UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

LIGHT AND PLACE:

ROBERT IRWIN AND OTHERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

FRANCESCA GIANI

Norman, Oklahoma

2022

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/335700

LIGHT AND PLACE:

ROBERT IRWIN AND OTHERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Robert Bailey, Chair

B. Byron Price

Kenneth Haltman

Alison Fields

Anne F. Hyde

© Copyright by FRANCESCA GIANI 2022

All Rights Reserved.

For Daniel and Peter

Table of contents

Abstract……vi

Acknowledgements……..vii

Introduction……1

Chapter I: California: Light and Place in Paintings and Photographs……10

Chapter II: *Genius Loci* and Southern California Architecture……..35

Chapter III: Robert Irwin and the Quest for Habitability……...74

Conclusion……...131

Bibliography……138

Appendix-Figures……145

Abstract

This dissertation argues that the clement climate and habitability of Southern California, as well as the rhetoric that enveloped its promotion over the course of a century, informed a specific mode of creation and representation of place in painting, photography, light-based installations, and architecture. These architectural and artistic interventions on and about Southern California conjure light to illuminate the ideal habitability of the place in question and attract viewers to images and environments that arouse sensorial responses. In the built environment, the creation of place is performed through a transparency of partitions between indoor and outdoor spaces that facilitate light infiltration, as well as through adaptability to the specific features of the site and careful consideration of the dweller's sensorial reactions. Southern California artist Robert Irwin in particular, provides a key for the interpretation of this peculiar rapport to place. Irwin's light installations respond to as well as embody Southern California, by assessing through light its habitability, and by responding to the dialogue of indoor and outdoor spaces experienced in Southern California dwellings at midcentury. More specifically, I contend that the light installations of Robert Irwin act as a quintessentially Southern California contemplation on the phenomenon of place by mediating the *genius loci* of the region through the architectural detail of the window-wall.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation was written during the peak of the Covid pandemic. My research had to be conducted remotely, under circumstances that did not allow direct access to primary sources. I had to therefore rely on the availability of individuals working at various institutions, mostly in the strictly regulated state of California, and on a broader network of contacts that I developed over the years.

I would like to thank Molly Haigh at Library Special Collections of the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA for sharing Frederick S. Wight's 1975 interview of Robert Irwin as well as Robert Irwin himself for granting permission to access it.

I would also like to thank Boris Oicherman, Curator for Creative Collaboration at the Weisman Art Museum for sharing his thoughts on the *First National Symposium of Habitability of Environments*, 1970, which he is currently working on re-launching as a *Second National Symposium on Habitability*.

Marisa Bourgoin, Head of Reference Services at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institutions, kindly granted access to the Maria Nordman interviews by Jean Butterfield, part of the Butterfield Paper, 1950-1997, as well as to the Doug Wheeler interview, conducted by Hunter Drohojovska-Philp, April 4, 2017.

Sally McKay, Head of Research Services and Annalise Welte, Reference Librarian at the Getty Research Institute Library, shared digital images of drawings and personal correspondence of Maria Nordman, Doug Wheeler, and James Turrell, part of the Giuseppe Panza Papers, 1956-1990.

I would also like to thank PJ Letovsky for generously sharing with me his documentary on Richard Neutra, *Neutra: Survival Through Design*, prior to its official release.

Finally, I would like to thank the committee and my professors at the School of Visual Arts for the years of learning I spent at OU, with special gratitude to Dr. Robert Bailey for his insightful guidance and for just being the pleasant person he is.

Introduction

This research frames the work of painters, architects, and installation artists produced in Southern California over the arc of two centuries in terms of its rapport to the region that inspired it. The study of this work sheds light on a specific mode of perceiving place that can be defined as peculiarly Southern Californian. From this analysis, a Southern California phenomenology of representation and habitation of place emerges in the built environment as well as in sculptural and pictorial spaces. All these interventions on and about place in Southern California entail a conjuring of light for the sake of illuminating the ideal habitability of the place in question. In the case of architecture and light-based installations, the representation and creation of Southern California place is performed through inclusion of the outdoors, permeability of indoor and outdoor, and adaptability to the specific features of the place. These artists and architects seem to agree with the notion that the best way to embody Southern California in pictorial form, installation spaces, and architectural terms, is through a conjuring of light celebratory of place and of a climate-driven inclusion of the outdoors, and through an adaptation to the peculiarities of site, all mediated by the viewer's perception and intentionality of experience (meaning that all are exceptionally mindful of the viewer's experience). Such mode of representation of place distinctive of Southern California has interested painters, installation artists, and architects and has led to work that speaks of the region through what can be defined (from a 20th-century perspective, at least) as the phenomenological experience of its dwellers.

One dweller in particular, Southern California artist Robert Irwin, provides a key for the interpretation of the region that will reveal itself central to the above-mentioned framing of place. Albeit being a recent work located in Marfa, Texas, *Untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016, the artist's first free standing structure, embodies exceptionally well Irwin's engagement with the notion of transparency and porosity of surfaces in the passage from one environment to the next, and well represent the phenomenological approach to place that this research is interested in recognizing (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4). Within the walls of the former military hospital, a series of interior spaces are transformed into alluring environments that the viewer and temporary dweller is invited to cross and inhabit. Through the use of carefully placed windows and semi-transparent scrims (panels of woven materials that reflect, refract and filter light), the interior spaces are at the same time divided and placed in communication with one another, through light. Visitors journey through a sequence of spaces articulated by light and by its interaction with the architectural elements of the windows, doorways, walls, and the semi-transparent, semi-reflective scrim partitions. The infinite permutations of the environments are contingent upon the intensity and inclination of the sunlight entering the interiors. The entire performance which lasts from "dawn to dusk" – meaning as long as there is light – varies with the seasons and the weather and relies on the dialogue between indoor spaces and outdoor ones as well as on the sensorially alert state of the viewer. Irwin's work, seen in its entirety from the early 1970s on, stages similar interactions between indoor and outdoor spaces, through transparencies and apertures of various sorts, along the lines of what can be today observed and experienced at the Marfa site.

This research argues how the light installations of Robert Irwin respond to as well as embody Southern California in the following ways: by conjuring light for the sake of revealing

the ideal and potential qualities of a place – artistic practice that has a history and tradition in the region; by responding to the dialogue of indoor and outdoor spaces staged by and experienced in Southern California domestic architecture at midcentury – platform for the promulgation of the so-called California dream; and by assessing and responding to the idiosyncrasies of a site through heavy reliance on human senses and perception, approach that also has seen precedents in the region. I argue that Irwin's work provides a condensation of traits that respond to, as well as embody, a Southern California character. More specifically, I contend that the light installations of Robert Irwin act as a quintessentially Southern California contemplation of place by mediating the *genius loci* of the region through the architectural detail of the window-wall.

This research operates between two different bodies of literature: contemporary art history of minimalism and of so-called light and space, and art and urban histories of Southern California. The interaction with the first body of literature is motivated by an intent to distinguish Robert Irwin's work from both minimalism – a mostly east coast phenomenon – and the work of light installation artists active in Southern California in and around the same time, often referred to as light and space artists. Through a literary review of minimalism and light and space elaborated in Chapter III, I argue not only that Irwin's work needs to be further untethered from the minimalist perspective, but that it also reflects on Southern California as a place, more poignantly so then other light artists part of the same light and space trend do. On the art and urban history side, with a consideration of a handful of books written on Los Angeles and its visual arts, the intent of this research is to provide a key to the understanding of Southern California that shies away from considerations on ecologies or political power and suggests an interpretation of the region based on a phenomenology of place.

Reyner Banham's book *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York, Harper and Row; London, Penguin Press, 1971) provided a social history of the urban plan and a first attempt at compiling the complexities of a place like Los Angeles into a coherent – albeit full of contradictions – whole.[1] From an architectural standpoint, Banham considers multiple aspects of the built environment, from the modernist edifice to the hot dog stand and the freeway systems, and finds an appeal in precisely that plurality of forms, without attempting to search for a constant, a common trait, a defining element. Banham assesses the value of LA architecture, which plays a pivotal role in the overall evaluation of the city, in terms of its function and aesthetic and in relation to other urban realities, operating more by comparison than by observation of what pertains to Los Angeles only. According to architecture critic and historian Thomas S. Hines, when considering the work of architect Richard Neutra, for example – represented also in this research – Banham fails to recognize how his simple aesthetic successfully spread throughout Southern California precisely because it responded to the needs of the place, more so than his perhaps more original colleague Rudolph Schindler, whom Banham prefers, ever did.[2]

In a radically different approach, *City of Quartz*, by Mike Davis (Verso, London, 1990) traces a political history of the city and shows how the real identity of Los Angeles lays in its transformation of political power into spatial forms, at the expense of the earlier Mexican elites, the Black community and the economically disadvantaged, and challenges the aesthetic of the place as a deceitful one based on political forces that have orchestrated the visual strategies of

[1] Jay Frierman, "Review," *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, by Reyner Banham, *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (November 1972), 554-555.
[2] Thomas Hines, "Review," *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, by Reyner Banham, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Mar., 1972), pp. 75-77

the city over the course of a century. *Looking for Los Angeles*, written under the auspices of the Getty Research Institute in 2001 and edited by Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth, seeks Los Angeles in all its representations, visual and non, from postcards to film and maps, from architecture to essays. The city, seen through the filter of all its visual icons, unveils the power of images as mediation between real places and spaces fabricated by the collective imagination. "What we see when we look at Los Angeles depends greatly on the conceptual framework we bring to the looking," announce the editors at the onset of their compendium of essays by eleven authors.[3] What we see in Los Angeles depends on what we are told we are about to see, before we see it, and that is valuable knowledge to be cognizant of as you passively absorb all the icons that form the visual fabric of LA.

While these studies focus on images as starting points for analyses that ultimately unveil their deceptive or ambivalent nature, this research evaluates a specific set of visuals associated with Southern California with the intent of arguing how they ultimately stand for a type of Southern California truth. As this research digs deeper into the porosity of indoor and outdoor spaces and the theatrical luminosity of the environment (both natural and built) as expressed and communicated in the work of many artists and architects, it finds a kind of Southern California veracity. Theatrical conjuring of light and, more specifically to the 20th century, porosity of surfaces and the window-wall (vehicle for both transparency and luminosity) are not merely means of advertisement or rhetorical baits. They are actual identity-forming signs of the Southern California place, conveyors of meaning that many inhabitants of the region – and Robert Irwin especially – detected, felt to be true, and expressed in their work.

[3] Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth, *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 10.

Peter Plagens' fundamental book *Sunshine Muse* sets Los Angeles for the first time on its own stage, disentangled from the New York scene, soberly aware of its own limitations yet awake to its own peculiar achievements, in a state of tension between self-sufficiency from and fear of absorption by the east coast art giant.[4] The massive collaboration amongst California institutions that led to the initiative *Pacific Standard Time*, in 2011, has produced two catalogs, *State of Mind* and *Phenomenal*, each exploring two aspects of the California art scene of the 1970s, conceptual art and so-called light and space, and each for the first time looking at the work produced in the region through the lens of phenomenology, therefore a relationship between viewer and place, or site, or work within site.[5]

In *Birth of the Cool*, Elizabeth Armstrong looks for a common thread in California arts, visual and non, and finds it in an alleged coolness of attitude toward place, creativity and life in general.[6] Similarly, this research aims at locating common threads in Southern California attitudes toward place, expanding the theoretical framework around the phenomenological notion of viewer introduced by *Phenomenal*, reaching beyond phenomenology in art, and into phenomenology in architecture.

Methodology

This research claims that Robert Irwin's work embodies something essential and true about Southern California as a place, and that others before and after him have in part achieved

[4] Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999).
[5] Rebecca Peabody and Lucy Bradnock, eds., *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011) and Robin Clark, ed., *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
[6] Elizabeth Armstrong, Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design and Culture at Midcentury (New York: Prestel, 2007).

similar results in their work. Methodologically, I will engage in formal and art historical analysis of works by Irwin as well as other artists and architects, and I will engage with the philosophical discipline known as phenomenology, from an architectural standpoint and through the lens of a definition of place. Phenomenological theories of architecture will aid me in constructing a theoretical framework for the definition of a uniquely Southern Californian place, one that, I maintain, Irwin's work ultimately embodies. To prove how the window-wall and the transparency of indoor and outdoor spaces constitute the regional *genius loci*, I will engage with literature that explores the Southern California suburban home through the lens of the advertising industry and the rhetorical power of the Southern California suburban idyll at midcentury. By considering Martin Heidegger's phenomenological notion of place and dwelling, as framed by Norwegian architect and architecture theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, I will engage with the concept of the *genius loci* and I will apply it to the Southern California domestic architecture at midcentury, as well as, through that architecture, to Irwin's work. The homes of Austrian American architect and theorist Richard Neutra built in Southern California between the 1920s and the 1960s will be assessed as a form of proto-phenomenological theories applied to the built environment. The link to Neutra will reveal the fundamentally phenomenological quality of the Southern California architectural aesthetic, constructed by the architect over the course of forty years, embraced by architects subsequently active in the region, and ultimately absorbed by Irwin in his light installations.

Chapter layout

While Irwin will not factor in all the chapters of this research, the analyses conducted in each section will provide a background to the framing and understanding of the artist's work. Chapter I will discuss the work of a number of artists who represented Southern California as a

place of ideal habitation from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th-century, arguing for a common thread in the theatrical conjuring of light for the sake of a fulfilling encounter with the viewer. Irwin begins working with installations that involve natural or artificial light in the early 1970s, time when the artist also begins to ponder on the idea of habitability and of what constitutes an ideal environment. Therefore, Chapter I functions as preliminary to Irwin's conception of place and notion of light. The artists taken under consideration in this chapter conjure light in painting or photography to stage a sensorial encounter with the viewer aimed at emphasizing the idyllic qualities of the place and its potential habitability.

Chapter II delves into architecture theory to illustrate the phenomenological concept of the *genius loci* and to maintain that the architectural element of the window-wall – and more broadly, the transparency of indoor and outdoor spaces – together with a sensorial responsiveness to the qualities of the environment, have acted as embodiments the *genius loci* of Southern California. These first two chapters together provide both an art historical background and a theoretical framework to Irwin's installations. Irwin's use of light as a medium becomes part of a broader history of depictions of California sites created in dialogue with the rhetoric of the California idyll and of the American West more broadly. Irwin's site-determined, phenomenological approach to installations is placed in a broader theoretical framework that roots it more firmly into its own architectural grounds.

Chapter III looks at the work of Robert Irwin through the lens of the *genius loci* and of the response to the characteristics of a place, arguing why and how Irwin's work embodies truths about Southern California. Through a review of literature on minimalism and light and space, as well as a comparison with other light installation artists around Irwin, this final chapter argues

for the need to untether Irwin's work from both trends, with consequences that will further illuminate the threads weaved in the previous chapters.

CHAPTER I

CALIFORNIA:
LIGHT AND PLACE IN PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

This chapter establishes a historical precedent to the work of Robert Irwin and of other installation artists in Southern California, setting the stage for a discourse on a Southern California approach to site. The artists here examined conjure light for the sake of a theatrical encounter with a place that promises fulfillment. Together, they provide a historical precedent, in which the romance and rhetoric surrounding the constructs of the California dream and of the American West more broadly, engenders a specific attitude toward the representation of light in relation to land and landscape. The representations of place taken under consideration in this chapter articulate a response to a specific embodiment of nature, one that promises fulfillment and does so in response to the seduction of Southern California. These works are meditations on place, in which light enunciates spaces, builds hierarchies, and carves arenas for the viewer to explore. The geological characteristics of the land captured and mythicized are relatively unimportant. It is the capturing of place as idyll and a site of future possibilities and fulfillment, often injected with a form of spirituality or sensorial awakening, that draws these works into the same trajectory.

The ideal places captured in these works differ significantly from the ideal places captured by the light installations and the built environment of Southern California at midcentury. The 19th-century and early 20th-century notion of ideal California was still strongly rooted in nature, while that same ideal place at midcentury was rooted in a domestication of nature through the built environment. If Yosemite stands for potential fulfillment in the 1860s,

the suburban home – with its annexed, domesticated nature – stands for the ultimate site of realization of the post-war Southern California dream. Naturally, even at midcentury, nature will continue (and continues still) to stand for fulfillment. These two categories, nature and the built environment are only partially distinct, especially in Southern California, where the fusion of the two is what distinguishes its built environment.

The first case examined is that of Albert Bierstadt's depictions of Yosemite. Bierstadt's well documented habit of magnifying geological features to dwarf the viewer into a state of stupefaction have the auspicated effect of theatricalizing the encounter with the place.[7] The artist's novel representation of light as a malleable substance, dense to the point of near fluidity – as it slides through mountain crevices and unites with the cascading water – represents a less explored aspect of Bierstadt's theatricalizing of the West. I argue how this new fluid light marks a dramatic shift from the diffuse radiance depicted in the landscapes of the Hudson River School, including the ones produced of East Coast locales by Bierstadt himself. This original and theatrical rendition of light on canvas becomes not only a platform for the artist's skills but also the artist's visual interpretation – whether intentionally or unintentionally crafted – of the light theorized by transcendental philosophy: a light the material presence of which coincides with God's presence in nature. Embedded into a political rhetoric of expansion, this same light blesses viewers and promises spiritual fulfillment, in line with the advance westward.

The work of photographer Carleton Watkins operates on similar grounds, coalescing representation of unseen territories with a spectacularizing of the same through a skilled and

[7] Nancy Anderson, "Wondrously Full of Invention: The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt," in *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, ed. Linda S. Ferber (Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills, 1991), p. 77.

experimental use of light during both exposure and development of the image. The vistas so crafted captured the viewers' imagination to a degree no photograph had achieved before. Both Bierstadt and Watkins were exposed to the ideas of Emersonian Transcendentalism, which hinged heavily on the role of light in communicating the 'spirit' of nature.[8] Transcendentalism found in the light of the American West - as in the light represented by Bierstadt and Watkins in the valleys and gorges of Yosemite and other locales - the materialization of the predicated light embodying the 'spirit' of nature. What had been theorized in the East, found its palpable expression in the West, through a compelling merging of spiritual and nationalist expectations.

Arguably, Ansel Adams more than any other photographer strove to capture the light he perceived in his own emotional response to the grandeur of Yosemite. The theater that the American West and its light generated in his mind was turned into spectacle for others to partake. Quests for an ideal place in California that the artist can then spectacularize for viewers through a conjuring of light, recur as a theme throughout the history of the region. The theme of pristine ideal place of habitation kindles the artist's desire to simultaneously celebrate it and preserve it. Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings, as well as the work of some of the members of the Transcendentalist Painters Group, respond to a need that relates them to Adams' quest. Agnes Pelton, for instance, invents organic forms that gather fluid light, embodiment of the spirit of nature, in imaginary landscapes, inspired by California.

4.2 Albert Bierstadt: "a light that never was"

Albert Bierstadt operated within the context of a pre-established formal tradition of landscape painting. Claude Lorrain's and Salvator Rosa's pastoral European scenes had

[8] Tyler Green, *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 57.

influenced American landscape painters of the first half of the century with their depictions of nature as an earthly Eden, a place where the presence of the divine could be seen and felt. The work of both painters achieved a never seen before diffused luminosity and, partially as a result of the impact of their work, light became the protagonist in American landscape painting throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.[9] Although the generation of artists known as the Hudson River School would favor delicate lighting that instilled a sense of contemplative serenity, a trend in style within this group later singled out by some as luminism would further intensify luminosity and create scenes of unprecedented clarity.[10]

In the footsteps of Lorrain and Rosa, the artists affiliated with the Hudson River school, painted landscapes in which elements such as trees and mountains are generally spaced apart, either on the sides of the canvas or in the far background. Light is pervasive, dispersed and unrestrained, uniformly infused in the atmosphere. Even though trees frame the scene, they do not interfere with the light in any substantial way. Light is more an atmospheric presence than a physical, circumscribable entity. Even when mountains dominate the background, they serve as a counterpoint and shadow, neither partially nor entirely blocking light, nor embracing it in their valleys and gorges.

View of Lake Winnipiseogee, 1828, by Thomas Cole, is a good example of a landscape where the presence of trees does not alter the dispersion of light throughout the scene. Even in *View in the White Mountains*, 1827, in which Cole amuses the viewer with light effects on the

---

[9] Andrew Wilton, *American Sublime: Landscape Paintings in the United States, 1820-1880* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 13.
[10] John Wilmerding, ed. *American light: the Luminist Movement, 1850-1875: Paintings, Drawing, Photographs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

ground, there is no attempt to capture or channel the light in any consequential way. *The Hunter's Return*, 1845 (fig. 5), shows Cole's interest in partially blocking the light. Even here, however, Cole's attention is on the effect light produces on the object it illuminates. In this instance, the artist values light for its impression on the surface of the log cabin rather than for its trajectory, movement in space, and corpuscular nature.

Even though in *Landscape with Tree Trunks*, 1828, Cole channels and controls the light, his rendition is still resonant of Lorrain's landscapes, with light becoming brighter on trunks and leaves, leaving no trace of its passing through the atmosphere. Again, it is still light valued for its effects on objects rather than for its tangible and circumscribable presence in areal portions of the landscapes. The same can be said for *View of Schroon Mountain*, 1838, where the artist's timid attempts to channel the light are lost in painterly effects.

Frederic Church is one of the first, if not the first American artist, to render light in slightly different terms. Considered by some to have on occasions adopted a luminist vocabulary – an art historical term with which few agree, and which designates a style rather than a movement – Church obtained more realistic light effects by more carefully hiding his brushstrokes and by generating more vaporous results, especially in the case of his paintings of the tropics. In his first landscapes, such as *Haying Near Haven*, 1849, the scene is open, and light inundates the entire visible portion of the landscape. In later landscapes, particularly those the artist produced in South and Central America, lighting effects become even more dramatic, with stronger contrasts and more vibrant colors. In these works, however, a still diffused light, generated by a sun nearly always dominating the top portion of the sky, governs the scene, producing an overwhelming aura.

In 1859, Albert Bierstadt obtained permission to travel with Frederick W. Landers' Honey Road Survey Party as far west as South Pass, high in the Rocky Mountain, and returned east with sketches and stereoscopic photographs of the locales explored.[11] In Bierstadt's imagery of the newly encountered western lands, the artist's intention to capitalize on the unprecedented scale of the chosen locales – often at the expense of accuracy of portrayal - emerges clearly. Whether or not Bierstadt believed in the uniqueness of the West and in the predictions of Manifest Destiny, the alluring of the viewer inevitably coincided with the promotion of the illusion of the West as pristine destination for the benefit of east coast patrons and viewers.

Albert Bierstadt's imagery of the newly encountered western lands differ significantly from his paintings of east coast locales not only for the amplified scale of the many peaks and gorges but also for the way the artist manipulates light into unprecedently complex and sensuous interactions with the geological formations on display. In *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863 (fig.6) and *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mount Rosalie*, 1866 (fig7), even when light seems to be lost into the vast layers of the atmosphere and no longer graspable, Bierstadt has it pouring into a mountainous depression cradled by rock walls and reflected by the water. Light is no longer a pictorial effect on some features of the landscape, it is a material presence of almost fluid texture that flows down into gorges, bound by rock walls and a theatrical darkness generated by stormy clouds occupying only half the sky above.

The Rocky Mountains were only the first inspiration for Bierstadt's new approach to light. In the mountains and valleys of California, Bierstadt found a "visual antidote to war," as Nancy K. Anderson elaborates, a place of pristine wilderness that offered the possibility of

[11] Anderson "Wondrously Full of Invention: The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt," in Ferber, ed., *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, 76.

another Eden during the tragic events of the Civil War.[12] In *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, 1865, the light is blocked on one side and allowed on the other to enter the arena-like space of the valley, through a mandatory path, where once again it is contained. Something similar happens in *Yosemite Valley*, 1868 and *Sunset in Yosemite Valley*, 1868 (fig. 8). In *Looking up the Yosemite Valley*, 1865-67, a cloud that the viewer does not see directly, but the presence of which he infers from a shadow darkening the ground, frames the flooding light in the top portion of the painting. Once again, the artist locates a barrier even in this more challenging circumstance, reminding the viewer that he is in control of light and author of the theater. Light is to Bierstadt something material that can be captured, contained, if only momentarily, in and by the landscape. Thus captured, such light would be figuratively brought east as proof of both the uniqueness of California and of the artist's superior ability in controlling its remarkable luminosity.

In the diffused light of *Wind River Landscape*, 1859, Salvator Rosa's desolate European landscapes are still a clear reference. In *Ascutney Mountain, Vermont, from Claremont, New Hampshire*, 1862, following Bierstadt's first expedition west, no element significantly alters the horizontality of the approach and, most importantly, no features in the landscape create an environment where light can enter, flow, or gather. Although Bierstadt had already witnessed the magnificence of the Rocky Mountains at that point, the painting depicts a locale on the East Coast, one that did not inspire the desire, nor established the need, for a different rendering of light. *Big Sandy River – Wind River Mountains*, 1860, is another example of how an East Coast locale, not to mention Claude Lorrain's model, still weighs on Bierstadt: trees and mountains

[12] Anderson in Ferber, 80.

frame the scene, and the diffused illumination works to create a landscape where light pervades a serene, pastoral atmosphere.

Timothy O'Sullivan's *Harvest of Death-Gettysburg, July 4, 1863*, was one of the photographs that together with the images dispensed by Matthew Brady during and after the Civil War put an end, however temporarily, to the pageantry of war and to the sense of the sublime in nature. It is with the first images, both pictorial and photographic, of the newly explored West that the perception of God's presence in nature and of God's approval of the deeds of humankind reemerges. Following the Civil War, the expansion towards West marks the beginning of a new era and a second chance for the country, at the expense of the native populations. The transcendentalist philosophy that had informed the work of the Hudson River School took on a new life in Bierstadt's western landscapes not only in virtue of the nationalistic platform that came in support of it, but also by reason of a heightened theatricality in the rendition of light. Bierstadt's landscapes showed Americans what they wanted to see in the West: a majestic land, full of beauty and potentials, which was there for the taking, essentially under God's blessing and according to a divine plan.[13] In this process of spectacularizing for the sake of both artistic accomplishment and territorial conquest, Bierstadt played an unprecedentedly authoritative role in rendering light as a capturable, guidable, and ultimately controllable element of the newly explored locales.

Bierstadt was a member of the so-called "neighborhood of Concord," an extended group of intellectuals around Charles S. Peirce, who considered New England Transcendentalism of

[13] Andrew Wilton, *American Sublime: Landscape Paintings in the United States, 1820-1880* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 33.

crucial influence to his own intellectual biography.[14] Transcendentalism predicated a light of panentheistic rather than pantheistic nature, one which shines *on* nature rather than being *of* nature.[15] Light behaves as a separate entity and a distinct substance which the artist can manipulate. "The sun flows (or radiates), and the mind is a stream of thoughts, so was the universe an emanation of God," maintained Emerson in 1841.[16] Light acquires fluid texture as it embodies the divine and as it mimics the flow of human thinking and perceiving of the divine. Others have arguably demonstrated how the work of the Hudson River School builds on the aesthetic dimension of Transcendentalism.[17] Bierstadt's noticeably different approach, however, more aptly embodies the transcendentalist conception of light in the way it depicts the element as a distinct entity, one that in creative and unexpected ways interacts with the features of the landscape. In his discussion of transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, Patrick J. Keane tells us how the philosopher and essayist – quoting the Neoplatonist Proclus - sought beauty in the mind of the viewer rather than in form and agreed with William Wordsworth who spoke of "a light that never was on seas or land," a light supplied by the observer, that is by his or her imagination.

---

[14] Guardiano, Nicholas L., "Charles S. Peirce's New England Neighbors and Embrace of Transcendentalism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2017): 216-245. muse.jhu.edu/article/665242.

[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all." Light for Emerson indicates separation from man and the material world and simultaneous unity of the two through light itself. Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 115.

[16] Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason:Tthe Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day,"* (Kansas City: University of Missouri, 2005), 445.

[17] Guardiano, "Charles S. Peirce's New England Neighbors and Embrace of Transcendentalism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2017): 216-245.

