



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

SOCIETY OF  
ARCHITECTURAL  
HISTORIANS

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Review: Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990

**Drive: Journeys through Film, Cities and Landscapes** by Iain Borden; **Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990** by Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander, eds.; **Car Country: An Environmental History** by Christopher W. Wells

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*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 291–294

Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu) on behalf of the [Society of Architectural Historians](http://www.jsah.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.2.291>

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self-presentation of this group, we find shades of Team 10, with historians taking the role that practicing architects played there—food for thought in and of itself, and in timely counterpoint to at least one young architect's recent anxieties.<sup>4</sup>

This is a wonderful book whose minor flaws reflect on the publisher as much as the authors. Some of the essays seem compacted, while others could stand fuller elaboration. See the sentence that begins “Keynes compares the land rentier to the ‘oppressive power of the capitalist’” (246–47) for a prose style rivaling Manfredo Tafuri in translation. More prosaically, typographical errors and grammatical infelicities mar an otherwise fascinating collection of new work. Such problems, one imagines, will be resolved in future publications, particularly with editorial support. Aggregate may now speak in part to itself, densely, but this group will no doubt learn to speak more clearly to the rest of us—for they raise questions that lead us into the future.

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## Notes

1. Despite the extensive negative press it has received, the term *functionalism* is not negatively invoked by this reviewer. See also Claire Zimmerman, “The Old Functionalist,” review of Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays*, *JSAH* 73, no. 1 (Mar. 2014), 165–67.
2. Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Anderson, trans. Richard Anderson and Julie Dawson (New York: GSAPP Sourcebook, 2012).
3. Nikolaus Pevsner's 1943 distinction between Lincoln Cathedral and a bicycle shed, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock's “architecture of bureaucracy” of 1947 both addressed the diminishing distinction between Architecture and “mere building” in the industrialized West. Pevsner sought to create the distinction anew; Hitchcock found a repository for all the buildings that were demonstrably more than building, but still, in his view, less than Architecture. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “The Architecture of Genius and the Architecture of Bureaucracy,” *Architectural Review* 101 (Jan. 1947) [fiftieth anniversary issue], 3–6.
4. See James D. Graham, review of *Alternate Ending I: The Glimmering Noise*, *JSAH* 72, no. 4 (Dec. 2013), 596–98.

Iain Borden

### **Drive: Journeys through Film, Cities and Landscapes**

London: Reaktion Books, 2013, 280 pp.,  
40 color and 40 b/w illus. \$28, ISBN  
9781780230269

Wim de Wit and Christopher James  
Alexander, eds.

### **Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990**

Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013,  
320 pp., 112 color and 102 b/w illus. \$59.95,  
ISBN 9781606061282

Christopher W. Wells

### **Car Country: An Environmental History**

Seattle: University of Washington Press,  
2012, 464 pp., 7 maps and 44 b/w illus. \$40,  
ISBN 9780295992150

In July 2013, a *New York Times* headline proclaimed “the end of car culture.” Though the summer driving season offered plenty of evidence to the contrary, recent data indicate that fewer Americans are driving fewer miles in fewer cars, and even forgoing the adolescent ritual of getting a driver's license upon turning sixteen. Thus, the *Times* felt confident in declaring that the country's century-old love affair with the automobile was finally, inevitably, running out of gas. But if the romance with the car is cooling down, studying its fraught legacy is still plenty hot, as a spate of recent publications makes clear. In fact, in the hundred years since the first Model Ts rolled off the assembly line at Highland Park, Michigan, the car and its social, spatial, and economic impact have been under almost continual scrutiny, producing triumphant Fordist narratives and muckraking antisprawl screeds in almost equal measure. More nuanced, scholarly studies emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century with *The Automobile and American Culture* (1980; David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, eds.), a notable early example that attempted a comprehensive analysis of what its editors called the “auto-consciousness” of the United States.

