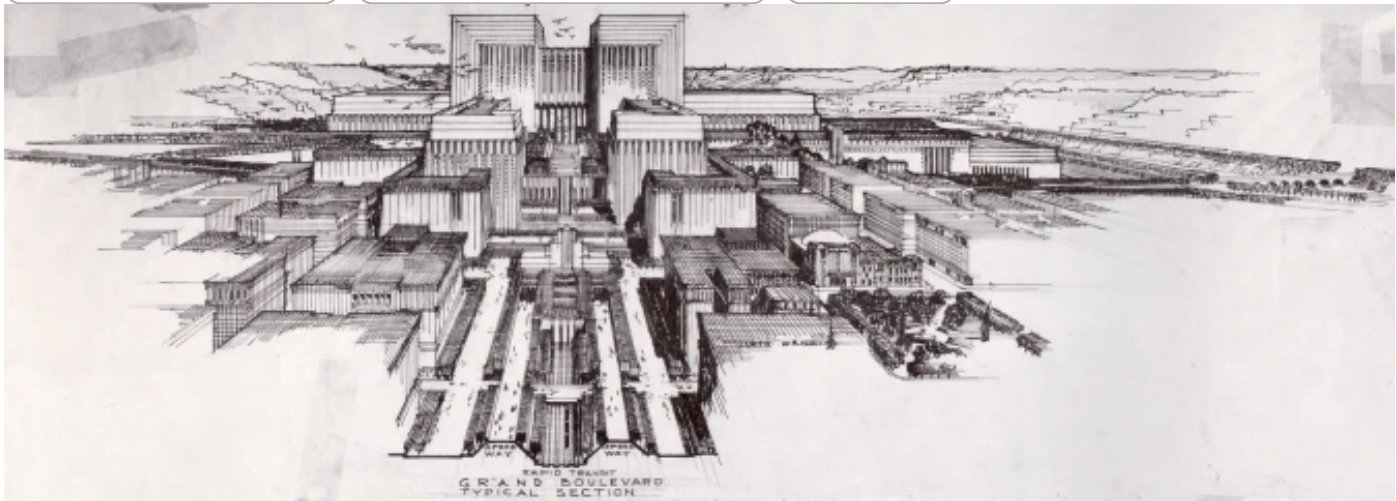


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The L.A. That Might Have Been

By Nathan Masters

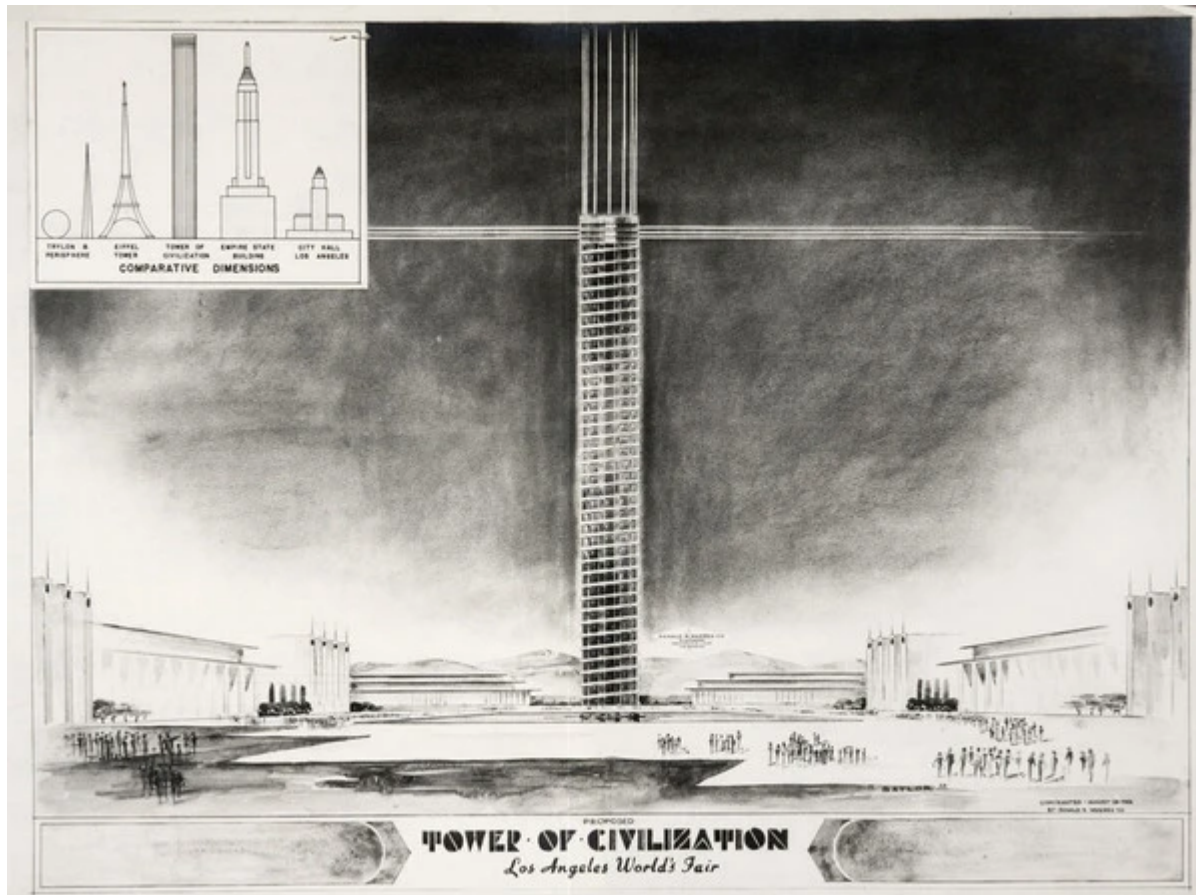
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A spiraling, 1,290-foot tower built of magnesium. A rapid-transit system with hundreds of miles of subways and elevated tracks. A comprehensive network of parks, beaches, and open spaces linked by greenbelts and parkways. These are just a few unrealized visions for Los Angeles featured in an upcoming exhibition at the Architecture and Design Museum, "**Never Built: Los Angeles.**"

