



PIGEON HOMED

Director Thom Andersen talks about the typecasting and re-typecasting of Los Angeles's modernist residential architecture in Hollywood films.

— Text Katya Tylevich —

I once witnessed a DVD of Thom Andersen's film, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), pass from the hands of an architect to those of a film buff; the two men looked like movie villains exchanging coveted goods in a dark alley. Apropos of the argument Andersen makes in the film, I should assume they live in modernist Los Angeles architecture and invite myself over. After all, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* contends, among other things, that since the '50s Hollywood film has denigrated modernist residential architecture in LA by casting it in the role of 'bad guy's home', a lair of evil – a superficial if not altogether inadequate structure.

Los Angeles Plays Itself consists of a persuasive collage of movie clips that support Andersen's argument brilliantly but make commercial release a touchy subject. Though not easily available to the public, the film nevertheless enjoys a cult following, by way of hand-offs, word-of-mouth, critical attention; festivals; and screenings. I want a copy of the movie, too, you know. But if I have ulterior motives, when I first call Andersen I swear they're subconscious. I call him to vent my observation that since his film's release, modernist architecture has also been cast in Hollywood as a lair of *boring*: a domestic hideaway, where cuddling, giggles and/or five stages of grief take place. To my surprise, Andersen doesn't hang up on me. The role of the modernist home *has* changed, he says, 'and it's become more complicated'. The filmmaker, who also teaches at CalArts and is about to release a new film, invites me to his home in Silver Lake (a Schindler fit for stardom itself) to further agree and agree to disagree about the changing (or not) role of modern architecture in Hollywood film today.

How has Hollywood's depiction of modernist architecture in LA changed since you began work on *Los Angeles Plays Itself*?

Around 1997, several articles emerged about a fad for modern architecture among Hollywood people. This 're-evaluation' of modern architecture – spearheaded by the rise of *Wallpaper*, which presented modern architecture as a default style for hip and young rich people – began to express itself in movies a few years later. This can be seen in two films that feature Neutra houses: *Anniversary Party* [2001] and *Laurel Canyon* [2002], both of which go out of their way to make Neutras seem a little homier than they often are. There is also a transformation between *Charlie's Angels* [2000] and the sequel, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* [2003]. In the first film, Lautner's 'Chemosphere' is the home of the villain. Of course, it's not the Chemosphere itself; it's a model they built on a sound stage so that it could be 'improved'. But in the sequel Lautner's Sheats-Goldstein House is where one of the Angels lives.

It's where the ha-ha comic relief happens, not the action.

Very much so. Still, modernist houses continue in their familiar role as lairs of evil, particularly



‘LOS ANGELES IS REMARKABLY NEGLECTFUL OF ITS 20TH-CENTURY HERITAGE’

– Thom Andersen –



in *The Glass House* [2001], *Fracture* [2007] and *Hostage* [2005]. And then in the film you mentioned when we first spoke – *I Love You, Man* [2009, a 'bromance' about an engaged real-estate agent played by Paul Rudd] – the large modern home occupied by Lou Ferrigno's character [one of Rudd's rich clients] is presented as a kind of object of ridicule. It looks to me rather grotesque.

But Rudd's character lives in a homey, sensibly sized, mid-century modern in Silver Lake. He's our 'good guy', and I don't think we're meant to ridicule his house.

That may be true, and I'm sure there are other examples like that in more recent films, but hominess still seems to be represented mostly by the Spanish colonial revival style, which has a continuing and increasing popularity in Hollywood movies.

You told me you like to think *Los Angeles Plays Itself* influenced *A Single Man* (in which the grieving George, played by Colin Firth, lives in Lautner's Schaffer Residence, 2009).

There's only one reason why I can make that claim. [Director] Tom Ford's partner, Richard Buckley, published the text of my film in a magazine he was editing at that time, *Vogue Hommes International*. So I assume Ford was also aware of the film. Of course, Ford is also a fan of modern architecture. He bought a Lautner house, which he renovated. But the Schaffer House is a little different from other Lautner houses that have been featured in films. It's an early work, small, done on a medium budget, constructed almost entirely of wood and glass, and it does have a somewhat homier feel than many of Lautner's bigger houses. Ford also has a bit of fun with George's obsessive-compulsive disorder, and having the character live in a modern house might be regarded as symptomatic of that condition, because of the idea that modernist houses have a certain *austerity*. They're 'works of art', to be preserved in a pristine state, and in that sense they're not very livable.

But the contrasts between George's home and the typical suburban homes of his neighbours seem only to applaud Lautner. »

Yes, but there's also a contrast between George's home and that of his woman friend, Charlie [Julianne Moore], a life-loving, lusty person who represents a force missing in the main character's life. And she lives in this rather vulgar Hollywood house crammed with stuff.

You're saying her house is presented as a positive?

I think so. Don't you?