The continued evolution of that consciousness is fully evident in the three books under review here, each of which

tackles a distinct aspect of the culture of automobility. In *Car Country*, Christopher W. Wells tracks its environmental evolution; in *Drive*, Iain Borden scrutinizes its experiential representation; in *Overdrive*, seventeen contributors examine its urban and architectural influence in Los Angeles, the world's original autopia. Unsurprisingly, all three books deal principally with twentieth-century developments in the United States, though each pushes these parameters in important ways. *Car Country* begins with the infrastructural consequences of streetcars and railways in the 1880s. *Overdrive*, which probes Los Angeles's “deep historical morphology,” commences even earlier, with Uto-Aztec settlements and Spanish-Mexican land grants in the 1780s, and extends its geographic scope to cultural exchanges between Angelinos and Latin America and East Asia. *Drive* considers films not only from the United States but also from the United Kingdom and Europe, including a number made after 2000. This does not mean, however, that *Drive* has the most contemporary outlook. Though *Car Country* and *Overdrive* are both assuredly historical accounts, their perspectives are temporally expansive: *Car Country* looks at the past to help us understand how we arrived at the present; *Overdrive* analyzes one city's history to provoke speculations on global urban futures.

While the car is central to each book, only Borden's remains firmly behind the wheel, in motion, with eyes on the road—literally, since driving as performance and experience is the book's subject and object. *Drive* is a clear continuation of Borden's long-standing scholarly interest in pushing architectural history's disciplinary limits into the realm of the lived city, examining the intersection of architecture and urbanism across diverse media. As such, *Drive* stands as a logical, if high-octane, sequel to his 2001 study of skateboarding as a transgressive and transformative urban practice. Here, however, it is not the car's endlessly proliferating subcultures (racing clubs, enthusiast magazines, etc.) that Borden considers, but its cinematic representations in films ranging from classic (*Grapes of Wrath*, 1940) to popular (*The Italian Job*, 1969 and 2003), from art house (*Breathless*, 1960) to underground (*C'était un rendezvous*, 1976).

And while Borden takes us on a cinematic journey that includes the earliest film to use a car trip in its story arc (*The Runaway Match*, 1903) and a recent film in which car trips are the story arc (*Drive*, 2011), his book is not intended as film history—and this may explain the frustrating omission, among the book's otherwise excellent end-notes and select bibliography, of a filmography of at least some of the 450 films Borden says he viewed while researching *Drive*. Borden's stated ambition is to explore the myriad cultural meanings driving assumed with the proliferation of the automobile. And although he introduces the voices of a number of distinguished interlocutors—as familiar as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, as unexpected as E. B. White, as little known as A. B. Filson Young—film (a technology almost as old as the automobile) is Borden's principal means of illustrating his critical navigation of the landscapes we traverse and inhabit, bodily and emotionally, when we climb inside a car.

Some of these landscapes are slow moving and place specific; others are accelerated and archetypal, especially in the book's first two chapters. In "Cities" and "Journeys," Borden examines driving as freedom and emancipation, at 30 mph and 55 mph, respectively, guiding us through terrains both identifiable and uncanny: the New York of *Taxi Driver* (1976), the Los Angeles of *Chinatown* (1974), the urban dystopia of *Alphaville* (1965), the faded small towns of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), the iconic west of *Thelma and Louise* (1991). In the book's last two chapters, he explores driving as alienation and transcendence. "Motopia" focuses on depictions of interstates and other limited-access freeways, both real and imagined, at speeds hovering around 70 mph, in films as diverse as *Metropolis* (1927), *The End of Violence* (1997), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), and *Cars* (2006). "Altered States" considers the pleasures and perils of high-speed chases and high-impact crashes (above 100 mph), as experienced simultaneously by on-screen drivers and voyeuristic moviegoers. Here, Borden's analyses of even such obvious filmic choices as *The French Connection* (1971), *Bullitt* (1968), *Week End* (1967), and *Crash* (1996), reframe familiar

interpretations of depicted thrills and anxieties, becoming thoughtful critiques of the experiential complexities of modern and contemporary life. That driving contributes significantly and unapologetically to that complexity—and that film is an essential vehicle for making it comprehensible—is the polemical heart of Borden's book. He is certainly not the first scholar to consider driving's cultural centrality, as the survey of recent literature that forms *Drive*'s introduction makes clear; nor is he the first to consider the dynamism of motion as a way of comprehending the twentieth-century city (see, for example, Mitchell Schwarzer's *Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media*, 2004). But by making the car, the nexus of these quintessential twentieth-century technologies, the subject of *Drive*, Borden makes an important contribution to our understanding of modernity itself.

