

# The Bradbury Building: Cinematic Fetish Location

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In his book, *The Architecture of Entertainment*, architectural historian, Robert Winter asserts, “by far the greatest promoters of appealing and imaginative – albeit esthetically superficial – architectural styles were the moviemakers” (Winter, 17). Architecture was used in cinema as a mode of expression and as a result has arguably become more than an aspect of the mise-en-scene and is indeed characterized by the apparatus. The apparatus renders a plurality of representation for architecture creating polyvalent spatiotemporal coordinates for material structures. Cinema has rediscovered lost landmarks in Los Angeles restoring a sense of moment and place to a viewer’s consciousness of the city. Kaplan explains that these ‘found landmarks’ promote a sense of pride for Angelenos (Kaplan, 16-18). It should also be noted that with respect to Los Angeles, the encyclopedic range of architectural styles is particularly well-suited for narrative filmmaking and visual storytelling. Gloria Swanson once remarked, “the public wanted us to live like kings and queens,” and it might be suggested that certain pieces of architecture in the city were to become castles or thrones in much the same way – through the public’s imagination spurred by cinematic modes of representation (Kaplan, 83). The Bradbury Building can serve as a prime example of cinematic architecture through its plurality of representation and its iconic value to the city as a physical landmark.

The history of the Bradbury Building is a distinct record lost and found within the history of the city where it is located. To properly situate the Bradbury Building within Los Angeles requires some historical background on the city itself. The German art historian and current

director of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, states that Los Angeles challenges European customs of experiencing a city through the absence of a core – or city center – a plan that becomes confusing and confounding for visitors (Gaehtgens, vii). Despite this atypical urban planning German geographer, Anton Wagner, conducted a comprehensive survey of the city in 1935 and determined that the dominant feature of Los Angeles's urban plan is not that of chaos (Gaehtgens, viii). Gaehtgens understands Los Angeles to have been built and developed by the people living there and not through a 'plan from above' following aesthetic norms (Gaehtgens, ix). Philip J. Ethington asserts that the urban plan of Los Angeles is the result of deep, historical morphology. Thirteen thousand years ago, spear-crafting Clovis hunters moved into the basin around where Los Angeles was developed. The Clovis hunters slaughtered the indigenous 'mega-fauna' to extinction, clearing ground for ten thousand years of Millingstone people's sedentary, acorn-based lifestyle (Ethington, 14). The Uto-Aztecs then marched into the area and set up a vast transportation network for trade while the Spanish colonizers later developed a 'rancho system' with the Uto-Aztecs (Ethington, 14). This rancho system converted the Yangna villages into European-influenced and architecturally hybridized ones when the Spanish expeditions committed to developing the area in 1769 (Kaplan, 31). Los Angeles became recognized as a city in the state of California when California was admitted into the Union in 1850. For a time, Los Angeles was a lawless frontier town, but in 1872, 5,500 of its inhabitants convinced city officials to underwrite a \$600,000 subsidy to get the Southern Pacific Railroad to link L.A. to northern California and the rest of the country (Kaplan, 35). This move outflanked San Diego whose natural harbour was a more logical terminus.

Los Angeles turned its image around by 1876 – paving its streets, adding gas lamps, building a city hall, hospital, public school, college, theatre and opera house (Kaplan, 35). The transcontinental railroad and an economic boom in the 1880s caused a population explosion – the population of Los Angeles was 44 in 1781 and grew to 11,000 by 1880 (Kaplan, 16). The Santa Fe Railroad opened its line into L.A. in 1886 which started a rate war with Southern Pacific – a fare of \$125 quickly dropped to \$12 reaching a low of \$1 and resulted in a huge flow of migration (Kaplan, 37). The population swelled to half a million by 1910 and then over two million by 1930 (Winter, 30).

While the railroads were linking Los Angeles to the rest of the country, within the city transportation networks were developing. The Pacific Electric Railway was started in 1887 – an electric trolley system often referred to as the ‘Red Car’ system. The trolleys were 50-foot long big red cars that moved at 40-50 mphs. By 1910, the railway had over one thousand miles of track, but its popularity began to wane with the proliferation of the car (Winter, 33-34). The electric railway was gone by 1962, but was instrumental in developing the urban pattern of the Los Angeles region – the low-density growth sprawling horizontally across the landscape because of a vast, fast and cheap travel option.

