4 The Transportation Palimpsest

'A city built on transport'—like all truisms it offers a misleading truth, because it is persistently interpreted as referring only to automobile transport, and that interpretation is so trivial and so shallow historically that its use casts doubts on the right of the user to speak. Motorized transportation is almost as much of a recent epiphenomenon on the basic city of Los Angeles as it is in any other major metropolis. However, the less densely built-up urban structure of the Los Angeles basin has permitted more conspicuous adaptations to be made for motor transport than would be possible elsewhere without wrecking the city.

The fact that these parking-lots, freeways, drive-ins, and other facilities have not wrecked the city-form is due chiefly to the fact that Los Angeles has no urban form at all in the commonly accepted sense. But the automobile is not responsible for that situation, however much it may profit by it. The uniquely even, thin and homogeneous spread of development that has been able to absorb the monuments of the freeway system without serious strain (so far, at least) owes its origins to earlier modes of transportation and the patterns of land development that went with them. The freeway system is the third or fourth transportation diagram drawn on a map that is a deep palimpsest of earlier methods of moving about the basin.

In the beginning was the Camino Real, the Spaniards' military road (if anything so tenuous deserves so positive a name) with its military bases, missions, and asistencias, wandering with seasonal variations across the present Los Angeles area from south-east to north-west on its way to the northern presidios of Monterey and San Francisco. Its exact route seems pretty difficult to establish nowadays, though it is widely held to have followed something like the line of the present Wilshire Boulevard from the pueblo to the La Brea tar-pits (that is, from present downtown to Hancock Park) and then turned north over
the Cahuenga pass into the San Fernando Valley. By the time the
Yankees moved in, or very soon after, there must have been a well-
established track running down to San Pedro, along which the ox-drawn
carretas could rumble on their massive wheels, and by the end of
the sixties there began to be a well-beaten track branching off the Camino
Real to go down to Santa Monica, and so forth. But movement was
painfully slow; two days to Santa Monica, and in the memories of the
grandparents of men my own age it could take up to a week to get
into the downtown area from the farms south of Riverside with a
loaded wagon.

While transportation remained in this condition, the pueblo city
of Los Angeles could not hope to be more than a minor market-town
— so things could not be allowed to remain in that condition for long
after the ambitious Yankees arrived, and on this point there was
sufficient consensus for community action. However much the
pioneer railroad [30] down to the harbour at San Pedro may have
served the private ends of its chief promoters, Phineas Banning, owner
of the rancho-land where the new port would be built, the railway was
financed with public money — bond-issues by the City of Los Angeles
and the County. The line began operation in 1869, connecting the
business community in the city with deep-water anchorages at
Wilmington/San Pedro, where, after Banning's dredging activities,
there was eighteen feet draught clearance over the sand-bar.

Yet it now appears that the true importance of the Wilmington line
was less in its inherent usefulness than as a negotiable property or
bargaining-counter in the railroad deals of the next decade. When that
same business community discovered that the Southern Pacific line
from San Francisco to Yuma might ignore them and go straight across
the high desert, they could see only economic stagnation in a future
that would leave them disconnected from direct access to the trans-
contiental railroads — few cities bypassed by the main trunk routes
prospered. So they had to besmirch themselves again and the infant

Wilmington line was part of the king's ransom the Southern Pacific
extracted from Los Angeles before they would agree to divert their
line south over the Soledad pass, and down through the San Fernando
Valley into the pueblo and then east to San Bernardino and on to Yuma.

This arrangement was patently useful to the SP, who could bring
heavy equipment and materials ashore at Wilmington and up the
city's line, and then build out east and west from the pueblo, instead of
having to overland everything through the San Joaquin Valley from
San Francisco. The conclusion of the deal was also, as far as anyone can
judge, the most important single event in the history of the area after
the foundation of the pueblo in 1781, and considerably more con-
sequential than anything since.

The terms of the deal with the SP began to shape the future super-
city almost at once. Construction began in three directions from the
pueblo: north to San Fernando, east to Spadra en route to San
Bernardino, both as part of the transcontinental linkage, and south-east
to the vineyard colony at Anaheim — a quid pro quo for the County. The
first train ran from San Fernando to Spadra in 1874, and in the same
year Senator J. P. Jones of Nevada floated a rival company to build a
line from the pueblo to deep water at Santa Monica, to be connected
back inland with the SP's competitors, the Union Pacific. In the upshot
it was to be a decade before any transcontinental line beside the SP
came over the mountains into Los Angeles, but Jones's thwarted plan
gave Los Angeles the Santa Monica line.