Intertwining technologies (of water supply, power transmission, and, of course, automotive infrastructure) are also at the heart of *Overdrive*, Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander's companion volume to an ambitious Getty Center exhibition of the same name. Organized as part of the massive (and ongoing) Pacific Standard Time collaboration of more than sixty Southern California cultural institutions, *Overdrive* is less an introduction to Los Angeles architecture and urbanism than a reassessment of its prodigious and influential accomplishments between 1940 and 1990. While many of these achievements are directly related to the transformative impact of the automobile, the car does not emerge explicitly as the book's central organizing device. Its essays are grouped into four sections—"Transformative Landscapes," "Engaging Modernism," "Developing Communities," and "Engineered Audacity"—whose contents revisit familiar Los Angeles tropes (and people, buildings, and infrastructure) while expanding the critical frameworks through which these are normally viewed. Thus, while the Case Study houses and John Lautner's Chemosphere put in an appearance, Dana Hutt's essay focuses not on their contribution to postwar modernism—which is, itself, re-presented in Wim de Wit's incisive contribution to the book—but on their material connections to postwar

aeronautics, evident in their early residential deployment of steel, plastics, and aluminum. Dana Cuff also takes on the Case Study program, not as an exceptional experiment, but as related to the many architect/developer home-building initiatives that defined Southern California's suburban landscapes after World War II. Becky Nicolaidis brings these developments almost up to the present in a useful chronology that charts how phenomenal growth transformed so-called sitcom suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s into edge cities that still characterize the region today.

*Overdrive* also includes examinations of less well-known aspects of L.A. architecture, including Susan Macdonald on the challenges of modernist preservation and Ken Breisch on the evolution of professional design education in the decades after the passage of the 1944 GI Bill of Rights. His institutional histories of architecture programs at the University of Southern California, UCLA, CalPoly in San Luis Obispo, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles provide an important pedagogical foundation for understanding the emergence of a Los Angeles-based architectural avant-garde, whose rise to prominence Stephen Phillips chronicles with estimable evenhandedness and a lack of macho rhetoric in one of *Overdrive*'s final essays. Phillips's "Architecture Industry" is sandwiched between Vanessa R. Schwartz's interpretation of the glamorous imagery and functional choreography of LAX in the "Jet Age" and Chris Nichols's evaluation of commercial architecture in the San Gabriel Valley as "everyday entertainment." This placement allows the early work of Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, Craig Hodgetts, and the rest of the L.A. Ten, to be understood as an engagement with a formal exuberance that, in varying degrees of intensity and intention, characterized numerous Los Angeles design practices in the second half of the twentieth century, whether they positioned themselves as conventionally mainstream or deliberately edgy.

As a collection, *Overdrive* unavoidably builds on the work of Reyner Banham, Kevin Starr, and Mike Davis, whose overlapping interpretations of the city and its

culture lurk in the historiographic underpasses of the entire book, emerging from the shadows only a handful of times, in Getty Research Institute Director Thomas W. Gaetgens's foreword, in the epigraph of Sandy Isenstadt's essay "Los Angeles After Dark," and in a concluding reference to "Fortress L.A." in Eric Avila's "All Freeways Lead to East Los Angeles." Isenstadt's and Avila's contributions to *Overdrive* typify the critical reevaluation that marks the project as a whole. While both begin with well-known (even overexposed) dimensions of the city—its nighttime illumination and its freeways—they offer new insights that force us to recalibrate urban legibility in physical and social terms, not only in Los Angeles, but also in countless places like it. By examining the diverse lighting effects of the "incandescent city" and by considering contrasting perceptions of the gridded landscape by day and night, Isenstadt shows how the sheer ubiquity of electrical installations (building floodlights, streetlamps, car headlights) gave shape, form, and undeniable beauty to what was otherwise, many argued, ugly, undefined sprawl.