The land around L.A. was fertile for all kinds of agriculture and the Los Angeles river flowed year round (Kaplan, 70). Charles Nordhoff published his book, *California for Health, Pleasure and Residence* in 1873 promoting Southern California as a place to live in good health (Kaplan, 39). The wealthy found this appealing and joined the rest of the population that migrated to Los Angeles. From their ranks emerged the oligarchs (Chandler, Doheny, Getty,

Hearst, Huntington, Otis) who more-or-less controlled the area prior to the establishment of Hollywood (Ethington, 16). The Huntington syndicate (alluded to in Polanski's 1974, Chinatown) was supported by Teddy Roosevelt – ironically the 'makeshift' city was consolidated when drought threatened the very life of the inhabitants of this burgeoning metropolis (Kaplan, 73). Roosevelt chose to protect the interests of the city over that of the local communities and the Los Angeles Aqueduct was constructed to achieve that goal although the ordeal is often referred to as 'the rape of Owens Valley'. Ethington provides an interesting account for the influence of the oligarchs when stating that they set up socioeconomic boundaries in the city which were then culturally transgressed and subsequently reinforced providing for a transnational story and making Los Angeles a city that is representationally relatable on a global scale (Ethington in Prakash, 58-67). This interpretation resonates with Mike Davis who refers to the oligarchs as a major part of 'boosterism' – for their intentions to promote L.A. as a major city of the nation, but also for their achievements in realizing it (Davis, 22).

Los Angeles was consolidated as a city, but mobility, through affordable and efficient transportation networks promoted L.A. as a 'makeshift' city – a term coined by author, Frank Fenton. Fenton published *A Place in the Sun* in 1942 where he described Los Angeles as the following:

It was all beautiful. A million bungalows and mansions of all conceivable architecture; flowers he could not name, and trees he had never seen before. Strange races on the sidewalks: Mexicans, Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese.

A strange and wonderful city.

It was not like some Middle-Western city that sinks down roots into some strategic area of earth and goes to work there. This was a lovely makeshift city. Even the trees and plants, he knew, did not belong there. They came, like the people, from far places, some familiar, some exotic, all wanderers of one sort or another, seeking peace or fortune or the last frontier, or a thousand dreams of escape. And all these malcontents had joined in a dreamy effort to create a city of their dreams.

(Fenton, 101-102)

Kaplan notes that L.A. is indeed composed of fragmented communities almost paradoxical with regard to how citizenship is defined through individualistic lifestyles (Kaplan, 9). Kaplan claims Los Angeles as being, “not a great homogenous mass with a pyramiding of populations and squalor in a single center, but a federation of communities coordinated into a metropolis of sunlight and air” (Kaplan, 69). This tradition of eclecticism has had a pronounced effect on the architectural styles in Los Angeles.

Gebhard and Winter in their comprehensive architectural guide to Los Angeles claim that the history of Los Angeles architecture is “essentially an analysis of the process by which Americans adapted European ideas to the special needs of an unusual environment.” (Gebhard & Winter, xv.). The first architectural style was the Mission Style which was California’s equivalent to Colonial Revival, Shingle and Tudor style (Gebhard & Winter, xviii.). The Mission style was specific to the history of the region and was well suited to the indigenous environment. A clash between modernist and anti-modernist positions emerged during the period of 1880-1920. Robert Winter, claims that this clash did not formulate dialectic in L.A. architecture and that buildings were erected to express the values of both positions (Winter, 12). The anti-

modernist position is exemplified through the Craftsman movement with its use of wood construction for proletarian bungalows (Gebhard & Winter, xviii.). The movement was founded by British social critic, William Morris, who rejected the ornamentation of Victorian architectural aesthetics. The modernist position was exemplified by the Beaux-Arts movement which contributed to the proliferation of popular business establishment in the downtown core. The movement emphasized sculptural decoration that expressed staid conservatism (Gebhard & Winter, xix.). The architectural reform philosophy known as the City Beautiful movement also reached Los Angeles and borrowed from the tenets of the Beaux-Arts movement. This modernist impulse in architecture promoted order and harmony.