Arguably, Bierstadt's artistic liberties in rendering the landscape and in orchestrating light stands as a visual response to Emerson's emphasis on the imagination over truthful perception.[18]

4.3. Carleton Watkins: transcendentalist with a cause

The work of photographer Carleton Watkins operates on similar grounds, spectacularizing new and unknown (to European/Americans) land through skilled and experimental use of light during both exposure and development of the image. The vistas so crafted captured the viewers' imagination to a degree no photograph had achieved before. While manipulation of light plays a key role in photography, we must not expect to find traces of it only in the resulting image, but rather in the complex stages of the photographic process. A comparison between photographs produced in the West during the geological survey era and earlier landscape photographs of for instance the Hudson River, White Mountain region of New Hampshire, or of the Berkshires in Massachusetts, reveals a clear jump in quality, in terms of originality of composition, definition of image, and rendition of details in both light and shadow.[19]

The rhetoric of western uniqueness and exceptionalism – which photographers responded to and simultaneously generated - compelled many to develop new methods and techniques and to portray the region, with incessant zeal. Since the onset of westward expansion, photographers thrived in the fertile hummus of the West – photographs of never-seen-before mythicized lands

[18] Keane, 445

[19] Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views, New York Public Library Digital Collections, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/robert-n-dennis-collection-of-stereoscopic-views?filters%5Bdivision%5D=The+Miriam+and+Ira+D.+Wallach+Division+of+Art%2C+Prints+and+Photographs%3A+Photography+Collection&filters%5Bname%5D%5B%5D=United+States+Military+Academy&filters%5Bplace%5D%5B%5D=Hudson+River+Valley+(N.Y.+and+N.J.)&keywords=#/?tab=navigation

possess an intrinsic market value and commercial allure – its exploration coinciding with the development of the medium itself. Photography landed in the US at a time, the 1840s, when explorations were commencing in earnest. The association of American wilderness with national identity and faith in progress mirrored a similar link between photographic images of the West as pristine beauty for the taking and photography as technological marvel. Although depictions of the West took the form of paintings, drawings, and prints, and Bierstadt and Moran delivered astonishing oil renditions of those same photographed locales, the general public perceived photography as the most truthful of the mediums. Albeit carefully constructed and often retouched, photographs arose in the collective eye as accurate records of what had otherwise been up to that point fantastic descriptions of unalloyed territories. Until the 1860s, when wet-plate technology was introduced and applied in the West, practitioners of photography were scarce, but as explorations picked up in pace, so did technical advancement in the use of the medium.[20]

Yosemite, Art of an American Icon claims that the exceptional geological features of Yosemite have had considerable impact on art production, since the time of its first encounter by white settlers.[21] The enormous scale of the land formations and the necessity to deliver the vastness and magnificence of the locales to the zealous collective imagination, presented these first non-native eyewitnesses with the challenge of both producing faithful accounts of their experiences and building an image adequate to public expectations. Technical innovation seemed to address both needs and wound up to be key in the emergence of new directions in both

[20] Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 10-13.
[21] Amy Scott, ed., *Yosemite, Art of an American Icon* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

photography and landscape painting – which depended heavily on photography. Watkins had inspired Bierstadt to depict on canvas what he had captured on photograph, leading him to go West in 1863. According to Tyler Green, Bierstadt, unable to match the photographer's superior sense of composition, compensated by exaggerating features and emphasizing light.[22] The employment of an 18-by-22-inch glass plate in a hand-crafted camera of likely his own making, allowed Watkins to deliver images so large and spectacular that they would have to be hung like paintings, rather than stored in albums.[23]

With his first photographs, his series of Yosemite views, Carleton Watkins introduced an array of technical innovations that implied unprecedented agency in the visual representation as well as procedural employment of light. The use of a mammoth plate camera allowed him to comprise more of the view, while maintaining the same degree of details that a regular size plate (located at the same distance) would have delivered. Adding toners to his albumen prints allowed Watkins to expand the range of shades, while keeping contrast intact. Hence, in spite of an emphasis on the richness of highlight details, dark shadows, and black tones, a sharp contrast still allowed mountains to assert their commanding presence in the light-inundated background and whitened sky.

In order to compensate for the inevitable lack of dimension in the sky rendition, Watkins placed the camera in a position that would ensure a layered composition of warm and therefore shaded colors with a consequent illusion of depth.[24] The use of compositional devices, especially

[22] Green, *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American*, 82-84.
[23] Ibid.
[24] The wet-collodion process, due to its sensitivity to blue light, delivered cool colors, namely the white of the clouds and the blue of the sky, as uniformly light, while rendering warm colors in the form of dark shades. Green, 296-297

the inclusion of bodies of water, to guide the eye upwards, contributed further to a tri-dimensional rendition. Additionally, Watkins' predilection for dome-topped prints conformed to his attempts to encourage both movement towards the back of the photograph and a sense of elevation.[25] The use of the large size format photographs - which he would often combine into panoramic views - speaks to the need for grandeur, while his ardent passion for details, which he succeeds in keeping sharp in both foreground and background, set the stage for a concept fully developed later by Ansel Adams.[26]

In photographs like *Tutocanula Pass*, 1865-66 (fig.9) , the masterful balancing of exposures transpires in the different shades of the mountains, which function as building blocks along the compositional planes. Detailed shadows in even the darkest areas compensate for featureless skies, adding dimension.[27] In *Mount Watkins, Yosemite*, circa 1872 (fig.10), the reflection of the mountain on the surface of the underlying body of water is much sharper than its originating body and occupies half of the image.[28] Unlike skies and mountains, water absorbs ultraviolet light, reducing the effect of atmospheric haze and delivering an image of itself that is clearer than the original landscape elements. Watkins' focus on reflections, signature element of his images, stressed the physical presence of light and its hazing effect on the top half of the photograph.

---

[25] Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: a History of Photography* (Boston: MacGraw-Hill, 2000), 151.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Weston Naef, *In Focus, Carleton Watkins: Photographs from The J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 1997), 32
[28] Ibid., 48.

Thomas Starr King, the unitarian minister who introduced Emersonian transcendentalism into the West and advertised Watkins work on the East Coast, exposed the photographer to the philosophical movement.[29] Transcendentalism advocated replacing traditional forms of revelation - such as the vision of angels - with personal and fully human experiences. Emerson applied the idea to the practice of crafting a unique form of human experience in nature. This translation to nature and to the new and allegedly unexplored wilderness of the West had an impact on Starr, and, through his evangelizing, on Watkins.[30] Emerson most likely met Watkins in San Francisco and certainly purchased two photographs at his gallery: a photo of Mount Shasta, a volcano in Siskiyou County in Northern California, which may have had particular importance to him, as he often referred to human creativity through the image of a volcano; and a print capturing Cathedral Spires, in Yosemite, also charged with meaning, as Starr shared Emerson's belief that nature should replace the church as a place of worship.[31]

Emerson proposed the metaphorical potentials of nature and landscape as a platform for the advocacy of Cultural Unionism. Starr was the first to apply Emerson's idea to the "new" nature of the West.[32] Green maintains that Watkins' exposure through Starr to large issues such as California's drive toward the Union and the national crisis leading to the Civil War, induced him to think more audaciously about his work, and to inject ethical content into his photographs. Watkins may have also been aware of Emerson's discussion of the idea of landscape in his work, *Nature* (1836), were the philosopher creates a distinction between the concept of land, as something made of multiple properties, and landscape, as an entity owned by none: "There is a

[29] Green, 62.
[30] Green, 60.
[31] Green, 281.
[32] Green, 69.

property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is the poet".[33] Watkins' need to grasp as much of the landscape as possible on his large camera and to focus more on the entirety of the land than on the single formation, may have derived also from a desire to apply the Emersonian principle to landscape photography

In his four mammoth plates of Mission of San Xavier del Bac, for instance, Watkins presents the locale not as a ruin part of an abandoned site in Arizona Territory, but as an inhabited and plowed land surrounding an impressive building in a majestic land.[34] Such breath in capturing his chosen locales responded not only to an Emersonian-informed desire to spectacularize the land but also to the cultural unionist aspiration to present California as a "full participant in American culture and in the Union."[35]

4.4. Ansel Adams and the "intellect receptive"

In the mid-1920s, Ansel Adams searched for ways to deliver the emotional charge of Yosemite and found in the use of red filters a crucial tool to dramatize the menacing rock formation in *Monolith: The Face of Half Dome*, 1927.[36] Photographers on the east coast had for the most part at that point lost interest in landscapes and turned their gaze to objects and subjects isolated from their highly industrialized surroundings. While landscape photography appeared somewhat passé to eastern eyes, Northern Californian photographers perceived nature as worthy of both purely aesthetic admiration and committed environmental protection. The f/64 Group expressed a new aesthetic not drastically different from the aesthetic of the first photographers of

[33] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Massachusetts: J. Munroe and Company, 1836), in Green, 93.
[34] Green, 349.
[35] Green, 122.
[36] Mary Street Alinder, *Group f.64: Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and the Community of Artists who Revolutionized American Photography* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), ix.

the American West. With their emphasis on sharp focus, clear detail and large-scale formats, Edward Weston and his younger friend Ansel Adams in particular, pushed Western landscape to the forefront of photographic concerns, harking back to the pioneering work of William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins and others.

From the very onset of Adams' rapport with Yosemite – which started in early adolescence – an urge to render on print his highly personal and sensorial impressions of California drew the photographer back to Yosemite time and again. His initial dissatisfaction with the first images produced, which he saw as frustratingly reductive versions of his highly emotional experiences of the place, led him to pictorialism, a temporary remedy of sorts. When in 1927 the use of a red filter delivered a drastically darkened sky, in what will be *Monolith, the Face of Half Dome,* Adams finally found in his photographed image an emotional charge that matched his own highly sensorial experience of place.

In *Aesthetic Transcendentalism in Emerson, Peirce, and Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting* (Lexington Books, 2017), Nicholas L. Guardiano argues that the phenomenological affair of becoming aesthetically informed by nature requires accepting the fact that sensations do not simply concern our external physical organs and do not simply result from a "mechanistic accumulation of raw sense data passively received by our sense organs from without."[37] Such a restrictive vision of perception would not explain how and why only after poets and artists expose us to their versions of reality , do we sense what they sensed, do we perceive what they perceived, in spite of our sense organs not having changed between the first unmediated exposure to reality and the second exposure mediated by the artist's sensibility.

[37] Guardiano, 2.

Artists aesthetically enlighten us to see truths that technically have always been there before our eyes. The artists' sensuous relationship with nature therefore, together with their ability to become aesthetically informed by it, results from an interaction between the mind and the senses, from a careful and intentional elaboration of what the physical organs communicate, so that the final image can reflect the emotional state in which nature induces the artist. The ability to enact this type of emotional elaboration, to feel more, while sharing the same sensory skills as others, is what Emerson refers to as the "intellect receptive."[38] Emerson encouraged the artist to elaborate his own vision of the world through the beauty of nature.[39] Adams' theater of emotions and sensations follows this Transcendentalist tenant by unveiling the poetic power of nature through the "intellect receptive" of the photographer. The California presented by Adams is one of ideal beauty that speaks of ideal habitability, where habitability at this point and in this region is also inextricably associated with the protection of its endangered nature.

4.5. Agnes Pelton's Eden between California and the mind

The Transcendental Painters Group was only briefly operational, between 1938 and 1942, in Santa Fe, Taos, and to a lesser extent Albuquerque. As declared in the TPG Manifesto, the artists' intent was "to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual."[40] Part of the group, Agnes Pelton distinguished herself for a marked interest in tightly controlled depictions of light on the painted canvas. Pelton conjured light as a formal and symbolic element, in accordance with the notion of light elaborated in Helena Blavatatsky's *Key*

[38] Guardiano, 3.
[39] Green, 61.
[40] Tiska Blankenship, "Agnes Pelton and Florence Miller Pierce," University of New Mexico Art Museum, http://www.cla.purdue.edu/waaw/Pelton_Pierce/

to Theosophy (London: Theosophical Pub. Society, 1889). The treatise attempted to combine elements from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity into a compendium of philosophical principles, which discussed light as a symbol of natural and artificial phenomena.[41] In 1930 Pelton approached a branch of Theosophy, the Eastern Philosophy of Agni Yoga, according to which fire is symbolic of vital energies. Once embraced the philosophy, Pelton strove to "picture esoteric concepts and, at times, to personify them."[42]

Pelton's imaginative landscapes were inspired by outdoor explorations of the effects of natural light, and although nocturnal desert landscapes informed her representations, the images are fantastical and the light is only natural in its inspiration, not in its transposition onto the canvas. Although Pelton's light radiates in the environment similarly to how the natural element travels through the ether, it is often staged as a spiritual presence on earth, possessing an unearthly aura.[43] In 1930, Pelton permanently relocated to Cathedral City, California, motivated at least in part by a search for new spiritual inspiration.[44] With her previous move to Long Island, she began to produce abstract paintings such as *Ray Serene* (1925) and *Ecstasy* (1928), in which light is present in multiple areas at the same time, but more in the form of bright, luminous color than in the form of pure emanated element.[45] She defined them as "especial light message to the world."[46] It was not until she moved to California, however, that light moved to the front and center of her concerns. Here she exhibited with the Transcendental Painting Group from the late

---

[41] Karen Moss, Timothy Robert Rodgers, Sharyn R. Udall, and Michael Zakian, *Illumination: the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce* (London, New York, New Port Beach, California: Orange County Museum of Art), 22-23
[42] Ibid, 61.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Gilbert Vicario, ed. *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, Phoenix Art Museum, 2019), 58.
[45] Vicario, ed. *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist*, 34-35.
[46] Ibid.

1930s to 1942, showcasing her work in California as well as New York galleries. It is from Pasadena, where the theosophy society had set up a center, that Pelton reached Palm Spring for the first time, and from there discovered Cathedral City roughly 100 miles southeast.[47] In Cathedral City, Pelton produced hundreds of landscapes and sixty to seventy abstractions, seeking spiritual renewal through a light-based representation and celebration of place.[48]

In *Wells of Jade*, 1931 (fig. 11), a primordial landscape sets the stage for a spiritual light to create various amorphous elements. Light is contained in a "biomorphic" fluid form that seems to be rising towards darkness. Once reached its destination it will probably expand, conquering the dark, or it will remain in its form, nurturing other less developed forms of light nearby with its life-giving luminosity. In this creational scene, Pelton exercises both visual and narrative control over light. In *The Voice*, 1930, the emphasis on the creative properties of light emerges more literally through a reference to the tree of life, the motif common to many religions and philosophies representing the interconnectivity of all life forms. The figure resembling the tree of life provides a means to represent light and life as they are being created, and it is an equally effective stratagem for Pelton to entrap light within the organic form that generates it. In *Future*, 1941, light is forced to emerge from the horizon with colors that do not belong to a sunrise or a sunset, while also being encapsulated in squares that radiate light from the top, acting as sun-like stars. A sinuous line illuminates the right portion of the canvas, competing with the suns as well as with the unexplained luminescent vapor arising from the ground. A star on the top left side, perhaps the most realistic element in the painting and the one

[47] Ibid, 59.
[48] Ibid, 65.

over which Pelton is not claiming control, seems to have the least brightening effect. The entire painting is staged as an act of agency over light in the context of a representation of place.

California stood as ideal place for Pelton on multiple levels. Studies have investigated the effect of the Southwest on relocated individuals in search for a fresh start and more specifically on women. In the collectively generated arena of new possibilities and high expectations that the Southwest offered, qualities such as independence, resilience, and determination found natural nurturing. For women who like Pelton sought new beginnings, the Southwest became the backdrop to the final stages of that phenomenon some refer to as "The New Woman," a time of proto-feminism and challenging of gender stereotypes in America.[49] Upon moving to the Southwest, women would often negotiate new roles for themselves and participate in more equal terms in the structuring of new societies. Nancy Strow Sheley compares photos of Pelton before her move to California with a photo of the artist in Cathedral City, noticing a drastic change from the quiet demure of a socially restricted woman to the strong and assertive posture of a woman in her fifties, standing in the elements by Highway 111.[50] California also embodied an ideal place for creation and habitation for the artist. Cathedral City, Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley in general stood for Pelton as an idyll of life-generating energies but also as an idyll in jeopardy and on the brink of extinction. The anxiety of an imminent loss fueled a sense of urgency in capturing natural beauty in the desert. The region had been dramatically altered by intensive building activity at the expense of desert land, and Pelton saw her work as a vital tool in capturing an essence soon to be lost. She wrote to her friend and fellow painter Raymond

[49]New Women in Early 20th-cenrtury America. Oxford Research Encyclopedia. https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-427

[50] Nancy Strow Sheley, "Bringing Light to Life: the Art of Agnes Pelton (1881-1961)" (dissertation, University of Kansas, 2000), 149.

Johnson: “My desert is disappearing, (...) I am concentrated with all of me as never before on this near desert landscape about which I feel a great urgency, as this village is having a boom – houses are going up all around – which means destruction of the desert flora, and perhaps within months, the spirit of the place will be changed. So against Time!”[51]

In search for and in celebration of the primordial life-giving attributes of light, Pelton staged idyllic landscapes that pivot on a theatrical conjuring and careful manipulation of the element in all its viscous, fluid materiality. About her sources of inspiration – light and place – Pelton wrote: “The vibration of this light, the spaciousness of these skies enthralled me. I knew there was a spirit in nature as in everything else, but here in the desert it was an especially bright spirit.”[52]

4.6. Lee Mullican: searching for the California sun

A desire to capture the luminosity of the California balmy climate informed the work of Lee Mullican, who depicts the land as pure light, inundating the canvas with the full texture and presence of its material nature. Following the dissolution of the three artist-group Dynaton, Oklahoma-born Lee Mullican moved to Southern California in search of a “new beginning” in life.[53] Furnished with the lessons in Surrealism - acquired while in the group and deepened by his interest in the cultures of ancient Americas and in Zen Buddhism – Mullican became enamored

[51] Sheley, 270.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Lari Pittman, Amy Gerstler, and Carol Eliel, *Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2005), 48.

with the agreeable climate of Southern California, but missed the sophistication of the east coast, finding the relative lack of institutional opportunities for artists quite bittering at first.[54]

Nevertheless, and perhaps due to his own frustration, Mullican produced important work in this period, drawing from both Native American sources and Zen Buddhism, which he absorbed with particular interest while in Southern California and through which he learned how to navigate his own spiritual struggles as a path to creative enterprise Southern California exposed Mullican also to theater, a former interest in life.[55] In Los Angeles, Mullican attended Rachel Rosental's *Instant Theater* for over a year, and, once resolved to leave theater behind and further develop as a visual artist, maintained a taste for theatrical representations that he transposed on canvas.[56]

To label Mullican's work as spiritual would be an understatement, given his marked interest in Zen Buddhism and Native American spirituality. Although most of his landscapes do not depict real places and coalesce features of disparate origins, works like *Open Bright August* (1961), *Paradise Gardens: A Walk* (c.1962), *Summer Fall* (1961), and *California Landscape* (1958), capture the abundance of light in California, allowing forms and shapes to melt into shimmering glare. Southern California may have discouraged him initially, but in time, the distance from the institutionalized and competitive art scene of the East Coast encouraged him to focus his efforts on the same landscape the clement climate was begging him to relish. Mullican conjures light in the form of heavily pigmented gleaming canvases that theatricalize the depicted

[54] Ibid, 49.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid, 50.

locale and treat light as a material, three-dimensional object that the artist can manipulate, mold, and work into shape.

Mullican's California idyll coincided with his personal journey of spiritual fulfillment. Since the opening of Japan to the West in the mid-19th century, California had progressively developed a unique brand of Zen Buddhism also thanks to the arrival of practitioners from traditional Zen Buddhist schools in Japan, directly to the state.[57] By the end of the 1950s, San Francisco had attracted countless followers of Zen becoming "a hotbed for the emerging counterculture." [58] By the time Mullican developed an interest in the practice, the Zen Buddhist spiritual path had acquired distinctively Californian connotations. Perhaps more importantly, the California Zen was embedded in the local climate and, in the case of Southern California, hinged heavily on the image of the sun. As Kevin Starr argues in *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (Oxford University Press, 2009), Southern California's sun-drenched, semi-arid landscape of scarce vegetation resembled closely that of much of India and lent itself easily as a backdrop to the Hindu tradition. Since the late nineteenth-century, "a certain kind of Zen metaphor, however fragile, a repose, a mystic quiet, exercised its influence in the art, architecture, and aesthetics of the region."[59] The post-war era saw an escalation in this regional climate-informed Buddhism in both the north and the south regions of the State, with Northern

[57] The treaty of Kanagawa, the first treaty Japan held with a western nation, marked the end of Japanese isolationism, https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/stable/pdf/43486807.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A555ae6c484e23a1f725210733ee51ac3, 193.
[58] Inken Prohl, "California 'Zen': Buddhist Spirituality Made in America," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2, *Religion and the Marketplace* (2014): 200.
[59] Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 339.

California referencing Japanese Zen-Buddhism and aesthetics, and Southern California relating back to Hinduism.[60]

4.7. Conclusion

California has been mythicized over the course of more than a century by promoters of the region as well as by countless artists. Perhaps due to the unique geological features of the land, to its clement climate, and to its unique light, numerous artists developed an appreciation for the theatrical potentials of this element as applied to the capturing of place, whether that would be in the form of a representational or abstracted landscape. The work of the above-examined artists generated highly sensorial experiences for the viewer through a manipulation of light engendered by a desire to capture places of ideal habitation. In the work of individuals like Bierstadt, Watkins, Adams, Pelton, Mullican as well as others, California inspired a complex mix of genuine allure, flaunting of artistic talents, and complicit theatricalizing of the represented locales. In almost all cases, light, theater, place, and the idyll coalesce under the aegis of some form of spirituality or sensorial awakening, whether that be transcendentalism, theosophy, or Zen Buddhism. This art historical survey traces a trajectory for the representation of place in Southern California with the intent of highlighting a tendency that is unique to the region. As we will see in Chapter II, Southern California architecture at midcentury will capture that same place-defining luminosity through its architectural features and through an emphasis on the senses. At the same time and soon after, Robert Irwin, as well as in part other light-based installation artists around him (Chapter III), will absorb that architectural vernacular to stage

[60] Kevin Starr, ibid.

environments that through light and sensorial awakening embody that same uniquely Southern California approach to site.

CHAPTER II

GENIUS LOCI AND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

This Chapter extends the notion of place from the terms in which I have explored it in Chapter I – therefore mostly as natural landscape – to include the built environment. The reason for this expansion of the notion of site is that the concept of ideal place in 19th-century Southern California necessarily differs from the concept of ideal place in the Southern California of the 1950s and 1960s. Albeit the natural landscape is still alive and well at midcentury, it no longer embodies the ideal site, the place where dreams and aspirations of and about Southern California can be realized. In the Southern California of the 1950s and 1960s, such place is embodied by the suburban home. In the domestic architecture of the period, enclosures of both natural and "artificially natural" elements such as yard, sky, and swimming pool, acquired significance of their own as good alternatives to more uncontaminated nature. In the average middle-class Southern California suburban life, dwellers found their daily exposure to the outdoors in the comforts of the private, fenced-in environments of the back yard, and, by extension, in the interior portions of the home, where large windows and window-walls blurred the lines between indoors and outdoors (generally on the back portion of the house). The spilling of one space into the other nullified the barriers between house and elements, the placid Southern California ones. The long commute in traffic, between downtown workplace and a suburban family dinner, discouraged evening mobility, promoting conversely a search for stress-relief and social

interaction within the domesticated nature of the private home. The backyard functioned as an Eden, a small heaven on earth, a landscape of controllable elements, a perfect balance between the wilderness of nature and the agency of man.

This chapter accomplishes several objectives: it presents the domestic home as the embodiment of the ideal place in Southern California at midcentury; it refines the notion of the ideal regional place through the phenomenological concept of the *genius loci*, developed by architecture theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz; it applies the notion of ideal place/*genius loci* to the architectural element of the window-wall, employed in Southern California domestic architecture at midcentury and emphasized by the literature supporting its boosterism; and finally, it examines the work of architect Richard Neutra, its consistent adoption of the window-wall, its proto-phenomenological approach to site, and its significant influence on the aesthetic of the Southern California built environment, to which Robert Irwin will later respond.

The 1960s were a decade of reevaluation for the field of architecture, although the fruits of this reassessment will not be harvested until a decade or more later.[61] With the wearing down of the modernist utopia, a desire to inject a human dimension into the aesthetic uniformity of the movement led to the search for new directions. Phenomenological theories offered a path forward that valued both the sensorial apparatus of man and the array of vernacular materials and environmental conditions that each specific region had to offer, thus remedying to both the perceived absence of human dimension and the flattening effect of the universalizing modernist aesthetic. Architecture theorist and architect Christian Norberg-Schulz was first to introduce the phenomenological theories of Martin Heidegger to the field, recuperating the concept of *genius*

[61] Jorge, Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 181

loci as a mean to translate the philosopher's notion of dwelling into architectural and tectonic terms. Heidegger's notion of ideal dwelling can be applied to practice through an architectural detail that embodies the *genius loci*, or spirit of the place.

Coincidentally, the 1950 and 1960s were also decades of profound architectural change in Southern California. The dramatic increase in population and the real estate industry that emerged from it (and at the same time fueled it) brought to the forefront of everyone's attention, in both the region and the country, the question of habitability and ideal dwelling, with the Southern California suburban home being advertised as epitome of both. In the early stages of the elaboration of an ideal form of dwelling and of the ensuing Southern California look, architect Richard Neutra (and others following), theorized and applied a proto-phenomenological approach to domestic architecture, before Christian Norberg-Schulz made the philosophy known to the mainstream field through his academic contributions.

Moving from the well demonstrated notion that the Southern California suburban home acted as platform for the promulgation of the American dream rhetoric at midcentury, this chapter argues that at the root of this success stands the ability of the architectural detail of the window-wall to embody the *genius loci* of Southern California. Robert Irwin, through a phenomenological approach to site, will respond to the *genius loci* embodied in the window-wall and perceivable in the visual texture of his birthplace, and will negotiate issues of habitability through his own window-wall and transparency-rooted installations.

The state of architecture: a need for phenomenology

In 1965, Christian Norberg-Schulz, one of the most influential architecture theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, lamented: "The present situation of architecture is confused and puzzling. From the client we hear constant complaints about the architects' lack of ability to satisfy him,

from a practical as well as an aesthetical and economical point of view."[62] As remedy to the problem, Norberg-Schulz proposed a type of architecture that is equipped to respond to the changing needs of the dweller, whose life "consists of changing activities which demand changing surroundings," an architecture, that is, which not only responds to the needs of the dweller but also determines his mood.[63] What starts in 1965 with *Intentions in Architecture* as an acknowledgement of a problem in the field, will become in 1979, with the work *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, a solution in the form of a phenomenological theory of architecture.[64]

With *Intentions in Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz argues for the inadequacy of the discipline and laments its failed attempt at offering a new visual order that can adequately replace the styles of the past. With *Existence, Space and Architecture,* the theorist formulates early phenomenological principles and introduces the concept of *Genius Loci,* a fundamental tool in the search for place and identity, at a time of meaningless modernist structures, mere buildings rather than manifestations of the intellectual practice known as architecture.[65] The publication proposed a Heideggerian approach to dwelling as solution to the dissatisfaction with the modernist utopia. The near extinction of a human dimension at a time of dramatic increase in urban population, together with the repetitive mannerism of modern architecture, ignited Norberg-Schulz' advocacy for the local architect, individual more sensitive to the autochthon

---

[62] Christian, Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press), 1966
[63] Ibid.
[64] Norberg-Schulz' professor in Zurich, Sigfried Giedon, also lamented, "thinking (in architecture schools) is trained; feeling in left untrained." His advocacy for aesthetic experience as a valuable source of signification in science would inform Norberg-Schulz' work. Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern*, 149.
[65] Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers), 1974

flavors and identity, than a cosmopolitan visiting celebrity, preceded by his own modernist reputation could ever be.[66] Finally, with *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz makes his case for a return to nature and place as a corrected path to modernism.[67]

Otero-Pailos tells us of the radical break from modernist ideology that had affected the field of architecture theory by the early 1960s and that had found in a return to pre-modern ideas a future for architecture. If modernism had recognized its guiding light in abstraction of space and form, future architecture would seek its *raison d'etre* in history and theory. If technology promised a teleological future for modern architecture, the new generation of thinkers proposed human experience (and its place-bound history) as the ontological way forward. This series of independent architects, whose collective achievements, say Otero, will only be identified retroactively and included Christian Norberg-Schulz, Kenneth Frampton, Charles Moore, and Jean Labatut, conceived of human experience as an act of continuity with the past, rather than rupture. The revaluation of history and theory legitimized the use of historical architecture as inspiration for modern design, *de facto* launching what will become the postmodern appropriative style.[68]

Driven by a desire to delve into the ontological reasons behind architecture (or its intentions as Norberg-Schulz called them) these architects relied heavily on the combination of images and words as didactic path to an advocacy of direct and physical experience of architecture. The endeavor ran against the grain of architectural historiography conventions, which affirmed the importance of secondary sources in establishing facts such as dates of

[66] Otero-Pailos, 168.
[67] Ibid, 181.
[68] Ibid, xi.

construction, patronage, and cost, information that the phenomenologists found, more or less, irrelevant. The proposed alternative, an experientialist historiography, would see architects addressing architects in a conversation informed by their own expert, firsthand experience, as well as the creation of the intellectual figure of the architect historian, who, especially in the case of Norberg-Schulz, successfully claimed territory from both the art historian and the designer.[69]

Architectural phenomenology drew its early stances from the concept of empathy surfacing in the German speaking world between the 1870s and 1900s, which argued for an understanding of architecture not via abstract mental analytic categories but rather through sensorial and personal experience of a building, and thorough empathic connection - via the viewer's emotional response – with the intentions of the architect. The perceiving subject and his or her bodily reactions provided a prime tool for assessing the quality of the creator's intent. Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Jean Labatut, early proponents of an attitude that will evolve into architectural phenomenology, and active respectively in Italy and the United States, dared to advance the idea that a building belongs to the age during which it is experienced, rather than to the age in which it was built, and that the modernity of a building was contingent upon the modern attitude of the viewer.[70] This radical turn toward the viewer and the validity of subjective experience also led to the idea that history amounted to the accumulation of the experiences contained by or revolving around a building. The old idea of the artist's intention found in phenomenological architecture a transposition of its terms and implications on a collective plane of action, where we are all responsible for generating meaning.[71]

[69] Ibid, xiii.
[70] Ibid, xxii-xxiii.
[71] Ibid, xxiv.

