

An Engineer Writes: The Inadvertent PoMo of Technology

Abstract

In this paper, I will try and shed a new light on the canonical mid-20th century British historian Reyner Banham in an attempt to make the claim that Reyner Banham was a fundamentally post-modern thinker. That, despite his explicit and vehement repeated claims for a technologically focused architectural discipline, the episteme he inhabited was a post-modern one which did not resemble his modern predecessors such as Nikolaus Pevsner, but more resembled that of his contemporaries and successors such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown - that in fact, it may have been Banham's critique of modernism that led to the post-modern thesis.

Reyner Banham was an incredible critic of architecture who wrote extensively on modernism, well-tempered environments and the relationship between architecture and technology. This led to him having the reputation of a crusader of high-tech architecture and modernism and he was typically known as an arch critic of the post-modern movement in architecture. Common literature on Banham says as such - including Anthony Vidler's *Histories of the Immediate Present*, Nigel Whitley's *Historian of the Immediate Future* as well as Todd Gannon's *Paradoxes of High Tech*. Banham in these cases is usually portrayed as a techno-focused advocate of machine aesthetics and technology's primordial role - which makes him seem as an extension of the modern movement in architecture.

However, it's Banham's very radical stance that makes him a post-modern thinker. Banham's focus on technology's role in architecture inevitably led to his conclusion that technology had made the tradition of architecture defunct, and that the world could now dispose off these *garments* of architecture. Banham allowed for architecture to be seen as *garments*, as mere robes worn by buildings. This duality - between architectural representation and its inherent function was also the basis for the postmodern movement - for Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to argue for architecture as a communicative medium, wearing *signs and symbols*.

Hopefully, this will prove to be a new reading of Banham and situate him more appropriately in his temporal and spatial context - changing how we think of Banham's relationship to his contemporaries.

Preamble

The larger goal of this paper is to view Reyner Banham in a new light, a light which hopefully would help explain both his larger ideological trajectories as well as the seeming paradoxes which haunt his image. But first, I'd like to set the context on how Banham gets viewed today, and thus how I'd like to situate my lens on him. There are a few key texts that have been written about Banham so far.

1. Anthony Vidler's "Histories of the Immediate Present"¹

Vidler's book is a collection of the various traditions of modernism that sprung up after the second world war. These include Colin Rowe's "Mannerist Modernism", Manfredo Tafuri's "Renaissance Modernism" and Emil Kaufman's "Neoclassical Modernism". Here, Banham is termed the "Futurist Modernist", riffing on his much known love for Antonio Sant'elia and the Italian Futurists. Vidler portrays Banham as "the engineer-art critic who was less convinced that modern architectural language had been exhausted by the end of the 1920s". Thus, Vidler projects Banham very much as a post-war extension of the modern movement, not to say that he's identical to the modern pioneers, such as Pevsner and Gideon, but that he's closer to modernism than the radical break later represented by post-modernism.

2. Todd Gannon's "Reyner Banham and the Paradoxes of High Tech"²

Gannon's book is, as the title suggests, about paradox. Primarily, about the paradoxes surrounding Banham's seeming opposing viewpoints. He's both a radical outsider, as well as the insider of insiders. He does not care for form, and yet hails the Archigram group (whom most would consider singularly form-makers) for their visionary drawings. For Gannon, Banham is a mystery. As eloquently put by Jared Langevin, Banham was in search of an "Image-able, Invisible Architecture".

3. Nigel Whiteley's "Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future"³

Definitively the most comprehensive account of Banham so far, Whiteley's book covers almost all the aspects of his theoretical career. Whiteley paints Banham in three phases - first as the champion of Nikolaus Pevsner's modernist ideals, through his dissertation "Theory and Design in the First Machine Age", second as a radical technologist, through "The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment" and lastly as an urbanist, through "Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies". This shows an evolving Banham, one who's sensitive to, and changes with the time, turning increasingly post-modern.

The above three texts are probably the most dominant accounts of Banham so far, and as can be seen, there's generally little consensus to be found.

