

Roof Lines

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The light in Southern California varies, but is perhaps most iconic when it is clear, and even piercing. Its strength renders color and contrast uniquely for the rich, altered landscape of the area. Edges are crisp along a beachfront cliff, up the ridge of a distant mountain's silhouette, or even across the roof lines of buildings.¹

As California enters year five of its current drought, our collective notion of landscape continues to transform. A look at the relationship between the state's another landscape and its resulting architectural

aesthetic reveals possibilities for an altered trajectory.

When Catholic missionaries made their way up the California coast in the late 1700s, resources were scarce. Drawing on an accumulation of cultural preferences and the limited materials available, the missionaries developed a simple architecture of adobe walls and tile roofs. In contrast to the slightly more complex detail of the Spanish tile, the semi-circular mission tile is simply flipped every other tile to horizontally lock in place. Perhaps if the resources were available, we would have inherited a similar architecture to that of colonial Mexico, full of rich detail and silver and gold plating. Instead California's first western-constructed vernacular was humble.²



1. Mountain lines captured at 85mph in the Sonoran Desert of California.



2. A mission style roof at Mission San Luis Rey de Francia set against the big blue sky of the west renders the aging tile upon white adobe walls.

Akin to the architecture, landscape interventions were humble too.

Peppertrees from Peruvian seeds and native oaks characterized the grounds of the missions, but scarcity of water kept vegetation sparse. As the region saw wealth, the landscape began to change. In the late 1800s affluent east coasters were lured by climate and terrain to San Diego and midwestern farmers were lured by fertile plains and warm temperatures to Los Angeles. This influx brought stylistic and industrial tendencies that defied the lack of water.

William Mulholland's vision for and subsequent construction of the Los Angeles aqueduct in the early 1900s assuaged increasing water demands.



3. The articulation and scale of the roof plane neither matches nor complements the altered landscape of Pasadena.





4. The intricate detail of Balboa Park's California Tower from the 1915 exposition and vegetation to match.



Southern Californians swiftly discovered that most anything will grow here with additional water. The landscape could now match any desired architecture. The Gamble House in Pasadena provided the tycoon of Proctor & Gamble with both a nostalgic Arts and Crafts home and the expansive green lawn and hedges he and his wife were accustomed to back in Cleveland. Despite the craftsmanship of the interior and the big lawn on which the home sits, it does not ally with the light and sky of Southern California.³

In San Diego, the Panama-California exposition of 1915 took California's light qualities to the limit. An intensity of both ornament and vegetation characterized the grounds of the exposition. Finally, Southern California would have the Churrigueresque and Plateresque that were built in Mexico centuries before.⁴

Perhaps as a response to a more urban environment or in anticipation of more established vegetation over time, some early works incorporated both austere walls and ornament. However, unlike the exposition, ornament of commercial buildings was often relegated to the roofline well above young vegetation or as trim in

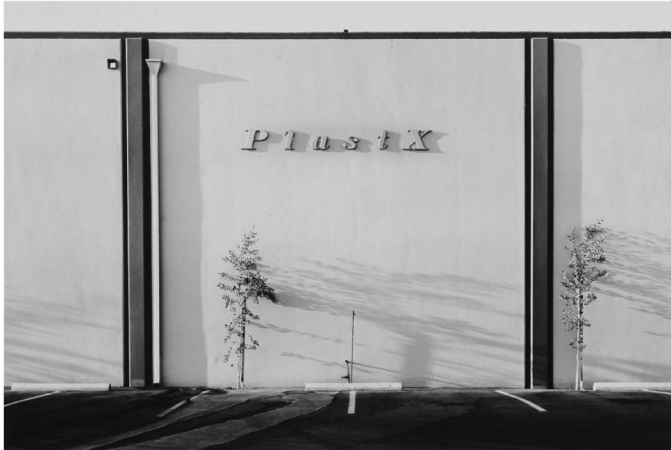


5. The Royal Laundry Complex (1927) by Gordon B. Kaufmann in Pasadena utilizes a similar roofline shadow effect as the early missions while also crowning the building with ornament.

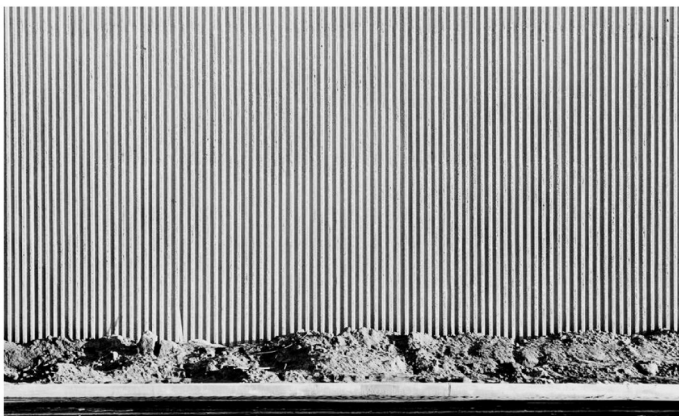
important locations.⁵ But as vegetation matured, architects realized a simple roof line suited the diversity of vegetation and the shadows the plants created. Early modernists like Irving Gill responded by taking influence from the missions and designing absolutely austere buildings, in contrast to the architecture of the exposition. In fact, Gill

lost his position as architect of the exposition to Bertram G. Goodhue of the New York City firm Cram, Goodhue, and Adams. In an alternate course of history Southern California architecture could have evolved from Gill's strong lines instead of Goodhue's detailed eclectic patterning.⁶

By the time Case Study Houses came into



7. South Wall PlastX (1974), Lewis Baltz



8. West Wall Unoccupied Industrial Structure (1974), Lewis Baltz

vogue in the mid-1940s architects were paying attention to the relationship between vegetation in Southern California and an architectural aesthetic. The modernism characteristic of Northern Europe seemed perfectly suitable to Southern California. This is best seen in Julius Schulman's photographs, in which vegetation becomes both a foreground and background element to the crisp lines of Californian modern architecture.⁷ Later an industrial

vernacular became part of the psyche of Southern California. As the Port of Los Angeles grew to be the largest in the United States, warehouses and distribution centers emerged throughout the region. Their rapidly constructed tilt up walls (developed by Gill) produce straight lines against the sky—the walls articulated through simple repetitive concrete formwork with slight deviations generating shadow. A young Lewis Baltz photographed this development, his black-and-

white photos becoming a major contribution to MoMA's *New Topographics* exhibition in 1975.⁸

Large industrial walls also offer a canvas for perceptual responses to the sky and light of Southern California. Sometimes changes in atmosphere and light render the strategies ineffective. But at best, they nearly blend into the sky above. As time passed, new developments began to play off these relationships in strange and playful ways.⁹ We continually construct Southern California's climate identity. From valley Edens to walls of privets, the dreams and images of both native and new Southern Californians supplant the climate, creating a richness of microclimates. As residents continue to rip out lawns and other vegetation deemed wasteful, the landscape of Southern California will inevitably change again. The microclimates that residents once created with plants from all over the world are now transforming into more drought tolerant plantings or, at worst, scorched gravel fields. California architects should anticipate these changes and, together with landscape architects, develop an altered aesthetic attuned to the new climate paradigm—perhaps starting from the sky.



6. A contemporary expansion of Irving Gill's Oceanside City Hall accepts the detail of an adjacent palm tree.





9. An industrial wall mimics the reflective qualities of water and in turn offers a response for both predominant sky conditions of the coast: early morning fog and clear afternoon skies.