

OP-ED

L.A. IMAGINED



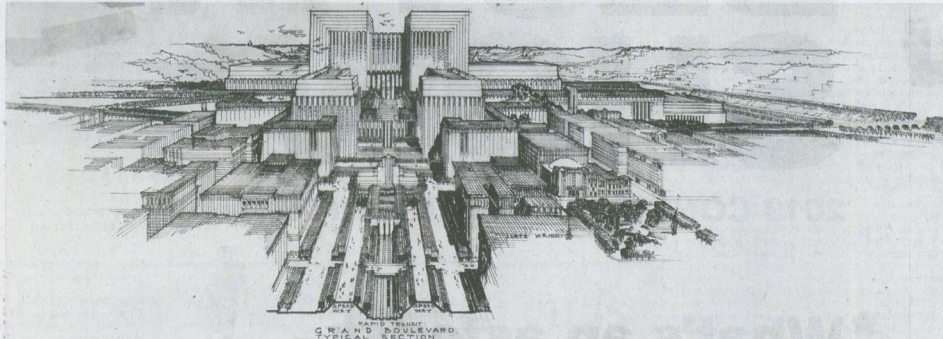
Museum of Natural History: Steven Holl's 2002 plan would have wrapped the building in a new glass facade and added a tower with commanding city views.

Steven Holl Architects



Firestone Boulevard office building: B-U's 2009 plan for a Downey retail palladium would have featured ornate braided layers of semi-transparent fabric.

B+U Architects



L.A. Civic Center: Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright, offered a futuristic "acropolis for the city" with his entry in a 1925 contest to reconceive downtown.

Eric Lloyd Wright

The city that isn't

By Greg Goldin
and Sam Lubell

IN 1907, CHARLES MUFORD ROBINSON, pioneering urban theorist, sketched a version of Los Angeles modeled on Baron von Haussmann's Paris. He envisioned wide avenues, broad vistas and open spaces for the increasingly cramped and unplanned metropolis, along with a central park, tree-lined and landscaped river banks and an architecturally unified downtown graced with large plazas and terraced gardens.

"You simply cannot afford to stand still," Robinson told the city officials who'd hired him, or the city's growing population would cause an unacceptable rise "in congestion, in discomfort and ugliness, and in paucity of municipal effectiveness."

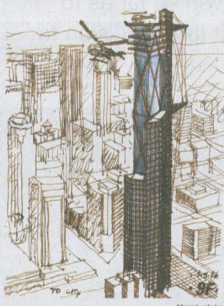
So began the 100-year-long story of rebuilt Los Angeles, the city that has been repeatedly diagnosed with dystopia and disparaged as a laboratory of urban errors and omissions. Yet, for every ill there has been a solution proposed. Some have been brilliant, others truly abysmal.

It all leads one to ponder the what-if Los Angeles, to imagine the city that would exist today if the best proposals for remedying its ailments had been realized. Los Angeles would now include a ring of thousands of acres of urban and regional parks, a bold, space-age airport, a winged nature center for Griffith Park and hillside housing developments sculpted to the contours of the landscape rather than sitting on graded and terraced scars. We would be living in a very different city.

Take two examples.

The first: In 1925, the Chicago firm of Kelker, De Leuw and Co. was hired to examine the city's transit needs—downtown was already a traffic nightmare—and the engineers returned with a sweeping proposal for 41 miles of subway tunnels and 241 miles of elevated and surface light rail, radiating from the civic center to every corner of the sprawling city. Voters rejected the \$33-million plan in a plebiscite. Had they approved it? Who can doubt that L.A. would long ago have had a subway to the sea and, perhaps, a thriving urban core?

The second: 77 years after Kelker and De Leuw's ill-fated plan for mass transit, architect Steven Holl reconceived the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park. Holl drew a building with a Mobius-strip tower, a glazed



Murphy/Jahn

Civic Center Plaza: A lattice of steel would have supported a four-story pyramid in Helmut Jahn's vision for an office complex near City Hall.

main lobby with its own plaza protected by an enormous copper canopy, and a green roof that cascaded to ground level, becoming part of the public park. The Natural History Museum would have become a celebrated landmark, giving a piece of the city that is too often overlooked and neglected a powerful symbol of civic engagement.

Los Angeles has never been able to decide whether it should be a collection of suburbs or a bustling vertical metropolis like Chicago or New York. It has been crippled by regional fragmentation and a weak power structure beholden to developers and petition-wielding residents. The catalog of unbuilt L.A. reveals so much imagination yet so little nerve.

Looking at 100 years of daring dreams need not be merely an exercise in what-if. It can also teach us how the city might still soar, if it could only develop the will to do so.

GREG GOLDIN and SAM LUBELL are the co-curators of the A+D Architecture and Design Museum Los Angeles show "Never Built: Los Angeles" and the authors of the forthcoming book of the same name. www.aphusd.org



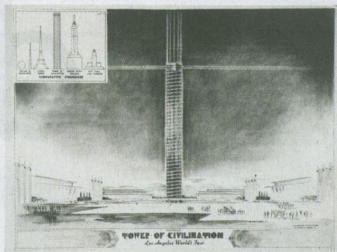
L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Mass transit: No lines on a map convey a greater sense of civic loss than the red routes of Kelker, De Leuw & Co.'s 1925 plan for an L.A. subway system.

The Causeway AN UNUSUAL FUTURE

Santa Monica offshore freeway: This early 1960s idea for traffic relief on Pacific Coast Highway originated with Santa Monica businessman John Dreescher.

City of Santa Monica



Tower of Civilization: Donald R. Warren's plan for a 1,290-foot-high tower for the proposed 1939 World's Fair would have given Los Angeles the world's tallest structure.

Huntington Library