¹ Vidler, Anthony, Histories of the Immediate Present (Boston: MIT Press, 1987)

² Gannon, Todd, The Paradoxes of High Tech (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, October 10, 2017)

³ Whiteley, Nigel, Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future (Boston: MIT Press, 2002)

The image of Banham I hope to paint in this paper will ideally help bring some coherence to these accounts, not to say that it will help explain the enigma of Peter Reyner Banham, but instead I hope it will deepen our understanding of him.

The Engineer-turned-Theorist

The argument, or rather, justification I'd like to make for Banham's radical perspectives was that he was epistemologically an engineer and a commoner.

Born in 1922 in Norwich (a medieval turned industrial town) to a working-class engineer, Banham gained an engineering scholarship with the Bristol Aeroplane Company. It was only after the second world war, in 1949 that he turned to architecture and history, enrolling in the Courtland Institute of Art, studying under Antony Blunt, Nikolaus Pevsner and Sigfried Gideon.

To look at Banham's epistemology as that of an engineer sheds a completely different light on this instrumental figure, and it makes for interesting comparison between him and both his mentors (Pevsner) as well as his contemporaries (Venturi + Scott Brown). As we will see, while his stance towards architecture turns explicitly more post-modern with his book on Los Angeles in 1971, there were always hidden signs of this inherent viewpoint in works leading up to this one, including, "A Home is not a House" (1965), "Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment" (1969), his work with the Independent Group as well as his "The New Brutalism" (1955).

Another interesting comparison to be made, is between Robert Venturi + Denise Scott Brown and Reyner Banham. Superficially seeming radically different, a deeper look shows us how they're actually quite in alignment over several issues. What's more interesting about this comparison for me however, is the new lens we can put over Banham that helps us understand him, and I think it's a radically different Banham that we will see.

Nigel Whiteley's "Learning from Las Vegas... and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham"

Whiteley's essay, while at first seemingly a rather random comparison, actually highlights a new kind of Banham from the power of the comparison. According to Whiteley, this comparison highlights the striking similarities between Venturi et al. (the canonical post-modernists) and Reyner Banham, who was usually considered to be a modernist. Whiteley writes,

"Learning from Las Vegas has much in common with Banham's Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies, and both reveal a permissive sensibility that is symptomatic of the time they were written"⁴

Whiteley situates both Venturi et al. and Banham in the same episteme, partly thanks to their

⁴ Whiteley, Nigel, *Learning from Las Vegas and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham*, Visible Language, Lancaster University, 2003.

close ages, and highlights the many similarities that can be found between Banham's book on L.A, and Venturi et al's book on Las Vegas.

Some points of similarities that Whiteley draws on are Banham and Venturi et al's closeness to the culture at the time, and specifically the new idea of the "expanded field" brought about by Rosalind Krauss. Their general openness and inclusiveness to both High and Popular Culture, taking a "Both-And" approach to cultural criticism.

Whiteley's points of difference were when it came to Banham's approach of "enjoyment" versus Venturi et al's idea of "learning" from popular culture. While Venturi et al. took an approach of trying to bring it into the tradition of high culture, similar to what was happening in art at the time by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Banham chose to take popular culture as it was, and enjoyed the diversity offered by accepting both high and pop culture.

"But, although Banham and Venturi et al. were diagnosing the same cultural phenomenon, they drew quite different lessons. Whereas Venturi et al. wanted to use the commercial decorated shed as the model for a renewed serious architecture, Banham saw it as an end in itself. It represented a type within diversity that made up the "polymorphous architectures" of Los Angeles"⁵

What makes this essay by Whiteley different however, is the different light it shines on Banham. For someone who's painted as deeply ingrained with technology's role in architecture, as one who's highly critical of both the profession as well as most iconoclastic architect, Whiteley's essay shows us a Banham who's fundamentally accepting, much more post-modern than originally thought to be. This version of Banham is also the starting point of my paper, trying to understand Banham's previous writings in this context, specifically his essay "A Home is not a House". What I think an analysis of that essay with a lens augmented by Whiteley will allow, is to situate Banham in a radically different way than before. Changing our conceptions of his relationship with Pevsner as well as Venturi et al.