The 1920s brought wild variation in architecture as it followed the spirit of the time regarding the arts – that art is an effect and that ‘if the effect is good, try anything’ (Gebhard & Winter, xx.). Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus movement exerted influence in L.A. and was an example of a synthesis of the Craftsman and Beaux-Arts movements – great craftsmanship with mass-production (Winter, 12). The modernist Bauhaus movement was ahistorical in its ethics but fantasized about historic architectural styles as adventurous escapades (Winter, 12). Richard Longstreth, in his book, *City Center to Regional Mall* recognizes this ahistorical treatment of architectural styles as having a relation to the travel industry of the 1920s whereby architecture contributed to effective merchandizing of L.A. on an international scale (Longstreth, 108). Architectural historian, Eileen Michels, refers to the synthesis as ‘soft modernism’ and qualifies it as a humanizing compromise (Winter, 143). The exteriors of the L.A. buildings of the 1920s reflect every style from French Baroque to Mayan to Art Deco, leading Robert Winter to state that “this was clearly architecture as entertainment – superficial, to be sure, but also diverting

and often appealing” (Winter, 38). The Depression and World War II stopped a lot of the architectural development and after the war, Los Angeles architecture was influenced primarily by the mature era of the International Style – the rejection of ornament and reliance on Le Corbusier’s ‘less is more’ machine aesthetic (Winter, 44, 138 & 153). This style suited a society that had replaced a producer economy with a consumer economy.

Los Angeles has seen the destruction of most of its Victorian houses downtown (predominantly on Bunker Hill), but the business district was spared. The Bradbury Building is situated at Broadway and Third Street in downtown Los Angeles and features an exterior that is often thought of as incognito when contrasted with the interior. The Bradbury Building was designed and built by George Wyman in 1893. The exterior façade is composed of brick masonry with sandstone trim, clerestory windows with a row of commercial shops at the ground level (Koenig, 20). The exterior is undistinguished like most of the commercial efforts of the time which emphasized conservative versions of Romanesque Revival style, but the interior is unique for its setting and time – unique still today. The interior opens up into an atrium basked in light from a pitched glass canopy five-storays above. The courtyard is a rectilinear space of 50 by 120-feet – seemingly narrow. The glazed skylight above is made of iron webbing and the supporting ceiling elements are ironwork trusses just below the clerestory windows (Koenig, 20). Gloria Koenig profiles the Bradbury Building in her book, *Iconic L.A.*, and remarks on features of the building reflecting mastery in engineering (Koenig, 20). Koenig goes on to describe the interior features – two wrought-iron staircases with treads of Italian rose marble, Art Nouveau balustrades of wood and cast iron enclosing the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor balconies, Corinthian columns on all four sides of the center court, hydraulic birdcage elevators at the north and south



sides of the building (their moving counter-weights in view) and yellow glazed brick walls on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor to reflect the flooding light from the skylight above (Koenig, 20). Kaplan connects the design of the building to a blending of City Beautiful and Garden City movements (Kaplan, 69). Wyman is noted as having been influenced by similar sources as those movements had been.

George Herbert Wyman, was working for his uncle as a draftsman in Dayton, Ohio. Together they moved to Los Angeles where Wyman continued to work for his uncle's new firm, Peters and Burns, which had been commissioned to design some of the early buildings at the Sawtelle National Military Home (Koenig, 19). Wyman's uncle then began working with architect, Sumner P. Hunt. This new partnership was fortuitous and Wyman joined a company that was being commissioned to design downtown office buildings. It was at this time that Lewis Bradbury found Wyman at the L.A. office and eventually chose him to design the Bradbury Building (Koenig, 19).

Lewis Bradbury was a real estate tycoon who had made his fortune in the Mazatlan gold mines of Mexico – the Bradbury Building was to be a monument to his life. Sumner Hunt started on the plans, but Bradbury found them to be overly staid and conservative (Koenig, 20). Although unproven with no professional education in architecture or engineering, the work went to 32-year old Wyman who had worked on preliminary planning. Wyman's unorthodox concepts resonated with Bradbury. Wyman was deterred from taking on the task and turned to a planchette board which supposedly spelled out 'Bradbury' as a reassurance for him to take the job (Koenig, 22). In the utopian science fiction novel, *Looking Backward* (1887), Edward Bellamy wrote, "a vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides but from the dome, the

point of which was a hundred feet above... the walls were frescoed in mellow tints, to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior.” (Bellamy, Chp. 10) This building of the future designed from the past was a deep inspiration for Wyman (and also for the Garden City movement in England). Lewis Bradbury had been in Europe and seen Eiffel’s 1876 Bon Marché Department Store and Labrouste’s 1858 Bibliotheque Nationale with their cast-iron stairways and glazed roofs (Koenig, 20). Wyman now sharing a vision with Bradbury got started on the building.