Eric Avila begins his essay with a brisk overview of the evolution of the freeway system, slowing down to consider the protests (unsuccessful) that accompanied the construction of seven roadways and interchanges through the heart of Chicana/o East Los Angeles. He then shifts back to familiar territory, summarizing the customary interpretations of the freeways as mobility city's defining feature, an interpretation that holds up just fine as long as your point of view is that of someone driving on an elevated expressway rather than walking on a surface street. It is from the latter perspective that Avila concludes his essay, with a consideration of muralists and graffiti artists who use the "public surfaces of freeway architecture" to challenge socioeconomic marginalization and invisibility. There is nothing startling about this interpretation, but by bringing it into the discourse of the freeway, Avila subverts received, by now canonical, narratives of Los Angeles as optimistic sunshine (Banham) or pessimistic noir (Davis).

Although *Overdrive* is lavishly illustrated from beginning to end, its visual climax is

the seventy-three plates that comprise the book's final section, including sketches, renderings, and photographs of iconic Los Angeles structures such as Sabato "Simon" Rodia's Watts Towers; Pierre Koenig's Case Study House #22; Pereira, Becket, Luckman and Williams's LAX Theme Building; Armet and Davis's Romeo's Times Square restaurant; and Gehry's Chiat/Day Offices. These, along with lesser-known images of freeway construction, urban renewal/slum clearance, and public housing (including Aliso Village and Pueblo del Rio), are organized into five thematic and typological categories derived from the *Overdrive* exhibition curated by de Wit, along with Christopher James Alexander and Rani Singh. As presented in book form these categories are mostly comprehensible, even without the introductions that accompanied their original Getty installation and continue to introduce their online presence (<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/overdrive>): electrical transmission towers are "urban networks"; an apartment building in Culver City is "residential fabric"; Dodger Stadium is a "community magnet"; Century City is an "engine of innovation." In many ways these categories, and the projects the curators associate with them, help to undermine the conventional hierarchies that, all too frequently, still inform the study of twentieth-century architecture.

These hierarchies persist, however, within the book itself, where the category "car culture" is unnecessarily narrow, obscuring a significant way *Overdrive* frames Los Angeles architecture and urbanism. Why silo Lautner's Google coffee shop, Killingsworth, Brady, Smith's Duffield Lincoln-Mercury showroom, and the unattributed Mobil gas station (designed by Whitney Smith and Wayne Williams) depicted in Julius Shulman's famous photograph? As Ralph Morris's aerial photo makes clear, Dodger Stadium works as a community magnet largely because of Emil Praeger's deft handling of the parking, accommodating 16,000 cars in a series of radiating berms and lobed lots. The innovations at Century City, obvious in the watercolor rendering of the original retail core, were due to Welton Becket's master planning for people and cars across superblocks, plazas, boulevards, elevated

bridges, surface parking, and subterranean garages. In a book whose title refers to the gearing of an automotive transmission, whose opening paragraphs cite driving and traffic as fundamental to the Angeleno way of life, and whose essays (with few exceptions) grapple with motopia's architectural and urban consequences, the framework of "car culture" can be applied quite reasonably not only to most of the projects reproduced in the plates but also to *Overdrive* in its entirety. If Los Angeles invented the future, as the book's subtitle suggests and its essays convincingly demonstrate, the metropolis achieved this principally by "reaching for the car keys."