These five lines radiating from the pueblo towards San Fernando,
San Bernardino, Anaheim, Wilmington, and Santa Monica constitute
the bones of the skeleton on which Greater Los Angeles was to be
built, the fundamentals of the present city where each of these old lines
is now duplicated by a freeway — on the San Bernardino freeway, tracks
run down the central reservation for some miles, so close is the
agreement between the rail and road networks. But these lines did more
than provide the skeleton, they brought the flesh. Subdivision of
adjoining land proceeded as fast as the laying of rails — construction of the Santa Monica line began in January 1873, and land sales began in Santa Monica itself in July the same year. More important, if the words of J.J. Warner in 1876 mean what they appear to mean, then commuting began almost as soon as the rails were down — 'Daily we go to breakfast in Los Angeles from San Bernardino, and back to its fountains and groves 'ere nightfall'. Before 1880 then, the railways had outlined the form of the city and sketched in the pattern of movement that was to characterize its peculiar style of life.

Shortly after 1880, too, the railroads were to bring in the Angelinos in something like their present quantities. Once the Santa Fé had come down the Cajon pass into San Bernardino from the desert, and then west to the pueblo in 1885, there were two genuinely competitive transcontinental systems serving the area, and in the ensuing rate-war, fares from Kansas City were at one point cut to one dollar — 'one single silver dollar'. The first great wave of immigration from the Middle West poured into Southern California and precipitated a land boom that lasted almost a decade. And although paper fortunes were made and lost with the usual legendary rapidity and parcels of land changed hands several times a day and all the rest of it, the final collapse of the boom seems to have been far less disastrous than in the normal scenario for such affairs; land speculation remains a major industry still. Yet, with a rising tide of human immigration coming in, and the process of land-subdivision proceeding with the usual US enthusiasm, why was the result not the usual outward sprawl from a central nucleus? The pueblo/downtown area did indeed concentrate the bulk of the population in the second half of the last century, but the nearer to the end of the century the less convincing its dominance — the immigrants who came in after 1885 tended to broadcast themselves more evenly across the face of the land.

In this trend a number of factors were involved. First, a very large proportion of the immigrant population came from thinly populated farming areas in the Middle West and their intention in California was to farm — they had the habits and the intentions of a dispersed way of living. They could settle anywhere that was served by water and transportation — and the transportation was there even before they arrived. Furthermore, the railway promoters worked closely with the subdividers, creating town-sites along the tracks. Some of these speculations faded away again, leaving only a pattern of pegs in the ground, marking the unbought lots. Others took root however, and formed centres of settlement and development with an economic and municipal life somewhat independent of downtown. But the speculators could not develop land that was not theirs to subdivide; the order in which the rancho lands were sold off by the grant holders and their successors was another dispersive factor; Santa Monica may have been subdivided in 1875, but adjoining San José de Buenos Aires just inland was not successfully subdivided until half a century later.

But the greatest dispersive factor is what is hinted at in Warner's apparent reference to commuting habits; given a railway system it was as convenient to live in San Bernardino or Santa Monica as on the outer fringes of the central city, especially where those fringes were ill-served by any form of transportation, as they were until after the railway age had begun. Judge Widney's Spring and Sixth Street line opened operations with its horse-drawn street-cars only in 1874, to connect the then business area with the fashionable residential zone around Spring and Hill, and in the next fifteen years other street-car lines opened in Pasadena, Pomona, Santa Monica, San Bernardino and Ontario (where the mules rode back down the long gentle slope of Euclid Avenue on special flat-trucks behind the cars, which were powered by gravity in this direction). But by that time — by 1887 in fact — George Howland's Pico Street line was operating out of downtown to serve the 'Electric Railway Homestead Association Tract' and the definitive age of the development of Los Angeles had begun.
Local electric services by street railways and inter-urban lines were to make almost every piece of land in the Los Angeles basin conveniently accessible and thus profitably exploitable, and the Pico line was the true beginning of the process, not only because it was directly linked to a subdividing company, but because it also formed the basis of the early speculations of Sherman and Clark, pioneers of the get-rich-quick electric railway. They seem to have been primarily speculators ('General' Moses Sherman liked to have a finger in every profitable pie within reach) whose companies floated, grew, collapsed, merged, came and went, were wrested from them by outraged shareholders, but popped up again under different guises. In the process, lines were built down to the University of Southern California and up to Pasadena (largely by merging and connecting existing local companies) and, in 'Sherman's March to the Sea', out through Hollywood to Santa Monica with an extension to Ocean Park in 1896—perhaps the most important of all their ventures since it provided the transportation infrastructure for an area of land that was to contribute much to the present character of the city.
promoted profitably increased traffic, they also produced more intersections and grade crossings where trains could be held up and schedules disrupted, so that the service began to deteriorate and street accidents began, in the twenties, to give the Big Red Cars a bad name. And what was obstructing the grade crossings and involved in helping to cause the street accidents was the other factor in the undoing of the PE; the automobile.

