

Markus Dauss: Architectural Iconoclasm: Southern Californian Modernism Reconsidered

Investigating and specifying the principle of architectural iconoclasm, this project will take a fresh look at modern and contemporary architecture of Southern California and LA in particular. Under this original premise it will consult the Getty collections and archives on the work of John Lautner, William Krisel, Pierre Koenig, Ray Kappe as well as Frank O. Gehry, Franklin D. Israel – and of Julius Shulman.

The work of California modernism's acclaimed exponents is considered particularly iconic. This common categorization, however, deserves reconsideration as it ignores aniconic or even iconoclastic elements as the other side of the Californian architectural complex. Consequently, in order to arrive at a comprehensive overview of Southern Californian modernism, this project strives to develop the general concept of an intra-architectural iconoclasm. While the idea of the iconoclast image is long established in the context of modern and contemporary visual arts (Boehm, Prange), the notion of immanent iconoclasm has barely been contoured in the realm of architecture. Architectural theory predominantly addresses iconoclast tendencies under the heading of vandalism, hence referring to destructive gestures of material manifestation and spectacular scale (Réau). Instead, the concept of architectural iconoclasm sought by this study insists on the productive quality of iconoclast tendencies (Gamboni), which will be evidenced as particularly pertinent in post-war architecture of Southern California.

Given modern architecture's shift from a largely ornamental and surface-oriented representational paradigm to its predominant focus on space, it may seem unobvious to determine 'image-breaking' tendencies in architectural modernism. This very withdrawal into the depth of space, however, can already be identified as iconoclast move (Gleiter). But not only in modern architecture's clear orientation toward space, can one detect the grounds for its immanent iconoclasm. Recent scholarly contributions have shown how the space-encoded nature of modern architecture and its implied body-related mode of perception necessarily employ iconic aspects, which in turn can form the basis for gestures of architectural iconoclasm (Colomina, Prigge).

This study will illuminate how the two forms of architectural iconoclasm—retraction into space and immanent suspension of iconic features—have crystallized in Californian architecture. In fact, the iconoclast tendencies of American architecture arguably culminate in post-war architecture of Southern California. Following the proclaimed ideal of model transfer, architecture in North America not only vowed to surpass the European role model but also sought to eradicate it altogether. Hand in hand with this claim of a pronouncedly American architecture went the ideal of conquering the seemingly vacant space of the North-American continent. California in particular, at its southwestern edge, represented an unformed territory. This idea was still shared by numerous new arrivals flocking California in the 1940s and 50s, among them several architects who found in the western state a quasi-paradisiacal expanse for projecting their architectural dreams (Hines). Especially mid-century LA with its strong urban growth continued to attract projects that set out to realize fantasies of innovation and new beginnings. LA's grid structure, its decentralized organization and urban sprawl, the horizontal reach of the urban area as well as its automobile infrastructure (Banham) suggested

an image of the city as unformed (Lynch) or still formable. In contrast to this actual vacancy of the city's shape and appearance stands the powerful imagery provided by Hollywood's dream factory.

Within this seeming contrast resides the type of interplay that characterizes, according to unanimous opinion, the core of the iconoclast image. For the concept of immanent iconoclasm in modern and contemporary visual arts is based on the following premise:

The artistic and art-theoretical discourse of secular modernism confirms the interdependency of iconophile and –phobic positions. It therefore constitutes a radicalization of the pre-modern constellation, in which iconoclast and iconophile views were already relationally dependent but ultimately excluded from each other against (Brock) the religious backdrop of pre-modern times (Freedberg). Instead, modernity produces artworks that aim at neutralizing the contrasting positions of iconophilia and –phobia in themselves. Such iconoclast images either recall key elements of classical pictoriality, only to undermine them. Or, alternatively, they hide their pictorial nature at first glance to reintroduce pictorial elements in a second step.

