

## Jon Bird on postmodern corruption in LA **Fallen Angels**

Mike Davis's book **City Of Quartz** (Verso, hbk 18.95) is subtitled *Excavating The Future In Los Angeles*, and he titles his prologue 'The View From Futures Past'. He thereby defines his project as a form of Foucauldian mapping of capitalism's dystopian future - a future projected from the past and present of Los Angeles as the paradigmatic geo-cultural entity of the post-modern world.

Exercising a surgeon's skill to unpick the sutured surfaces and historical myths of corporate postmodernism, Davis remorselessly uncovers a densely woven fabric of corruption, civic neglect, social conflict, and a tapestry of power that have defined the economic and cultural history of southern California during the last 150 years.

A quote from Walter Benjamin introduces the narrative, and Davis's study of LA as a 'deracinated urban hell' stands as a polarity to Benjamin's elegaic celebration of Paris as modernism's Utopian urban realisation.

Benjamin described the boulevards and arcades of Paris, made into sites of leisure and social exchange by Baron Hausmann's restructuring of the urban fabric to produce imperial vistas and commodified public spaces - the domain of the 'flaneur'. Davis cites the example of Alexander Haagen (the shopping-mall king of southern California), whose early shopping centres reproduced, in plan, Jeremy Bentham's design for maximum surveillance: the panopticon prison. The finan-

cial potential and ability to consume becomes, in the early-1980s in LA, the object of protection and control - there is the ever-present threat (or promise) of 'armed response'.

Where others have come in the past to praise the architectural extravaganzas and simulated spectacles of LA, (and both Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard are indicted), Davis buries them under an awesome accumulation of fact, anecdote, interpretation and critique that unfolds the terrifying tale of the political economy of LA.

Whoever reads this book - and it ought to be compulsory, particularly as an extremely effective antidote to any excess of the 'post-moderns' - will select favourite passages that illuminate the total picture. In a chapter analysing the confrontations between developers and homeowners, a conflict encompassing various interest groups, ethnic minorities, and apartment block realtors, the overloaded sewer and flood-control systems become the nodal point on the battleground between conservation awareness and land speculation.

Davis vividly introduces this section with an anecdote told by Aldous Huxley of walking on Hyperion Beach with Thomas Mann in 1945, and encountering '10m used condoms': 'as far as the eye could reach in all directions, the sand was covered with small whitish objects, like dead caterpillars'. This overwhelming evidence of the LA residents' sexual profligacy was resolved 15

years later, along with all the accumulated waste of 3m people, by the Hyperion Activated Sludge Plant - a technological marvel that finally gave in to overload in 1987; the first in a series of increasingly serious eco-disasters, from groundwater contamination to gridlock, and the worst air pollution in the advanced industrial world.

In another chapter - 'Fortress LA' - Davis charts the 'archisemiotics of class war': design and architecture in the service of the public and private security apparatuses, combining to concentrate individual safety and security within heavily fortified locales, constantly patrolled and kept under surveillance, and where access is restricted or forbidden to the poor and the homeless.

This segregation and militarisation of public space along class and racial divisions, often through an architecture exhibiting all the characteristics of post-modern pastiche, is fundamentally reshaping 'the social relations of the built environment'. Security becomes not only the corollary of a certain income and lifestyle, but also the material and symbolic representation of the 'middle-class imagination', a barrier beyond which the fantasies and fears of inner-city life are projected, to find their realisation in dystopian fictions like *Blade Runner* and *Conors*.

This produces a cycle of anxiety and aggressive response that justifies the most brutal excesses of, on the one hand the Los Angeles Police Department, (anti-drug raids that saturate cordoned-off areas with over 1,000 patrolmen, elite tactical squads and a special anti-gang taskforce 'arresting more black youth than at any time since the Watts Rebellion of 1965'), and, on the other, City Hall's actions against the homeless in a series of policies and strategies designed both to contain and remove the socially oppressed.

There is a bizarre inventiveness to the design de-

terments that Davis lists: the Rapid Transit District's 'barrel-shaped bus bench' that discourages sitting for more than a few moments and makes sleeping impossible, or the employment by local businesses of 'overhead sprinkler systems programmed to drench unsuspecting sleepers at random times during the night'.

As one numbing example follows the next in this catalogue of the 'cultural logic of late capital', all previous images of the city as the civic space for democratic exchange and social interaction are obliterated, to be replaced by a representation of Los Angeles as a festering wound where every spectacle of post-modern indulgence - corporate or individual - barely conceals a genealogy



of power and corruption.

Just as modernism reified the city as the focus of the unleashing of the forces of technological and social progress, so postmodernism has focused upon the metropolis as a screen for the projection of the culture's visions and nightmares.

Mike Davis systematically unpicks the connections between the fantasies of the privileged, the powerful and the protected, and shows how their fears of *otherness* (in all its manifestations and guises) have created the political and geo-cultural logic of excess, paranoia and despair as it is lived as everyday reality in Los Angeles today. And we all know that what happens in America today... •