Convenient as the services of the PE might be, the door-to-door private car was even more convenient in this dispersed city, and had begun to proliferate in the area even before the inter-urban railway network reached its operational peak. As early as 1915 the automobile had begun to steal custom directly from the PE, since it was used for the jitney services that cruised the main streets and avenues picking up waiting passengers at the trolley stops. Even so, it took the automobile an uncountable time to kill off the PE (partly because of shortages and rationing in the Second World War) and it was not until 1961 that the last train ran on the line through Watts to Long Beach – both places virtual creations of the PE.

By that time the city had already embarked on a programme of studies in the kind of Urban Rapid Transit now fashionable in city-planning circles (e.g. San Francisco’s BART line), but it looks like being a long time before anything serious is done about it. It will not be easy to persuade Angelenos, many of them able to remember the dying agonies of the PE, to leave the convenient car at home – in spite of their complaints about traffic jams – and climb into whatever coloured rolling-stock the new dream-system offers. As Ray Bradbury (a non-driving Angeleno) rightly said in 1960:

... it’s no use building it unless we dramatize it enough to make people use it. I’m all for making Walt Disney our next Mayor ... the only man in the city who can get a working rapid transit system built without any more surveys, and turn it into a real attraction so that people will want to ride it.
The city got Sam Yorty for its next Mayor and Walt Disney died and rapid transit is presumably postponed till the Greek Kalends. The automobile remains the characteristic transportation of Angelenos.

The date when it became characteristic is not easy to fix. The Automobile Club of Southern California has been incapable of conceiving any other form of movement ever since its foundation in 1900, but is notoriously among the most bigoted lobbies operating in the area (which is quite an achievement in that stronghold of the John Birch Society). But if one takes the conscious provision of large-scale specialized facilities for automobiles as marking their effective ascendancy, then the establishment of the Motor Age in Los Angeles dates neither from the foundation of the Automobile Club, nor from the building of the first freeway, but from about 1927.

Now, one of the attractions of the automobile in a dispersed and relatively under-equipped community is that it requires, fundamentally, very few special facilities - it will run tolerably on any fairly flat, hard surface. So Sunset Boulevard was not surfaced at all beyond Fairfax Avenue as late as 1927. But in that year work was already in hand on the first real monument of the Motor Age: Miracle Mile on Wilshire Boulevard. The Boulevard itself was the creation of years of ad hoc subdivisions, beginning with a quarter-mile stretch west of the present McArthur Park laid out in 1895 by the ineffable Gaylord Wilshire - socialist, enthusiast, medical crank but - more to the point - member of a clan that had already developed parts of Fullerton and knew their business. Further west, the stretch of the Boulevard through Beverly Hills was regularized as part of Wilbur Cook's plan of 1906, and the continuation to the sea at Santa Monica was completed in 1919. But the eastward extension into downtown, which converted West Lake Park into McArthur Park as we know it, was not made until 1934 - after some dogged resistance from downtown interests to whom the shops on Wilshire constituted a grave commercial threat. The possibilities of shopping on Wilshire had been spotted about a decade before, by

A. W. Rose, a real estate operator who had looked into the probable shopping habits of the new, affluent, and motorized inhabitants of areas like Beverly Hills, the westerly parts of Hollywood, or the areas of the Wolfskill Ranch that were about to become Westwood and Holmby Hills. The chances appeared to be that they would prefer to come to shops along the stretch of Wilshire between La Brea and Fairfax, and by 1928 this stretch was already known as Miracle Mile.