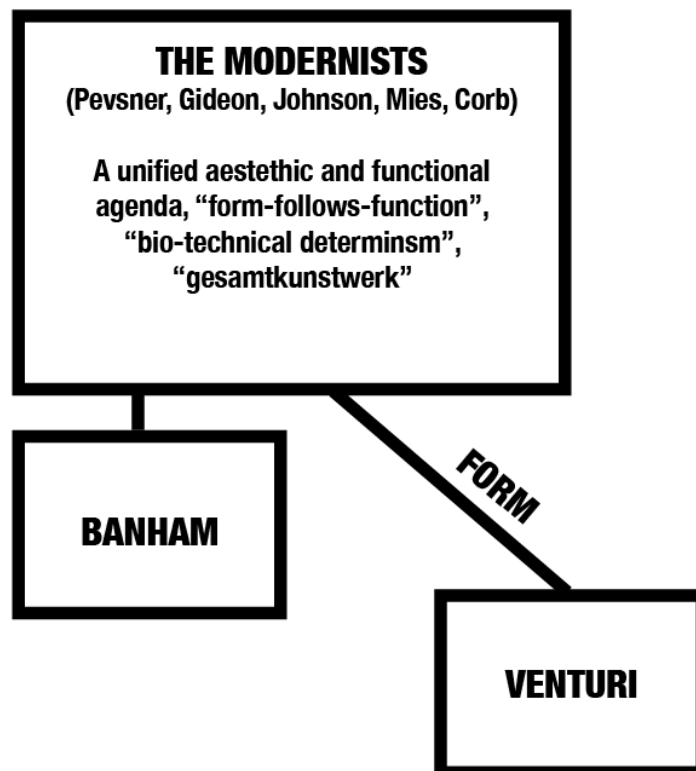
⁵ Whiteley, Nigel, *Learning from Las Vegas and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham*, Visible Language, Lancaster University, 2003.

Diagrams

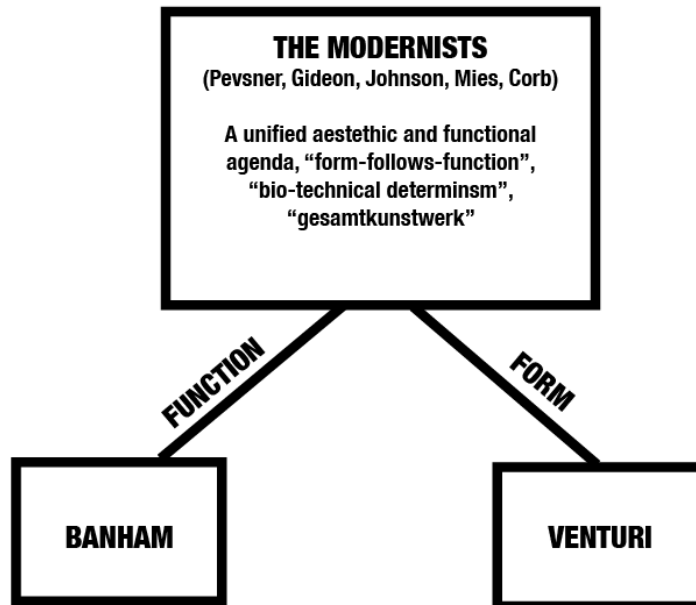
Banham's focus on technology's role in architecture inevitably led to his conclusion that technology had made the tradition of architecture defunct, and that the world could now dispose off these garments of architecture. Banham allowed for architecture to be seen as garments, as mere robes worn by buildings. This duality - between architectural representation and its inherent function was strikingly similar to what Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown argued for architecture, it being communicative medium, wearing signs and symbols. This similarity in their perceptions of what architecture is, is what helps situate them historically, and helps set them apart from their modern forefathers.

The diagrams below are meant to help put this contextualization of Banham into a more visual form.