Curated by Greg Goldin and Sam Lubell, the exhibition draws on plans preserved in the region's archives to present an alternate history -- and an alternate present -- for a place where inspirational solutions to the city's problems have often been downscaled, defeated, or altogether forgotten.

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community funding through a Kickstarter campaign and was as of this writing close to its goal.

If there's a lesson to the exhibition, it's that shortsightedness in the past has created a city that doesn't always live up to its potential.

"The city is filled with ambitions that are repeatedly frustrated," said Goldin, an architecture critic who has written for Los Angeles Magazine, LA Weekly, and the Architect's Newspaper, among other publications. "There's this repeated pattern of the city and people within the city proposing essential remedies to what are acknowledged ills, and with each passing generation they are frustrated."

Lloyd Wright's plan for the Los Angeles Civic Center. Courtesy of Eric Lloyd Wright.

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A 1934 architectural rendering by Rudolph Schindler for a Union Oil gas station. Courtesy of the UCSB Art, Design & Architecture Library.

Harlan Georgescu's Sky Lots, planned for downtown Los Angeles in 1964. Courtesy of the Getty Research Institute.

Beginning in the 1920s, for example, seemingly every decade brought with it a new plan for a rapid-transit system.

In 1925, the city and county commissioned the firm of Kelker, De Leuw and Co. to propose a public transit system that could grow with the city -- home then to about one million

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from the street level. In the city's dense urban core, trains would move underground. Outside of the downtown area, they would emerge from their tunnels and soar over cross-traffic on elevated tracks. In all, the plan called for the immediate construction of 153 miles of elevated or underground rail lines.

It also sketched out future grade-separated routes that would have stretched from Canoga Park to Long Beach and from Santa Monica to San Dimas. Today, with the Los Angeles Basin built-out, new transit lines are confined old rail right-of-ways or can be constructed only through costly and controversial tunneling. But in 1925, with much of the coastal plain still open countryside, subways or elevated rail lines could have expanded with the rest of the city.

In what Goldin calls a "huge loss" for the city, the proposal died after the Los Angeles Times aggressively editorialized against elevated trains as ugly and dangerous. "That brought it to its knees," he said.

New rapid-transit proposals -- **available through the Metro Library website** -- followed in 1945, 1953, 1954, 1961, 1968, and so on, even after Los Angeles had pulled up the rails of its fabled streetcars and turned exclusively to rubber-tire mass transit. Fixed-rail transit didn't return until the 1990 opening of Blue Line, and today's Metro Rail network, though in the midst of an expansion, is only a shadow of what previous planners had envisioned.

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The 1925 proposal envisioned L.A.'s rapid-transit system growing along with the city.
Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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Many of the Pacific Electric rail lines would have been converted into subways or elevated lines. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

The product of more than two years of research, the exhibition -- as well as **a companion book**, due out from Metropolis Books on April 30 -- highlights architectural designs for both the public and private realms that would have transformed the way Los Angeles looks, functions, and thinks about itself. Goldin and Lubell scoured the archival collections of dozens of institutions -- many of them **L.A. as Subject** members -- in their search for unrealized proposals.

The earliest is Horace Dobbins' **California Cycleway**, an elevated, wooden bicycle path that would have connected Pasadena to Los Angeles. (Only a small, 1.25-mile stretch was ever completed.) Among the more recent is a **2002 design by Steven Holl for the Natural History Museum**.

In many cases, Goldin said, the failures are a product of a decentralized city government that pits institutions against one another.

"That's a formula for not getting things done," he said. "It cedes a lot of power to developers and people with money. So they end up largely calling the shots."

Although Goldin and Lubell hope these unrealized proposals from the city's past can inspire visionary planning in the future, some plans were selected to provoke a different response.

The **Santa Monica Causeway**, for example, shocks with its audacity. Conceived as part of the ill-fated **Pacific Coast Freeway**, the seven-mile offshore causeway would have created an artificial yacht harbor where surfers and sunbathers play today.

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"Most of them are residential: projects like Pierre Koenig's Case Study House 22 and John Lautner's Chemosphere. In the public realm, I definitely think Disney Hall fits the description. Approaching that building, however flawed it is, still takes my breath away. Union Station is one of the finest train stations in the country, and certainly a building that lifts the spirit and gives you the sense that L.A. is a sophisticated cultural capital."

Even at Union Station, however, the consequences of the city's past failures are apparent.

"Unfortunately once you walk out you see the problems with L.A.," he explained. "It's disconnected from the rest of the city by large roads and a freeway."

The seven-mile-long Santa Monica Causeway would have created an artificial harbor

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John Lautner's 1975 design for a nature center in Griffith Park. Courtesy of the Getty Research Institute.

Steven Holl's 2002 design for the county Natural History Museum. Courtesy of Steven Holl Architects

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