But it was not open to unlimited commercial development. Downtown interests had wanted it to be a broad residential avenue, not a

31. Parking behind Wilshire Boulevard
business rival, and the city had zoned it accordingly. Ross therefore had to negotiate or litigate a ‘spot’ waiver to the residential zoning for every site, and this he could only do for substantial and well-regarded clients who would not lower the supposed tone of the street. But substantial operators were in the mood to move, and the mighty Bullock’s department store was ready for Wilshire Boulevard by 1928, though their chosen site was further east, not on Miracle Mile proper. But Bullock’s-Wilshire, like the new shops on the mile, were all built with parking lots at the rear [31] and were specifically designed for motorized access, with portes-cochères or other specialized entrance facilities on the parking side.

The result is a unique transitional monument to the dawn of automobilism; the shops on Miracle Mile stand hard up to the sidewalk so that it looks like a conventional shopping street, except that it is not clogged with cars mis-parked in desperation by frustrated shoppers. All but a few of them are safely and correctly stowed away round the back, and Wilshire Boulevard is one of the few great streets in the world where driving is a pleasure. It is also, of course, the first linear downtown, with residential areas immediately behind the parking lots and almost seventy thousand souls within walking distance, never mind the motorized shoppers from a city-wide catchment area.

More conventional public provisions for the automotive age began in the same years as Miracle Mile: the upgrading of nondescript through-streets to the status of Boulevards (though long stretches of Santa Monica and Pico, for instance, are still pretty nondescript for mile after mile), the installation of traffic signals (synchronized, for the first time, on Wilshire) and the Figueroa Street grade separation in the north-east corner of downtown. This last—a simple enough underpass in its origins—is another historical landmark of importance, since it was the first of the works that eventually led to the Arroyo Seco Parkway, otherwise the Pasadena Freeway, the beginning of the freeway network.
The grade separation was begun early in 1938, the Automobile Club’s celebrated Traffic Survey proposing a freeway system had been published the previous year, and the State of California legislation that made the freeways possible followed in 1939, by which time the Arroyo Seco Parkway was well in hand. It was only six miles long, and it was a parkway for a variety of reasons. One was emulation of Robert Moses’s celebrated parkway system in New York; another was to mollify local opinion, since the side had been sliced off Elysian Park and the park strip in the bottom of the Arroyo had been extensively invaded by the time the highway reached Raymond Hill and curled round into Pasadena. No doubt Sunset magazine, the official organ of obsessive gardening and planting in Southern California, had a hand in the parkway concept too. Certainly the magazine is credited with a lobby that has sustained the parkway tradition ever since, so that — however much one may be amused at the signs on the freeways warning Danger Landscaping Ahead — one can still be grateful for this sustained programme of planting and improvement that has made the freeway embankments and cuttings a visible environmental asset to the city (even if freeway noise and dust are not).

The Arroyo Seco Parkway [32] was the only section of the freeway system completed before the Second World War. The first of the post-war links, the Hollywood, went over the mountain into the San Fernando Valley, its southward extension became the Santa Ana (of ill reputation, because of its jams and accidents) and the Pasadena’s southern leg became the Harbor Freeway. This may sound like rapid progress, but freeway building has not been as fast as is sometimes supposed — the San Diego was not over the Santa Monica mountains into the valley until 1962, and my first road map of Los Angeles, printed in 1964, still did not show the western end of the Santa Monica freeway.

Thus the wide-swinging curved ramps of the intersection of the Santa Monica and the San Diego freeways, which immediately persuaded me that the Los Angeles freeway system is indeed one of the greater works of Man, must be among the younger monuments of the system. It is more customary to praise the famous four-level intersection which now looks down on the old Figueroa Street grade separation, but its virtues seem to me little more than statistical whereas the Santa Monica/San Diego intersection [33] is a work of art,

33a. Intersection of Santa Monica and San Diego freeways
got beyond the status of a cocktail-party topic — better performance can probably be got by filling out more of the proposed grid of the present freeway system [34] to increase the number of usable alternative routes. As currently proposed, the grid would give 1,500 miles of freeways on a pattern of approximate three-mile squares. After the Superfreeway came the urban helicopter, connecting landing pads next to freeway intersections and served by freeway-flyer bus services (which had been proposed independently as the simplest way of putting Watts back in touch with the city).