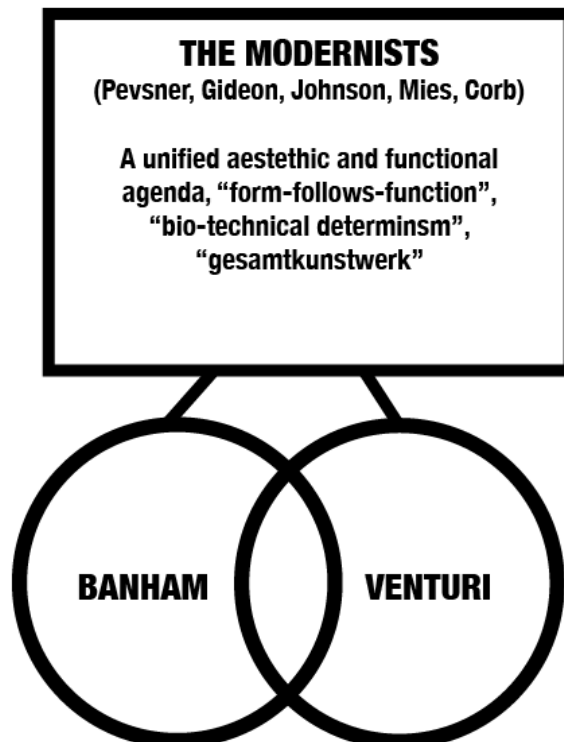
Original Conception



My Argument



Whiteley's Argument



Changing Postwar Perspectives

The situation after the second world war was radically different than it had been previously. As outlined in her book "Anxious Modernisms", Goldhagen points to a series of different positions taken by architects postwar, which was all outlined with a certain "anxiety" that existed in this new age, one fundamentally different from the age of the original modern masters.⁶

As described by Goldhagen, this was an age where "communism was a menace against which the Western democracies guarded vigilantly in their own societies", it was an age of a degree of uncertainty about the modern movement, which seemed to have turned into the corporate-backed international style.

During this time, as pointed out by Whiteley, the idea of the "expanded field" in art was coming about, and Banham surely would have been aware of this. In fact, he was part of his own "expansion"⁷, with his involvement within the independent group, a collective of artists, critics and writers. The independent group was known to be a bunch obsessed with daily popular culture and what it meant for art. They worked on bringing mass culture into debates about high culture, subverting the original dominance of the earlier masters. The independent group lasted from 1952 - 1956, with Banham leading the first session. This involvement surely would've been a point of subversion from Banham against the prevailing dominant traditions in the profession, allowing him to fit into the general context of the post-war quite succinctly.

A Home is not a House, or the Power of Environmental Machinery.

As mentioned by Whiteley in his paper about Los Angeles, Banham represented a break from Pevsner in that he did not subscribe to cultural elitism. Pevsner famously wrote, "The Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture, and a bicycle shed is a building"⁸, clearly displaying his tendency to discriminate about what architecture was, and this tendency is precisely what Banham attacked with his 1965 essay in *Art in America* entitled "A Home is not a House", stating early on, "Mechanical services destroy proverbial wisdom"⁹.

Written with accompanying drawings by French architect and artist Francois Dallegret, "A Home is not a House" is Banham's polemical stance for an architecture of pure functionalism. Here, Banham ridicules American homes, as being built without any protection from cold and warm weather. He argues that homes are now merely representational devices, with the real work being done by the systems of heating, cooling and wiring that create habitable, or fit environments for human existence. He calls these the "environmental machinery".

⁶ Goldhagen, Sarah, *Anxious Modernisms*, (Boston: MIT Press, 2001)

⁷ Whiteley, Nigel, *Learning from Las Vegas and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham*, Visible Language, Lancaster University, 2003.

⁸ Whiteley, Nigel, *Learning from Las Vegas and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham*, Visible Language, Lancaster University, 2003.

⁹ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in *Art in America*

Famously, Banham pointed this out as an American condition, underhandedly commenting on how the American ideology towards buildings was fundamentally different than Pevsner's.