The g*enius loci* in architecture

Norberg-Schulz' theory and practice, based on a sensorial and human-centered search for authenticity in dwellings, matured from a study of the phenomenological theories of Edmund Husserl, as well as of Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's thoughts on dwelling and their architectural translation in the work of Norberg-Schulz tell us that successful architecture - one that manages to convey meaning *about* as well *to* a place, and ultimately bring satisfaction to the individuals inhabiting it - is one that translates the peculiarities of the environment into the character of the dwelling. Norberg-Schulz calls this character *genius loci*, reappropriating the religious ancient Roman concept translatable into "spirit of place."[72]

Drawing from gestalt theory and from Jean Piaget's research on child psychology via the work of urban planner and writer Kevin Lynch, Norberg-Schulz tells us that a visual bonding with the environment leads to a sense of emotional security, and that from early childhood, humans identify or make 'friends' with their specific environment, that being fog, ice, and cold winds, or vast, sandy desert and scorching sun[73]. This allows us to create perceptual mental schemata through which we experience all future events. Although all cultures develop "systems of orientation" (focal points, named regions, routes), when the system is weak (or weakened), the image-making process challenges the sense of belonging and security that comes from 'dwelling,' and men feel lost.[74] To dwell, according to Heidegger's notions upon which

[72] Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 18.
[73] Kevin Lynch, cited in Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 19
[74] Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 19.

Norberg-Shculz sheds light, is to find remedy to that loss. A dwelling must in a sense send out roots into those initial mental schemata.

Dwelling presupposes both identification and orientation with the environment. In other words, man must know how he feels into a specific environment as well as get the full bearings of it. Norberg-Schulz tells us that man gradually develops an awareness of how his own psychic states correspond to the 'forces' of nature and it is at that point that he nurtures a rapport or 'friendship' with things, finally experiencing the "environment as meaningful."[75] Dwelling means to gather the world as a concrete thing or building.[76] Concretization is the property of the work of art, which gathers the "contradictions and complexities of the life-world" into, in the case of architecture, a dwelling where we live life "poetically," and where the *genius loci* of the place is made concrete.[77] The concretization of the *genius loci* is accomplished when the building embraces the properties of a place and "brings them close to man," as Norberg-Schulz suggests.[78]

Relying on Heidegger's notion of the bridge, Norberg Schulz theorizes an existential purpose for buildings, which consists in transforming a site into a place, activating meanings that exist in a potential state in the site.[79] The bridge unveils the meaning of the river above which it rises, by suddenly drawing attention to the partition created by the body of water upon the land, as well as to the actual concept 'riverbank,' absent until then. In other words, the bridge doesn't simply connect banks that are already there, but rather turns

[75] Ibid, 168.
[76] Ibid, 425.
[77] Ibid, 23.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid, 18.

two otherwise anonymous sides of a river into a place of connection and passage, into a place for human existence and interaction with the land: the bridge brings the concept and reality of banks into being and turns them into place.[80]

Translated in architectural terms, the bridge exemplifies visually the concept of the meaning-bearing architectural detail. According to Norberg-Schulz, Heidegger wants to reveal the *thingness* of things, that is the role that details and elements play in gathering the world around them, in bringing truth into existence, technique which the philosopher in *Being and Time* calls "'phenomenology".[81] The existential purpose of architecture - through the architectural detail/element - is therefore to turn a site into a place and to turn the potential meanings of that site into the fully unveiled meaning of place.[82] In the mind of the theorist, Heidegger's phenomenological notion of dwelling and place remedies also Karl Marx's limited understanding of the relationship between man and the environment. Although it recognizes the autonomy of nature (its objective reality is "given independently of man's consciousness"), and the impossibility of man to isolate himself from nature, Marxism` does not address the concepts of 'meaning' and 'character,' which phenomenology attempts to determine. Failing to address the psychological dimension of the relationship between man and nature and therefore of the concept of dwelling, Marxism "fails in its attempt to win human alienation."[83] Alienation is according to Norberg-Schulz first and foremost a loss of identification with both nature and all the man-made things that form the environment in which man lives. The loss of

[80] Ibid, 18.
[81] Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture," *Perspecta*, vol. 20 (1983), 64.
[82] Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 68.
[83] Ibid, 168.

place and its consequent sense of alienation leads to the treatment of man-made things as objects of consumption, "thrown away after use," and of nature as "resource" to be used and exploited.[84] As remedy to this destructive development, Norberg-Schulz reminds us of the importance of recuperating the concepts of "identification" and "gathering," that is the concept of "thing."[85] A thing has meaning if "it is part of the place in which life is concretized," if, in other words, it reveals its functions and purposes to us, escaping the status of mere commodity.[86] When a jug reveals its purpose in the act of pouring water and wine, it reveals life to us, and it escapes the condition of commodity.

Dwelling poetically (as Heidegger defines ideal dwelling) means being able to "'read' the revealing of the things which make up our environment," to understand how the things "gather world" while being part of it, as the jug gathers water and wine while being part of our life, between earth and sky.[87] In order to be meaningful "the inventions of man must have formal properties which are structurally similar to other aspects of reality, and ultimately to natural structures."[88] Dwellings are structurally similar to nature, as they mimic its boundaries (floor/ground, wall/horizon, ceiling/sky) and are therefore naturally inclined to be meaningful.[89] Such emphasis on the element of a dwelling that best embodies its inhabited environment and in turn makes that embodiment manifest (in other words, for Norberg-Schulz, the detail that

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid, 168-169.
[87] Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*,169
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

supports the *genius loci*), has translated in the field of architectural theory into an embracing of site and tectonics.

The Window/Wall as the Southern California *genius loci*

According to Norberg-Schulz the architectural detail "explains the environment and makes its character manifest."[90] The window-wall is that detail that explains the appeal of the Southern California home while simultaneously making its character manifest, that being the ability to incorporate the elements comfortably and aesthetically, something a Norwegian house for instance would not be able to stage year-round. As the bridge element suddenly unveils the existence of the two pre-existing banks, so the window-wall allows the dialogue between outdoor and indoor spaces to come to existence and full visualization.

In Southern California domestic lifestyle and architecture of the 1950s and 1960s, a steady tendency toward the outdoor becomes evident. The unique development sought to incorporate the outdoors and expose dwellers to the clement climate of Southern California. Such openness to the outdoors responded to the needs of the Southern California lifestyle, and simultaneously shaped its identity. As discussed by Kevin Starr's book *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (Oxford University Press, 2009), literature for homeowners, such as *Sunset* magazine, *Sunset* books, *Life* magazine, *Look* magazine, and *House Beautiful* supported the articulation of an outdoorsy and affordable domestic lifestyle, based on a uniquely Californian clemency of climate.[91] On October 22 1945, *Life* provided an ostensibly

---

[90] Norberg-Schulz, in Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1996), 29.

[91] Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963*, 28-29

encompassing picture of the Southern California casual and outdoorsy lifestyle available to families of disparate financial means, showing the rest of the country how lunches and dinners on the patio, golf and tennis clubs (for the wealthy), and easy access to the publicly owned beaches, all contributed to offer a readily available and financially permissible life of leisure and natural comforts.[92]

By 1956, when *Look* magazine devoted an entire issue to "The West," a regional mythology - or "new frontier in living" - was already firmly in place, having found articulation in the geography and mild climate of California, in its post-World War II demographic explosion and suburban expansion, in the introduction of new techniques and materials in construction, and in a celebrity culture cross-promoted with the image of a now financially permissible private swimming pool.[93] Literature for homeowners spelled out an outdoor domestic lifestyle based on decks and homemade barbecues, from relatively simple to more articulate ones, for all budgets and skills, promoting the backyard pool as crucial to the making of the Southern California house.[94] *Sunset* claimed historical roots to the institution of the pool in Southern California, where democratization of this recreational venue through subsidized structures between the 1920s and 1930s, led to a flourishing swimming culture - both leisurely and competitive - later boosted by images of domestic life by the pool, spread by Hollywood. If in the 1910s and 1920s exclusivity still characterized the private swimming pool and only high-end publications such as *Town & Country*, *Arts & Decoration*, *Country Life in America*, and *House & Garden* reserved a space for the luxury amenity, less than twenty years later, a dramatic increase in demographics

[92] "The California Way of Life: Climate and the Automobile Create a New Pattern of Indoor-Outdoor Living," *Life Magazine*, October 22, 1945
[93] Daniell Cornell, *Backyard Oasis* (Prestel USA, 2012), 52
[94] Ibid.

and a significant improvement in construction techniques, led - in a general climate of ascent in consumerism - to a surge in demand for the backyard pool.[95]

In the 1941 February issue of *Popular Mechanics*, an article titled *Back yard Swimming Pools Built at Low Cost* presents this home improvement as affordable to middle-class families.[96] Once that affordability was achieved and promoted, household publications embraced the social potentials of the backyard oasis, as a place to entertain friends and interact with family members, in the balmy California days.[97] The quick rise in popularity of backyard swimming pools came also as a result of the efforts of *House Beautiful* chief editor Elizabeth Gordon. Gordon endeavored to define the American family and taste in the aftermath of World War II, by proposing the Ranch Style house - single family, one-story, with backyard pool - as the ideal American home. Since the clemency of the Southern California climate easily allowed the inclusion of a pool, the Southern California house qualified as the ideal American dwelling. Gordon's entourage of writers, architects and photographers, which she imported from her previous position at *Good Housekeeping*, supported her vision throughout, and allowed *House Beautiful* to double its sales during Gordon's 25-year tenure.[98]

---

[95] Ibid, 53

[96] By assuming a "they're-just-folks" rhetoric in regard to Hollywood actors, *Shelter Magazine* presented celebrities as suburban neighbors, who relaxed in their relatively unpretentious backyard pools and seemingly closed the gap between middle-class life and Hollywood exclusivity. At the same time, the close association between private swimming pool and stardom contributed to the seductive power of the home improvement, which now carried the traits of a finally affordable luxury. Cornell, 54.

[97] The backyard swimming pool popularity grew so dramatically, that from 10.000 pools nationwide in 1950, their presence mushroomed to 175.000 in 1959, with California claiming half of that escalation. Ibid., 57.

[98] Ibid, 56

Photographer Maynard Parker served Gordon's vision for the postwar American home by proposing images of the California house as livable, unpretentious, and hinged on the privacy of the fenced backyard. This newly defined institution paved the way forward in the search for a post-war - and soon thereafter, Cold War - identity, with the search focusing heavily on the West, and more specifically on the Southern California Ranch Style suburban house.[99] Together with the spread and promotion of the backyard swimming pool, Parker documented the architectonic dialogue between indoor and outdoor in Southern California homes. In a 1946 photograph advertising a Malibu Ranch Style house by Leo Bachman, a mother is captured ironing clothes in the utility room, which, open through a window to the backyard porch, allows the woman to keep an eye on her young children at play.[100] This priceless amenity is presented as a unique feature of the Ranch Style house plan, which allows for visual and physical communication between indoor and outdoor environments. In another photograph documenting the Woodman Plaza model home, in Pacoima, California (fig.12), a family of three is seen lounging on the back porch, backed by a window door and a large window-wall that stretches for most of the partition – now almost annulled – between exterior and interior living spaces.[101] Altogether, Parker's photos of Southern California homes consistently showcased an abundant use of glass on walls facing the backyard – exposing indoor to outdoor – together with a backyard fence that ensured privacy and transformed the outdoor space into an indoor one.[102]

[99] More broadly, photographs by Parker served Gordon's agenda in framing the suburban Ranch Style American house as a capitalist society alternative to what communist economic and political systems had to offer elsewhere, namely individual liberties as embodied in the privacy of the single-family home. Jennifer A. Watts, *Maynard L. Parker: Modern Photography and the American Dream* (Yale University Press, 2012), 135-136.
[100] Watts, *Maynard L. Parker: Modern Photography and the American Dream*, 143.
[101] Watts, 142.
[102] Watts, 140-141.

This visual constant in Parker's photographs effectively sold the fluidity of the outdoor-indoor space – together with a potential for year-round enjoyment – as idiosyncratic of the Southern California home.

The Southern California novel urgency on domestic spaces came as a result of the desperate need for housing in post-World War II Los Angeles and of the high numbers of architects who flocked there, attracted by the potentials of a new housing utopia in the paradisiac climate of Southern California. Even in instances in which well-known and well-reputed architects were involved, the needs of the land always took priority – at least from an aesthetic standpoint – by surrounding the structure, by spilling into it through multiple points of transparency, and by applying its layered and sinuous formations to the blueprint of the house.

Established in 1956, Crestwood Hills, formerly known as the Mutual Housing Association, endeavored to build cheap and community-oriented dwellings, each with its own unique characteristics and all geared toward incorporation of the outdoor into the indoors through pervasive use of window walls and low vertical impact on the land.[103] Launched with the idea of being "the prototype for California modern living," Crestwood Hills was built on "Utopian ideals – a blueprint for creating communities were very real people can live in extraordinary homes on their very real incomes."[104] After interviewing renowned architects

[103] As an example, the MHA 104 model (2 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, 935 square feet), sold for $10,239. Cory Buckner, *Crestwood Hills: the Chronicle of a Modern Utopia* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2015), 101.
[104] Buckner, 7.

Richard Neutra, Lloyd Wright, Douglas Honnold, and John Latner, the MHA selected architects Whitney R. Smith and A. Quincy Jones and structural engineer Edgardo Contini.".[105]

The Case Study Houses, initiated by *Arts and Architecture Magazine* in 1945, ran intermittently until 1966, with a total of 26 houses being built, providing "a forum for talented architects," exceeding all expectations on its popularity, and providing models of low-cost design for the middle-class American family. The first 6 built houses attracted almost 370,000 visitors, contradicting the assumption and initial fear that modern design would not allure most of the contemporary public. Designed by Craig Elwood, Richard Neutra and other equally or lesser-known talents, the houses pivoted on use of glass and transparency of indoors.[106] This new kind of modern design, did not seem to scare people off.[107]

As Thomas S. Hines demonstrates in *Architecture of the Sun*, even though this postwar development of California architecture was undoubtedly influenced by both European and American modernism, it more relevantly drew from the Southern California modernist tradition established by Richard Neutra, Schindler, and by their followers, Gregory Ain, Raphael Soriano,

[105] Ibid, 11
[106] Esther McCoy, "Arts and Architecture Case Study Houses," *Perspecta,* vol. 15, "Backgrounds for an American Architecture" (1975): 54-73.
[107] One of their advertising brochures recited "Live in the Community of tomorrow... today. 500 modern homes – designed for California living... every detail has been deliberated by the architects who designed them and by the families who will live in them. More than two years of planning and preparation are back of the homes in Crestwood Hills. The result: distinctive California homes, designed expressly for California living at costs that can be met by families of moderate income." (1947 brochure for Mutual Housing Association featuring the Pilot House in Mt. Washington), Buckner, 50.

and Thornton Abell, as well as, earlier on, by early modernist Irving Gill's work in the first decades of the century and in the areas of San Diego and Los Angeles.[108]

Genius loci and California dream: a brief history

It is possible to trace a history of the Southern California openness to the climate and of adaptation to the needs of the land. The tendency to value natural formations and local climate in the act of inhabiting a place for instance, is an attitude dating back to the early settlements. In his essay *All About Eden*, author Blake Allmendinger discusses the collective perception of Southern California ever since the gold rush, in terms of "Edenic utopia (...), exotic tropical paradise (...), and end point of Manifest Destiny," explaining how the state has for over a century allured newcomers in search of not only financial wealth, but also "sunshine and surf, safe refuge, or stardom."[109] Reminding us of the reality of displacement, enslavement, oppression, and failure often mocked by the "California Dream," Allmendinger delineates the California rhetoric of fulfillment and self-realization, as measured not so much by financial wealth - although financial achievement certainly enhanced the rhetoric - as much as by the Eden-like clemency of climate and land. From the "carefully constructed facade" of "leisurely, civilized paradise" of the pre-Anglo era, with front porches and hacienda courtyards that frame daily activities and lighten the burden of labor, to the idealistic counterculture lifestyle of the hippies, who in the geodesic dome and the constant contact with light and nature found alternatives to the middle-class American

[108] Thomas Hines. *Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900-1970*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010.
[109] Blake Allmendinger, "All About Eden," in Stephanie Barron et al., *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Art, and Berkely, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), 113.

lifestyle, California seemed to naturally deliver both nourishment and leisure, providing a relatively effortless enjoyment of life.[110]

Historian Anne Hyde shows how the acceptance of the peculiar textures, shapes and colors of the Western landscape represented a chief aspect in an appropriate assimilation of the West and in the elaboration of a new American identity, following the 1840s descriptions of the newly explored locales by John C. Fremont. Not only did such a recognition ultimately lead to the idiosyncratic architectural styles of California and the Southwest, which clearly responded to the characteristics of the climate, but it also gradually strengthened the idea that a new American identity emerged out of an unprecedented union with the landscape.[111] The West, and California in particular, entrusted its own identity to the land since the very onset of the so-called westward expansion. The leading attitude towards the integration of the human presence in the land would be one that for the most part - and only relatively to the East Coast - would give precedence to the latter.

The concept of a house in constant dialogue with its surrounding landscape has a rich history that predates the spread of the swimming pool and even the use of glass. The California Ranch house traces its origins to a time antecedent to the pervasive introduction of glass and plans of original Ranch houses show how the central patio - encircled by perimetral rooms - together with the covered passages between buildings, already had a dialogue between indoor and outdoor set-in place. In later updates, this framework often saw the puncturing of walls through large windows, and the transformation of the original covered passageways between

[110] Ibid, 115
[111] Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920* (New York University Press: 1990).

buildings into glass galleries.[112] From at least the early 1920s on, we begin to see houses built on slab and in level with the garden, together with the use of glass doors that replace walls and windows and grant access to the internal outdoor patio.[113]

Even though the concept of the Southern California garden stands far off that of the untouched wilderness, it does resonate with the notion of the middle-landscape, and the perfectly tame garden, which balanced technology and urbanization, with wilderness. The Southern California backyard still urges a degree of care for what makes the place appealing, and it still molds the need to tame the wild, around the ethos and the sale value of abundant nature and forgiving climate. The sense of entitlement to the land, the Jeffersonian idea that "as few as possible shall be without a small portion of land," upon which the Southern California home was founded, also forms the ground for the appreciation and care for its needs.[114]

In *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*, Lawrence Culver claims that the city of Los Angeles played a pivotal role in what he calls "the democratization of American leisure," one based from the very beginning on what local boosters presented as leisure and as middle-class cure to urbanization.[115] From the very beginning, early promoters of Southern California succeeded in presenting leisure as "pastoral agricultural frontier," rather than a luxury accessible only by the well-offs.[116] Notable figures such as Charles

---

[112] *Sunset: Western Ranch Houses* (San Francisco: Lane Publishing, 1946), 93.
[113] Esther McCoy, "The California House... How it Started," *Los Angeles Times House Magazine*, July 19, 1963. UCLA Special Collections, W. W. Robinson Papers, Box 92, folder 23, Newspaper Clippings, 1951-1953.
[114] William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), xviii.
[115] Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure* (Oxford University Press: 2010), 9.
[116] Ibid, 16-17.

Fletcher Lumnis propelled an image of Los Angeles rooted in ideal outdoor living and romanticized Hispanic heritage that crafted the place into a mythicized "pre-capitalist Eden" for Easterners.[117] The Wrigley family purchased Catalina Island in 1919 and turned it into a resort, combining the peril of the Old West with the romance of the Old Spanish and the exoticism of a tropical paradise, thus anticipating Disneyland's mission. The community of Palm Springs followed the example of Catalina and successfully replaced it after World War II. With its golf courses and ranch houses, the site will inspire and provide a model for the rest of the country, particularly for its focus on enclosed and relatively private forms of entertainment, such as patios and private clubs. The Great West, generally seen by Americans as wilderness transformed into "the garden" through hard work, differed from California, where the concept of leisure separated the region from the rest, even at the early stages of the Gold Rush, predicated yes, on labor but also luck and pleasure. Furthermore, differently from other places of leisure such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, South Florida or New Orleans, California's boosterism anchored leisure on the idea of permanence, rather than temporary escape.

That same idea of leisure and livability will characterize the conceptualization of the house, built around the pleasure of living outdoor, a source of all year round entertaining. The 1947 *Sunset* magazine publication dedicated to Western Ranch Houses clearly states the purpose of this housing typology, which is, to let the outdoors in, objective that extends to landscaping, an endeavor to be undertaken through a completely different approach. Ranch gardens must be "livable," recites the book, adding that, "in planning a house, careful attention has been paid [to] the relationship of the garden *rooms*. Garden spaces are related to the rooms of the house or to

[117] Ibid.

garden areas. The livability of each is increased by planning connecting passageways that invite free movement."[118] If by 1947 or soon after, the Ranch House had been established as a staple in California and had been presented to the rest of the country as one of the characteristics of the region, not to mention a natural complement to its climate, by 1956, *Look Magazine*, with its issue dedicated to the West, presented the upper-class modern California house as almost completely open to the outdoors through massive window walls. The magazine even provided advice on suitable fashion for "life in a fish-bowl." "The great outdoors often intrudes upon the indoors," explains the article, and "houses that are open to scenic views also put stay-at-homes in the public eye." The fashionable California woman wears made-in-California lounging skinny pants, appropriate for a visually exposed life, and "smart enough" for women who opt for window curtains.[119]

Notable examples of individuals who contributed to the creation of a Southern California landscape – that being in the form of domestic or landscape architecture – include Frederick Law Olmstead and the later case of Ruth Patricia Shellhorn. Olmstead created a community in Palos Verdes near Los Angeles in the 1920s, in which roads followed the topography of the land with minimum grading.[120] Under the guidance of developer Frank Vanderlip and the architectural vision of Myron Hunt, Palos Verdes embodied a signature Southern California style inspired by the Mediterranean charm of the Amalfi coast. Olmsted's father, a merchant with a deep interest

---

[118] Ibid, 27

[119] "The West: New Frontiers in Living... 28 Pages on the Life that Lures the EAST," *Look Magazine*, September 18, 1956.

[120] Christine Edstrom O'Hara, "Regionalism in California: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr's Planning and Design in Palos Verdes Estates," *Frederick Law Olmsted Jr: A Vision for the American West*. June 20, 2014. YouTube video, 27:16, minute 13, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr: A Vision for the American West: Regionalism in California - YouTube

in nature, was already testing California regionalism at Stanford University, project in which he had been involved and where the color of the stones matched that of the hills, as well as of the vegetation around it, when not watered.[121] At Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, Olmstead had envisioned a yellow landscape that would integrate the funerary monuments and tombs in the surroundings. The Victorian taste of the time would end up prevailing and privileging a green vegetation, rejecting his original plans. For his vegetation, Olmsted conducted climate studies and relied on local plant expert Theodore Paine for the selection and education on care needed to grow and propagate indigenous plants.[122]

Southern California landscape architect Ruth Patricia Shellhorn (1909-2006) led a 57-year long career in landscape architecture in the Los Angeles area, starting at the peak of the Great Depression. Over the course of her long career, between 1933 and 1990, Shellhorn delivered close to four hundred landscape designs in Southern California, including small private gardens, large ones for high-profile clients in Hollywood, as well as her best-known projects for Bullock's Pasadena (opened 1947) and Walt Disney at Disneyland.[123] At the core of her practice stood the belief that landscaping – whether that be for a private garden or a larger public space - had to obey and respond to the needs of the land as well as to the need of the owner, an attitude

[121] Ibid, minute 7.
[122] Ibid, minute 7 to 8.
[123] Bullock's Pasadena is considered to be the first modern department store in the region to be located in the suburbs and to be designed for the automobile as the preferred transportation to and from the center. For Walt Disney, Shellhorn devised an architectural landscape project that brought together in a coherent whole the various components of the park, then under construction (Adventureland, Frontierland, Tomorrowland, and Fantasyland). Kelly Comras, *Ruth Shellhorn* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 88 and109.

she called "humble design."[124] Shellhorn's designs embraced the notion of tropical lushness as well as the porosity of outdoor and indoors. When commissioned by *Sunset Magazine* to write seven articles on the theme of solving typical garden design problems encountered by suburban homeowners, Shellhorn underlined the importance of thinking about home and garden as a single unit with "a natural flow from house to garden, just as there is from one room to another."[125] She proposed screening and enclosing spaces as well as plans that approached the outdoors as integral part of the home, with carved areas for activities and gardening.[126] With the post-World War II increased emphasis on the Southern suburban home as the ideal form of dwelling in the free American world, Shellhorn further amplified her interest in portraying the outdoor portion of the house as central in family inner dynamics, regularly introducing barbeques and pergolas.[127]

Interestingly, Shellhorn's ideas about dwelling carry similarities to Richard Neutra's approach, discussed later in this research and pivotal in the crafting of the Southern California aesthetic of ideal dwelling. Even though Shellhorn did not dislike the modernist look and ideals, she was critical of the modernist dismissal of the peculiarities of a region and responded to its shortcomings with a philosophy of dwelling pivoted on physical wellbeing.[128] Coincidentally, Shellhorn collaborated with Ralph Cornell on a commission for Neutra, whose proto-phenomenological approach to dwelling will lay the ground for much of the Southern California

[124] According to Comras, Shellhorn was critical of the practice of "whipping the site into submission" which she saw as "an attempt of the ego for supremacy," and in contrast to which she advocated for "a little more humility and a reverence for natural beauty," a philosophy that found implementation for instance in her preservation of the arroyos on the Riverside campus of the University of California. Comras, 52.
[125] Ibid, 30.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid, 31.
[128] Ibid, 44.

ethos.[129] Although Shellhorn's vocabulary was one composed of plants and outdoor materials, glass played a role in the landscaper's vision as well, as in the case of the patio with view built for Edith Knapp's home and studio in Santa Monica. To protect the client from up-canyon winds while simultaneously ensuring a full view of the Santa Monica mountains, Shellhorn employed a system of glass screens, completely independent from the home, which granted enjoyment of the outdoors in less-than-ideal conditions.[130]

Equally interesting in this brief historical survey of the Southern California approach to land and place through the act of dwelling is Shellhorn's creative method, which closely resembles that of Robert Irwin, discussed in detail in Chapter III. In what she considered her biggest accomplishment, the Bullock's project, Shellhorn began by familiarizing with the topography of the place and its existing flora. "(I let) the site 'talk' to me," she explained, "until I have a feeling for the area and its natural and manmade surroundings... I then try to create a design that restores or enlarges the possibilities of re-creating the natural setting."[131] Two aspects are notable in this description of her own creative process: firstly, what can be defined as a senses-based, site-responsive approach to the place, similar to Irwin's phenomenological and site-determined approach; secondly, the tendency to "restore and enlarge" the natural setting, which echoes the act of embodiment through a dwelling of the *genius loci,* simultaneously bringing to life and amplifying the potentials and peculiarity of a place.

[129] Ibid, 21.
[130] Ibid, 101-102.
[131] Ibid, 153.

Genius loci meets Western Frontier

Scholarship on the West has considered California as a unique form of the American Frontier, rooted from its early stages on the idea of a permanent, all-year-round leisurely lifestyle and an Eden-like climate. Especially in the postwar era, middle-class families across the nation could identify the American Dream of a private home and of financial stability, with the clement climate and the Ranch-style houses of Southern California, which became with time the ideal platform for the articulation, promotion, and unfolding of the California dream.