Construction began in 1892, but a major problem emerged when excavating for the foundation – a vigorous artesian spring was discovered. Wyman through sheer ingenuity used the active spring to supply steam for the building and in order to run the two hydraulic elevators. The foundational infrastructure was reinforced with massive steel beams imported from Europe (Koenig, 22). The construction cost doubled rising from a quarter million to half a million dollars. The building was completed in 1893, but Bradbury had died a few months before the opening ceremonies. Wyman went on to receive official training in architecture, but none of his other buildings in L.A. were ever memorable like the Bradbury Building. In 1962, the Bradbury Building was named an Historic Cultural Monument by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board and was added to the National Register of Historic Structures giving it federal recognition. In the 1940s the upper level offices had been used as sewing rooms for garment factories and by 1969 a major restoration of the building was necessary. After the earthquake of 1971, the building needed extensive retrofitting to meet new building codes. This seismic renovation cost \$2.4 million (Koenig, 22). Civic leader and investor, Ira Yellin, bought the Bradbury Building in 1989 and hired restoration architect, Brenda A. Levin to preserve all the architectural details of the

building while modernizing it for economic viability as an office building (Koenig, 22). David Wallace in his book, *Dream Palaces of Hollywood's Golden Age*, explains that reasons for restoration are varied and usually based on the cost of doing it well, but that this mode of evaluation can be trumped by the historical importance of the building or its designer (Wallace, 10). It might be suggested that the historical importance of the Bradbury Building has been formed considerably through cinema and that the public's identification with the building has become fetishized adding a unique set of criteria for determining its restoration and ongoing preservation.

The Bradbury Building is physically situated in Los Angeles, but that hasn't always been the case in its cinematic presentation. The Bradbury Building's spatiotemporal signs are often altered from a verisimilar presentation of its physical location, leading to the building representing a plurality of spaces and times. The building has been juxtaposed with other familiar monuments through montage editing - the Space Needle Tower of Seattle in The Night Strangler (1973) or the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco in Good Neighbor Sam (1964). These cinematic juxtapositions break the signifying chain that connects the Bradbury Building to Los Angeles through the creation of a surfeit of spatial connotations for the building. Temporal representations of the Bradbury Building have also been varied and ambivalent through cinematic presentations - a relic of the past in The Night Strangler or a ruin of the future in Blade Runner (1982). Murder in the First (1995) and The Artist (2011) are among many films which have used the Bradbury Building to authenticate a filmmaker's vision of the past - each version with its unique mix of factuality and fabulation.

The Bradbury Building has served many functions in its cinematic presentations, from cameo appearances in Lethal Weapon 4 (1998) to provocative tributes in Joseph Losey's remake of M (1951). The building has had a plurality of function within narratives as well – a high-end downtown condo building in Greedy (1994) and a sleazy, run-down hotel in Good Neighbor Sam. This plurality of function and presentation represents a plurisignation for the Bradbury Building in cinema leading to a surfeit of connotations for the building. These semiotic conditions suggest that the Bradbury Building serves as a fetish location for cinema, however, it is the mobility of the cinematic apparatus which reifies the spatiotemporal conditions for representational plurisignation and cements the building's status as a cinematic fetish location. The cinematic apparatus constructs a complete view of the Bradbury Building, combining panopticism with the mobile gaze – in effect, a mobile panopticism. The long take, mobile framing, hi- and low-angle shots, deep staging and great depth of field construct an unending space that is the featured Bradbury Building. This conspicuously eclectic representation creates spatiotemporal coordinates that are constantly in flux with infinite vantage points.

The cinematic representation of the Bradbury Building has provided a surfeit of connotations – a plurisignation of the spatiotemporal register. This is apropos given many of the architectural historians' assertions regarding Los Angeles. Reyner Banham wrote, “the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement” and “mobility outweighs monumentality” (Banham, 57). L.A. becomes a ‘sympathetic ecology for architectural design’ (Banham, 226). Sarah Schrank notes that a building's fame can stand-in symbolically for aspects of the city, playing on contested meanings and creating a representational layering of an urban-based spatial idiom (Schrank, 278). Francois Penz and

Andong Lu claim that recording architecture transforms a location from fixed coordinates in a 'naïve space' of physical materialism to a consciously registered expressive space (Penz & Lu, 9). This claim harkens to Mark Shiel's concept of the cinematic city as creating and projecting 'lived social realities' (Shiel, 1).