"Left to their own devices, Americans do not monumentality or make architecture" ¹⁰

"So if services are to be felt anywhere as a threat to architecture, it should be in America" ¹¹

"And it hit me then, that if dirty old Nature could be kept under the proper degree of control (sex left in, streptococci taken out) by other means, the United States would be happy to dispense with architecture and buildings altogether" ¹²

Banham seemed to glorify this American ideology and condition, loving how bare-bones and simple the conditions for living were. This appreciation for the new world was seen best through his article "The Great Gizmo" written earlier for the industrial design magazine, referencing an American mentality that was a do-it-yourself working class ideology, one that Banham surely would have appreciated. He wrote in "A Home is not a House",

"All this will eat up quite a lot of power, transistors notwithstanding. But one should remember that few Americans are ever far from a source of between 100 and 400 horsepower—the automobile. Beefed up car batteries and self-reeling cable drum could probably get this package breathing warm bourbon fumes o'er Eden long before micro-wave power transmission or miniaturized atomic power plants come in"
¹³

What seems to explain Banham's love of America, I think stems from his own working-class background. Being trained as an engineer, Banham cared more for whether something worked or not, instead of its high cultural traits, perfectly linking him to the American condition at the time.

What made this essay truly radical however, was Banham's distinctions between the way architecture looked and the way it worked. He noted,

"Only the word house is a manifest misnomer—just a flat piece of ground where the operating company provides visual images and piped sound, and the rest of the situation comes on wheels" ¹⁴

"If the countless Americans who are successfully raising nice children in trailers will excuse me for a moment, I have a few suggestions to make to the even more countless Americans who are so insecure that they have to hide inside fake monuments of Permastone and instant roofing." ¹⁵

¹⁰ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

¹¹ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

¹² Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

¹³ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

¹⁴ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

¹⁵ Banham, Reyner, "A home is not a house" in Art in America

If any essay were to highlight the stark differences that existed between Venturi et al. and Reyner Banham, it would be "A Home is not a House", Banham here was rather myopic, polemically arguing for only the functional quality of architecture, almost entirely disregarding form. However, this is also what distinguished him from his modernist predecessors, and showed that his lens on architecture was similar to that of Venturi et al's, except that the positions they took were in opposition.

Banham even wrote on Las Vegas around this time, but again, took an oppositional view to Venturi et al. While Venturi et al. positioned Las Vegas as a "communication system", Banham on the other hand was only impressed by the sheer amounts of environmental management that occurred through Las Vegas, stating,

*"What defines the symbolic spaces and places of Las Vegas - the superhotels of The Strip, the casino-belt of Fremont Street - is pure environmental power, manifested as colored light.... [T]he fact remains that the effectiveness with which space is defined is overwhelming, the creation of virtual volumes without apparent structure is endemic, the variety and ingenuity of the lighting techniques is encyclopedic.... And in a view of architectural education that embraced the complete art of environmental management, a visit to Las Vegas would be as mandatory as a visit to the Baths of Caracalla or La Sainte Chapelle"*¹⁶

As can be seen above, Banham too recommends a visit to learn from Las Vegas, but for radically different reasons. But the interesting part none the less is that Banham still sees something to be learned from in the city, unlike most of his predecessors, who chose to completely ignore or banish the site.

*"The point of studying Las Vegas, ultimately, would be to see an example of how far environmental technology can be driven beyond the confines of architectural practice by designers who (for better or worse) are not inhibited by the traditions of architectonic culture, training and taste."*¹⁷

This distinction highlighted by Banham, between architecture's outward appearance and its ability to create 'fit' environments for human habitation was a drastic shift from earlier modernist ideologies such as Pevsner's and Gideon's, who called for a unification of architecture's outward appearance and its inner purpose.

This, Banham termed the difference between the "Hardware" and "Software" of architecture.

"Hardware versus Software"

Whiteley, in his book refers to this break away from the unification of form and function as an analogy of "Hardware versus Software". Whiteley argues that Banham describes "an architecture in which the "hardware" of form becomes subservient to the "software" of

¹⁶ Banham, Reyner, *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969)

¹⁷ Banham, Reyner, *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969)

activity”.

Whiteley focuses on a statement by Banham in *Home is not a House*, stating,

“Unlike the living space trapped with our forebears under a rock or roof, the space around a campfire has many unique qualities which architecture cannot hope to equal, above all, its freedom and variability”

Where this notion of “freedom and variability” is key for Banham, not just as a means of freedom of use, but also now a new freedom of design, where the stuff of architecture no longer performs the task of maintaining a stable environment for human habitation.

