Review: The Speculative City: Art, Real Estate, and the Making of Global Los Angeles


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The term “speculative” is increasingly being applied to many forms and ideas, from natural history to philosophy and fiction. But Susanna Phillips Newbury’s use is aligned with enterprise. She asserts that art and the city of Los Angeles helped shape each other’s development and that together they transformed the “Southland.” In the preface, she contends: “Understanding how works of art and architecture both actively remediate and are instrumentalized by economic development in the form of real estate requires a distinct approach to art history and its substantiating historical documents.” The book uses a wide-ranging series of case studies, from parking lots to artists’ studios, to show how they have played an active role in mediating urban economic environments through branding, place making, and actual development.

Chapter one discusses the impact of Ed Ruscha’s artist book on parking lots with its “visualization of the city as the material sum of its most-used but little-noticed features.” Addressing the work of photographer Lewis Baltz, in chapter two, Newberry explains the importance of his work in communicating ordinary environments and the changing landscape of Southern California.

Artmaking is further addressed in the next chapter, which continues to use examples drawn from suburbia. This chapter introduces William Leavitt, whose artwork constituted both image
and object, focusing attention on the popular visual culture of midcentury and helping to sell the suburban lifestyle.

Newberry also includes examples of this distinctive Californian lifestyle as shown in shelter magazines like *House Beautiful*. These ideal homes were staged and showcased products and ideas for better living. They focused on the ideal consumer: white, young, exemplifying the traditional nuclear family. Homebuilding during this era was a way of measuring economic growth. In the early 1960s, the building industry shifted to communities and by extension offering services like mortgages. The author presents these developments with well-chosen and often colorful images, noting too the critiques made of them.

Newberry transitions to the topic of museums and their impact on Los Angeles, citing the effect of the Centre Pompidou on its Parisian neighborhood and how this corresponds to MOCA and real estate values. The author’s discussion of the planning is particularly insightful.

The concluding chapter, however, presents Los Angeles in crisis and changes that then ensued. As the author concludes: “How speculation relates as a formal and social method to the concept and composition of artworks, to economic and cultural policy, and to the construction and distribution of arts-backed civic philanthropy is a lesson drawn from this book’s Southern California case study.”

From a unique approach to cultural history, economics and planning, Newberry’s book, with its extensive notes and comprehensive bibliography, has much to offer libraries and will serve the needs of many academic programs.