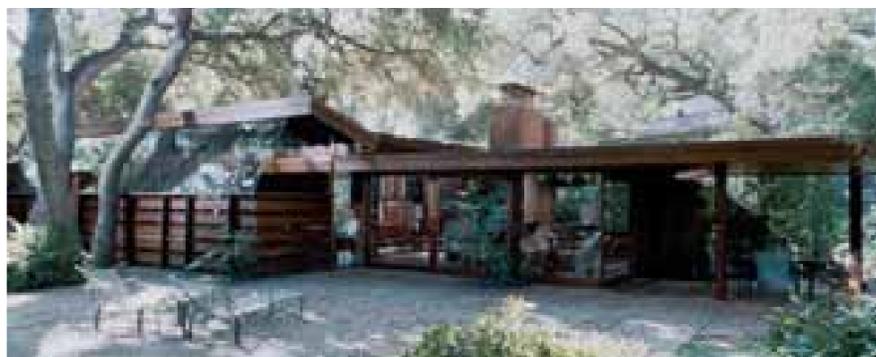
I thought it was representative of a kind of chaos.

But a creative, warm chaos. »



IN *LA CONFIDENTIAL* (1997), DIRECTED BY CURTIS HANSON, RICHARD NEUTRA'S 1928 LOVELL HOUSE IS OWNED BY PORNOGRAPHER AND PIMP PIERCE PATCHETT, PLAYED BY DAVID STRATHAIRN. CLIPS FROM THE FILM ARE SHOWN IN THOM ANDERSEN'S *LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF* (2003).





IN *A SINGLE MAN* (2009), DIRECTED BY TOM FORD, JOHN LAUTNER'S 1949 SCHAFFER HOUSE IS HOME TO PROFESSOR GEORGE FALCONER (PLAYED BY COLIN FIRTH). FALCONER HAS FOUND HIMSELF UNABLE TO RECOVER FROM THE LOSS OF HIS PARTNER, WHO DIED IN A CAR ACCIDENT, AND PREPARES FOR A SUICIDE ATTEMPT.



Your 'obsessive-compulsive disorder' comment reminds me of the part in *Shopgirl* (2005) in which Steve Martin's character (a wealthy man courting a young saleswoman played by Claire Danes) brings his love interest to his large modern home in the hills and asks, self-consciously, 'Do you think it's too done?'

Steve Martin's character is presented as having impeccable, if somewhat stodgy, over-refined taste. He's an ambivalent character: he's considerate of the shop girl but, in the end, breaks her heart. Of course, that turns out to be a positive transformation for the girl, who abandons her dreams of marrying a wealthy man and discovers something more essential – true love with an idling slob.

So we're to smirk at Steve Martin and his 'too done' home and life?

I think a lot of viewers would look at it that way.

Are such 'ambiguous' representations of LA modernist homes representative of a larger trend in Hollywood?

I feel uncomfortable making generalizations. I don't have the same interest in Hollywood movies that I did when making *Los Angeles Plays Itself*.

What of your interest in architecture since then?

That's become stronger and more militant. I've become convinced that Los Angeles has the greatest heritage of 20th-century architecture of any city in the world, but it is remarkably neglectful and unappreciative of it. There's a crisis in preservation of architecture in Los Angeles now, particularly of some of the more important private residences, which should be preserved by public institution and opened to the public. Why should our museums spend money on paintings you can see at any other museum in the world, when they could spend money on preserving and making open to the public works that can be seen only here in Los Angeles? These homes represent some of the most important art produced anywhere in the world in the 20th century.

You believe they should be preserved as works of art?

As works of art that belong to the public. They could be a great draw for cultural tourism, which Los Angeles has totally neglected. There's a shot in my new film, *Get Out of the Car*, of Schindler's Bethlehem Baptist Church, the only commission the architect ever had for a noncommercial public building. It's a very modest church, located in Compton, and it could collapse at any time. The city recently declared it a historic cultural landmark, but during that process no one actually went inside the church. Apart from the fact that it's often covered in graffiti, the roof is about to cave in. The church in great danger, and it seems to me that everyone is rather indifferent to its fate.



'CRITICISM OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS OFTEN AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL CONSERVATISM'

— Thom Andersen —



What are you getting at in *Get Out of the Car*?

It's a portrait of Los Angeles. A 'city symphony film', whereas I called *Los Angeles Plays Itself* a 'city symphony film in reverse'. It's a response. Put it this way: in *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, I quote director Robert Altman speaking about filming his movie *Short Cuts*. Let me get this right. [Andersen retrieves a book from his impressive library and reads.] 'The setting is untapped Los Angeles, which is also Carver Country. Not Hollywood or Beverly Hills, but Downey, Watts, Compton, Pomona, Glendale – American suburbia, the names you hear about on the freeway reports.' [He puts the book down.]

This, of course, is a tremendously condescending thing to say. If you happen to live in Downey, Watts, Compton, Pomona or Glendale, those are not names you hear about on the freeway reports; it's where you live. Altman didn't actually film there, but we did. At least we filmed in Downey, Watts, El Monte, Pacoima, Lakewood, El Sereno and Boyle Heights, as well as in Silver Lake and Hollywood. I wouldn't claim any particular virtue in filming in those places, but it's at least a corrective to the provincialism of Hollywood's vision of Los Angeles.

So was *Los Angeles Plays Itself* a defence of LA architecture or an observation?

A defence. I was profoundly offended by a lot of the criticism of modern architecture, because it was an expression of a kind of social conservatism: that criticism was aimed at modern architecture's aspirations towards creating a better life for working-class people. Obviously, the story is more complicated than that, but look at the major modern architects of Southern California – Schindler, Neutra, Gregory Ain – they were all men of the left who had a commitment to creating affordable architecture. So I thought anti-modernism in Hollywood movies was an aspect of an unconscious conservatism. And it's still going on. «