The surplus of connotation in the representation of the Bradbury Building through cinema evokes the idea of fetish. However, the concept of fetish is also teeming with connotations and varied definitions, interpretations and applications. If the Bradbury Building is to be considered a 'thing', then in our consumer culture its relationship with cinema is that of a means to reproduce the building on a mass scale. In this sense, the cinematic plurisignation of the spatiotemporal register of the Bradbury Building is a confirmation of its democratization and loss of uniqueness. Norbert Bolz in *Culture and Contingency* writes, "they want a product loaded with meaning, with a kind of sensual promise – the sensuality that religious symbols used to have" (Bolz, 8). Bolz evoke the religious concept of fetish – a thing remains remote to our imagination and we desire to bring it closer (von Amelunxen, 204). In the modernist context, the religious fetish developed through Karl Marx's idea on commodity fetishism – the object is also an image, a screen upon which fantasies are projected where the tension of fact and fantasy produces "grotesque ideas" that form the fetish (Marx, 162-168). In Roland Barthes's ontological theories of the photographic image, these "grotesque ideas" are reconceived through the operations of the camera. The object represents itself and at the same time is represented creating a stubborn presence and polysemous meaning (Barthes, 196). The spatiotemporal paradox lends to a sense of loss or absence. This concept of loss and the desire to consolidate a whole experience from the fragments of actuality and memory evokes the Freudian conceptualization of fetish. Marcia Ian

distills the Freudian fetish to its most basic qualities – abstraction, idealization, isolation (Ian, 50). For Ian, psychoanalytic fetish is constituted by an excess belief in the symbol and the denial that we created the symbol (Ian, 50). Ian writes, “fetishism, therefore, is a kind of materialistic idealism” – conflating physiological with ideal, reality with image and signified with the signifier (Ian, 54).

Arguably, architecture recorded through the cinematic apparatus provides an intersection between multiple understandings of fetish. The Bradbury Building in cinematic representation is the signifier which denies its signified (the actual building) and therefore creates a fetish in its synecdochic relationship between reality and representation. Jean Baudrillard affirms that this kind of fetish represents a ‘passion for the code’ – an empowerment through acts of abstract manipulation on subjects and objects and a “fundamental articulation of the ideological process” (Baudrillard, 91-101). The multiplicity of understandings on the term ‘fetish’ constitutes a semantic distortion for Baudrillard. The distortion that Baudrillard outlines aptly explains fetish in architecture. The cathedral once acted as a symbolic node of power to evoke the presence of God. In cinema, the Bradbury Building is used to evoke the presence of cinema as a symbolic node of power – the cinematic representation of architecture constitutes the fetish, the actual building denotes nothing. The Bradbury Building is a conduit for ideas of cinema and can thus be referred to as an architectural fetish object as well as cinematic fetish location.

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## **Filmography**

500 Days of Summer (d. Marc Webb, 2009, USA)  
Amelia Earhart – The Final Flight (d. Yves Simoneau, 1994, USA)  
Avenging Angel (d. Robert Vincent O’Neill, 1985, USA)  
Blade Runner (d. Ridley Scott, 1982, USA)  
Chinatown (d. Roman Polanski, 1974, USA)  
D.O.A. (d. Rudolph Mate, 1950, USA)  
Good Neighbor Sam (d. David Swift, 1964, USA)  
Greedy (d. Jonathan Lynn, 1994, USA)  
Indestructible Man (d. Jack Pollexfen, 1956, USA)  
Lethal Weapon 4 (d. Richard Donner, 1998, USA)  
Los Angeles Plays Itself (d. Thom Andersen, 2004, USA)  
M (d. Joseph Losey, 1951, USA)  
Marlowe (d. Paul Bogart, 1969, USA)  
Murder in the First (d. Marc Rocco, 1995, USA)  
Murphy’s Law (d. J. Lee Thompson, 1986, USA)  
Pay It Forward (d. Mimi Leder, 2000, USA)  
Peep World (d. Barry W. Blaustein, 2010, USA)  
Shockproof (d. Douglas Sirk, 1949, USA)  
The Artist (d. Michel Hazanavicius, 2011, USA)  
The Night Strangler (d. Dan Curtis, 1973, USA)  
Wolf (d. Mike Nichols, 1994, USA)