In the constructing and selling of the ideal California house, the emphasis on openness and idyllic lifestyle went hand in hand with a persistent echoing of the rhetoric of the Western Frontier. In literature of the 1950s and 1960s, the California house is presented as an almost natural expression of the land, and as the result of a search for something new and uninhibited by tradition. In an article titled "The California House... How it Started," the author delineates a history of the institution rooted in the idea of emancipation. The worldwide known California house develops from the local needs, not from accepted conventions, and "like the pioneers, is not bound to the East Coast or to Europe." From its very "indigenous" onset, the California house emerged from an intuitive and first-hand knowledge of "climate control, indoor-outdoor relationships and site planning."[132]

Southern California, with its clement climate, its public beaches and its affordable outdoorsy lifestyle was often sold to the public as a new frontier of a sort, as a land of the West

[132] Esther McCoy, "The California House... How it Started," *Los Angeles Times House Magazine*, July 19, 1963. UCLA Special Collections, W. W. Robinson Papers, Box 92, folder 23, Newspaper Clippings, 1951-1953.

that promised excitement and fulfillment. The previously mentioned September 18th 1956 issue of *Look Magazine* dedicated to the western regions of the country and titled "The West: New Frontiers of living... 28 pages on the life that lures the EAST," recited, "the West is a way of living," and defined the region as "extravagant, restless, exciting" and "overpowering."[133] Celebrating the affluence in water provided by the Columbia River, the article opens up with figures concerning the waves of settlers advancing westward - 400.000 people moving in yearly, with 300.000 directed to California.

In the same issue, an article titled "Los Angeles: the Art of Living Bumper-to-Bumper" boasts the technological achievements that have allowed men to build “more swimming pools in Palm Springs, a desert town, than in any other town in the world."[134] For each western state the article lists advantages and points of pride, with California sporting the longest list with "more fruit, more wine, more nuts and, by 1975, more people (23,000.000)" than any other state.[135] Defined as "truly, a favored son of the gods," the Angeleno "golfs all year, swims, and gardens most of the year."[136] Los Angeles cannot claim the nightlife of New York City, continues the article, only because the heavy traffic discourages the average Angeleno from getting back on the road after returning home. The backyard, with its pool, its “ubiquitous barbeque,” and outdoor liquor cabinet, thus becomes the preferred space for entertainment for a few or many friends, who also have chosen the suburbs as their home."[137]

---

[133] "The West: New Frontiers in Living... 28 Pages on the Life that Lures the EAST," *Look Magazine*, September 18, 1956.
[134] "The Art of Living Bumper-to-Bumper" in "The West: New Frontiers in Living... 28 Pages on the Life that Lures the EAST," *Look Magazine*, September 18, 1956.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

Reinforcing the association between the California lifestyle and the West as "frontier," the article "Playboys of the Western World" discusses the lure of the West and of western clothes, the sales of which increased about 50 per cent a few years prior to 1956. An image of a Western Party in a Hollywood hilltop ranch combines the fascination with the frontier life - at that point fueled by Hollywood Western films - with the modern California charm of the backyard swimming pool. The article "Western Houses: Built around a New Way of Life" describes the Western style as a blending of "the hot colors of the Spanish Southwest, the natural, rough materials of the frontier and the construction techniques of twentieth-century America."[138]

A February 1950 issue of *Pageant Magazine* titled "California: Dreamland West," provides testimonies of various individuals whose "job types" managed to make a good living in the region (fig. 13).[139] "When James Marshall found a gold nugget in a shallow stream at Sutter's Mill in 1848," claims the article, "he transformed California from a remote American outpost to a seething, galvanic new state. Today, it still hasn't settled down. Flooded with a modern version of the Forty-niners – seekers whose clothes, jobs, cars, opinions are molded by the Golden Land – California is a study in 20th-century frontier living." Further down, a photo of an oil worker carries the caption, "Like the Forty-niners, this soil worker – one of the 15,000 – knows the riches in California's soil.[140] His hands and clothes may be smudged, but his living standard has been boosted by black gold."[141] A portrait of a young woman in bathing suit claims, "most

[138] "Playboys of the Western World" in "The West: New Frontiers in Living... 28 Pages on the Life that Lures the EAST," *Look Magazine,* September 18, 1956.
[139] "California: Dreamland West," *Pageant Magazine,* February 1950.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

Americans grow older every year, but the magic of the movies keeps the stars young, their beauty ever-fresh. So it is with all Californians. There is no time for age, only for the youth of a frontier."[142]

These articles idealize California as a place where even humble workers can make a good living, where a forgiving climate and easy-going lifestyle keeps settlers youthful and healthy, and where opportunities are still numerous and unrestricted. A similar example of California dream boosterism can be found in the previously mentioned issue of *Life Magazine*, in which an article provides an overview of the different "life packages" you can expect to secure for yourself, depending on your salary. Even a modest income of $3,000 per year grants a family a decent house with the privacy and pleasures of a fenced backyard, for the children to play in and the adults to relax (fig.13). Gardening is an all-year activity and so is the option of setting up lunches and dinners outside. The California climate ensures access to tasty produce regardless of the season, and outdoorsy activities, such as mini golf, are part of the California deal.[143]

The proto phenomenology of Richard Neutra

A discussion of the architectural microcosm of Southern California mandates careful consideration of the work of architect Richard Neutra, not only due to the influence that Neutra's work had on the production of younger architects in the region (who will create that Southern California look we are examining) but also since Neutra, with his philosophy and his practice, stood at an ambiguous junction between modernist aesthetics and phenomenological concerns. Richard Neutra's decision to emigrate to the United States was curiously influenced by a travel

[142] Ibid.
[143] "The California Way of Life," *Life Magazine*, October 22,1945.

poster he had seen in Zurich, which read "California Calls You," as well as by his own reported desire to live in a place where "one does not have to fear the winter."[144] Unlike Walter Gropius, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, Neutra emigrated to the United States voluntarily and with the precise intention of seeing the work of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, animated by the conviction that America was the capital of modern architecture.[145] The poster, part of the architect's life-changing decision to relocate to the land of the sun, embodies the well documented propaganda that attracted thousands to California from the rest of the United States as well Europe. The architect's remark about the weather reminds us of how the *genius loci* had to be by necessity construed around the single, most appealing aspect of a Southern California lifestyle: its climate. The anecdotes fit nicely with the motivation behind the choice of Neutra as spokesperson for the Southern California home and for its successful achievement of the *genius loci*.

Neutra came and conquered Southern California architecture, generating a style more than a body of work, a silent legacy more than a name for himself. Anthropologist Robert Ardrey wrote to Neutra in 1967:

> I can remember times in Los Angeles in the '30s when there was only one man, Richard Neutra, and you said, 'That's a Neutra house.' Nobody else could have built it. And then later you looked at a house and you said: 'Look at the Neutra influence.' But then later on, unless you were a Neutra fan and connoisseur you

[144] Thomas Hines, *Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900-1970* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 275.
[145] Thomas Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 6.

> wouldn't say it because your concepts had spread so widely and deeply into domestic architecture that they had become part of the modern way of life."[146]

Bauhaus School founder Walter Gropius described Neutra, whom he visited in Los Angeles in 1928, as "a lonely pioneer designing modern buildings, the like of which were then unknown on the West Coast.[147] Neutra's chief contribution to Southern California architecture can be seen not only in the architect's respect for nature and tendency to incorporate it, learned in part from Japanese architecture and urbanism, but also in the flawless combination of repetition and peculiarity (that for instance, Thomas Hines prefers to the 'tour de force' of a Schindler or late Le Corbusier).[148] More importantly to the scope of this research, in the postwar years, Neutra began to systematically abandon the use of metal and wooden mullions – which created geometric fenestration patterns similar to the ones visible at the Lovell House (1929) and the Lanfair Apartments (1937) – in favor of the large spans of glass that will become signature of the Southern California home (fig. 14).[149] Hines observes how Neutra's architecture serves to "choreograph the sensory and emotional responses of the human body," recognizing how Neutra's interest in engaging all senses through design can only be properly appreciated if experienced in first person.[150]

It is therefore a phenomenological architecture of sorts, even though, paradoxically, it presents itself also as starkly modernist in its forms, at least when compared to the more

---

[146] Hines, *Achitecture of the Sun,* 606.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid, 590-591.
[149] Ibid, 589.
[150] Ibid, 590.

canonically phenomenological architecture of Juhani Pallasmaa, for example. As Michael J. Ostwald and Raeana Henderson argue, the reason for this apparent discordance can be found in the fact that Neutra's work benefitted more from the clinical approach of pioneering psychologist Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt than from the theories of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, founders of the phenomenological school of thought. Even though Husserl attended Wundt's 1879 lectures on how to isolate and measure bodily responses to stimuli, he would later develop his theories toward more metaphysical directions.[151] Wundt and Husserl both relied on human senses as key to the understanding of the world. However, Wundt adopted a more scientific approach then the poetic one of Husserl (and Heidegger). That makes Neutra a follower of the more scientific branch of architectural phenomenology, with Norberg-Schulz (as well as Pallasmaa and others) adhering to the more poetic route established by Husserl and Heidegger. The distinct origin of Neutra's concern with human sense would explain why the architect occupies both the position of the modernist, enamored with modern design, and that of a phenomenologist, fascinated by humans' sensorial responses to the architectural space.[152]

Neutra produced phenomenologically sound dwellings before phenomenology even began to be recognized as a valid way of approaching site by the field of architecture (therefore long before Norberg-Schulz called for a regaining of "basic human values" in modern architecture in 1965). Published in 1954, *Survival Through Design* provided a near lifetime compendium of reflections on built environment and human psychology and physiology. Even

[151] Neutra called on the theories of pioneering psychologist Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt, to argue that the most important purpose of design is to control the senses and clarify the body's position in space. Michael J. Ostwald, and Raeana Henderson. "Richard Neutra Ocular-Centric Phenomenology," *Architecture Research*, 2012; 2(3): 27-35 (Rosemead, California: Scientific & Academic Publishing Co, 2012).
[152] Ibid, 28.

though the rest of the world eventually caught up with Neutra, his concerns for "the larger environment as well as its myriad microscopic components," as Hines notes, anticipate what would later be called 'environmental psychology.'[153] Neutra's predilection for the 'pinwheel' floorplan - which consisted in placing quadrants in a cruciform manner so that each would be pinned on one side but open on most others - was motivated by his conviction that the human eye needs to find peripheral vision whenever possible.[154] The pinwheel plan would normally be accompanied by an abundant use of flat, horizontal planes, which combined with it, contributed to keep the verticality of one's cone of vision under check. In turn, the predilection for horizontal planes, paired with the profuse use of transparent walls (window-walls) widens the scope of that much sought-after peripheral vision.

Neutra's fascination with peripheral vision stemmed from the idea that this inherently challenging system allows us to grasp our surroundings, providing both a sense of safety and a potential alert for imminent danger. Horizontal planes and transparent walls, combined, widen the scope of our peripheral vision, causing our eyes to rapidly and repeatedly reset and turn, in search of stability. The Bailey House (1946), with its horizontal roof and floor-to-ceiling glass walls, often caused visitors to "adjust their gazes" while ambulating the interior of the home.[155]

Sylvia Lavin also discusses Neutra's ambiguous modernism as well as his groundbreaking use of the glass wall (with which here we refer to a more ambitious and expensive version of the window-wall).[156] More specifically, Lavin sees the corners - meeting

[153] Hines, *Architecture of the Sun*, 572.
[154] Ostwald and Henderson, 31.
[155] Ostwald and Henderson, 30.
[156] Sylvia Lavin, ed., *Everything Loose Will Land: 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: MAK Center; Nürnburg: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2013).

point of two floor-to-ceiling glass planes - as particularly disorienting, with their games of alternate transparency and reflectivity, solidity and intangibility, as well as with the indoor/outdoor dialogue they engender. Although high modernism had embraced from the beginning an extensive use of glass, the material mostly took on the function of sealing off the interior in its clear and pure casing. Even modest postwar suburban homes had incorporated "picture walls" according to those static terms, thanks to the low-cost expansion in scale that the advances in glazing technology had produced.[157] It is with Neutra that, according to Lavin, we see a shift from the "glass box" and the "classically or geometrically precise space" delineated by glass, to the viscosity of the indoor/outdoor environments initiated by that same material, under different circumstances. Lavin sees Neutra's simultaneous non-modernist and modernist stance expressed, respectively, in the architect's high regard for the fully sensorial organism/individual inhabiting and experiencing the architectural space, and in the utopian hope that a house could provide an ideal environment for human fulfillment.[158]

Richard Neutra created a legacy in the Southern California suburban home tradition that arguably no other architect was able to replicate, although numerous followed in his steps and enriched that legacy. His many houses in the Los Angeles area provided a model for much more humble middle-class homes not only by accidental aesthetic inspiration but also as a result of the architect's intentions. Physician and Lovell House (1927-29) owner Philip Lovell described the house as "a case study for features that could appear in the humblest of bungalows".[159] As Hines

[157] Ibid, 18.
[158] Ibid.

[159] *Neutra- Survival Through Design*, written, directed and produced by PJ Letofsky, *Vimeo* (email to author with password, January 18, 2021), from minute 30.00 to minute 31.08.

also notes, the peculiarity of the home was that it was an assemblage of prefabricated steel structures (and therefore an easily importable model) that Neutra managed to inject with much elegance.[160] Following completion, both Lovell and Neutra opened the house for public guided tours for four consecutive weekends, during which thousands of Angelinos visited, receiving first-hand knowledge of not only the potential reproducibility, on a smaller, more accessible scale, of the Lovell House, but also of the guiding principles and philosophies of its underlying design.

Neutra conducted a lengthy study of the family members' habits prior the design stage, learning about their peculiarities, biases, and modalities of interaction with each other and the environment. Quietly sitting in a corner of the room, he would occupy himself with some form of quiet activity, as to feel and look 'busy' to the family members and facilitate his own integration into their daily life. All the acquired information would determine various house features in the later stages of design.[161] Neutra's actions – directed at democratizing modernist architecture and demystifying its intimidating otherworldly look, defined by some as "Moon architecture" - turned the Lovell House into a local icon and marked the beginning of the architect's success in Southern California.[162]

Neutra scholar Barbara Lamprecht tells us of a 1958 analysis undertaken by the university of California, at Berkley, that endeavored to define creativity within specific parameters, and involved in its efforts some of the world's most famous architects.[163] The study encouraged its subjects to identify, among other pivotal points, the moment in which they

[160] Ibid, from minute 31.09 to minute 31.14.
[161] Hines, *Architecture of the Sun*, 315.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Letofsky, *Neutra- Survival Through Design*, from minute 12.06 to minute 14.48.

"knew" they had become the architects they wanted to be. In response to the query, Neutra chose to discuss a little-known yet personally valuable project, a cemetery in the 12th-century city of Luckewalde in Germany, for which he was commissioned as city architect in the early 1920s. At Luckewalde, Neutra crafted what Lamprecht describes as a "forest with graves," a lushly vegetated area, far removed from Berlin, made up of a series of outdoor rooms perched at the end of diagonal offshoots along a spine, a central path to which the visitor could return. The project, which escapes the traditional boundaries of architecture, was made possible also through Neutra's collaboration with an agriculturist, and, according to Lamprecht, builds upon the architect's ideas on evolutionary biology.[164] Neutra carved natural and human built environments and dioramas of a sort with the idea that, as humans, we gage our environment by accessing its natural elements, by catching site of the horizon, by knowing our vegetation, by familiarizing with our bodies of water, and so on. Founded therefore on principles shared by Heidegger, the cemetery employed the 'languages and tools of architecture" and revealed itself in time to be a "constellation of sensual opportunities," albeit not being a traditional work of architecture with a foundation, a roof, and walls.[165] This unusual commission provided Neutra with a chance to reflect and operate upon the concept of perception and of sensorial space, which he later applied to his more customary projects, marking a moment of creative realization.

Richard Neutra created a look for Los Angeles - and Southern California by extension – that undeniably marked an era of successful self-definition and self-promotion for the region. Addressing his wife in a 1920 letter, Neutra wrote, "I believe that space has validity because I am an architect, but even more so because I am a human being. But believe me, dear Dione,

[164] Ibid, from minute 12.06 to minute 14.48.
[165] Ibid, from minute 1.38.39 to minute 1.39.50.

there's more to it."[166] That ulterior element and aspect Neutra attempted to grasp was the concept of place, made by transforming a space into something meaningful to the individual inhabiting, task at which the architect succeeded. Early on in his career, as he was endeavoring to create what he would consider a well-designed house, Neutra grappled with the idea of space as something that exists beyond the architectural parameters of the time and as an entity that grounds its own definition in human needs. These would be the first steps toward a phenomenological approach that will allow Neutra to develop his interest in the body, the senses, and perception as prime reference for architectural planning, as well as programmatic tools for the tailoring of a physical space and of an existential place. Following his relocation to Los Angeles, Neutra was able to create homes that respond to the needs of man in the specificities of place, and to deeply imbue the visual texture of Southern California with an aesthetic that married the modernist faith in functionalism with the ontological faith in the senses promoted by phenomenology and later on, critical regionalism.

Conclusion

The concept of the fourfold played a crucial role in Heidegger's conception of dwelling, which in turn informed Norberg-Schulz' theories on the *genius loci* and the detail. Man, contends Heidegger, exists as part of the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, four components, each of which cannot exist without the other (earth cannot exist without sky, nor can sky exist without divinities to inhabit it, nor earth can exist without its mortals). The fourfold is the unity of the four elements and its wholeness cannot be divided. Humans inhabit the fourfold through a dwelling, which, if successful, "saves" the earth.[167] Heidegger tells us: "To save really means to

[166] Ibid, from minute 1.40.34 to minute 1.41.35.
[167] Norberg-Schulz, *Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture*, 65.

set something free into its own presencing. (…) Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it..."[168] Saving the earth therefore implies an activation by man's act of dwelling, of the earth's implicit *raison d'être,* its nature and purpose. When human beings dwell in the most ideal form, they save, spare, safeguard the fourfold. Man takes part of the fourfold (or safeguards it) when he "saves the earth, receives the sky, awaits the divinities, and initiates the mortals."[169] As David J. Gauthier explains, this mode of dwelling and building that creates space for the fourfold compares to what the Greeks called *techne,* a term indicating the act of making "something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way."[170] Heidegger also recuperates the Greek concept of space as *peras* or "something that has been made room for, something that has been freed," and builds upon it his argument, according to which a bridge "gathers the earth as landscape around the stream."[171] Gauthier concludes that in Heidegger's notion of dwelling, the authentic builder "will attempt to let things appear as gathering sites of the fourfold."[172]

Arguably, the Southern California home offers such form of utterly instrumental building, as it serves the act of dwelling in all its aspects. It offers isolation of the family nucleus as well as that space for social interaction that the city does not provide; it offers exposure to nature, as well as protection from the infringing of that piece of nature by others. Through the Southern California home, man "saves the earth" and sets "something free into its own presencing," by gathering nature, bringing it into existence as the 'backyard,' and saving it for its dwellers. In the Southern

---

[168] Ibid.
[169] Marin Heidegger in Norberg-Schulz, *Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture*, 65..
[170] Martin Heidegger in David J. Gauthier, *Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Politics of Dwelling* (Idaho Falls, Idaho: Lexington Books, 2016), 89.
[171] Gauthier, 88-89.
[172] Ibid.

California home, man "receives the sky" by incorporating a portion of it, not only through the implied vertically sectioned areal portion marked on the ground by the fence, but also by absorbing it into the indoor portions of the home through the window-wall. In this same home, man "awaits the divinities," hopes for the earthly Eden of the California idyll to come to realization within the domesticity of its indoor/outdoor environments. Man "initiates the mortals" via the Southern California home by conducting an idea life, in an ideal dwelling, therefore honoring his own mortality and finitude. The Southern California home has it all - at least in its intentions and in its own advertisement strategy.

In accordance with Heidegger's notion of boundary as a place where something begins its own presence rather than a place where something ceases to be, Norberg-Schulz notes that boundaries derive their identity as enclosures from the openings punctured on their surfaces (window, door, threshold).[173] Therefore, in a dwelling, the boundary of the wall is the place where, through the apertures of the door or of the window, the outdoor begins its presence on one side, and the indoor begins its presence, on the other. In Southern California homes, the element or detail of the window takes on the dimensions of an entire wall and integrates the two functions - that of the window and that of the wall - accentuating to an unprecedented degree the beginning/end, Janus-like identity of the boundary, as discussed by Heidegger. Southern California homes, or at least the ones that developed a regional identity of openness, embrace the properties of the place – mild temperatures, clear skies and sunshine - by hinging heavily on openness to the outdoor and by stressing the tectonic value of the fused wall-window element.

[173] Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci,* 13.

The tectonic detail of the wall-window spells out the environmental identity of the place while at the same time manifesting its character in the form of a dwelling. Just like the bridge brings the *place* into existence while simultaneously bringing its elements, the banks, into existence, so does the window-wall bring the *genius loci* of the Southern California idyll into existence, while giving birth to the indoor/outdoor dialogue, premise to the idyll. The window-wall of the Southern California suburban home embodies the *genius loci* by providing comfort, familiarity and orientation. It allows for the gathering of what is familiar and known about the place and unveils the meaning of the dwelling in the form of what makes it unique. In the face of the relative platitude of the Southern California urban and suburban landscapes, the identity-forming element of the porous window-wall prevails as the distinguishable element of an otherwise anonymous and visually uncharacteristic sprawl, providing a center and a point of reference to the disoriented man.

Given the enormous success that the Southern California suburban home of the 1950s and 1960s, with its fenced backyard, its pool and outdoor living room, and most importantly its large floor-to-ceiling windows had in *de facto* promoting the idyllic habitability of California, and given of course the interest in habitability that, as we will see, Robert Irwin demonstrated with his architecturally oriented installations, a discussion of the *genius loci* in Southern California architecture appeared paramount. The Southern California home became a successful vehicle for the sale of a dream, as it favorably channeled the best characteristics of the dream itself and activated the *genius loci* of Southern California in the form of the window-wall.

CHAPTER III

ROBERT IRWIN AND THE QUEST FOR HABITABILITY

"The 'work' is not *in* the architecture. They are one and the same"
Robert Irwin, 2005

Introduction

Chapter III builds on what this research has thus far argued about Southern California as ideal place via the work of artists and architects who have engaged with the habitability of the region, by connecting these explorations and theories to the work and interests of Southern California artist Robert Irwin. Irwin's work captures in its most condensed way a Southern California rapport to place that can be in part observed in artists and architects before him. His installations perform an assessment of place that responds to the Southern California *genius loci* through an architecturally mediated vernacular, a conjuring of light, and a responsiveness to site based on sensorial awakening, engagement, and involvement of the viewer, as a temporary inhabitant of place, in the terms set up by Irwin. Such reading drastically reconfigures Robert Irwin as a paradigmatically Southern California artist, as a figure who has traveled and created elsewhere in the United States and the world, but who has ultimately devised an installation space vernacular from and about Southern California.

The chapter is divided into a section that analyzes the work of Irwin, not chronologically, but rather based on specific themes that make his installations relevant to the scope of this research. The concept of the *genius loci*, of habitability, and of indoor-outdoor transparencies are interpreted through the work of Irwin with the intent of showing how the artist's engagement with these aspects of the regional approach to site make him quintessentially Southern Californian. The next section places Irwin in the context of the literature on minimalism,

underlying differences and reasons for a treatment of Irwin as an independent artist whose vernacular is rooted more in Southern California realities than in minimalist approaches to objects and space. The last section considers the work of two artists, Doug Wheeler and James Turrell, most commonly associated with Irwin and with the so-called light and space trend, as well as of an artist more marginally located, yet, most closely associated with Irwin's architectural vernacular, Maria Nordman. The intent in this section is to compare and contrast the wok of Irwin with the work of other light installation artists and to argue how Irwin emerges again from this comparison, as an artist who embodies quintessential characteristic of Southern California.

Robert Irwin: Site Determinacy as *genius loci*

The writings, lectures, and audio interviews of Irwin, together with the multiple publications on his work, provide an illustration of not only the arc of his thinking, but also the crucial shifts that separate Minimalist rationales and practices from his own approach to the art object. Fundamental aspect of Irwin's practice is the so-called conditional approach (he often defines his work as conditional art), which this research deems pivotal in the adaptation of the architectural concept of the *genius loci* into the spatial terms of the light installation.

At the very core of Robert Irwin's approach to art, space, and life more broadly, lays the above-mentioned conditional approach, an embrace of the present moment as a physical space, as a state of mind, and a set of sensorial responses to the material characteristics of a building or built environment, including its immediate surroundings in the form of air, light, temperature, and more. The disorientation of the viewer constitutes the necessary precedent for a reevaluation of those site-specific circumstances. The needs of a place can only drift to the surface if one

sheds concepts and needs, vestiges of other, previously experienced places and re-directs attention to the specific characteristics of *that* place *only*.

The only set of pre-existing knowledge Irwin unconsciously taps on is comprised of his own sensitivities to the visual textures of Southern California. A type of visual knowledge acquired by growing up in the region, it emerges from an exposure to its climate, its middle-class suburban lifestyle, and, most importantly, its transparency of outdoor/indoor spaces, experienced over the course of a life consumed in, and surrounded by, Southern California suburban homes. This research interprets Robert Irwin's installations in terms of the artist's preoccupation with habitability and of his approach to the idea of place. It argues that Southern California architecture mediates Irwin's reactions to *space* by offering the artist the architectural vernacular of the window-wall as formal vehicle for a semiotic negotiation with *place*. Like the *genius loci*, the site-determinacy of Irwin's installations results from a sensorially-based assessment of the characteristics of a place. As the Southern California dwelling realizes the *genius loci* in architectural terms, Irwin's site-determined installations construct a sensorially-based, proactively responsive dwelling in the context of the gallery and, in some cases, outdoor space. Irwin's installations construct place by echoing the emphasis that Southern California architecture placed on the window-wall and the transparency of indoor/outdoor barriers, therefore embodying and evoking the Southern California *genius loci*.

Irwin and the First National Habitability Symposium: installation space as habitability

Irwin's ideation of the site-determined approach came as a result of the artist's early career interests and concerns. His heavy involvement in the First National Symposium of Habitability testifies to Irwin's preoccupation with space not only in terms of temporary occupation – as in response to the gallery space – but also in view of long-term adaptation to the

environment, that is of habitability. In 1970, Robert Irwin hosted, in his studio in Venice Beach, the First National Symposium on Habitability, product of a collaboration with his friend, space program psychologist Ed Wortz. Wortz had been working with NASA on a project assessing and defining habitability at the same time Irwin was employed as artist in residence with NASA subcontractor Garret Corporation.[174] Not unlike Wortz, Irwin found the modalities of assessment of good habitability taken by the space agency far too technical and out of touch with the sensorial needs of the individuals subject of the study. In agreement, the two proposed to broaden perspectives by bringing together disparate voices in the context of a symposium. The technical approach promoted by NASA would be counterbalanced and integrated by the more intuitive and human-centered perspectives of experts with humanistic or less technical backgrounds, including psychologists, philosophers, and artists such as Irwin. One of the objectives of the symposium was, in the words of Ed Wortz, "to bring together people who deal with factual knowledge and people who deal with intuitive knowledge," people who, according to Wortz, live in two distinct realities that our society does not seem to integrate.[175] Scientists, psychologists, sociologists, artists and more, joined the symposium in a combined effort to define habitability both on earth and off earth (as in subaqueous or outer space environments). For the occasion Irwin altered the architectural framework of his studio and transformed it into an environment that allegedly facilitated conversations about habitability.[176]

Early into the symposium, contributors realized that, if it is possible to *assess* the habitability of a place by simply inhabiting it, *expressing* habitability through a mathematical

[174] Edward Wortz, et al. "First National Symposium on Habitability" (Los Angeles: AiResearch Manufacturing Co., 1971).
[175] Ibid, vol.4, 150.
[176] "Habitability.art: What is Everyone, Who is Everything?" *Weisman Art Museum*, Habitability.art — Weisman Art Museum (umn.edu), accessed October 2021.

formula that applies its criteria to all circumstances, presents an undeniable challenge. In other words, speakers and attendees came to the shared recognition of a gap between an intuitive assessment of habitability (this place, following a period of habitation, "feels" habitable), and a scientific hypothesis/prediction-based assessment of the same (this place is habitable because it meets this set of criteria, in these specific circumstances). Perhaps more significantly, at least from Irwin's perspective, many speakers and participants recognized that the tools so far employed in the assessment of habitability proved unable to address the problems of "human response to beauty, the human need for some sort of communion with nature," as well as of human relationships within a potentially habitable environment.[177] The proposal of a "new view" that would value those elements in a proper analysis of habitability and the importance of improving livability of the habitat by placing efforts on its aesthetic-experiential quality quickly moved to the center stage of the symposium discussions.[178]

Irwin's minor verbal contribution to the dialogues was limited to an observation of a parallel between the speakers' inability to verbalize the issue of "humanism" – as he called the interest in the sensorial and aesthetic needs of human beings – and the issue of humanism itself. In other words, Irwin thought, speakers were having problems expressing the modalities through which one can assess the importance of humanism in habitability, due to the difficulty humans have in "putting forth ideas abstractly."[179] Irwin's intuition was confirmed by the difficulties some of the speakers admitted in measuring "interpersonal feelings" within a certain environment and in developing a "phenomenology of intimacy."[180] One of the chief problems

[177] Wortz, ed., "First National Symposium on Habitability," Vol.4, 36.
[178] Ibid, 51.
[179] Ibid, 63.
[180] Ibid, 144.

was found in the subscription to abstract technocratic systems that design environments "to pure embodiment of the most abstract form of intelligence," with a resulting excessive abstraction of the places in which we live.[181]

Beyond the success or lack thereof of the symposium in addressing the issue of habitability in a universal, all-encompassing manner, the event offered Irwin the opportunity to dwell on the concept of habitability according to his own phenomenological approach, which, amid the difficulties encountered by speakers, seemed to have emerged validated. The discussions and issues brought to the fore offered an opportunity for all to reflect on the concept of habitation of an extraneous environment, not only by drawing from our data-informed knowledge of inhabited environments on planet Earth but also, and most importantly, by relying on new sets of phenomenological tools that can formulate the habitation needs of a new *homo geographicus*.[182]

This exercise in blank canvas-assessment of habitability (in a virtually unknown and seemingly inhabitable environment) further encouraged Irwin to approach the installation site without preconceptions and with a newly acquired reassurance in the importance of sensorially determined and site-specific human needs. When working on an installation, Irwin approaches any situations by attempting to make the viewer more aware not only of the physical qualities of the place but of the psychological space that the viewer carries around (in simpler terms of how the place makes one feel) and promotes the application of that same approach to the building of homes and cities, as well as to life in general.