This study explores the interrelatedness of aniconic and iconic features as a characteristic that connects the concept of immanent iconoclasm and the city of Los Angeles. This constellation becomes even more evident when focusing on LA's architectural buildings instead of its urban frame structure. For the structurally weak image of the city of LA triggered counteractive architectural strategies: The iconisation of architectonic design—especially that of opulent private houses—was promoted by a wealthy class of commissioners ('the industry') during an epoch of prosperity and urban growth. This convergence culminates in the new prevalence of mid-century architectural photography, as it is especially pertinent in the work of Julius Schulman. His photographs heighten the central elements of Californian architectural modernism: tectonic reduction, innovative use of materials, spatial clarity, floating room division, multiplication of horizontal levels, integration of water landscapes and the physical and visual opening toward a building's near and wide surroundings. Shulman's photographic interventions accentuated these features in order to enhance the building's auratic appearance (Niedenthal). Rather than following the specific architectural logic at stake, he thereby drew from strategies of pictorial staging and editing. Schulman can therefore be considered an exponent of the general interplay between modern architectural language, photography and publishing activity (Colomina). Through the alliance with the photographic medium the architectures of mid-century-California were elevated into the sphere of the classic and surrounded by an atmosphere of purity and transcendence. At the same time, however, they were enlivened and made compatible with contemporary lifestyle-design. In spite of Shulman's ambitious and wide-ranging project of portraying post-war Los Angeles (Lubell/Woods), the number of Southern-Californian buildings that were ultimately staged and published in such powerful fashion remains limited (Serraino). Shulman's project included even the documentation of mass suitable and affordable yet highly memorable modern architectural complexes, as exemplified by William Krisel's building projects in Coachella Valley. These examples, however, were rarely published, for *tract housing* was excluded from being considered an iconic genre (Creighton/Menrad).

Given these observations on Shulman's photographic project one can ascertain an ambivalent pattern, which has been identified—on a much more general level—for today's so-called global icons (Haustein). Produced by capitalist processes of canonization they obtain the status of fetish- or quasi-religious cult objects. And yet they equally partake in iconoclast tendencies. For, on the one hand, the presence of global icons can overshadow or even destroy local image cultures. On the other hand, however, they are themselves subjected to iconoclast dynamics: Their wide dissemination and recognition causes their own substantial transformation, often resulting in the dismantling and depletion of their semantic core. When circulating globally, iconic imagery is easily misread, as iconographic chains, image genealogies and organizational patterns get undone. Several studies suggest that architectural icons of global scale are subject to the same dynamics: Due to their worldwide fame and presence, such iconic buildings lose their typologically specific meaning and function (Jencks). Like abstract images, they ultimately operate as enigmatic signifiers. In contrast to classic icons, global icons are fundamentally open to interpretation (Kamleithner/Meyer). In its most extreme forms this interpretative openness defers the problem of originality and archetype. This very problem is of course constitutive for the classical icon, whose pictorial origin resolves in the sphere of religious transcendence. For the global icon the problem of originality is often substituted by an auto-referential gesture, an indexical hint to the (architectural) image's own mediality.

Shulman's glamorous photographs acquire precisely the kind of autonomous efficacy that adheres to mediatic icons being continuously reproduced as emblems of modernity. In fact, the photographic reproductions cease to be attached to the actual buildings they represent. Instead they circulate globally as unspecific, yet auratically laden ciphers of the 'promises of modernity'. Following these lines of thought, Shulman's photographic oeuvre today preserved in the Getty Collection will serve this study as research material. It will be the basis to examine the close link between iconicity and iconoclasm within the architectures of Southern Californian modernism. How precisely did the interplay between photographic visual regime and architectural space unfold? And why did it produce characteristics analogous to those of the iconoclast image? Discerning the interdependency of transparency (depth) and opacity (surface) should lead to illuminating insights: For opacity, as Colomina has pointed out, can be considered an important aspect of mediality bound to the subjectivity of the observer. Indeed, given the mirroring effect of modern glass fronts and their resemblance to media screens, mechanisms of projection come to replace those of transparency. Instead of producing all-encompassing clarity, the mutual interdependence between architecture and media aesthetics results in irritating and decentering experiences. Within this constellation, even elements of transparency lead to the de-auratization of architecture and therefore correspond to photography's anti-auratic qualities (Benjamin). In addition, the shock effect of the newly formed architectural language may be seen in analogy to the mediatic power of film, as its moving imagery was considered paradigmatically iconoclast since the very beginnings of cinema (Groys). This structural correspondence concretizes with respect to the architectural feature of the strip window. The dynamic sampling of the gaze and the denial of perspectival centeredness demonstrate parallels to the filmic medium. It also underlines modernism's inclination toward forms of immanent iconoclasm.