And then in 1969 it was suddenly observed that the fifth diagram of the transportation palimpsest had been drawn, not in fancy but in fact. It was in the air above the Angeleno’s heads, but it was not the helicopters that planners and professional visionaries had led them to expect. With hindsight, one can now see that in a city as dis-urban as Los Angeles, the answer was more likely to be rural than conventionally urban, and what the Angelenos could see over their heads was usually that most rural of aircraft, the Twin Otter, designed for bushwhacking the outbacks of Canada. As an urban commuter plane it has the prime rural virtue of short take-off and landing runs (STOL) which enable it to operate out of odd corners of larger airports or from small private and municipal airfields, much more cheaply than any helicopter, and to potter about in the clear airspace below the crowded jetways above.

Flying these bushcraft, airlines like Cable and Aero-Commuter are — at this writing — already offering a dozen daily scheduled flights between Los Angeles International Airport and all stops to Fullerton, Burbank, or El Monte, and twice that number of services to the alternative international airport at Ontario. In other words, the urban air-bus exists and is in regular service in Los Angeles. As with Miracle Mile, Los Angeles has done what we are always told it will do, but rarely does in fact — prototyped a new solution for other cities to contemplate.

33b. Intersection of Santa Monica and San Diego freeways

both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it.

And what comes next? The freeway system is not perfect — what transport system ever is? — and even though it is vastly better than any other urban motorway system of my acquaintance, it is inconceivable to Angelenos that it should not be replaced by an even better system nearer to the perfection they are always seeking. A rapid-rail system is the oldest candidate for the succession, but nothing has happened so far. The core of the problem, I suspect, is that when the socially necessary branch has been built, to Watts, and the profitable branch, along Wilshire, little more will be done and most Angelenos will be an average of fifteen miles from a rapid-transit station.

The next candidate was the Superfreeway, with access only from existing freeways, not from surface streets. This one never seems to have
frightened money from the East that will never know how to go with the flow of Angeleno life.

Those who do go with the flow, the motorized citizens rolling at night along the four freeways that box in the central downtown cavity, can at least look at the city of illusion created by the lights of the buildings. But they are more likely to notice the light (in the singular) of that very singular building, the gleaming cube of the Water and Power offices. It is the kind of monument that architects can relevantly offer to this city founded precisely on water and power — and transportation, which has monumentalized itself in the freeways themselves, and really needs no further monument, since they serve and facilitate that unfocused ubiquity that has made Los Angeles what it is — and has shrivelled the heart out of downtown.

11 Ecology IV: Autopia

The first time I saw it happen nothing registered on my conscious mind, because it all seemed so natural — as the car in front turned down the off-ramp of the San Diego freeway, the girl beside the driver pulled down the sun visor and used the mirror on the back of it to tidy her hair. Only when I had seen a couple more incidents of the kind did I catch their import: that coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors. A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one’s destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway, the mile or two of ground-level streets counts as no more than the front drive of the house.

In part, this is a comment on the sheer vastness of the movement pattern of Los Angeles, but more than that it is an acknowledgement that the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno. Though the famous story in Cry California magazine about the family who actually lived in a mobile home on the freeways is now known to be a jesting fabrication, the idea was
immediately convincing (several) other magazines took it seriously and wanted to reprint it because there was a great psychological truth spoken in the jest. The freeway is where Los Angeles live a large part of their lives [111].

Such daily sacrifices on the altar of transportation are the common lot of all metropolitan citizens of course. Some, with luck, will spend less time on the average at these devotions, and many will spend them under far more squalid conditions (on the Southern Region of British Railways, or, in the New York subway, for instance) but only Los Angeles has made a mystique of such proportions out of its commuting technology that the whole world seems to know about it — tourist postcards from London do not show Piccadilly Circus underground station, but cards from Los Angeles frequently show local equivalents like the 'stack' intersection in downtown; Paris is not famous as the home of the Metro in the way Los Angeles is famous as the home of the Freeway (which must be gallling for both Detroit and New York which have better claims, historically). There seem to be two major reasons for their dominance in the city image of Los Angeles and both are aspects of their inescapability; firstly, that they are so vast that you cannot help seeing them, and secondly, that there appears no alternative means of movement and you cannot help using them. There are other and useful streets, and the major boulevards provide an excellent secondary network in many parts of the city, but psychologically, all are felt to be tributary to the freeways.