[181] Ibid, 148.
[182] Ibid.

Irwin and the Case of the Getty Gardens: site-determinacy *in-fieri*

Irwin's site-determined approach to installations has been informed from the very onset of his investigations by concerns on habitability. The modalities of the site-determined approach can be seen in many if not all of Irwin's installations. But perhaps the project that best embodies the idea of site determinacy by successfully implementing it in the most challenging of circumstances, is the Getty Gardens, the single largest public art commission of his life.[183] None of Irwin's installations convey the primacy of change in relation to the site-determined approach as well as the Getty Gardens do.

Working with a nurseryman from Encinitas, Irwin created "a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art," as the two of them liked to remind each over the course of the project.[184] Weschler describes Irwin's process as one rooted philosophically in the "loam of Becoming, as opposed to that of Being," and aligns the artist's handling of "time stretched across a structure" with the temporal dynamics inherent to music and "its unfolding of thematic material across time."[185] In a region where seasons are relatively undistinguishable, the 134,000 sq ft installation follows the seasons by design, through more than 500 varieties of plant materials carefully selected to balance games of reflections, light, color, and textures. The plan changes over time and continues to change still, following the growth of the plants as well as their replacements.

[183] Lawrence Weschler, *Robert Irwin Getty Garden* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2020), 2.
[184] Ibid, 8.
[185] Ibid.

More interestingly, the case of the Getty Gardens illustrates the Southern California architectural genesis of Irwin's approach by exposing the uncomfortable incongruences between his design and New York architect Richard Meier's "Aristotelian unities."[186] Starting from an "elegant and timeless" classic structure formed in his "mind's eye," Meier put forward a "kind of Aristotelian structure within the landscape," characterized by rationalist forms and geometric rigor that extended throughout the entire plan.[187] Concerned by the rigidity of the plan and by a potentially dwarfing effect on the visitor's experience, some of the chief donors began to doubt Meier's approach. Eventually the Getty executives sought to include an artist who could stand up to Meier and impose his own vision upon him, according to Weschler's gathered testimonies from a contemporaneous witness.[188]

Although Irwin admitted in a later interview to have enjoyed his interactions with Meier, including the altercations, he criticized the architect's seemingly humanistic approach to the site as mere "lip-service." Meier professed to build structures for the "contemplation of the eyes and the mind," for "all the human senses" as well as more broadly for the "human experience." Questioning his intent, Irwin noted how in all his structures – as well as in all of the structures built by "most of them" (architects, that is) - the attempt to mold around the human experience falls into a formula, a "Meier formula" in this case, recognizable "from a mile away."[189] After a period of mediated friction between the architect and the artist, the Getty staff went for Irwin's vision, which they found less visually sophisticated but conceptually more commanding.[190]

[186] Ibid, 6.
[187] Ibid, 3.
[188] Ibid, 4.
[189] Ibid, 5.
[190] Ibid, 7.

Irwin's conditional or site-determined approach, and most importantly its contrast with Meyer's, attests to a Southern California way of inhabiting land and place, one that is devoid of the purist ambitions of the "white architects" generation of Modernists, to which Meier belongs. Meier's emphasis on open spaces, transparent surfaces, and light only seemingly resembles that of Irwin. The modernist drive toward a universally valid architecture made of pure forms and lofty universalist ambitions is absent in Irwin's design. The only purity Irwin was attempting to restore - if any - was that of the spirit of the place, by proposing for instance the recovery "of the notional brook," as reminder of the pre-existing canyon. More broadly, Irwin followed the committee's desire for lush vegetation as well as the idea of a constantly changing experience for the visitor.[191] The pure abstraction that informs Meier's design, where "some imaginary point on the floor (...) lines up perfectly with some other point on the other side, in the Museum," is replaced in Irwin's vision by experiential attitudes that produce decisions based on "how it felt," rather than on abstract, pre-determined geometry.[192] As Irwin elaborates, "in the beginning I just try to leave myself open... spend my time just attending... Not planning... just running my senses over the possibilities. (...) After a while I begin to ask myself... What if? What would I like to see here? What kinds of things feel right here in this space? (...) I fantasize. I build things consciously when I am awake and unconsciously when I'm asleep. I build them and then I dwell in them... I walk through them over and over... in this way ideas become experiences."[193]

Irwin's creative process stems from intuition and sensorial responses, while Meier's roots in pre-established formulas. The intuition at the base of the artist's creative process translates into an equally instinctual practice of discovery on the part of the visitors, who can choose

[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid, 12.
[193] Ibid, xi.

different paths and be exposed to a variety of ever-changing sensorial experiences over the course of the year. In winter, the garden goes through a process of "nesting itself" and of creating gradually increasing intimacy around the visitor.[194] Meier's abstract/mathematical creative process, on the other hand, resides mostly in the mind of the architect and does not leave room for instinctual approaches to the perambulation of the space. The tenets of abstract architecture are hidden in the structural plan of the building like codes awaiting to be deciphered but for which only the architect has an interpretative key. Irwin reads the difference between his own approach and that of Meier through the lens of the modernist pursuit and the immediately following art historical trajectory. What started as "dominant abstract systematization" (which Meier still embraces), evolved to be everything that technological progress has been leaving out for the last two hundred years: the phenomenological experience.[195] In a progress characterized by prevalence of quantity over quality, phenomenology delivers quality via the only possible path, that of individual, sensorial experience.[196] Prioritizing perception means that the first impression of a phenomenon or a place, that which precedes all intellectual and conceptual considerations upon it, provides us with the closest grasping of reality we will ever achieve through other subsequent means of knowing. Furthermore, by injecting the experiential moment with the awareness of the always changing state of reality, we more carefully attend to the moment for what it truly is, one that is identical only to itself and that will never reoccur under the same circumstances. As requested by the artist, the signature plaques recite, "EVER PRESENT, NEVER TWICE THE SAME," and "EVER CHANGING, NEVER LESS THAN WHOLE." The kind of Heraclitean, phenomenological seeing (as Weschler calls it) that Irwin

[194] Ibid, 31.
[195] Ibid, 13.
[196] Ibid.

advocates pertains to a pre-intellectual state of mind, in which senses take over intellect.[197] No plan is made in advance and decisions are always developed progressively, once on the spot.

As Irwin elaborates, "aesthetics is not something that is stylistically bound, (…). It's more like philosophy. It's a method, not an end or a final product or even a state of grace that one finally arrives at. It's a way of continuously approaching the world."[198] The imposition of a personal style and signature upon a place or space – supposedly embodied by Meier's work – collides with the aesthetic process of adaptation to circumstances that Irwin advocates. The artist refers to this modernist tendency to plan ahead instead of responding *to*, as "the other side of the ambitions of the fifties, the rush to plan the world. (…) they had this utopian idea that they could just build whole cities. It never came out very interesting."[199] The lived-by-time look of the European cities, in all its contradictions and surprises, boasts a much more appealing complexity that comes from the inevitable succession of minds layering ideas upon previous ones, without a comprehensive plan informing the many interventions.

The Getty Gardens represent not only a successful implementation of the principle of site-determinacy, but also an installation in which the factors involved in its site determinacy – in this case, nature - challenged the artist's initial raw sensorial openness to the place (which normally leads to the plan of action) with the constant flux of change that it entails. In other words, nature changes more dramatically over time than a gallery space does. The Getty Gardens offered an *in-fieri* platform for Irwin's site-determinacy, complicating the terms of the

[197] Ibid, 13.
[198] Ibid, 67.
[199] Ibid, 66.

interaction between place and artist as well as the formulation for habitability. As the artist himself recognized, "You can't plan the phenomenological in nature... you can only court it."[200]

Irwin and the window-wall

In 1975, Irwin produced the work *Window Wall*, installed on the California State University campus in Long Beach. Part of an exhibition exploring transparency and visibility, it stood as one of Irwin's first works in the direction of site-determinacy, what he at that point would call 'site-responsive' art, or 'site-conditioned, or site-determined.[201] The piece consisted in a wide rectangular wall frame that Irwin built around the pre-existing structural outdoor pillars of a busy passageway between the art department and other campus buildings. By replacing some of the negative space flanked by the pillars with a structure, Irwin accentuated the landscape by framing it into a window of a sort.

According to Melinda Wortz, the piece "both confused and heightened perception" and it strove to keep its art connotations as invisible as possible, trying its very best to blend with the architecture of the gallery.[202] Simms notes how Irwin had been trying to break the boundaries between work and the environment for decades already. On these early attempts to move beyond painting and away from the frame of the canvas, Irwin noted "I sensed the world around me opening out, not closed in."[203] The conceptual image of a window-wall, that is a wall in which the window occupies most of the plane, clearly facilitated that search for aperture and receptivity to the world Irwin was craving, and which had led the artist to his frustration with the canvas. Irwin had become at that point increasingly weary of the boundaries that the frame placed on his

[200] Ibid, xi.
[201] Matthew Simms, *Site Determined* (London: Prestel, 2008)17.
[202] Ibid, 17.
[203] Ibid.

work, lamenting the lack of frankness in a 'framed' depiction of reality. With *Window Wall*, that same frame that used to set undesired boundaries in place around the canvas, becomes a way to draw attention to an environment and its associated phenomena. The window-wall frame gathers the world into a *thing* while simultaneously bypassing its lateral boundaries. If you can't stretch your reach beyond the perimeter of the frame, as in the case of a painting, you can do so through its plane, by passing through it, in the case of a window-wall.

Even though, as Wortz tells us, *Window Wall* was the first work set outdoor and in communication with people's motion in its immediate surroundings, it was certainly not the first work to contemplate on the issue of in/out dialogue or of the transparency of space dividing surfaces, or partitions. The columns Irwin produced in the early 70s - which he considered unsuccessful due to flawed display practices by galleries and institutions - represented his early experiments with the idea of transparency and invisibility of barriers. The columns stood as objects in the installation space, but in factuality disappear thanks to the outstanding clarity of acrylic, questioning the idea of visual barrier between viewer and viewed.[204]

Window Wall may have constituted a point of temporary arrival in Irwin's analysis of the in/out, viewer/viewed, visual barrier/transparency issues in relation to habitability. Virtually all Irwin's installations ask viewers to sensorially assess habitability, and if in the early as well as later works scrims play the role of an evolved window-wall, *Window Wall* spells out with literal clarity the artist's source of inspiration. Both scrims and windows will continue to be fundamental in staging transparency as a point of debate for habitability, which will in turn continue to be assessed sensorially.

---

[204] Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982), 113.

Subtle Interventions by Irwin

The room installed at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970 in a space that Irwin described unattractive and "clumsy," (fig. 17) offered the first real challenge to the artist. Faced by the restrictive qualities of the room, Irwin resolved to allow the idiosyncrasies of the site – and from that point on, of *each* site - to determine the installation.[205] At the Museum of Modern Art that intention translated into a room that hosted mainly two scrims positioned in such a way as to confound perception and skew one's expectations toward the space. The scrim material alone achieves that goal by altering its state from opaque to translucent according to the viewer's position, while the positions of the scrims within the room accentuated that sense of geographical confusion.

The artist's intent was to allow viewers to decide for themselves whether that was indeed an installation to begin with, a habitat of some sort, a place. Irwin insisted on having no installation plaque that would identify the work as indeed an intervention to the pre-existing environment and on multiple occasions sent his friends from Pace Gallery on missions to remove labels that the Museum repeatedly placed by the room. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the piece received no attention by the media nor the critics and was quite simply ignored. In the presence of the artist, only one visitor showed appreciation for it – a fifteen-year-old male with most likely no art background – while his own artist friends attending the opening night and observing the space while in his presence, demonstrated clear discomfort.[206] Later, Irwin began receiving

[205] As he explains the occurrence, "instead of my overlaying my ideas onto that space, that space overlaid itself on me." Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*, 150-151.

[206] Irwin recalls the visitor's feedback with a sense of satisfaction and pride. This "kid" who happened to walk in, noticed the space and voiced his approval with enthusiastic comments, which showed how he just "got it," realized that that was indeed "something," and that he

feedback from artist colleagues, who confirmed their discomfort and defined themselves confounded and troubled by the work. Irwin recalled the experience as one of ultimate success: his intention was to alter perception as a mean to induce the viewer to "deal" with the situation and ultimately assess its adequacy, with such assessment being the result of a purely personal sensorially-informed opinion.

That same year Irwin hosted the above-discussed symposium in his studio and habitability must have been in his mind. The notion of habitability as an assessment reached via uncharted phenomenological routes had been at the center stage of discussion and arguably constituted the reason behind the initiative. Building an installation that placed the visitor in a position to evaluate a space, in terms of soundness, efficacy, habitability on a purely perceptual level (and in a basic sense that addresses the question, do I want to be in this space? Does it even make sense as a place?) would have addressed the same concern the artist had been currently interested in. Naturally, Irwin hoped that the space would just make sense, *as a place* and even without any kind of marking or announcement of its existence. More importantly he hoped that the visitor would engage in the act of sensorially assessing the space, without any guide or indication of the path to take – or even of the existence of a path to be taken – and phenomenologically evaluate its sensibility, its reason to exist as a place, its habitability. When the fifteen-year-old walked into the installation space, looked at it from various points, orbited it, walked in it, took the time and care to assess it and said "Yeah, wow, man, okay, all right. Hey, baby, that is all right!" then asked the artist if he had built that, shook his hand and said, "That's just fine, man, that's all right, okay!" Irwin felt the project had succeeded in engaging visitors, or

---

appreciated the artist's intention to create a space that invited visitors to question its own identity. Weschler, 152.

at least one of them. The issue of transparency and porosity of barriers had been from the beginning linked with the problem of habitability of space and with the act of assessing habitability based on what makes sense – to the individual experiencing it – in that place and in that moment.

In 1971, his participation to the UCLA art galleries show, "Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space," provided an opportunity to work with a pre-existing space – a stairwell to be precise – particularly vulnerable to changes in light quality and color from the nearby reflecting surfaces and windows. Irwin neutralized, blocked, and removed things in the space, altering perception and creating the illusion of longer windows or cornered angles.[207] The stairwell was simply that, an unadorned space that Irwin described as "a very loaded kind of situation" precisely due to these subtle changes in light, shadow, and color that only a trained eye would detect and cherish.[208] His interventions were equally subtle and were simply meant to highlight the inherent value of the space. In order to avoid the risk of not being noticed at all, Irwin added a scrim that would emphasize the space for the viewer, but that also - and counterproductively - drew attention away from the subtleties of the initial space, and therefore from the artist's intent. Visitors would point to the scrim and say, "Oh, that's it," that is the work, Irwin recounts. "The point of these exercises," continues the artist, "was to achieve the maximum transformation with the minimum alteration."[209] The stairwell, according to Irwin, "was doing exactly what it did so well. It didn't need my scrim. And in a funny way, maybe it didn't need any of the details I added. What was really essential was going on there anyway."[210] The UCLA show offered

[207] Weschler, 170-172.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid, 172.
[210] Ibid.

another opportunity to run the senses through the space and respond with interventions that would at best activate inherent, pre-existing qualities. The apparent oxymoron "maximum transformation with minimum alteration" points to the act of gently leveraging the potential qualities of an environment, through the introduction of an element that adds to a place what the place needs, to reach its full potential, in other words, that acts like a *genius loci* of a sort.

Between 1972 and 1973, Irwin traveled from one midwestern college to another and made himself available to museums and institutions, which felt routinely confounded by the lack of plan accompanying that availability. Irwin would not concede to either a plan or a budget as his approach consisted in spending time in a gallery or museum space and, in time, come up with a response to it. One of Irwin's first experiments with site-determined art is represented by the 1978 proposed project for Ohio State University in Cleveland, Ohio (fig. 1978). Commissioned with the creation of a public work for the University Oval Mall, Irwin responded with a site-determined installation, ultimately vetoed by the dean.[211] Taking an anti-statuary approach, Irwin worked with the pre-existing space and, from an observation of people's interactions with and within it, developed a system of elements that would simply activate and accentuate the sculptural properties of the space. Supporting his choice to opt for an all-encompassing installation rather than a traditional three-dimensional object, Irwin explained, "to me, it was already a piece of sculpture, with all the properties of a piece of sculpture: physical divisions, both organic and geometric, participation of people, the kinetics of movement. It was already operative in that way."[212] In the proposed design, which integrated itself fully with the site, the plane gets divided into triangles of various sizes and angles, according to the main routes

[211] Robert Irwin, Arthur Danto, Lawrence Weschler, and Sally Yard, *Robert Irwin* (Los Angeles, New York, Los Angeles Museum of Art: Rizzoli, 1993), 130.
[212] Ibid, 131.

preliminarily observed. Some of the resulting triangular planes are meant to provide a stage for active interaction, such as frisbee or football throwing and are therefore in line with the paths that surround them. Others are meant to support more repose-based interactions for its inhabitants, such as naps on the lawn or seating, and are therefore tilted (hence the title). Driven by a study of population behavior on campus, Irwin devised the space based on this basic division, and proceeded with slightly tilting chosen planes to a degree such that the highest point would be roughly 30 inches high off the ground. That tilting would have allowed people to lay down or to use the highest points along the edge of the plane as sitting location, letting feet dangle, as on a bench of a sort. Even though, as Arthur Danto noted, some of the artist's expectations seemed to be tinged with California optimism - as in the case of the lawn benches, which would not work quite as well in an Ohio cold and damp day - *Tilted Planes* responds to the needs of the place and the people inhabiting it. By highlighting the natural paths of ambulation, *Tilted Planes* not only serves the inhabitants, but also activates areas that would otherwise not be visible through the same magnifying lens. The planes bring the paths - those same paths that people were already traveling - into full existence.

Irwin at Marfa

Originally a 1920 military hospital in the middle of the Chihuahuan desert (north of the Rio Grande and west of the Pecos River), *Untitled (Dawn to Dusk)* (fig.1,2,3,4), which took seventeen years to transform between 1999 and 2016, stands as Irwin's perfect ode to the *genius loci* of the so-called Trans-Pecos territory. In a series of halls and corridors, Irwin adapted the pre-existing exterior wall windows in a way such that the sills would fall in line with the visitor's eyes and create a Dutch-like landscape effect, where the land is reduced to a strip while the sky occupies most of the visual plane.

The West is the muse for this work as it ultimately was for the original building, which laid flat and low in an expanse of yucca, buckwheat and other desert vegetation. In between the two rows of windows on the opposite walls of the corridors, which form the main body of the U-shaped construction, stands a double set of scrims that interact with the light trajectories from the many apertures. In the pristine skies of the western desert where the sunrays are unchallenged by the distant mountains, the scrims complicate the dynamics of interaction with the interior walls on both sides of each corridor. The transparent barrier erected by them is echoed throughout the length of the halls and doubled by the second scrim, parallel to it but not quite adjacent. The prolonged length of the scrim, stretched through the vertical axis of the corridor, combined with the repetition of the windows as well as their infinitely multiplied refractions on and through the scrim mesh, reads as an almost obsessive reiteration of the indoor/outdoor passage and associated sensations.

When during the 1998 Art and Architecture Symposium hosted by The Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, Irwin explained his method of approaching any given place as one that starts with an attempt to develop a kind of intimacy for it, "in the sense that Don Judd had with Marfa," he was predicting the Marfa outcome in a way, some time before embarking on the project. [213] The interior environments of *Untitled (Dawn to Dusk)* recreate in the context of an outdoor installation and on a larger than ever scale, that same intimacy that Irwin sought in other installations similarly framed around the transparency of barriers (fig. 19-20-21-22-23). The

[213] Jacques Herzog, William F. Stern, and James Ackerman, "Art and Architecture: a Symposium Hosted by the Chinati Foundation" (Marfa: Chinati Foundation, 2000), 87.

"intimacy for the place" constitutes the first step in the search for what makes phenomenal sense to the artist, and, at a later stage, to the visitor.[214]

Irwin in relation to minimalism and light and space

Scholarship of the past fifty years has addressed minimalism in terms of the movement's involvement of the viewer: from an initial assessment of the 'literalist' nature of the Minimalist art object - that is the referring of the object to simply itself, to its own space, and to the viewer within that literal space (what Michael Fried defined as theatricality) – to the considerations on the dynamics of the viewer's experience through the lens of the psychological phenomenon known as the gestalt. Following an increased awareness of the influence of Phenomenology on the movement, the viewer's role acquired relevance in the thinking about minimalism.

Scholarship on light and space emerged in part in the context of the early scholarship on minimalism, and in part as the result of much later surveys of Southern California art. Once the distinctiveness of light and space became clear as a result of these assessments of the California art historical context, differences between the two forms of minimalism appeared more evident. With the scholarship on light & space of the early 2000s, it became clear that the West Coast movement responded more to the materials, the philosophies, the climate and the landscape of California, than to its early exposure to East Coast minimalist practices. The study of Robert Irwin's work in particular has demonstrated how some practices, such as the deliberate boycotting of the gestalt, go directly against some of the chief ideas behind minimalism. Scholarship on light and space in general noticed an evident shift from the minimalist focus on

[214] The symposium included, besides art historian James Ackerman, artist Claes Oldenburg with his wife and collaborator art historian Coosje Van Bruggen, artist Roni Horn, architects Frank O. Gehry, Michael Benedikt, Jacques Herzog & Pierre De Meuron, and William F. Stern. Irwin and Gehry were and continued to be friends and collaborated over the course of the following years.

the materiality of the object to a progressive dematerialization of the art object in favor of its space, and later to fully independent environments. Ultimately, that initial attention given to the viewer by minimalist art, blooms in light and space into a full focus on the viewer's perception and on the phenomenological mechanisms of his or her aesthetic experience.

The 2000 book *Minimalism* by James Meyer offers a rather valuable synthesis of the scholarship on minimalism of the past fifty years.[215] Meyer presents minimalism not as a defined movement, but as a debate that surrounded a new kind of abstraction during the 1960s, offering a survey of early minimalist works and writings, key exhibitions and essays associated with the establishment of the "movement," together with an assessment of the new directions in minimalist practice that engendered later trends such post-minimalist and land art. Meyer defines minimalism as an avant-garde style – generally associated with Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris – that emerged in NY and L.A. during the 1960s, and that is broadly characterized by single or repeated geometric forms of a primarily sculptural nature, in which all traces of intuitive decision-making and emotion are removed.[216] In 1965, Barbara Rose saw what she called 'ABC Art' not as a style but as a sensibility expressed in various media. Donald Judd spoke in the same year of 'Specific Objects,' and in 1969 Robert Morris argued for a new kind of sculpture, applying the concept of the gestalt to the new art in his "Notes on Sculpture." Michael Fried's 1967 "Art and Objecthood" rejected minimalism for its "theatrical" quality.[217]

Rose provides a philosophical and literary context to the work, connecting its artists' literary statements, for instance, with the work of influential Austrian philosopher Ludwig

[215] James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2010).
[216] Ibid, 15.
[217] Ibid, p. 74 and 196.

Wittgenstein, with whose writings many of them were familiar. Wittgenstein proposed a simplification in the use of language, which he deemed confusing due to its dependence on context. Similarly, the work of Judd and Morris attempts to simplify communication with the viewer, by referring to nothing but itself, with no attempt to transcend into the metaphysical or the metaphoric.[218]

In his 1966 essay "Specific Objects," Donald Judd proposed the new work in terms of a new category of self-referential objects, in opposition to painting, the illusionistic qualities of which always refer to something beyond the canvas.[219] The exclusively self-referential nature of both materials and color in the new art – materials are materials and colors are colors, with no illusionistic or symbolic value – render the work observed, quite simply, the object we see inhabiting the space. The lack of reference to anything beyond that space enhances the viewer's awareness of her moving through the space occupied by the object.[220]

This research argues that the work of Robert Irwin does indeed refer to something other than itself and therefore contradicts the minimalist project as framed by Rose and Judd. Irwin's installations respond to the dialogue between indoor and outdoor that dominates (to this day still) the architectural landscape of Southern California and is therefore not self-referential. At the same time however, Irwin's work enhances the viewer's awareness of her own movements through the installation space and charges her with assessing the value of such installation. This research therefore argues how Irwin's work differs from the minimalist statement while also building upon it in a different direction, that of a uniquely Southern California assessment and consideration of site.

---

[218] Ibid, 27.
[219] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1965), 74-82.
[220] Meyer, *Minimalism*, 15.

Art critic Michael Fried took issue in his 1967 article "Art and Objecthood" with the lack of reference in minimalist art.[221] The purpose of a work of art for Fried is not to affirm its own mere objecthood, but rather to defeat it, by creating an ideal aesthetic space that transcends both the material status of the object and the material presence of the viewer. A true work of art is a work that "convinces" the viewer of its ability to create an ideal aesthetic space and places him in a state of "pure presentness," that is a state of removal from the everyday life and into an aesthetic space of bliss. Minimalist art's destruction of this act of recognition confines the viewer to his own conditions of space and time, says Fried. The literalists' interest with time (as he calls the new artists) - or with the duration of the experience - is paradigmatically theatrical for the critic, who sees theater as the negation of art. Art holds value because it pulls us out of our literal world, and when the theatricality of the object replaces the object itself, the work of art becomes 'literal,' anchoring us to our literal world. Irwin's installations, I argue, do possess that theatricality denounced by Fried, in the way they involve the viewer in a carefully paced assessment of place and engage with the duration of time. However, they also disentangle the viewer from his literal world, by echoing the forms and dynamics of a particular form of dwelling, placing themselves in a position that dialogues with both the objecthood of minimalism and the ideal aesthetic space of art.

Significant progress in the treatment of light and space as an autonomous trend is represented by the 2011 publication *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945-1980*, with which scholars began to carve a niche for the Southern California movement in relation to the regional art scene of the second half of the century.[222] A precedent to *Pacific Standard Time* is however

[221] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, Vol. V, no. 10 (June 1967), 12-23.
[222] Rebecca Peabody and Lucy Bradnock, eds., *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980*, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011).

Peter Plagens' *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970*, which provides an in-depth anecdotal reconstruction of a vibrant and underground art scene, radically different from its equivalent on the East Coast and deeply embedded in a local aesthetic informed by Zen Buddhism and technologically advanced materials, as well as architecture.[223] The introduction of plastics in the practice of many artists, radically changed the nature of the pictorial space and its relation to the viewer. The new sculpture was prematurely addressed, according to Plagens, by the 1967 LACMA exhibition "American Sculpture of the Sixties," and emerged from its artists' knowledge of books like *The Shape of Time* by George Kubler and *Man's Rage for Chaos*, by Morse Peckham. An initial enamorment with mass-produced materials soon grew into an aesthetic philosophy complete with its metaphysical elements – namely Zen Buddhism – and an interest in scientific investigations – phenomena such as sensory deprivation, Ganz fields and anechoic chambers, with which artists like Robert Irwin and James Turrell began to experiment.

The catalog *It Happened in Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles, 1969-1973*, part of the *Pacific Standard Time* initiative, peeks into the art studio and class backstage and examines the resonance of Pomona College experimental practices on the production of many artists active in the region and beyond.[224] Interesting is the attention given by this publication to lesser-known artists, people like William Leavitt who, through recreated environments and installations, looked at California suburban homes of the 1960s, inspired by catalogs of swimming pool companies in Los Angeles. The catalog also discusses the influence that the college environment had on James Turrell, who felt that with his mature work, *Roden Crater* – "the largest high-fire

[223] Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
[224] Rebecca McGrew, ed. *It Happened in Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles, 1969-1973* (Pomona: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011).

bowl" – he eventually came full circle in combining his interest in light with his early exposure to the art school's pug mills for clay and forges for bronze casting.[225] Pomona also exposed him to the theories of Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and of Visual Perception psychologist Jerome Gibson, through the teachings of Professor of Social Psychology Graham B. Bell. The publication ultimately sheds light on the interaction, within the environment of Pomona College, between these early Light & Space practices and the various experimentations in Performance and Conceptual Art. These early interactions may have encouraged an overall interest in the human subject, its body movements, its social behavior, and its interactions with the environment, all elements that will play a pivotal role in Light & Space practices. In a sense, Leavitt's work spells out the connection that this research hopes to shed light onto: the resonance that suburban domestic environments, with their dialog between indoor and outdoor spaces, had on the structuring of space in installations such as Irwin's, Nordman's, Wheeler's or Turrell's. What operates as an indirect and possibly unaware reference in Irwin (or Wheeler) comes through as a literal reaction to a set of visual elements in Leavitt.