On the basis of the considerations, this study aims at scrutinizing the link between built space and iconic or mediatic spatiality. Photographic documentations in the Getty Archives reproducing mid-century Californian architecture will be the point of departure for the project's second phase. How did the aforementioned mid-century architects design the architectural zones of transition between outside and inside? To answer this question, analyzing the interstitial zone of space and surface, described above, will be a significant task. In this respect, one may also ask how mid-century houses stage or frame their apertures and views in a concrete, constructional sense. Do they anticipate particularly photogenic settings? And in how far are these settings in turn applied metaphorically? How would this kind of metaphoric approach relate to the idea of a house or building as 'viewing machine', instead of merely as 'machine in the garden' (Neutra)? In this respect it will be fruitful to examine how the settings of the residences, often placed in spectacular locations, reflected the urban scenery of the movie metropole LA. What was, complementarily, the role of a natural environment that appeared iconized and at the same time segmented through framings, window or wall openings? In integrating these environments the spectacular positioning of some of the iconic residences in the hills of Los Angeles certainly plays a decisive role, as examples by Lautner and Kappe can demonstrate. Views of natural or urban surroundings enabled by glass fronts or strip windows (for instance Koenig's famous CSH No 22) (Smith 1989, 2009, 2016), create an arguably paradoxical site-specificity.

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The research project will distinguish and qualify the building's varying references to photography and film. A concrete example for the reciprocation between architectural and filmic strategies—in this case science fiction—is for instance Lautner's use of technologically highly advanced room models during the late 1950s that were inspired by space capsules. Lautner's buildings create UFO-like apertures into the environment (Campbell-Lange) leading out onto a specific urban landscape that itself consists of encapsulated units (Crawford). These evoke—especially in their photographic reproduction—quasi-abstract, non-relational patterns. In which way do iconizing and iconoclast effects relate in this case? What kind of mediality, on the other hand, does the so-called Googie-architecture (co-invented by Lautner) implement? What are the implications of its 'iconoclast pictoriality' and its move toward spatial mobility?

Elaborating further on the interrelation between film and architecture, this study will also consider the work of Franklin D. Israel, an iconic figure of the 1980s and 90s, who connected spatial constructions to stage design and cinematographic collage. Israel diagnosed parallels between cinematic sequentiality and the spatial configuration of Los Angeles, its architectural parcelling and the historical dynamic of the metropolis (Israel; *Architectural Monographs* No 34). Finally the project will discuss how deconstructive tendencies—as exemplarily discussed in Frank O. Gehry's *Residence* (1978)—relate to architecture's immanent iconoclasm. In this context the fundamental conceptual difference between so-called vandalism and architectural iconoclasm will be clarified: Even though postmodern deconstructivism—in regard to its scenarios of bricolage and uncertainty—may aim at presenting controlled simulations of decay and destruction, the latter will ultimately persist as mere symbolic act. From this deconstructivist vantage point

it will be fruitful to take another look at modern architecture in its specific Southern Californian adaptation. Programmatic modern agendas, like quantitative mass reduction and active thinning-out, were meant to destruct traditional practices. They proved, however, to be mainly expressed in metaphoric terms. Modern architects did indeed apply the image of an 'expurgating precision bomb', but they never actually pursued gestures of destruction. Instead they aimed at innovative and highly 'rational' spatial constructions. This aim triggered the withdrawal into the depth of space mentioned above, which Gleiter has convincingly argued to have resulted from a narcissistic insult. For modernity experienced somewhat traumatically how the traditional competence of architecture, namely to mediate between human and world, was transferred to mass media. This very aspect led to a neurotic rather than rational type of iconophobia in modern architecture. The transition to questions of space, which appeared redemptive at first, currently signifies a renewed and even exponentiated threat to architecture's core competence, since computer generated designs have begun to dominate architectural practice. Informatic imaging techniques challenge architecture's authority over both image and space, as they entail both the means of spatial encoding and its constructional realization. The Computer-aided design (CAD) developed by Gehry during the 1990s reacts to this development with its sculptural turn, reintroducing an artistic quality to the algorithmic construction of image and space (Ragheb). Gehry reinforces this type of demiurgic re-empowerment by locating it in the design sketch, which he draws with his own ingenious hand (Van Bruggen). Again, one can detect in Gehry's design practice—as it is documented for the Walt Disney Concert Hall—the coexistence of iconic and iconoclast tendencies. With this constellation in mind, the study hopes to illuminate various highlights from the architectural collections of the Getty Research Institute. Their selective re-reading under pertinent new premises is the goal of this project. The results shall be expounded and published.

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