Furthermore, the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive, which can be duplicated, in part, on other systems (England would be a much safer place if these skills could be inculcated on our motorways) but not with this totality and extremity. If motorway driving anywhere calls for a high level of attentiveness, the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical.

That concentration is required beyond doubt, for the freeways can kill — hardly a week passed but I found myself driving slowly under police control past the wreckage of at least one major crash. But on the other hand the freeways are visibly safe — I never saw any of these incidents, or even minor ones, actually happening, even in weeks where I found I had logged a thousand miles of rush-hour driving. So one learns to proceed with a strange and exhilarating mixture of long-range confidence and close-range wariness. And the freeway system can fail; traffic jams can pile up miles long in rush-hours or even on sunny Sunday afternoons, but these jams are rarely stationary for as long as European expectations would suggest. Really serious jams seem to be about as frequent as hold-ups on London suburban railways, and might — if bad — disrupt the working day of about the same number of citizens, but for most of the time traffic rolls comfortably and driving conditions are not unpleasant. As one habituated to the psychotic driving (as Gerald Priestland has called it) in English cities, and the squeal of the driving conditions, I cannot find it in me to complain about the freeways in Los Angeles; they work uncommonly well.

Angelinos, who have never known anything worse than their local system, find plenty to complain about, and their conversations are peppered with phrases like 'being stuck in a jam in the October heat with the kids in the back pukey with the smog'. At first the visitor takes these remarks seriously; they confirm his own most deeply ingrained prejudices about the city that has 'sold its soul to the motor car'. Later, I came to realize that they were little more than standard rhetorical tropes, like English complaints about the weather, with as little foundation in the direct personal experience of the speakers.

This is not to minimize the jams, or even the smog, but both need to be seen in the context of comparisons with other metropolitan areas. On what is regarded as a normally clear day in London, one
cannot see as far through the atmosphere as on some officially smoggy days I have experienced in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the photochemical irritants in the smog (caused by the action of sunlight on nitrogen oxides) can be extremely unpleasant indeed in high concentrations, but for the concentration to be high enough to make the corners of my eyes itch painfully is rare in my personal experience, and at no time does the smog contain levels of soot, grit, and corroding sulphur compounds that are still common in the atmospheres of older American and European cities.

It is the psychological impact of smog that matters in Los Angeles. The communal trauma of Black Wednesday (8 September 1943), when the first great smog zapped the city in solid, has left permanent scars, because it broke the legend of the land of eternal sunshine. It was only a legend; the area was never totally free of atmosphere. The Spaniards called it the Bay of Smokes and could identify it from the ocean by the persistence of smoke from Indian camp-fires, while plots of land in South Cucamonga were advertised in the eighties as being free from ‘fog-laden sea-breezes’. But there is a profound psychological difference between fogs caused by Nature’s land-forms and light breezes and God-given water, and air-pollution due to the works of man. To make matters worse, analysis showed that a large part of the smog (though not all, one must emphasize) is due to effluents from the automobile Angelenos. We were shocked to discover that it was their favourite toy that was fouling up their greatest asset.

But, psychologically shocked or no, most Angeleno freeway-pilots are neither retching with smog nor stuck in a jam; their white-wall tyres are singing over the diamond-cut anti-skid grooves in the concrete road surface, the selector-levers of their automatic gearboxes are firmly in Drive, and the radio is on. And more important than any of this, they are acting out one of the most spectacular paradoxes in the great debate between private freedom and public discipline that pervades every affluent, mechanized urban society.

The private car and the public freeway together provide an ideal—not to say idealized—version of democratic urban transportation: door-to-door movement on demand at high average speeds over a very large area. The degree of freedom and convenience thus offered to all but a small (but now conspicuous) segment of the population is such that no Angeleno will be in a hurry to sacrifice it for the higher efficiency but drastically lowered convenience and freedom of choice of any high-density public rapid-transit system. Yet what seems to be hardly noticed or commented on is that the price of rapid door-to-door transport on demand is the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey.