Another catalog, *Phenomenal*, published on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition held in 2011 at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, as part still of the *Pacific Standard Time* initiative, focused exclusively and for the first time on the so-called light and space trend (which the catalog capitalizes, with the addition of an hyphen, into "Light & Space"), representing still to this day the most important publication on the loosely affiliated set of interests.[226] *Phenomenal* frames it as such, mapping its early developments and providing a selective history of transitional works and exhibitions that played a key role in defining

[225] Ibid, 304.
[226] Robin Clark, ed., *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

"phenomenal" work in 1960s and 1970s Southern California. From a brief survey, it appears evident that these artists' work and early developments responded to the philosophical ideas, materials, natural environment, and even the architecture circulating and visible at that point in the region.

In one of the catalog essays, Michael Auping addresses a pivotal aspect of Robert Irwin's installations: the transition from "objecthood" to environment, or from "a thing being framed by a room to the room being the thing," which he defines as one of the most compelling and far-reaching narratives of the late 20th-century.[227] As the materiality of the art decreased, Auping concludes, all these artists focused on the context, with architecture being the mother of contexts.[228] As Robin Clark tells us, although Larry Bell's initial work certainly responds at least in part to the 1950s and 1960s geometric abstractions of Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, it found its strongest inspiration, according to the artist himself, in a specific architectural element, the rectangular skylight in his Marine Street studio in Venice, California.[229]

In *Birth of the Cool* (2007), editor Elizabeth Armstrong frames the artistic phenomenon within the broader contest of the architectural trends of the time.[230] Elizabeth Smith tells us that modern architecture constituted a "small but significant part" of the California ethos of the dreamlike land of opportunities and that the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* became one of the several fora for the publication of modern architecture and furniture, popularizing an aesthetic trend of open spaces and light-exposed interiors. The work of photographer Julius Schulman contributed significantly to a climate of identification of a middle-class public with the

[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid, 103.
[229] Ibid, 68.
[230] Elizabeth Armstrong, *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury* (New York: Prestall, 2007).

characters inhabiting his photographs and promoting a leisurely and easy-going lifestyle in beautiful Southern California modern homes.

Although the bridge between the broader artistic tendency often referred to as L.A. look or light and space and Southern California architecture has been considered in past literature and even explicitly recognized as a direct inspiration by the artists themselves, a full expansion of this link with specific reference to what in the case of Irwin, Wheeler and Turrell, for instance, can be defined as light-based installations, has never been set forth, and the modalities in which such installations are informed by architecture have not been thoroughly explored. The intent of this research is to further explore that aspect of the Southern California scene and to tease out concepts derived from architecture that played a role in defining a regional aesthetic.

In her 2018 *Minimal Conditions: Light, Space, and Subjectivity*, Dawna Schuld returns to light and space to examine the expansion of sculpture into the phenomenological and perception-based practices of the artists involved in the movement, particularly in reference to the role played by the movement in the shift from minimalism to the dematerialization of the art object.[231] Schuld defines experiential or phenomenal art, as a practice that deliberately places its participants into situations of altered reality. The phenomenal experience, by definition, cannot be articulated in words without automatically negating the experience itself, nor can it be described at the end of the event, without running the risk of losing its immediacy to the abstractions of language. Meaning, in the aesthetic experience, exists therefore in the viewer's mind only, and it is rarely considered to have a potential for externalization or socialization.

[231] Dawna L. Schuld, *Minimal Conditions: Light, Space, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

If the experience of Phenomenal Art cannot be articulated, the movement itself can be situated in a socio-historical context, the reconstruction of which Schuld embarks on for the benefit of the reader. Maurice Tuchman's Art and Technology program at LACMA – inspired by the theories of Jack Burnham – influenced the practice of many light and space artists, similarly to how the 1960s and 1970s developments in psychology from a focus on observable behavior (behaviorist research) to one on phenomenology of lived experience (consciousness studies), encouraged them to consider their work in terms of "embodied states in specific objects."[232] Schuld also elucidates how minimalism's embrace of phenomenology came on the heel of an increased interest in formalist criticism, together with the publication of literature on phenomenology - particularly the 1962 English edition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* - and with a series of scientific discoveries and realizations that altered the collective perception of the world. When phenomenology began to be embraced – at a time in which historians and critics had been debating over the nature of the viewer – other fields, namely psychology, with its theory of the gestalt, were also bringing the issue of the viewer to the fore. Ultimately, by embracing phenomenological theories and thus "producing" light & space art, minimalism further encouraged the viewer to recognize her role in determining the aesthetic presence of the work through her own perception.

The artists considered by Schuld often use the pronoun "you" when discussing the dynamics of appreciation of their own work, to remind viewers of how they – the viewers – have the capacity indeed to generate meaning and should therefore refrain from searching for it in the work itself. Schuld further clarifies the passage from minimalism to light & space, by discussing the shift from "specific objects" and "one thing after another" in Judd's work, and to "situations"

[232] Ibid, 2.

(in the work of Irwin and others), in terms of an expansion of Greenbergian formalism and of universalizing aesthetic ideas, to include the conscious states of aesthetic experience. This expansion, Schuld claims, helps to comprehend the dynamics between "perception and perceptible, sensation and knowledge," in regard to minimal art as well as to art in general. In other words, according to the author, light & space art expands the purview of minimalism through a focused attention on perception and on the aesthetic experience. While Rosalind Krauss saw this move away from the unambiguous and effective superficiality of minimalism and toward a search for phenomena, as a small-m minimalism, Schuld attempts to claim the legitimacy of the movement in terms of its expansion of a recognized canon.[233] This research builds on these considerations on the phenomenological nature of Irwin's work, by exploring the phenomenology of place associated with the built environment. This in turn frames Irwin's installations in terms of their reference to Southern California, via the phenomenological emphasis on site specificity.

Scholarship on Robert Irwin has discussed the artist's notion of the gestalt as a salient characteristic of his practice and in connection with his so-called site-determined approach. Robert Morris' essay "Notes on Sculpture," published in three parts between 1966 and 1967, introduces the theory of the gestalt in reference to minimalism, extending the character of the object to the viewer's experience.[234] In the new art, according to Morris, sensuous materials and high finishes that produce intimate relationship with the viewer have been shed and the "better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the

[233] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Overcoming the Limits of Matter: on Revising Minimalism," in *Studies in Modern Art I: American Art of the 1960s,* ed. John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 131-132, in Schuld, p. 3.
[234] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture 1 – 3," in Harrison & Wood, pp. 828-835

viewer's field of vision."[235] Even though the work must be a self-contained unit for the gestalt to occur, the experience of the work exists very much in time and the minimalist work requires a movement in space and time for the gestalt (or unity) to occur. The object has not become less important, rather less "self-important," for the viewer partakes in the creation of the gestalt. The old expectation that everything has to come from within the work has given way to a much more complex reality that now includes the viewer.[236]

Matthew Simms explores this important aspect of Irwin's work in his publication *Robert Irwin: A Conditional Art* (2016), which provides an analysis of Irwin's career and the first scholarly monographic study of his work.[237] Simms offers a survey of Robert Irwin's career, starting from his early Abstract Expressionist work and his later increasing interest in the sensuous relationship between the work and its viewer, direction which led him in the 1960s to a closer scrutiny of issues of perception and phenomenal experience via a dramatically reduced visual vocabulary. In the 1970s, Irwin turned his attention to the aesthetic potentials of the space surrounding the work and embarked on a form of installation, in which carefully crafted architectural spaces would challenge or suspend "habitual patterns of perception."[238] This career shift led him to abandon his studio, shed all desires to plan a space, and work on invitations only. Most importantly, this allowed him to let go of skills, habits and preconceptions that he had acquired up until that point and had been hindering his own ability to respond to the specific

[235] Ibid, p. 832.
[236] Meyer, 30.
[237] Matthew Simms, *Robert Irwin: A Conditional Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
[238] Simms, 7.

potentials of a site. From then on Irwin approached each site as a blank canvas and developed the unique approach to creation that will characterize the rest of his career.

Irwin explains how his creative approach to the installation space consists in favoring an unmediated experience. By leaving himself sensorially open to possibilities, while trying to shed preconceptions and knowledge derived from interventions previously realized in similar spaces – this clearing of the mind is what phenomenology calls "bracketing out" – the artist sets up the stage for an unmediated experience. These "subversive interventions" engendered illusionary perspectival distortion, with the ultimate goal of preventing the gestalt, that is the ability to observe all the parts of an environment, and mentally build a coherent whole out of those elements. In Irwin's rooms and installations of this period, viewers cannot grasp the space in its entirety, as a whole; they cannot "gestalt the room," or observe distinct sections of the environment, mentally recompose them like pieces of a puzzle, and create, based on previous perceptual experiences of reality, a complete picture.

In relation to these considerations upon Irwin's notion of shedding preconceptions as necessary premise to the experience of a work, this research frames the artist's act of building and creating something that responds exclusively to the pre-existing qualities of the space itself in historical terms and as an approach rooted in a Southern California responsiveness to the specificities of a place, rather than to universally applicable guidelines. I argue how the site-determinacy of Irwin's practice has a history and a past in Southern California that is worth acknowledging and that further entrenches the artist's contribution in the humus of the region.

Irwin in relation to other light installation artists: Doug Wheeler, James Turrell, Maria Nordman

Together with Robert Irwin and James Turrell, Doug Wheeler is seen as one of the main exponents of the so-called light and space movement. In a similar fashion to Irwin, Wheeler creates installations that rely on natural and artificial light to blur boundaries between the architectural elements of a space, confounding the viewer through geographical disorientation more so than Irwin does in his work.

Wheeler began his experimentations with light by producing white canvases that required the support of white floors in the chosen installation space. The attempt in these early endeavors was to surpass the limits of the canvas via light, which traveled beyond the frame into the surrounding environments and the floor especially. These attempts however felt insufficiently untethered from materials and perimetral boundaries. Wheeler took his first leap toward installation spaces when he visited *Roxy's* by Edward Kienholz, up at Ferus Gallery between 1960 and 1961. The emotional impact of the show, so centered on breaking boundaries between installed piece and the viewer's body, led him to the realization that his work had up until that point been limited and constrained by the frame. Like James Turrell, Wheeler's perception of space had been broadened since early age by his own experience of flight, as he was often allowed in his adolescent years by his father, who provided medical service to communities in remote areas, to take over their private plane at high altitudes. His work responds to these early memories of sensorial awakening and deprivation at high altitudes that have pushed him throughout his career to recreate some version or reiteration of those experiences.

Like Irwin, Wheeler had a passion for cars and attempted admission to The Art Center School (Art Center College of Design in 1965) as an aspiring car designer. It would be

Chouinard however that will accept him on a full scholarship in 1961.[239] By then, Robert Irwin had already left his teaching positions at Chouinard to his students Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Jerry McMillian and others, therefore Wheeler's link to Irwin is less direct than others'. Wheeler met Irwin not only through the work and teaching of his students at Chouinard, but also in 1963, while the older artist was working on his line paintings. The line paintings for Irwin represented an early attempt to break away from the frame and the weight of materials, efforts that will lead him soon after to his breakthrough disks.[240] Wheeler therefore met Irwin at a rather propitious time, in the midst of an experimentation that will inform his own work. That first meeting in fact launched a conversation between the two artists on the possible avenues for immateriality with particular emphasis on the viewer's reaction to immateriality and invisibility-related phenomena. While Irwin was at that point focusing on the transparency of oil paint through his line paintings, Wheeler embarked on a body of work, in which he strove to stretch the void portion of the canvas as much as possible by reducing the geometric forms populating it, in a tension between forms and void, presence and absence, that will eventually lead the artist to abandon form altogether and replace its materiality with the less interfering one of light. With time, the figures would disappear, and Wheeler would concentrate more and more on the white void as a very first source of light. This line of inquiry eventually led to *Untitled (Canvas Light)*, 1965, where Wheeler called the viewer's attention on what lays outside the canvas, by placing fluorescent lights behind the suspended support (and in between it and the wall), and by cutting angled edges all around and spraying the surface with multiple layers of acrylic lacquer. The result is one of emphasis on both light and subtle color fluctuations of soft rose, violet or blue,

[239] Doug Wheeler and Germano Celant, *Doug Wheeler* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020), 30.
[240] Ibid, 33.

according to Wheeler, who defines them as transitional work between his early canvas and his later plastic and light fabrications.[241] This type of work entailed the creation of a completely white environment, from floor to ceiling, so that the canvas could reflect color and light from its environment and, according to Celant, so that the work could include the architectural framework that contained it.[242]

Between 1965 and 1967, Wheeler embarked on his fabricated light paintings, which provided an opportunity to focus on light as a tool to articulate space, according to Celant and which in time would increase in sophistication, with the employment of multiple materials such as sprayed lacquer, acrylic, clear-cast polyester lenses, halogen lights, magnetic transformer, and daylight neon, to create highly intricate and polished pieces that engendered optical illusion directed at erasing portions of the visible surface.[243]

Between 1967 and 1970, Wheeler produced a body of work referred to as light encasements, for which modification of the architectural space around the object is for the first time required. From this point on, Wheeler, like Irwin, will abandon object making. Celant tells us that up until that point his work consisted in freeing the light from the painting while simultaneously calling the viewer's attention to the center of the work, erased through illusionary stratagems. In other words, tells us the critic, the artist developed a path of dematerialization of the object. Eventually, that initial modification of the surrounding space will evolve into an elliptical cove, or a curving of all the room corners, which in the first experiment in his studio at the West Pico Boulevard ballroom (held between 1963 and 1967, year he moved to Venice

[241] Ibid, 45.
[242] Ibid, 50.
[243] Ibid, 60.

Beach), meant a curving of the floor and wall corner, initially in the form of a perfect circle, and subsequently, in the form of an ellipse.

In 1968, Wheeler holds a solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, and there, for the first time, the architecture housing the work, create a white syntony with the light paintings, also white.[244] In this new context, the light paintings are no longer treated like luminous windows, but rather begin to act as perceptible fields.[245] Around the same time, once transferred to his new studio in Venice Beach on Windward Avenue, Wheeler built his first complete light environment, an installation where those last vestiges of architectural framing are lost, and light inundates, undisturbed, two thirty-by-thirty-foot rooms with large, four-foot elliptical coves on all angles (floor to wall, wall to wall, floor to ceiling).[246] Through the use of sprayed light-emitting phosphorous paint, activated by four-hundred-watt black ultraviolet arc light and fluorescent tubes, Wheeler created, in the first room, a cloud-like, full-immersive environment in which any perception of the walls is lost. In the second room, the artist built his first large-scale light wall environment by illuminating the perimeter of the thirty-foot-wide and eighteen-foot-high wall with argon neon tubes arranged in double rows, and by shaping coves around the entire perimeter.[247] In 1969, Wheeler gained some independence through the support of Doug Chrismas, who had moved from British Columbia to Los Angeles in 1966, showcasing New York as well as California artists in his Westwood gallery. There, Wheeler was able to further explore his light encasements and soon after, also thanks to that exposure at Westwood, the artist was offered an opportunity to exhibit his work with Irwin at *Robert Irwin– Doug Wheeler*

[244] Ibid, 71.
[245] Ibid, 76.
[246] Ibid, 77.
[247] Ibid, 77-81.

(1966), in Fort Worth Texas at first, and in Amsterdam as second destination. Both artists made a case of immateriality with disc paintings by Irwin and light encasements by Wheeler.[248]

For the purpose of this research, it will suffice here to consider Wheeler's early work and ambitions, as they will animate his later explorations into light as well. From a brief exploration of Wheeler's work, it is clear that the environment plays a crucial role, more so than it does in Irwin's. Light encasements depended heavily on the presence of completely and perfectly uniformly white floors, while the disc paintings interacted mainly with the background wall. It would therefore seem that Wheeler engages with the architectural space more so than Irwin did, at least at that early point in his career. Even though Irwin's work will eventually establish a dialogue with architecture – in actuality a fusion with it, more so than a dialogue – it will not be of the same kind Wheeler establishes. Although the younger artist was already engaging with the architectural framework of the containing room while Irwin was still attempting to break free from the object without surpassing its immediate surroundings, Wheeler's approach to the architectural space is – and from then on will be - one of engagement for the sake of erasure. Wheeler's spaces negate themselves by annulling distances, perimeters, depths, and relational spaciality. Walls, floors, and ceilings, elements that would normally aid us in assessing space by coming into relation with one another, no longer play that fundamental role. Irwin's engagement with the architectural environment dramatically differs from Wheeler's, by, on the contrary, reiterating and emphasizing spatial passages such as window-like apertures and door-like entryways for what they actually are, therefore relying still on the basic elements of a room, a space. In *String Line-Light Volume* from the series *Continuing Responses,* installed at the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth in 1975, Irwin's use of black string, which in the words of

[248] Ibid, 82-87.

the artist is to be placed "in direct response to the already existing spaces and their uses," demarcates spaces and structures where previously there were none, carving new spaces out of pre-existing ones.[249] Irwin's action is constructive, while Wheeler is destructive. Even when Irwin disorients the viewer by shifting perspectives in the architectural elements of a room, he does so, as we have seen, with the intent of defeating the viewer's attempt to "gestalt the room" and of allowing the viewer to re-experience the environment as something new and independent from pre-conceived notions. Wheeler erases space and the architectural elements that constitute it so that we viewers can experience a new space, but one that the artist crafts without our active involvement. We are called in to finish the work, in a phenomenological sense, by activating it with our senses, but we are not called into action in a constructive sense. We are not asked to assess the space starting from a blank state, devoid of pre-set knowledge. We are invited in and allured in a condition of awe and often ecstatic anxiety.

Some of the light encasements build around the idea of passage from one environment into another. Irwin built on that same idea from the very beginning and until recently with the Marfa installation. But Wheeler's passages differ dramatically from Irwin's. Wheeler's *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12* (2012) (fig. 24) an installation often referred to with the more accessible title of "Infinity environment" and built at Chelsea's David Zwirner Gallery, can be characterized as one of the most ambitious and arguably the most successful attempt by an artist at controlling light within an enclosed environment for the sake of the viewer's bewilderment and stupefaction. Visitors are guided into a white room and, once there, tend to approach what appears to be the intensely illuminated back wall of the room. In reality, the back wall is an entryway into a much

[249] Robert Irwin and Matthew Simms, *Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017), 86.

larger room, shaped, molded, and lit in such ways that all sense of depth is lost, all dimensions flattened. As they enter the room and yet still perceive nothing but a bi-dimensional lit image that they seem to be inexplicably crossing, viewers begin to come to terms with the unreliability of their own senses. What they see is not what they are experiencing, or vice versa what they are experiencing by walking into a three-dimensional environment must not be what is really occurring.

Wheeler's installations of this kind involve the surrounding environment in its entirety, leading to a de-objectification and dematerialization of the space. Architecture is here a starting point, but not an end, nor a subject. Wheeler may be responding to a regional architectural vernacular by citing windows, doors, and passages from indoor to outdoor spaces, but he negates them in the moment he summons them. Wheeler's lit crossable walls deny themselves as both walls and passageways through sensorial illusion. The viewer crosses the threshold doubting the nature of both wall and entryway and quickly learns to doubt everything visible, including the second environment, a seemingly boundless space where depth cannot be assessed, a white vacuum.

Irwin's scrim doorways at Marfa, on the other hand, affirm their architectural nature through transparency. The see-through luminescent quality of the scrim does not behave as an illusion; it does not sensorially disorient viewers nor transport them onto a place that offers no spatial anchoring. On the contrary, the sequence of passageways comports a reiteration of an architectural space for what it is, the moment of passage from a less illuminated and interior-like space to a more brightly lit and exterior-like space. Illusion plays a role in conferring a sense of infinite repetition, but one that does not undermine our expectations, nor instill mistrusts in our own senses. We know that through repetition, however infinite, the installation will bring the

same reiterations of architectural elements. The experience may differ each time, but we know what to expect and we are not asked to doubt what we are experiencing.

And yet, Wheeler tells us in reference to his 1970 installation at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles, *Environmental Light* - also known as *Untitled (Environmental Light)* (fig. 25)- "I wanted to effect a dematerialization so that I could deal with the dynamics of the particular space... it was a *real* space – not illusory – it was a cloud of light in constant flux.".[250] Therefore, the intent, at least according to Celant's interpretation of Wheeler's words, is to create a real space that feels unearthly because it is indeed not located on earth. Wheeler's environments endeavor to recreate the sensations that he has felt since childhood while in a plane in the "disinhibited" and "without boundaries" space of the skies.[251] Arizona is another declared source of inspiration to the artist who claims to have been trained to "see" in a "constant awareness of the landscapes and the clouds" during his time spent in the desert state. As Celant observes in reference to Wheeler's Tate Gallery Installation (1970), it "offers a vision of emptiness as the subject of art," statement that can be extended to his oeuvre since his mid-1960s experiments with white paintings.[252] The architectural envelope, he continues, is "pure and untouched" and "neither container nor content," and the work leads to a "loss of self" in the viewer, "an exiting from the world in search of another meaning."[253] Wheeler's later experiments with the so-called synthetic deserts – anechoic spaces that eliminate echoes and recreate some of the visual elements of his flights over the Arizona deserts – separate themselves even more clearly from an

[250] Wheeler and Celant, *Doug Wheeler*, 99-100.
[251] Ibid, 100.
[252] Ibid, 114.
[253] Ibid, 114-115.

exploration of the inter-dynamics of the various architectural elements of a space and delve decisively into the sensory deprivations of a carefully crafted environment.[254]

Like Doug Wheeler, James Turrell works directly with a more theatrical, disorienting light than does Robert Irwin in his more subtle installations, and his creative process relates closely to his flight experience in his private plane. Light is not only Turell's prime medium, but also his chief subject matter. The artist often combines so-called artificial light with natural light and insists on the illusory distinction between the two: "There is no unnatural light," he explains, and clarifies how "(In both cases) You have to burn something, and the light you get is going to be characteristic for what you are burning, the temperature at which it burns, and perhaps how fast it is moving away from you."[255] Turrell, however, does not think of light as something that illuminates an object, revealing its presence as well as obscuring the presence of others in return. The physical aspect of light, its wave-particle nature, is what draws the artist to use the element as a subject rather than a medium, or instrument in the creative process. All Turrell's experimentations are led, according to the artist, by an attempt to treat light itself as the revelation in the work.[256] "That's very difficult," he admits. "You have to create an instrument to do that. I started with a projection..."[257] Turrell's projection pieces consisted in projecting a single beam of high intensity light from one corner of a room to the opposite one. The interaction between light and corner walls creates the illusion of a floating volumetric object. Turrell's projection pieces stood as the artist's first attempt to materialize light, to confer volume and corporeal three-dimensionality to something normally associated with immateriality. Upon

[254] Ibid, 130.
[255] James Turrell, *Extraordinary Ideas Realized* (Berlin: Hatje Kantz, 2018), 100.
[256] Ibid, 36.
[257] Ibid.

studying art, astronomy, mathematics, and perceptual psychology at Pomona College, Clairmont, Turrell received an M.A. in Art from Claremont Graduate School and collaborated with Robert Irwin and Ed Wortz on the Art and Technology program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for the aerospace firm Garrett Corporation between 1968 and 1969. As previously mentioned, this collaboration culminated with the National Symposium on Habitability, held in 1970 at Irwin's studio. Albeit the experience had an impact on the artist, his later interests and explorations led him farther from notions of habitability and closer to a scientific study of perception, aided by the introduction of the latest technology.

In one of his more minimal pieces, *Sky Space 1*, 1974 (fig. 26), constructed at the stables of Italian collector Giuseppe Panza in Varese, Italy, a boxed environment, intimate and minimal, opens to the sky through a recessed cutout square that frames the blue with its bright white walls. In a radically different and earlier work, *Stuck Red* and *Stuck Blue*, 1970 (fig. 27), both part of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, windows cut into false walls are backed by the pre-existing corners of the room.[258] From the point of view of the observer, the corners to which the windows open, brightly lit by colored fluorescent tubes, appear to be flat, solid rectangular surfaces, reminiscent of windows observed from an interior space, apertures in man-made structures to a sun-regulated environment of at times bright blue afternoon skies, and at times fiery red sunsets.

In the 1970s, following his move to Flagstaff, Arizona, Turrell embarked on the work for which he is best known, *Roden Crater*, an extinct volcanic cinder cone near the Painted Desert

[258] Robin Clark, "Phenomenal: an Introduction," in *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface*, 40.

and the Grand Canyon turned into a celestial observation and an experiential installation comprised of multiple environments, the most important of them being the central skyscape, one of the many built by Turrell around the world. Being the largest skyspace installation so far, *Roden Crater* includes, together with the skyspace experience (fig. 28), more than 20 spaces designed to link visitors to the movement of celestial bodies and the various positions of the sun throughout the day. Deep into the high desert northeast of Flagstaff, the location requires commitment in terms of time and travel and well responds to the artist's interest in remoteness. With works in 26 countries, including Tasmania and upper Norway, Turrell humors us by noting, "if you find yourself nowhere, you are probably somewhere near my work."[259]

First embarked on in the 1970s, the skyspaces now number over 100 and are located in different sites around the world, including Europe and Asia, with many in the artist's home state of California. Dome-like cement structures, skyspaces welcome visitors in through an open entryway, offering them repose, generally on a bench structure that runs along the inner curved walls of the dome. In the *Skyspace* of *Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art*, in Arkansas, a round oculus on the ceiling offers direct view of the sky above, and since the rim around the aperture is extremely thin, the aperture or oculus is flush with the roof, appearing perfectly bi-dimensional. Visitors to the dome, enter it through an open entryway, sit on the bench and, quite simply, stare at the sky. The experience is a contemplative one, and almost completely uneventful. Turrell invites us to pause and look at something virtually immobile and unchanging. The American philosopher John Dewey claimed that experience is for the most part undifferentiated, and that in order to have an experience, one must be vigilant. Turrell's

[259] Turrell, *Extraordinary Ideas Realized*, 100.

skyspaces move from a similar premise and induce vigilance in viewers, in the hope of augmenting their perceptual sensibilities.[260] At sunset and sunrise, moments of the day in which mutations in both color and light intensity are significantly more pronounced and noticeable, the real experiential work unfolds. A programmed LED light sequence is initiated in the interior portion of the structure altering the perception of the section of sky observed through the oculus. At sunset, as the sky shifts from a pale sapphire to a delicate yellow, an intense orange and a saturated cerulean, the interior LED lights change accordingly, from an intense amethyst to a vivid emerald and again, gradually, to a bright yellow. At sunset, as the sky visible through the oculus moves from pale gray to yellow, pink and green (before turning into dark blue and black), the LED apparatus generates interior shades of light turquoise, intense azure, delicate peach, glowing lime, and deep magenta. Over the course of a 40-minute light show, interior and exterior become one, and the boundaries between nature and artifice, outdoor and dwelling, significantly less distinguishable. Skyspaces are structures that mediates the dialogue between humans and the sky and that Turrell uses to "set up a situation to which I take you and let you see."[261] In describing his skyspace structures, Turrell points out the sense of closure, and how "you feel as if you're in something, even though it's completely open."[262]

Turrell's ganzfeld pieces, explored initially in the late 70s and still developed today, emerged from his early studies on perceptual psychology and attempt to engender in the viewer complete loss of depth perception. Ganzfelds (term coined by German psychologists studying the

[260] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putman, 1934), 205.
[261] "Roden Crater," *Skystone Foundation 2022*, http://rodencrater.com/about/
[262] Michael Auping, "Stealth Architecture: The Rooms of Light and Space," in *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* (MOCA: University of California Press, 2011), 96

phenomenon) consist in environments where a homogeneous, dense, misty, and all-embracing light surrounds the viewer, whose eyes search for a resting point at no avail. The effect is initially disorienting and then eventually hypnotic for an experience that elicits stupor and a sense of the uncanny. According to Richard Andrews, Turrell's art is rooted in the landscape of the western United States. Considering that he was born and raised in the Los Angeles area and that he considered the experience of flying over the California desert fundamental in his creative process as an artist, the assessment is not far-fetched. As an experienced pilot, he referred to his plane as his studio, as a creative stage for the absorption and first elaboration of raw visual, auditory, and olfactory information.[263] Turrell's fascination with light, however, started in his childhood Quaker family home in Pasadena, California, when he dotted pinholes in his bedroom shades to replicate stars and constellations. From his Quaker upbringing years, the artist also learned to appreciate the calm, contemplative quality of the many Quaker meeting houses set up for circular gathering, often illuminated through apertures in the ceiling.[264]

Turrell's work negotiates light and architecture and does so in a literal, direct way. Some structures remind us of windows, some of skylights. Southern California architecture of brightly lit environments and dialogue between indoor and outdoor certainly informed the artist's architecturally framed light installations. However, the core of Turrell's experience stems from his time spent in the desert, in flight, flavoring light, in its compositions and behaviors, its physical and psychological interactions with the perceiving individual. Stemmed from his personal, sensorial experience of light, Turrell's main preoccupation is the framing, setting up of a similar experience for the viewer, where the surrounding of the so-called 'art object' becomes

[263] Turrell, *Extraordinary Ideas Realized*, 19.
[264] Ibid.

the art object itself, through a dismantling of the boundary between viewer and viewed. In installations in which surroundings physically envelop the viewer to such a degree, the object – the surroundings – encapsulates and assimilate the perceiving subject. Although this applies to both Wheeler and Turrell – coincidentally perhaps, they both respond to their experience of the desert – Turrell went arguably further than anyone else on this route of expansion of the perceived surroundings, when he created *Roden Crater*.