Christopher Wells uses this phrase in the epilogue to *Car Country* to explain how deeply Americans have internalized automotive travel, becoming so dependent on cars that reaching for the keys has become "the default national gesture." By the time readers of his excellent environmental history encounter the epilogue, Wells has made it abundantly clear that this dependence came about not by default or unconscious predestination but by deliberate choice, through a series of calculated decisions in the first half of the twentieth century that utterly, though perhaps not irrevocably, transformed the United States. In large measure, the story Wells tells in *Car Country* is a familiar one: the proliferation of the automobile in the decades after World War I wrought vast changes in the country's physical landscape and its spatial logic, producing by the decades after World War II a network of highways and decentralized settlements serving residential, commercial, and industrial purposes that once were found almost exclusively in central cities. This may sound like the story of suburbia, and in part it is, but Wells's book is so full of fresh insights and new perspectives that it should rightfully find a place alongside Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985) and Dolores Hayden's *Building Suburbia* (2003).

One of the virtues of *Car Country* is that Wells turns his attention to the middle landscape only after a thorough examination of the car's distinct impact in the city and the country. This balanced approach is particularly effective in the book's early chapters, which look at the state of roads,

traffic, and socioeconomic priorities before and after the arrival of the automobile between 1880 and 1919. By giving equal time to urban and rural actors—driving enthusiasts, motor tourists, farmers, real estate developers, agronomists, railroad managers, and road engineers—Wells creates a nuanced portrait of communities and interest groups struggling to come to grips with a machine whose transformative potential no one fully understood. In the city, the car exacerbated what was already regarded as intolerable vehicular congestion and encouraged trends toward dispersal; in the country, automobility offered a salve for rural isolation and encouraged centralization of institutions and services. In between, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, new and entirely automotive landscapes emerged.

In three chapters devoted to “creating car country” in the interwar years, Wells takes us along streetcar lines and roadside strips, on one-way streets, parkways and cross-country highways, to affluent suburbs and residential neighborhoods near downtown, to shopping districts and shopping centers, to factories and forests. Along the way he explains their physical and cultural geography through the lens of mobility, convenience, and the availability of natural resources, all operating in a free-market economy. At the same time he pays

particular attention to larger forces at work, and their deleterious environmental impact: the expanding reach and power of the oil and auto industries, and their connections to highway finance and construction through the invisible mechanism of gasoline taxes.

The book’s final section deals with the suburbanized United States in the 1940s and 1950s, decades in which the mandates and standards of car country effectively entered the national DNA. Even scholars well versed in the history of the midcentury suburb—and the incentives and subsidies that gave rise to low-density subdivisions, restrictive zoning, and sprawling commercial development—will appreciate Wells’s synthesis and summaries, particularly when (and because) they connect the dots between suburbanization and car-oriented transportation policies. With the benefit of hindsight, Wells grasps what eluded our twentieth-century driving forebears, leading him to a stunning, though fully substantiated conclusion about the car-dependent landscapes the majority of Americans now occupy. The car did not cause suburbanization; suburbanization caused us to require cars.

*Car Country* includes two photo galleries, arranged chronologically and with detailed captions, that serve as visual time lines of the developments Wells ably

chronicles in the book’s seven chapters. While these pictures provide a satisfying overview of the country’s physical and infrastructural evolution, they are not really necessary, not only because Wells’s narration is so evocative but also because what he evokes is instantly recognizable. We do not need pictures of car country because we live in car country. The photograph on the book’s cover is an aerial view of the junction of the President George Bush Turnpike and US-75 in Plano, Texas, north of Dallas. But it could be Los Angeles; it could be anywhere in America; it could be anywhere in the developed world—and, with more than one billion cars on the face of the planet, that may be the point. What *Car Country*, *Drive*, and *Overdrive* all demonstrate, and what architectural, urban, and environmental historians can learn from them, is the ubiquity, however uncomfortable, of a motor age transposition of Descartes: I drive therefore I am. So thoroughly have we organized our buildings and landscapes around the automobile, collectively traveling three trillion miles per year on four million miles of roads, that it is going to take a lot more than the supposed “end of car culture” for the United States to enter a post-motor age.

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