Whiteley argues that for Banham, this is also a contrast between the American and European way of building, “The shift is from form and hardware to service and software, a shift whose credibility hinges on the observation that it is the American Way to spend money on services and up - keep rather than on permanent structure as do the peasant cultures of the Old World”.

This characterization between the duality of the Hardware and the Software that constitute architecture is what’s novel about Banham’s epistemology. The very articulation of architecture in this way, breaking it up into two entirely different units is what breaks Banham away from his predecessors, who’s logic was much more unified into the coherence of form and function and machine aesthetics.

Attitudes towards Popular Culture, "Both/And"

Banham's background also allowed him to take a much more inclusive view towards the built environment and buildings - most commonly seen through his book *"Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies"*. This outlook, for enjoying a diversity in the built environment not only separated him from the more myopic outlook of his modernist forefathers, but also separated him from Venturi et al.

As pointed out by Whiteley in his *"Los Angeles and Las Vegas"* article, Venturi et al. did not really appreciate Las Vegas for what it was, instead they wanted to "learn" from it, and culturally appropriate it for the discipline of architecture, just as Andy Warhol had done for mass consumerism and art.

Banham's approach to "enjoy" Las Vegas and Los Angeles instead of "learn" from them sets him apart, but it also gives insight into a world view that's much more fundamental than being either "modern" or "post-modern". It's the view of a working class engineer, one without inhibitions on what can be considered a higher form of artistic expression, for him, everything is on a level playing field, and being a natural provocateur, he tends to prefer the banal and vernacular.

This ideology, of taking things at face value, without trying to appropriate them for a discipline can be seen time and time again in Banham's work, including the *"Home is not a House"* essay. It seems as though the further he gets out from under the wing of Pevsner,

the further away he gets from the canonical lore of the discipline of architecture. Choosing the Mojave desert, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara instead of the traditional profession. This is what fundamentally made him neither "modern" nor "post-modern" when it came to architecture, but more so a radical outsider, coming at it from an engineer's point of view.

What stands out among this is his rather radical "Both-And" attitude, which tended to be non-exclusionary, and enjoying of a diversity in the built environment not seen propagated by any historian of architecture before. This ability, to see value in all things without the intervention of an architect, is what made him appear this radical amongst his peers, with very few pretensions as to what was considered "good". Just going to show how different he was to Pevsner who again started out by saying "The Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture, a bicycle shed is a building". As written by Whiteley,

"Banham was doing something closely akin to this: challenging orthodoxies and thinking through differently structured possibilities so that the dualistic division into "cathedral or bicycle shed" could become, inter alia, cathedral as (decorated) bicycle shed (as may apply to Venturi et al.), or even cathedral and bicycle shed (as Banham might have argued)"¹⁸

Conclusions + What this might mean for us today

To conclude, my hope is that I've shown a version of a Banham that's different than what we're typically familiar with, but in true Banham fashion, I'd like to focus and speculate on what this perspective means for us now, and for our future, to be a historian of the immediate future, so to speak.

I think Banham's cutting-through-the-bullshit mentality, his method of taking straightforward ideas to their absurd extremes can prove extremely valuable for us today. In part not only because of the highly uncertain times we live in now, but also thanks to technology's resurfaced prominence in the built environment.

What we're coming back to again is an aestheticization of technology, this time around the digital kind in the built environment, both through techno-corporate utopias as well as through the current generation of architects inclined on "digital form-making". These utopias can be quite spectacular and mesmerizing, and it can be difficult to see past the aesthetic, if anything, that's what we're most inclined on seeing. But, it might be a good time to put on the Banham hat and ask how they work, not just how they look. It's time to take a working class perspective to the problems of the built environment and understand the daily impact of the environment on people's lives. Digital culture is not synonymous (nor should it) with high culture, and it's far too important to be left alone with high culture theorists. Digital culture is at a point where it might be important enough to influence the next century in architectural development, so why leave it up-to parametricism?

¹⁸ Whiteley, Nigel, *Learning from Las Vegas and Los Angeles and Reyner Banham*, Visible Language, Lancaster University, 2003.

As he once said in *Reyner Banham loves Los Angeles*,
"I care not for how a city looks, but for how it works, and Los Angeles works".

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