Turrell elaborates on his notion of the environment and of the importance of surroundings in his 2013 interview with Michael Govan for the Guggenheim. The same object viewed in two completely different environments, says the artist, will produce two radically different experiences. The night-blooming cereus, a cactus that only blooms in the moonlight, following the trajectory of the moon in the sky, can be experienced in the middle of the Arizona desert – which you would have to reach by car – on precisely the only two summer nights it blooms. Or it can be experienced, Turrell reminds us, on a penthouse in New York City, during a party while drinking margaritas. Without expressing a preference out of the two circumstances – they both certainly have their appeal – Turrell underscores how differently the same object can be experienced depending on its surroundings. Roden Crater stands as a reminder of the importance of surroundings, by staging a cosmological theater in the middle of a desert. Knowing that Turrell described his work as an instance of the viewer looking at herself looking, in a situation in which the object is absent, representation is absent, and a main focus is absent, Roden Crater offers the most effective way for the viewer to zone in on himself.[265] It is the ideal landscape,

[265] Ibid, 115.

one in which we are hyper aware of our presence, not in a separate location from that of the landscape itself, but in the midst of it, enveloped in it.

The desert, California or Arizona, had an impact on Turrell and Wheeler as well as on Irwin, who spent time in the void of the desert, shedding the object from his work as a consequence of that experience. Irwin's installations, albeit partially informed by the artist's early experience in the desert, do not try to induce the viewer into a state of contemplative meditation along a path of isolation from our hectic world. The reiterated doorways and passages, the understated rooms that want to be assessed in their habitability, do not transport us to alternative realms, nor do they expand the sphere of the landscape from that of a wall painting to that of an all-encompassing environment. On the contrary, they ask us to focus on the space as architecture, as a structure made of parts and components that relate to the viewer's presence in space. Even and perhaps especially in his barest installations, such as *Fractured Light – Partial Scrim Ceiling – Eye-Level Wire* (fig. 17), installed at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970-71, Irwin places the burden – as Butterfield notes – "almost entirely on the viewer," who is assigned the task of perceiving and assessing the space, at times, in the most subtle circumstances, failing to recognize it.[266] If a Turrell commands our attention and transports us into an alternate reality, one which we would never experience in our daily life – not even as pilots hovering above the desert at sunset and sunrise, considering how sensorially heightened his environments are – Irwin's spaces have at times been barely noticeable. As the artist himself notes, the point of the MOMA installation was to simply pay attention.[267] However, Irwin does not ask his viewer to pay attention to subtle changes in a contemplative fashion, similarly to how Turrell sets up his

[266] Jean Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space* (New York: Abbeville, 1993), 23.
[267] Ibid, 24.

demands of the viewer in a skyspace. Irwin's viewer is asked to observe in order to assess the space, not in order to observe herself observing. At times, when the space was defined so lightly by the artist that visitors would fail to even recognize it, the distance between Irwin's expectations and the visitor's reactions was so vast that the artist had to admit the need for a "cultural agreement" with his audience in the future.[268]

Even though German-American artist Maria Nordman shies away from opportunities to engage in interviews and exchanges of opinions on and about her work, her installations undoubtedly relate to architecture, on both a conceptual level and a formal one. Born in what in 1943 was Eastern Germany, Maria Nordman studied at the Max Plank Institute in Stuttgart and later at the University of California, Los Angeles, for sculpture and film, receiving both her Bachelor and Master's degrees there. Soon after graduation in 1967, Nordman worked for architect Richard Neutra as an editorial assistant. Between the 1960s and 1970s, Nordman engaged in a series of work centered on the idea of opening closed spaces to the outdoor environment through minimal design and architectural plans.

Jan Butterfield, who interviewed Nordman in 1979, tells us that the artist deflects all "why" answers as metaphysical and unanswerable.[269] Although Nordman did not take active participation in the Southern California art community of the 1960s, she produced independently and insularly, showcasing her work for the first time in 1970 and 1971 with solo exhibitions in

[268] Ibid, 29.
[269] Ibid, 97.

her own studio, as well as exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1972, the Newport Harbor Art Museum in 1973, and the University of California, Irvine, the same year (fig. 29).[270]

Nordman's early work – the portion of her oeuvre this research concerns itself with – resembles Irwin's in the way it deals with the subtle and virtually unnoticeable as well as with the tension between interior and exterior architectural spaces. Even though Nordman does not discuss this aspect of her work, it is clear, says Butterfield, that her concern is to reach out to the 'accidental participant," meaning to the passer by who may or may have not identified the place as an exhibiting space, and to provide him with an opportunity to mature awareness of the work itself. Her work *1014 Pico*, 1971 (fig. , embodied such attempts by setting up an experience similar to that of the anechoic chamber, something both Irwin and Turrell worked with and knew well. The artist turned her studio into an environment where all sounds and light had been blocked and where visitors would upon their entry find themselves in a disorienting place, then gradually adjusting their bodies and beginning to hear and feel the pulsation of their own heartbeat. This painstaking process of adaptation to the environment may induce at times sensations of comfort and at times an almost overwhelming sense of psychological threat in visitors. Often, as Butterfield notes in reference to her own experience of Nordman's space, the event/installation would lead to an enjoyment of the newly acquired state of isolation from the world, as well as to a collapse of time and space into one entity, of which the subject would become part.

Another in-studio work realized by Nordman in 1971 and in a slightly altered form in 1973, *Window Frame Rectangle*, consisted of a room deprived of all light fixtures and furniture,

[270] Ibid, 97.

and open to the street through a single mirror-coated window that allowed unidirectional indoor to outdoor visual access. At nighttime, the direction would be reversed and people passing by would see the interior of the space lit by a single interior woo-light.[271] Butterfield confesses that "there is no vocabulary for describing Nordman's work, and those who have participated in the pieces are often unable to discuss them easily – even with each other." In the absence of a formal or contextual reference, Butterfield looks at the concept of the void as conceived by Zen Buddhism as possible informant to Nordman. "So unprecedented are these works in Western art that one turns to the Orient for illumination," writes the art critic.[272] The dynamic of fullness versus emptiness that one experiences (the emptiness of the place, which the viewer fills with the intensity of her own response), echoes the dynamic of light and darkness staged by the passage from indoor to outdoor.

A seeming lack of pertinent milieu in the immediate surroundings led Butterfield to look elsewhere for references. Nordman's debt to architecture however transpires in the artist's formal preferences as well as in her conceptual approach to practice. Nordman opts for the term "work" and "dialogue" when discussing what we may be tempted to call "installations." The artist's choice of nomenclature can be explained according to Gabriella Mills with a rejection of the static nature and inherent permanence and monumentality of an installation. The term "work" better renders the concept of process and change that one experiences inside Nordman's pieces. The exchange of sounds and light in the work created in June of 1984 for MOCA spoke to Nordman's interest in the concept of dialogue between two opposing terms, in this specific case, the dramatically different streets of Central and Alameda in Los Angeles, placed in dialogue by

[271] Ibid, 99.
[272] Ibid, 99.

allowing people to traverse the space.[273] The contrasts between light and darkness contrived in these rooms elaborate, according to Mills, on the dichotomy of artificiality and nature of the urban space.[274] In her 1982 publication "Poiema," (Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther Konig) Nordman writes "And this flow of light which could produce a place, this flow of air which could produce a sound, all of it remaining unpredictable – this incidence could have a moment of hesitation in the case that at least two people are there."[275]

Butterfield observes how Nordman's work is meant to be walked in, stood in and sat in, in order to be experienced and then reminds us of the take by Marga Bijvoet, who related the artist's work to the time she spent at the Max Planck Institute in Stuttgart, where she was exposed to notions of quantum physics and to the centrality of light in the definition of matter and time.[276] It is just as likely however that Nordman developed such a transitory notion of place in relation to light and sound, as result of an exposure to the architectural theories of Richard Neutra, for whom she worked as an editorial assistant from 1967. Neutra's emphasis on the responses of the human body in relation to the built environment, what will anticipate the field of environmental psychology, may be a more plausible and pertinent reference for the work of the German artist, adopted, as Neutra himself was, by Southern California.[277]

A passage from Neutra's 1956 publication *Life and Human Habitat* will shed light on the type of interest in sensorial perception of space to which Nordman was exposed:

---

[273] Ibid, 111.
[274] Ibid, 112.
[275] Maria Nordman, *Poiema, Notizen/notes 1970* (Cologne: Walther König, 1982), third page of English section.
[276] Ibid, 112.
[277] Hines, *Architecture of the Sun*, 572.

> Nothing of the exterior world about us would penetrate our interior, our daily universe, had we no senses. And they are not limited to five; they form a multitude with millions of sense receptors. These senses do not function independently of each other but in continued, constant connection. Physiologists call this interdependence and fusion of sensorial impacts "stereognosis".[278]

This sense of unpredictability, both in terms of provenance of the stimulus and of its nature, unfolds in Nordman's work on a poetic level in the words of *Poiema*:

> And there is that neutrality of a presence which speaks of a source and an incidence which can be anywhere and which can't be predicted. As the light from the sun which produces all the colors at once, to different degrees, depending on the time, the person and the atmosphere of the place." [279]

Interestingly, and more pertinently to the scope of this research, Nordman's work always translates into a reflection on the notion of transparency of dividers and of dialogue between separated environments. With her work *6/21/79 one day only. Dawn to Dusk*, at the University Art Museum of UC, Berkley, Nordman planned an experience completely rooted in the perception of light, during the longest day of the year, the summer solstice. Through transparent theatrical gels and pure white adhesive-backed paper, Nordman staged a gradual increase in light

[278] Richard Neutra, *Life and Human Habitat. Mensch und Wohnen* (Stuttgart: Stuttgart, 1956), 18.
[279] Nordman, *Poiema*, second page of English version.

intensity to be appreciated over the course of the day. Viewers' expectations would be gently nurtured with subtle changes in the quality of light over time, with delicate passages from initial undefined paleness at first to a gleaming intensity of light that turned the space of the ceiling window-lit environment of the museum into a sanctuary of a sort.[280]

In *12839 Washington Boulevard (at Beethoven), Los Angeles, California*, installation set up in Venice for the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, between May 1 and July 22 of 1979 (fig. 31), Nordman modified a storefront between an apartment house and an adjacent awning shop, by coating the cement quadrangular entryway with shiny white paint, and by applying mirrored-glass windows and doors. The mirror coating on the windows prevented visual access from the street into the interior environment, which, upon entering, revealed itself to be of whiteness so blinding that it would disorient the viewer's senses. The work, created for the chance pedestrian, turned the idea of porosity of outdoor and indoor, of delicate passage from dark to light, on its head, annulling the nuances and gradual crescendo of light celebrated in other works.[281]

One of her most celebrated works received virtually no advertising and yet was seen by a surprisingly high number of visitors, including Italian collector of contemporary art Giuseppe Panza. *4th and Howard Street, San Francisco, 1975*, consisted in a room divided into two sections by what would initially appear to be a gray scrim, but on later scrutiny reveal itself to be a wall of light. The effect was obtained by cutting a slit from floor to ceiling on one of the walls, so that light would penetrate through the vertical gap in the form of a thin sheet of light of surprising material quality.

[280] Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, 107.
[281] Ibid, 105.

Nordman's work stages passages from darkness to light in gradual or abrupt forms. It relies on fundamental architectural elements such as doors, walls and windows that function as basic linguistic blocks in a dialogue with the viewer, who is encouraged to assess the space and to determine its nature as a work of art, as a space worth engaging. Nordman's work resembles Irwin's in its borrowing from architectural components and in its engagement of the viewer in acts of cognizance and assessments of a space. Even though Nordman is perhaps the least Californian of the artists considered here, and even though she considers herself a fully independent voice from the Southern California trend that involved those same artist as well as others, her work embodies the type of California approach to site that this research is interested in exploring and defining. In spite of some fundamental similarities, when compared to Nordman's urban, unglamorous, and small scale work, Irwin's installations build more vigorously on phenomenology and sensorially engage viewers through a more generous rapport with natural light and the outdoors, in more luminous, alluring environments. While Nordman plays with apertures and passages by pushing to a limit the tension between open and closed, accessible and inaccessible, visible and unnoticeable, Irwin's windows and doors are more honest and direct in their own message. They speak more clearly of their own function, that of bringing light in and of offering a passage from an indoor to an outdoor or outdoor-like space, and they reiterate, amplify, underscore the experience those functions offer the viewer. Through their own sensorial reactions, viewers are called in to assess the space and define place.

Conclusion

When artists approach their creative process in an experience-rooted (or phenomenological) way, they respond to their own experience of their surroundings. Those

surroundings may include domestic environments as well as their cumulative presence in the urban and suburban sprawl. If Irwin's installations respond to the requirements of the site, then they also respond to the historically established need - in the broader site of Southern California - for transparency of indoor/outdoor barriers as well as to consolidated practices of prioritization of the needs of the land. If inhabiting and experiencing a place is a mean to harvest enough sensorial information to operate within its needs, its history, its materials, and its relations, then the interior/exterior dynamic of domestic spaces and the rapport architecture/landscaping-land must qualify as the set of experiences necessary to know a place and operate within it. Norberg-Schulz said, "It is a truism to say that the environment influences us and determines our 'mood.' That architecture is a part of our environment is just as evident."[282]

Just like phenomenology in architecture concerns itself with the concretization of existential space through the act of building places, so does Irwin build places with the intent of interrogating the existential aspects of its habitability, answering the question, is this appealing to humans from a human perspective? Architectural phenomenology demands close attention to the detail and values the basic elements of the built environment (wall, floor, ceiling) as well as materials that possess sensuous qualities. Irwin activates the architectural nature of the installation space, its basic elements, and the sensuous qualities of light and transparent surfaces. As dwellings that embody the *genius loci* reveal the landscape in its essential qualities and make the world visible, so do Irwin's installations reveal the essence of the Southern California landscape and negotiate its habitability through an artistic interpretation of the architectural *genius loci*.

[282] Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, 22.

Irwin never showed interest in the phenomenological theories of Martin Heidegger, and it is not the intent of this research to directly associate the two. Heidegger's theories, combined with Norberg-Schulz' interpretation of them, offer a key to the reading of Irwin's work in terms of phenomenologically assessed habitability. Irwin however did have a declared interest in the theories of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and from a close study of their writings, Irwin elaborated the tenets of his own practice. In the artist's words: "I think the philosopher Husserl, best framed the critical issue at work here when he spoke of the need for a 'phenomenological reduction.'[283] A stripping away (...) a bracketing out of the cocoon of our pervasive knowledge, to return, for the moment, to our perceptual roots in the world, where we can ask the fundamental question: How could it be otherwise?"[284] There is a clear parallel between the act of bracketing out that Irwin inherited from Husserl and the process of response to and embodiment of the *genius loci*. Bracketing out entails an act of freeing oneself from the "habit of perceiving things the way we have always perceived them, by setting our assumptions aside" and "having a clear canvas."[285] The phenomenological reduction process known as "bracketing out" bears a resemblance with the *genius loci* formation process. Orienting oneself to the environment necessitates a preliminary act of expulsion of and purification from previous mental associations. It's only when one rids of any meaning derived from pre-existing mental associations that one can create new meanings that emerge from the specificities of a place and their interactions with the perceiving individual.

[283] Jacques Herzog, William F. Stern, and James Ackerman, "Art and Architecture: a Symposium Hosted by the Chinati Foundation," (Marfa: Chinati Foundation, 2000), 83.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Clark, ed., *Phenomenal*, 65.

Orientation is another key aspect that links Heidegger's theory of dwelling with the Southern California urban milieu, in which Irwin and other artists operated. The housing boom of the 1950s and 1960s and the general interest in habitability via the built environment informed numerous Southern California artists who found inspiration in the suburban home as well as the urban sprawl. Besides the more obvious connections in the case of artists Maria Nordman, who worked for Richard Neutra, others responded in tangential ways to the visual pervasiveness and semantic significance of the domestic built environment. Bas Jan Ader filmed himself rolling down the roof of his own bungalow, while Larry Bell and Peter Alexander built resin cubes that seem to respond to the mullion-less window aesthetic overtaking office buildings as well as domestic architecture. Ed Ruscha produced a photographic collage – a sequence of virtually undistinguishable low buildings – that testifies to the repetitious, numbing quality of the Los Angeles urban sprawl.[286]

Los Angeles between the 1950s and 1970s (but Southern California more broadly) did not distinguish itself for a well-established, historically-bound aesthetic. Contrarily to the East Coast, Los Angeles "is really without tradition (…) without culture, slightly touched by Western but almost equally by the Eastern (culture)," tells us Irwin, in 1969.[287] In a place that lacks tradition, the attention to the conditions of the place and to what makes the place unique and meaningful to its inhabitants (in spite of its cultural and historical shortcomings)

[286] The 25-foot accordion-folded book part of the Getty Research Institute offers a continuous one-and-a-half-mile stream of photographs of every single building on the famous LA strip, as they appear from the window of a car in motion. More information here: https://blogs.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/worksofart/every-building-on-the-sunset-strip/

[287] Matthew Simms, ed., *The Los Angeles Tapes: Alan Solomon's Interviews with Kauffman, Bell, Turrell, and Irwin* (New York and Washington D.C.: Circle Books and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2018), 205.

becomes the necessary step to that instinctual search for a center, an image of signification and identification. Heidegger argues that the purpose of architecture is to provide an existential foothold, which, fighting alienation, provides us with a meaningful environment. In the context of the Southern California urban sprawl, disorientation is key. What is Ruscha documenting if not his own search for a signifier that can rise out of that monotony of forms (and perhaps finding it *in* that monotony)? What meaningful environment can a Southern California dwelling provide in the midst of an urban sprawl that offers little in the way of a foothold? Arguably, the window-wall transparency, embodiment of the Southern California *genius loci*, offers that anchor, that hinge upon which to leverage a sense of geographical import.

Irwin's installations restage the existential foothold of the Southern California dwelling, inviting its viewers to experience it, assess it, and hopefully discover personal meaning in it, similarly to how the young visitor of the room at MOMA had done. Irwin's transparencies, subtle changes in light and texture, porosity of surfaces and restaging of passages, *when successfully implemented by the artist and perceived by the viewer*, yield the self-posed question, "how could it be otherwise?"

CONCLUSION

This research argues for the existence of a peculiarly Southern California way of perceiving and capturing place and it does so through an art historical analysis of artists and architects who operated in the region over the course of roughly a century. Light and adaptability to the conditions of the place both play an important role in this uniquely Southern California approach to representation and habitation of site. A theatrical conjuring of light for the sake of a celebration of the unique qualities of the site as well as an attention and responsiveness to the peculiarities of the landscape and its climate, can be found in pictorial and photographic images as well as in light-based installations and the built environment. Such heightened attention to light and to the sensorial awakening of the viewer through light leads to what can be defined as a phenomenological approach to place.

In 1965 art historian and curator Alan R. Solomon conducted his *Los Angeles Interviews*, which included Robert Irwin and James Turrell, and which were intended to probe the Southern California scene following his move from New York to the University of California Art Department at Irvine.[288] A thread is weaved throughout his interviews with which Solomon hoped to hone in on the environmental causes to the artists' undeniable California character. Solomon's enterprise shares traits with the intent of this research, at least in reference to the work of the light-based installation artists. The art historian's attempts to get to the origin of a California aesthetics was met time and again over the course of the interviews with resistance on the part of his interviewees. Rejecting his positivistic attempts to seek a cause-and-effect relation

[288] Matthew Simms, ed., *The Los Angeles Tapes: Alan Solomon's Interviews with Kauffman, Bell, Turrell, and Irwin* (New York and Washington D.C.: Circle Books and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2018).

between the work and its context, the artists insisted on their own utter independence from any form of movement or regionalism of any kind. To the question "does California have anything to do with this?" Turrell replied with a politely dismissive "I don't know whether it really does. I was born here, and I don't have a reason right at the moment to leave, but when I get enough reason, I'll leave. (…) I just accept (the environment, the air, the distances) because I live here."[289] The other interviewees followed a similar pattern of wariness of Solomon's "environmental determinism," as Matthew Simms describes it.[290] Over the course of his multiple attempts at getting a direct and satisfactory answer, Solomon was chasing the "shared attitude" and "values," which he timidly defined as "phenomenal," and which seemed to be as volatile as the air that carried them.[291]

I would argue that, although the reason behind these artists' preference for light-based installations *was* ultimately in the air – meaning in the incredible amount of attention placed by architects, artists, promoters and industries on the Southern California climate – it was not necessarily in a single element that artists would have easily recognized and pointed out to the art historian. Solomon seems to implicitly recognize his own mistaken assumption when he admits to Kauffman, "There's the question I put to you earlier. I don't know if you can ever come to the bottom of this, because it probably involves the things that you are not consciously aware of."[292]

Rather than searching for "abstract environmental determinants" as Simms defines them and asking the artists to provide them, more specific factors can and should still be sought for in Southern California with the awareness that an artist's aesthetic choices, albeit complex, layered,

[289] Simms ed, *The Los Angeles Tapes*, 24.
[290] Ibid, 25.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid, 24.

and never fully identifiable, will always respond to and be informed by *something*.[293] The questions I began this research with and moved from are: why would an artist feel inclined to build a sequence of transparent, translucent walls pierced by a telescope doorway that seem to multiply to infinity the viewer's experience of a transitional passage from indoor to outdoor space, as Irwin does in one of the environments of *Untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016, at Marfa?; Why does Doug Wheeler build environments where what looks like a large wall inundates the place with light like a window would, and asks us to question its nature – of both wall and window – by mutating into a doorway as we step across it, uncertain of what comes next? We could ask similar questions regarding other installations by artists engaged with light at this point in time, and wonder why this is happening in Southern California rather than New York City, or Seattle.

Why the obsession with architectural installations that pivot on light and its modalities of interference with the components of the environment? Why did installations suddenly become so architectural - rather than performative for example - and what is it that architecture transmitted to art, beyond the obvious formal borrowings?[294] Should we scrutinize the Southern California way to inhabit the land as a path to a fuller understanding of this curious shift in visual vocabulary (many of these artists started as 'regular' painters)? Is there a parallel between the artists' interest in creating strangely familiar dwellings through their work and the way man inhabited Southern California in the previous decades? What does Southern California domestic

[293] Ibid, 26.

[294] Michael Auping tells us of the case of Bruce Nauman, who, in his performance piece *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968) went from walking in his signature pose (but this time with his hands behind his head and a theatrical bumping from side to side) along a narrow corridor constructed by him as a way to comment on the impact of architecture on the human body, to simply leaving the corridor in place for the viewer to experience, in the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.(Clark, ed., *Phenomenal*. 97)

architecture tell us about the way man has dwelled in the region and what does this formally related art form tell us about the way artists have interacted with architecture and thought about habitation in that same region?

As Auping noted in reference to the ephemeral quality of Irwin's installations, "what makes those qualities palpable to our perception are practical structures – windows, walls, corridors, doorways, and skylights - in other words, architecture."[295] In reference to Irwin's 1974 Riko Mizuno Gallery installation *The Portal*, Auping adds, "It's not that the art is like architecture, the gallery, or a wall/portal - enough so as to constitute just another inch toward static experience-as-art – it's that it *is* that."[296]

Even when we consider works that seem to go against the grain of the alluring and inviting, when we explore subtle and barely noticeable light-based installations, or even better installations that ponder on the inhabitability of a place, we must ask ourselves why. Why would Bruce Nauman's experiments with 'uncomfortable' environments, for instance, which explore the condition of uneasiness and the question "what it is about certain spaces that makes us feel uncomfortable" and "what emotions do we have when we sense a room is not right"? Why was there such a concurrent and collective interest in the concept of habitability as well as lack thereof? Certainly, the aerospace industry, which was well rooted in the region, employed thousands of professionals, and concerned itself with issues of adaptation to non-terrestrial environments drew attention to the concept of habitability.[297] However, so did the home

[295] Michael Auping is the only major scholar who to this day has given any close attention in a major publication to the rapport light-installations/architecture, through his essay "Stealth Architecture: The Rooms of Light and Space." Clark, ed., *Phenomenal,* 83.
[296] Ibid, 85.
[297] Kevin Starr discusses the industry and various companies that had headquartered in the Los Angeles area in *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963,* 221-222.

construction industry, at a time when a massive increase in population summoned distinguished and emerging architects to the region, leading to a mushrooming of homes both groundbreakingly modern and harmoniously situated in the landscape. The mass-produced housing conglomerates, driven by the same need and yet significantly less attractive and less inconspicuously integrated with the land - and documented, for instance, by the aerial photographs of William Garnett - raised questions of habitability in relation to sustainability and resistance to growth.[298] Homes and habitability were in everyone's mind, at a time of simultaneously triumphant and concerning population growth, as well as of promotion of California as the most promisingly American in the America of tomorrow.[299]

Another informant for such a vivid interest in habitation and modalities of spatial occupation, has been found in phenomenology, a philosophical stance that has long interested many of the artists engaged in light-based installations in Southern California. Phenomenology places the individual's experience at the forefront of its concerns, stressing the importance of intentionality and first person-based experience. Although the phenomenological root of light-based installations has been explored, the link *through phenomenology* to architecture has not. Moving from an analysis of the installations, this research argues how in both architecture and light-based installations, the emphasis on the window-wall – as well as on its various developments along the transparency/porosity axis – made phenomenological sense as much for the artists as it did for the architects.

[298] See for instance, *Finished Houses, Lakewood, California*, 1950.
[299] Starr discusses the mediatic interest in California throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, with 1962 constituting an "*annus mirabilis of coverage"* (Kevin, Starr, *Golden Dreams,* 413-414).

This research argues that that 'something in the air,' which explains the idiosyncratic Southern California quality of the work, does originate in the clement climate and exposure to the outdoors, but it further elaborates upon it through an architectural vernacular procured by the ideal California dwelling. Both artists and architects respond to what can be defined as the regional *genius loci*. The ability of the Southern California home to embody the *genius loci* of the region is what allowed it to become such a successful vehicle for the promotion and implementation of the suburban American dream. In time, having drenched so vividly the visual texture of Southern California, the window-wall - but more broadly the porosity of the domestic environment in the suburban home, chief platform for the Southern California *genius loci* - entered the repertoire of artists like Irwin – and others down the road – who instinctively selected the element as formal vehicle for a semiotic negotiation with the place (with the porosity being the sign of a Southern California visual vernacular). If the *genius loci* of Southern California finds its embodiment in a dwelling that promotes habitability through incorporation and enjoyment of the outdoors, the artistic re-elaboration of that same trope consists in the re-visualized and relived habitability of the light-based installation.

If in architecture, the phenomenological approach translated into a literal incorporation and domestication of the outdoors through the extensive use of glass walls, fenced backyards and swimming pools, in Irwin's phenomenological mediations with space – as well as in others' with him – it translated into an incorporation of an architectural vernacular structured around the same term, that of the porosity and window/wall duplicity, and in turn, into an unprecedented development of an architectural framework to art installations. As Maria Nordman noted in regard to her own work, it is "not only about light or something as vague as space. It is about

people, architecture, and landscape. The work is a situation."[300] That 'situation' is the habitability of place, the *genius loci* conveyed by that transparency we see in the work of Nordman, Turrell, Wheeler, and especially Irwin. Irwin's installations in particular, this research argues, embody truths about Southern California in work that, through light and through an architectural vernacular that responds to the local built environment, stage transparencies of indoor and outdoor spaces and respond to the *genius loci* of the region. Irwin is not the first artist to conjure light to showcase, assess, or celebrate place and he is not the first artist to sensorially open up to a site, its peculiarities and hidden potentials, nor to invite viewers to a sensorially heightened sharing and evaluation of that same place. There is a rich history in California for both creative approaches. The intent of this research has been to delineate such history in broad strokes and to shed light (no pun intended) on a distinctly Southern California – and in some cases, Californian and Southwestern more broadly – phenomenology of place.