The watchful tolerance and almost impeccable lane discipline of Angeleno drivers on the freeways is often noted, but not the fact that both are symptoms of something deeper—willing acquiescence in an incredibly demanding man/machine system. The fact that no single ordinance, specification or instruction manual describes the system in its totality does not make it any less complete or all-embracing—or any less demanding. It demands, first of all, an open but decisive attitude to the placing of the car on the road-surface, a constant stream of decisions that it would be fashionable to describe as ‘existential’ or even ‘situational’, but would be better to regard simply as a higher form of pragmatism. The carriage-way is not divided by the kind of kindergarten rule of the road that obtains on British motorways, with their fast, slow, and overtaking lanes (where there are three lanes to use). The three, four, or five lanes of an Angeleno freeway are virtually equal, the driver is required to select or change lanes according to his speed, surrounding circumstances and future intentions. If everybody does this with the approved mixture of enlightened self-interest and public spirit, it is possible to keep a very large flow of traffic moving quite surprisingly fast.

But at certain points, notably intersections, the lanes are not all equal—some may be pre-empted for a particular exit or change-over
ramp as much as a gile before the actual junction. As far as possible
the driver must get set up for these pre-empted lanes well in advance,
to be sure he is in them in good time because the topology of the
intersections is unforgiving. Of course there are occasional clods and
strangers who do not sense the urgency of the obligation to set up the
lane required good and early, but fortunately they are only occasional
(you soon get the message), otherwise the whole system would snarl
up irretrievably. But if these preparations are only an unwritten moral
obligation, your actual presence in the correct lane at the inter-section
is mandatory – the huge signs straddling the freeway to indicate the
correct lanes must be obeyed because they are infallible.

At first, these signs can be the most psychologically unsettling of all
aspects of the freeway – it seems incredibly bizarre when a sign
directs one into the far left lane for an objective clearly visible on the
right of the carriageway, but the sign must be believed. No human eye
at windscreen level can unravel the complexities of even a relatively
simple intersection [112] (none of those in Los Angeles is a symmetrical
cloverleaf) fast enough for a normal human brain moving forward at
up to sixty mph to make the right decision in time, and there is no
alternative to complete surrender of will to the instructions on the
signs.

But no permanent system of fixed signs can give warning of transient
situations requiring decisions, such as accidents, landlips or other
blockages. It is in the nature of a freeway accident that it involves a
large number of vehicles, and blocks the carriageway so completely
that even emergency vehicles have difficulty in getting to the seat of the
trouble, and remedial action such as warnings and diversions may have
to be phased back miles before the accident, and are likely to affect
traffic moving in the opposite direction in the other carriageway as well.
So, inevitably the driver has to rely on other sources of rapid informa-
tion, and keeps his car radio turned on for warnings of delays and
recommended diversions.
Now, the source of these radio messages is not a publicly-operated traffic-control radio-transmitter; they are a public service performed by the normal police stations, who derive the information from the police, the Highway Patrol, and their own 'Signalert' helicopter patrols. Although these channels of information are not provided as a designed component of the freeway system, but arise as an accidental by-product of commercial competition, they are no less essential to the system's proper operation, especially at rush hours. Thus a variety of commanding authorities - moral, governmental, commercial, and mechanical (since most drivers have surrendered control of the transmission to an automatic gearbox) - direct the freeway driver through a situation so closely controlled that, as has been judiciously observed on a number of occasions, he will hardly notice any difference when the freeways are finally fitted with computerized automatic control systems that will take charge of the car at the on-ramp and direct it at properly regulated speeds and correctly selected routes to a pre-programmed choice of off-ramp.

But it seems possible that, given a body of drivers already so well trained, disciplined, and conditioned, realistic cost-benefit analysis might show that the marginal gains in efficiency through automation might be offset by the psychological deprivations caused by destroying the residual illusions of free decision and driving skill surviving in the present situation. However inefficiently organized, the million or so human minds at large on the freeway system at any time comprise a far greater computing capacity than could be built into any machine currently conceivable - why not put that capacity to work by fostering the illusion that it is in charge of the situation?

