets, or to broader political economies. I think within the disciplines, within the offices, we have to have the capacity for research and development. I think in schools we have a great obligation to be doing research to produce new models.

I think the way to go forward in a place like LA is going to be on a project-by-project basis. We don't know where the opportunities are going to come from. They will emerge from various places. But it is projects, not plans, that will be an apt method forward. There will be a project or two that will emerge that can catalyze change in the environmental and resource-management sector. And then the question will be: what next?

LAND USE

Conversation with
Matthew Coolidge

MICHAEL MALTZAN: WE ARE ASKING EVERYONE TO STEP OUT OF THEIR EXPERTISE AND TALK ABOUT WHAT IS PERSONALLY INTERESTING TO YOU ABOUT LOS ANGELES. WHAT ARE YOUR FASCINATIONS AND YOUR INTERESTS IN THE METROPOLIS OF LA?

Matthew Coolidge: It is easy to step out of my discipline because I do not really have one. I came here [to Los Angeles] in '92 and have been going back and forth from Southern California to the East Coast and points in between ever since.

St. Peter's Impression on Parking Lot from Film Angels and Demons, photo by Matthew Coolidge

As a teenager, I started coming out to California on summer vacations from school by Greyhound bus or whatever means possible. The thing that was most amazing to me when I first came to Southern California was the chaos. In fact, the riots of '92 occurred a few weeks after I first got here. I immediately thought, "Whoa, I didn't know American cities were capable of this anymore."

Obviously there are a lot of negative issues surrounding the riots or the civil unrest. But the thing that struck me as I drove around town in the midst of this was that it was like a big shopping spree where you did not need a credit card; people were getting new furniture, diapers, or bikes for their kids. There were other bad things, too, but there was a type of economic correction that was going on as part of the chaos, and the police were literally standing there doing nothing. Allowing it to happen, like it had to. It was an amazingly vivacious, exuberant, and horrific—but also spectacular—display of the potential of the place. It made it feel like Los Angeles was capable of dramatic change in this otherwise fairly tamped-down time in our history.

So that moment set the hook for me. I lived on the edge of Los Angeles in an anachronistic, ramshackle orange-grove town called Piru—an amazing place, really. It was like living in a historic Southern California booster myth place,