If illusion plays as large a part in the working of the freeways as it does in other parts of the Angeleno ecology, it is not to be deprecated. The system works as well as it does because the Angelenos believe in it as much as they do; they may squeak when the illusion is temporarily shattered or frustrated; they may share the distrust of the Division of Highways that many liberal souls currently (and understandably) seem to feel; but on leaving the house they still turn the nose of the car towards the nearest freeway ramp because they still believe the freeways are the way to get there. They subscribe, if only covertly, to a deep-seated mystique of freeway driving, and I often suspect that the sanctifying stories of the horrors of the freeways are deliberately put about to warn off strangers.

Partly this would be to keep inexperienced and therefore dangerous hayseeds off the carriageways, but it would also be to prevent the profanation of their most sacred ritual by the uninitiated. For the Freeway, quite as much as the Beach, is where the Angeleno is most himself, most integrally identified with his great city.

Say, isn't that your old Aunt Nabby who just passed you in the outer lane of the BenBen at eighty? There she is, six months in Southern California and already she's got the glued up ash-blond hair, the wrap-around shades and the tight pants and ... a chrome yellow Volkswagen with reversed wheels and a room-voom exhaust.

Thus wrote Brock Yates in Car and Driver magazine, a capsule account of identification with Southern California citizenship via the automobile as a work of art and the freeway as a suitable gallery in which to display it.

The automobile as art-work is almost as specific to the Los Angeles freeways as is the surf-board to the Los Angeles beaches. It has a lengthy tradition behind it, but that tradition drives far less from the imported dream cars, the mile-long Hispanos or the gold Dual-Ghias of the film stars, than from the wonders wrought in backyards by high-school drop-outs upon domestic Detroit-built machines. The art of customizing, of turning common family sedans into wild extravaganzas of richly coloured and exotically shaped metal, was delinquent in its origins, however much the present apologists of the hot-rod cult may try to pretend to the contrary, and the drag-racing which is almost the dominant local land-born sport in Los Angeles is simply a
ritualized version of the illegal sprint races that used to take place on the public highways.

But in the uninhibited inventiveness of master customizers like George Barris [113] and Ed Roth, normal straight Los Angeles found something that sprang from the dusty grass roots of its native culture - 'to ride forth seeking romance... in speak in superlatives

... to throw dignity out of the window, to dress dramatically... to tackle the impossible' - tamed it, institutionalized it, and applied it in some form to almost every vehicle awhirl in the City of Angels (whence its influence has spread back to Detroit and thus to all other motorized parts of the globe). The customized automobile is the natural crowning artefact of the way of life, the human ecology, it adorns.

If you regard the freeways, with Brock Yates as an 'existential limbo where man sets out each day in search of western-style individualism' then the assertiveness of the style of the art-automobile might be regarded as an aid in that anxious search. But my own observations of Angelino drivers at close range suggests that many of those who flaunt a wild rail on the Berdoo or the San Mo are relaxed and well-adjusted characters without an identity problem in the world, for whom the freeway is not a limbo of existential angst, but the place where they spend the two calmest and most rewarding hours of their daily lives.

113. Customized car, George Barris, designer

My first consciousness of any specific architecture in Los Angeles occurred almost exactly twenty years before writing these words (and probably triggered the process which led to them being written) when I discovered Charles Eames's house [114] in an American magazine. That experience was not unique; the Eames house has had a profound effect on many of the architects of my generation in Britain and Europe. It became the most frequently mentioned point of pilgrimage for intending visitors to Los Angeles among my friends, some of whom were later to edit a special issue of the English magazine Architectural Design devoted to Eames's work, and to his house. For most of two decades it has shared with Rodia's towers in Watts the distinction of being the best known and most illustrated building in Los Angeles (a fact which still surprises many Angelenos).

The reasons for the reputation of the Eames's house are as multifarious as they always must be for a durable masterpiece. The inherent originality and quality of the design are manifest, but it is quite likely that the simultaneous appearance in the world's press of Eames's globally successful steel and moulded plywood chair, the most compelling artefact of its generation in some ways, helped to focus world attention on everything that Eames was doing at the time. Again, the style of both the house and the chair answered exactly to an emerging taste for that kind of line-drawn design in many parts of the world. But, the most crucial factor is external to Eames's qualities as a designer: it was the publication of the house, like the chair, in John Entenza's Los Angeles-based magazine Arts and Architecture.