[300] Clark, ed., *Phenomenal*, 89.

Bibliography

Alinder, Mary Street. *Group f.64: Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and the Community of Artists who Revolutionized American Photography*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014.

Allmendinger, Blake. "All About Eden," in Stephani Barron et al., *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Berkely, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000, 113-127.

Anderson, Nancy. "Wondrously Full of Invention: The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt." In *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, edited by Linda S. Ferber, 69-107. Manchester, Vermont: Hudson Hills, March 1, 1991.

Armstrong, Elizabeth. *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design and Culture at Midcentury*. New York: Prestel, 2007.

Auping, Michael. *Forty Years: Just Talking About Art*. New York: Prestel, 2018.

Banham, Reyner. *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.

Buckner, Cory. *Crestwood Hills: the Chronicle of a Modern Utopia*. Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2015.

Butterfield, Jean. *The Art of Light and Space*. New York: Abbeville, 1993.

Celant, Germano. "Arte Ambientale in California: Asher, Nauman, Irwin, Orr, Turrell, Nordman, Wheeler." *Domus* (June 1975): 52–53.

———. "Ambient/Art." In *La biennale di Venezia, Section of Visual Arts and Architecture, General Catalogue*, First Volume, 187–201. Venice: Alfieri Edizioni d'Arte, 1976.

———. "Urban Nature: The Work of Maria Nordman." *Artforum* (March 1980): 62–67.

———. "Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman: Space in Brackets." *Art Press International* (November 1981): 16–19.

———. *Doug Wheeler*. New York: David Zwirner Books, 2019.

Clark, Robin, ed. *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Comras, Kelly. *Ruth Shellhorn*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2016.

Cornell, Daniel. *Backyard Oasis*. New York: Prestel, 2012.

Culver, Lawrence. *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2006.

Dennis, Robert N. Collection of stereoscopic views, New York Public Library Digital Collections, The New York Public Library, 2022. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/robert-n-dennis-collection-of-stereoscopic-views?filters%5Bdivision%5D=The+Miriam+and+Ira+D.+Wallach+Division+of+Art%2C+Prints+and+Photographs%3A+Photography+Collection&filters%5Bname%5D%5B%5D=United+States+Military+Academy&filters%5Bplace%5D%5B%5D=Hudson+River+Valley+(N.Y.+and+N.J.)&keywords=#/?tab=navigation

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Putman, 1934.

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, Vol. V, no. 10 (June 1967), 12-23.

Gauthier, David J. *Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Politics of Dwelling*. Idaho Falls, Idaho: Lexington Books, 2016.

Goetzmann, William H. and William N. Goetzmann. *The West of the Imagination*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009.

Green, Tyler. *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American*. Berkeley: University of California Press, October 16, 2018.

Grenier, Catherine. *Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of An Art Capital*. Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2006.

Guardiano, Nicholas L. "Charles S. Peirce's New England Neighbors and Embrace of Transcendentalism." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2017): 216-245.

"Habitability.art: What is Everyone, Who is Everything?" *Weisman Art Museum*, Habitability.art — Weisman Art Museum (umn.edu), accessed October 2021.

Hankins, C. Evelyn ed. *Robert Irwin: All the Rules Will Change*. London: Prestel, 2016.

Harvey, Samantha C. *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature*. Edinburgh University Press, June 11, 2013.

Hassrick, Peter, ed. *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.

Herzog, Jacques and William F. Stern, and James Ackerman, Art and Architecture: a Symposium Hosted by the Chinati Foundation, Marfa: Chinati Foundation, 2000.

Hines, Thomas. *Architecture of the Sun: Los Angeles Modernism 1900-1970*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010.
———. *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 2006.

Hyde, Anne Farrar. *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920*. New York University Press, 1990.

Irwin, Robert. *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*. Culver City, California: Lapis Press, 1985.

Irwin, Robert, Arthur Danto, Lawrence Weschler, and Sally Yard. *Robert Irwin*. Los Angeles, New York: Los Angeles Museum of Art, Rizzoli, 1993.

Irwin, Robert and Matthew Thomas Simms, ed. *Notes Toward a Conditional Art*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.

Irwin, Robert. *Untitled (Dawn to Dusk)*. Marfa, Texas: Chinati Foundation, 2019.

Jacquet Benoit and Vincent Giraud. *From the Things Themselves: Architecture and Phenomenology*. Kyoto University Press, 2013.

Judd, Donald. "Specific Objects." *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1965), 74-82.

Keane, Patrick J. *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day."* Kansas City: University of Missouri, November 22, 2005.

Knight, Christopher. *Art of the Sixties and Seventies: The Panza Collection*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.

Krauss, E. Rosalind. "Overcoming the Limits of Matter: on Revising Minimalism." *Studies in Modern Art I: American Art of the 1960s*, ed. John Elderfield. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991, 131-132.

Lavin, Sylvia, ed. *Everything Loose Will Land: 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: MAK Center; Nürnburg: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2013.

———. Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007.

———. "Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment"

Assemblage , No. 40 (Dec., 1999): 6-25 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171369

Lewallen, Constance M. and Karen Moss. *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Life Magazine, October 22, 1945.

"The West: New Frontiers in Living... 28 Pages on the Life that Lures the EAST," *Look Magazine,* September 18, 1956.

McCoy, Ester. "The California House... How it Started." *Los Angeles Times House Magazine,* July 19 1963. UCLA Special Collections, W. W. Robinson Papers, Box 92, folder 23, Newspaper Clippings, 1951-1953.

———. "Letters between R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra, 1914-1924." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* vol. 33, issue 3. (October 1973): 219-224.

———. "Arts and Architecture Case Study Houses." *Perspecta*, vol. 15, "Backgrounds for an American Architecture" (1975): 54-73.

McGrew, Rebecca, ed. *It Happened in Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles, 1969-1973.* Pomona: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011.

Meyer, James. *Minimalism*. London: Phaidon Press, 2010.

Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture 1 – 3." *Artforum, New York*: vol.4, no. 6, February 1966, 42-44; vol.5, no. 2, October 1966, 20-23; vol. 5, no. 10, Summer 1967.

Moss, Karen, Timothy Robert Rodgers, Sharyn R. Udall, and Michael Zakian. *Illumination: the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*. London, New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2009.

Naef, Weston. *In Focus, Carleton Watkins: Photographs from The J. Paul Getty Museum.* Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 1997.

Nesbitt, Kate, ed. *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Neutra, Richard. *Survival Through Design*. Oxford University Press, 1954.

Neutra, Richard. *Life and Human Habitat. Mensch und Wohnen*. Stuttgart: Stuttgart, 1956.

Neutra- Survival Through Design. Directed by PJ Letowsky. Neutra-Survival Through Design, Directed by PJ Letofsky on Vimeo. Email to author with password, January 18, 2021.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Intentions in Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1966.

———, *Existence, Space and Architecture*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1974

———, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980.

———, "Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture." *Perspecta*, vol. 20 (1983): 61-68.

Maria Nordman. *Poiema, Notizen/notes 1970*. Cologne: Walther König, 1982.

———. *Various surroundings in two countries depending on the sound of the voice: fragment from the notes of Maria Nordman*. Munich: Kunstraum (English version 1968/German 1977).

Nordman, Maria and Germano Celant. "Conjunct: City of Light." *Artforum* (November 1990): 139-42.

Nordman, Maria and Scott Tennent. "A Conversation with Maria Nordman. April 5, 2012." *LACMA Unframed*. https://unframed.lacma.org/2012/04/05/conversation-with-maria-nordman

O'Donnell, Oliver C. "Pierce, Bierstadt, and the Topographic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century North America." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 103, issue 2 (2021).

O'Hara, Christine Edstrom. "Regionalism in California: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr's Planning and Design in Palos Verdes Estates." *Frederick Law Olmsted Jr: A Vision for the American West*. June 20, 2014. YouTube video, 27:16. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr: A Vision for the American West: Regionalism in California - YouTube

Ostwald, Michael J. and Raeana Henderson. "The Modern Interior and the Excitation Response: Richard Neutra Ocular-Centric Phenomenology," *Architecture Research*, 2012; 2(3): 27-35 (Rosemead, California: Scientific & Academic Publishing Co, 2012).

Otero-Pailos, Jorge. *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, November 30, 2013.

"California: Dreamland West." *Pageant Magazine*. February 1950.

Peabody, Rebecca and Lucy Bradnock, eds. *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.

Pittman, Lari, Amy Gerstler, and Carol Eliel. *Lee Mullican : An Abundant Harvest of Sun*. Los

Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, November 15, 2005.

Plagens, Peter. “Maria Nordman.” *Artforum* (February 1974): 40–41.

Plagens, Peter. *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1999.

Prohl, Inken. “California 'Zen': Buddhist Spirituality Made in America.” *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2, *Religion and the Marketplace* (2014): 193-206.

Respini, Eva. *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

Rosenthal, Mark and Germano Celant. *Andre, Buren, Irwin, Nordman: Space as Support*. Berkeley, California: University Art Museum, 1980.

Salas, Charles G., and Michael S. Roth. *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001.

Schreyer, David and Andreas Nierhaus. *Los Angeles Modernism Revisited: Houses by Neutra, Schindler, Ain, and Contemporaries*. Zurich, Switzerland: Park Books, 2020.

Schuld, Dawna L. *Minimal Conditions: Light, Space, and Subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

Scott, Amy ed., *Yosemite, Art of an American Icon*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

Sheley, Nancy Strow. “Bringing Light to Life: the Art of Agnes Pelton (1881-1961)” (dissertation, University of Kansas, 2000), https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/304604398?pq-origsite=primo

Simms, Matthew. *Site Determined*. New York: Prestel, 2009.

Simms, Matthew. *Robert Irwin: A Conditional Art*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

Simms, Matthew, ed. *The Los Angeles Tapes: Alan Solomon’s Interviews with Kauffman, Bell, Turrell, and Irwin*. New York and Washington D.C.: Circle Books and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2018.

Smith, Elizabeth A. T. and Esther McCoy. *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989.

Starr, Kevin. *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963 (Americans and the California Dreams)*. Oxford University Press, September 9, 2011.

Sunset Western Ranch Houses. By the Editorial Staff of Sunset Magazine in collaboration with Cliff May. San Francisco: Lane Publishing Co., 1946.

Turrell, James. *Extraordinary Ideas Realized*. Berlin: Hatje Kantz, 2018.

Vicario, Gilbert, ed. *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2019, Phoenix Art Museum.

Watts, Jennifer A. *Maynard L. Parker: Modern Photography and the American Dream*. Yale University Press, 2012.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: a Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Robert Irwin: Getty Garden*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Wight, Frederick, S. "Robert Irwin Interviewed by Frederick S. Wight." *Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait*. Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977. UCLA Library Department of Special Collections.

Wilmerding, John, ed. *American light: the Luminist Movement, 1850-1875: Paintings, Drawing, Photographs*. Princeton University Press, 1989.

Wilton, Andrew and Tim Barringer. *American sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*. Princeton University Press, 2002.

Wolfe, Ann M. *Suburban Escape: The Art of California Sprawl (Center Books on the American West)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Wortz, Edward, et al. "First National Symposium on Habitability." Los Angeles: AiResearch Manufacturing Co., 1971.

Wortz, Melinda. "Maria Nordman: 315 N. Alameda/166 N. Central, Los Angeles." *Artforum* (October 1983): 82.

Appendix – Figures

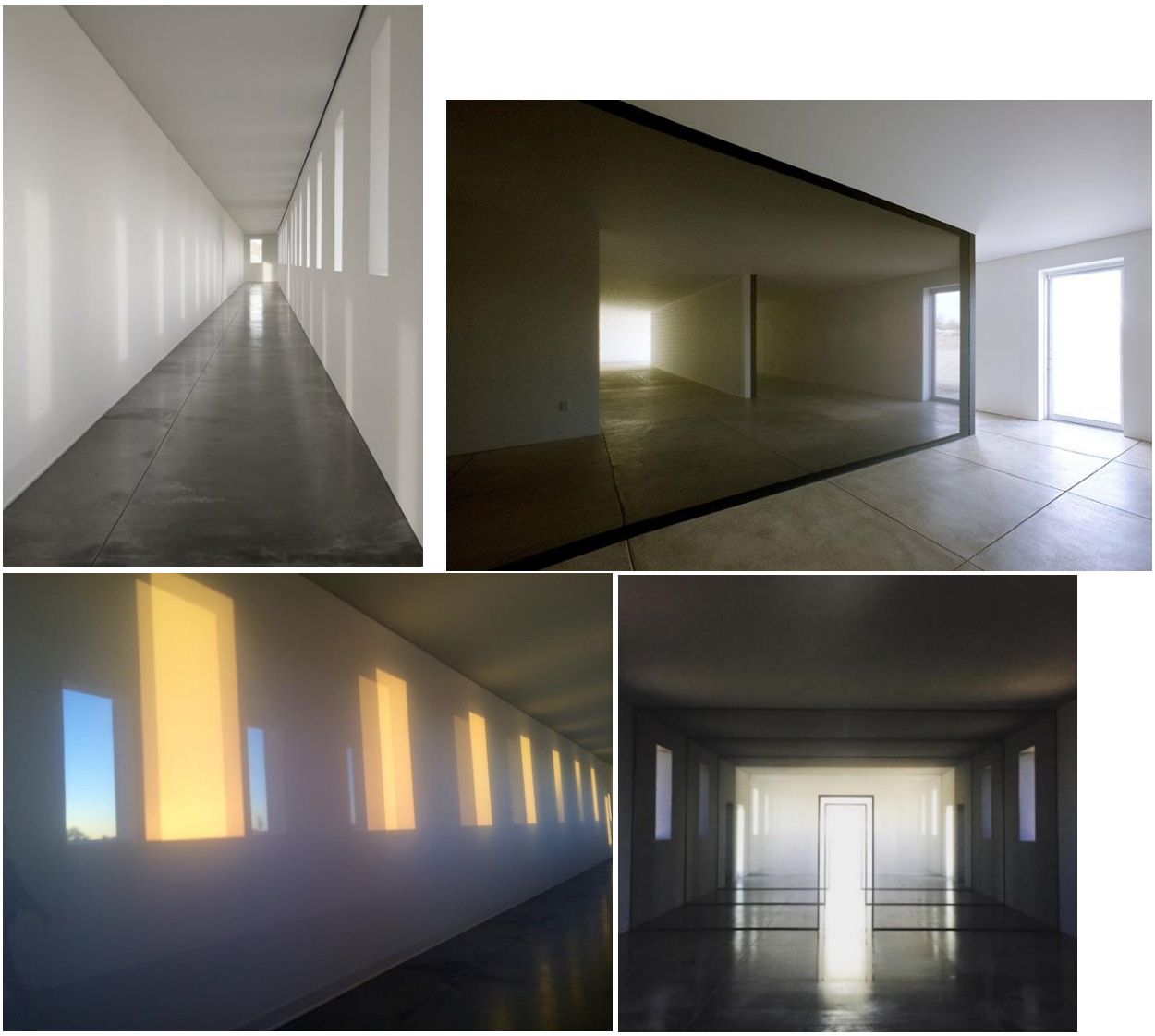


Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4. Robert Irwin, *Untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016.

Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.



Fig. 5. Thomas Cole, *The Hunter's Return*, 1845.

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fortworth, Texas.



Fig. 6. Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 7. Albert Bierstadt, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie*, 1866.

Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Fig. 8. Albert Bierstadt, *Sunset in Yosemite Valley*, 1868.

Haggin Museum, Stockton, California.



Fig. 9. Carleton Watkins. *Tutocanula Pass*, 1865-66

The Photographs of Carleton Watkins. Carleton Watkins.org.



Fig. 10. Carleton Watkins. *Mount Watkins, Yosemite*, circa 1872.



Fig. 11. Agnes Pelton, *Wells of Jade*, 1931

Bequest of Raymond Jonson, Collection of the Jonson Gallery, University of New Mexico.



Fig. 12. Woodman Plaza Model, Paicoma, California.

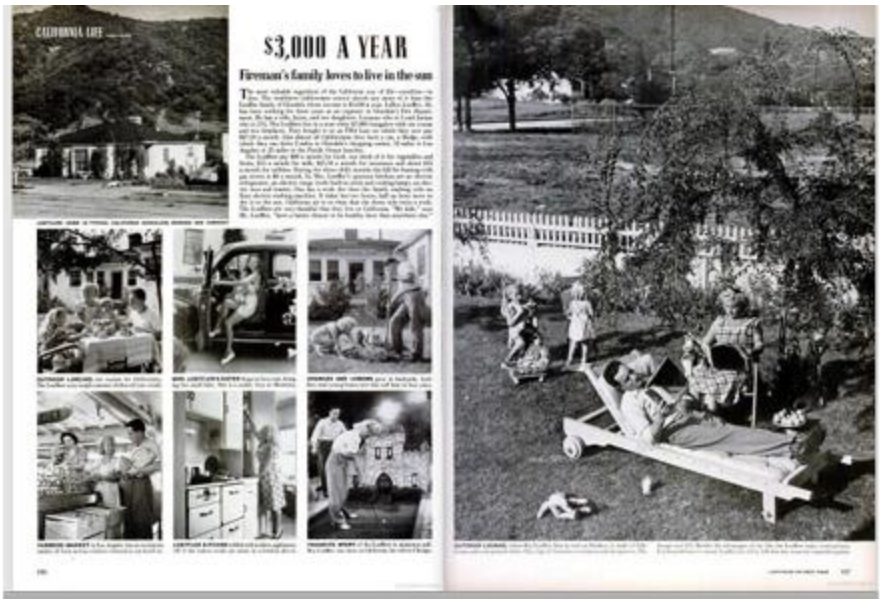


Fig. 13. "The California Way of Life," *Life Magazine*, October 22,1945.



Fig. 14. Richard Neutra. *Chuey House*, photographed by Julius Shulman in 1960.

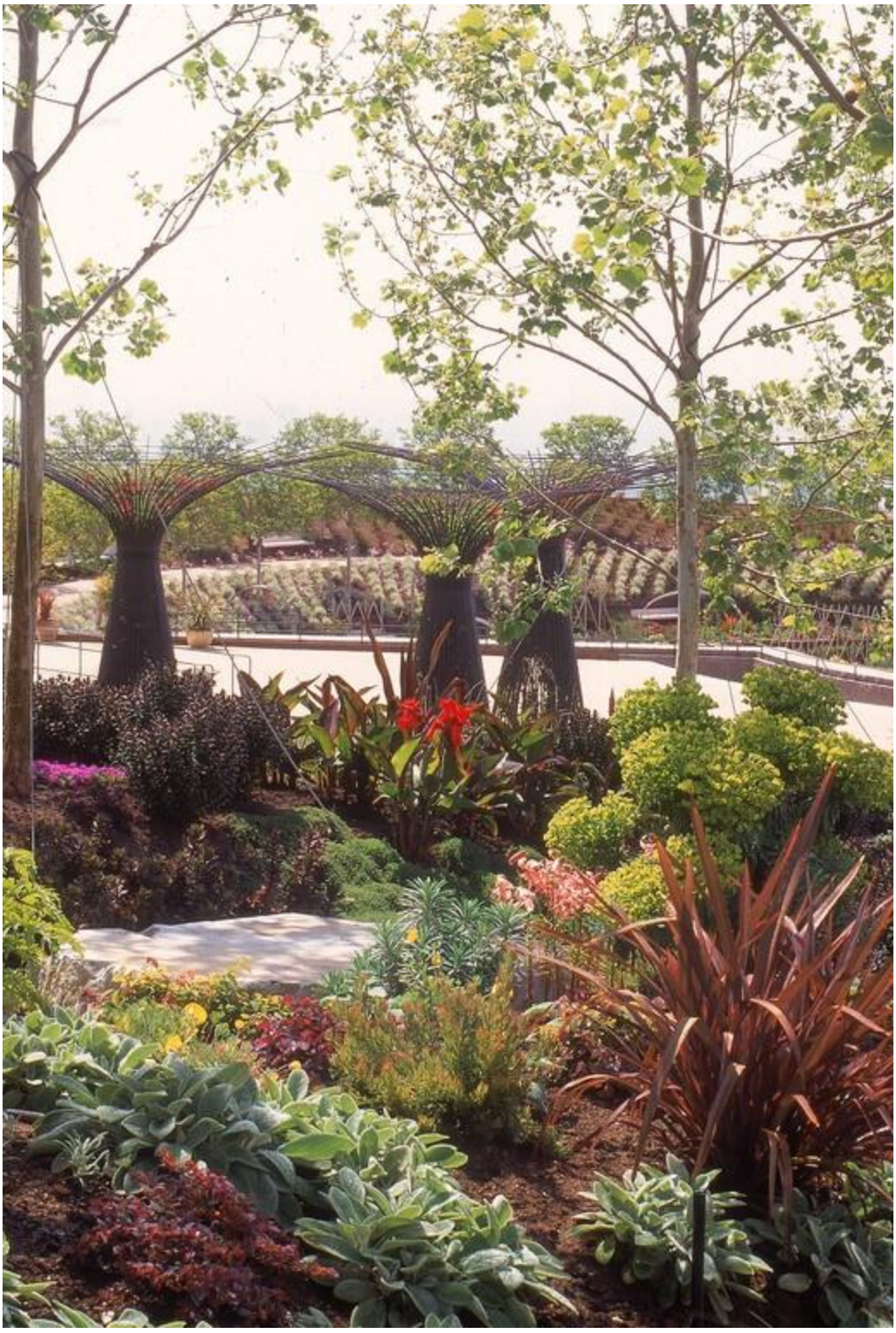


Fig. 15. Robert Irwin, *Getty Gardens*, 1997.

Getty Museum Collection. Central Garden (Getty Museum)



Fig. 16. Robert Irwin, Window Wall, 1975. Collection of California State University, Long Beach, California.

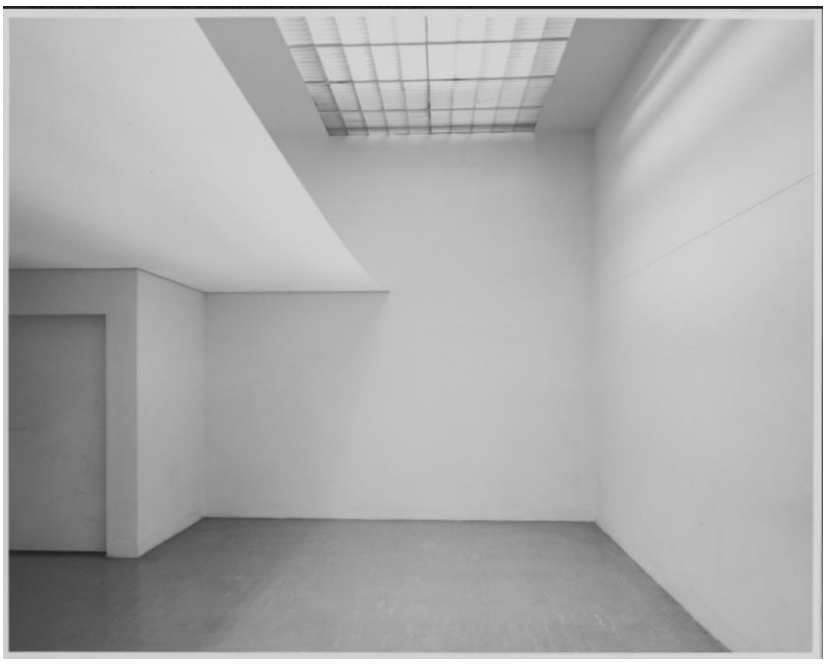


Fig. 17. Robert Irwin, *Fractured Light – Partial Scrim Ceiling – Eye Level Wire*, Museum of Modern Art, 1970.

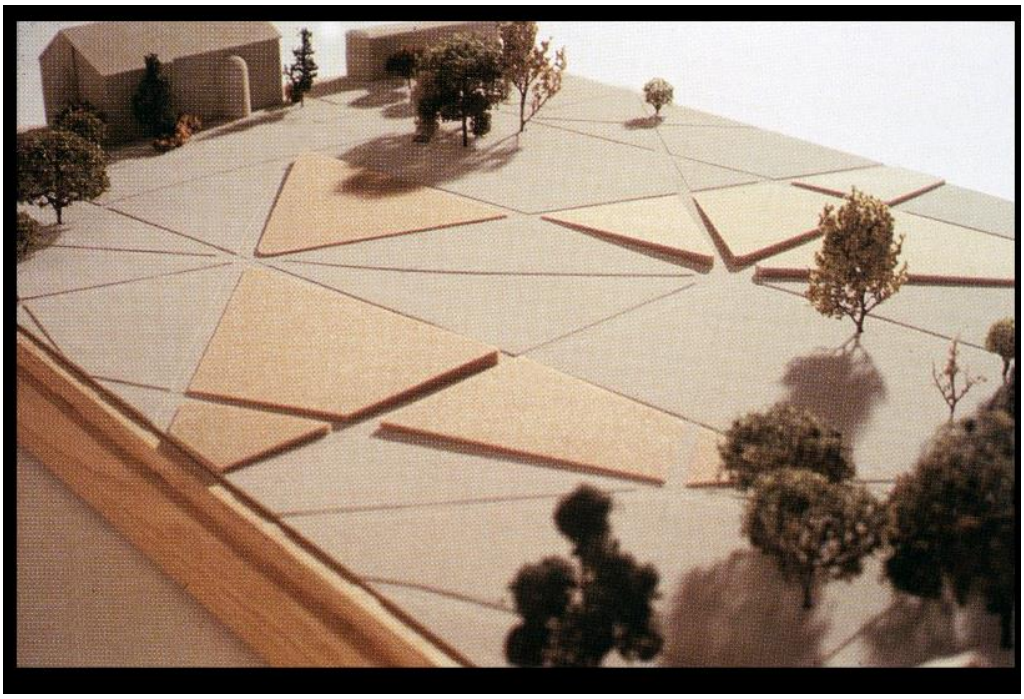


Fig. 18. Robert Irwin, proposed model for Tilted Planes, 1978, Oval Mall, Ohio State University

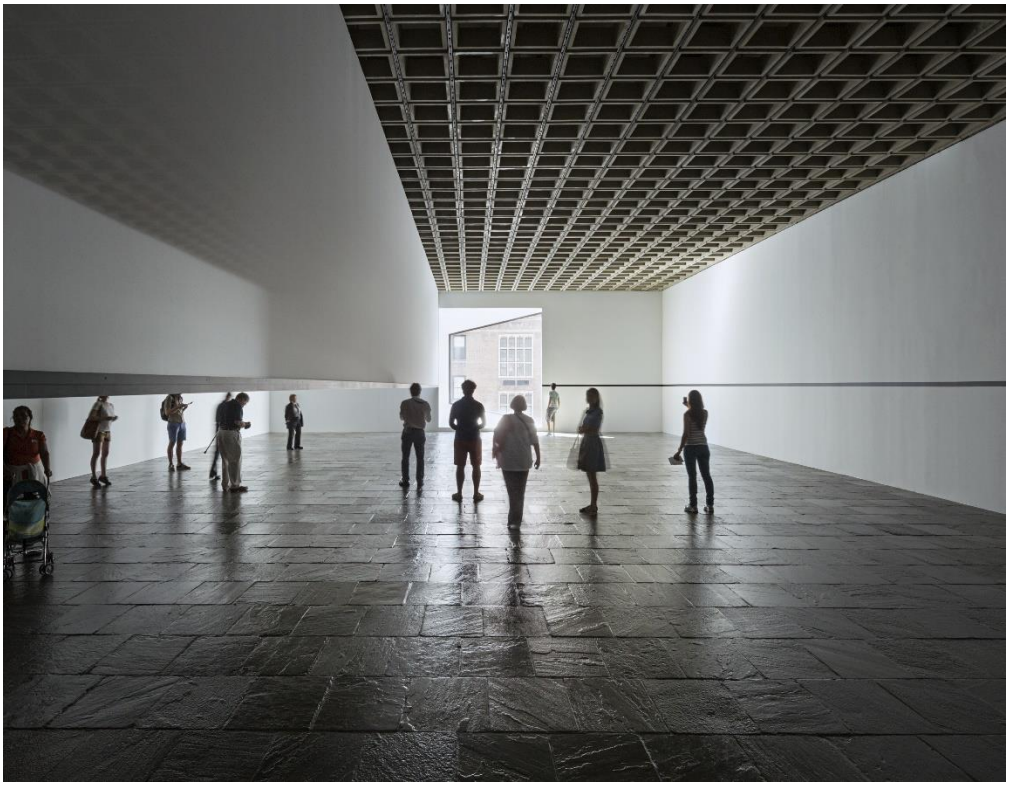


Fig. 19. Robert Irwin, *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light*, Whitney Museum of Art, fist installed in 1977.



Fig.20. Robert Irwin, *Slant Light Volume,* Walker Art Center, first installed in 1971.

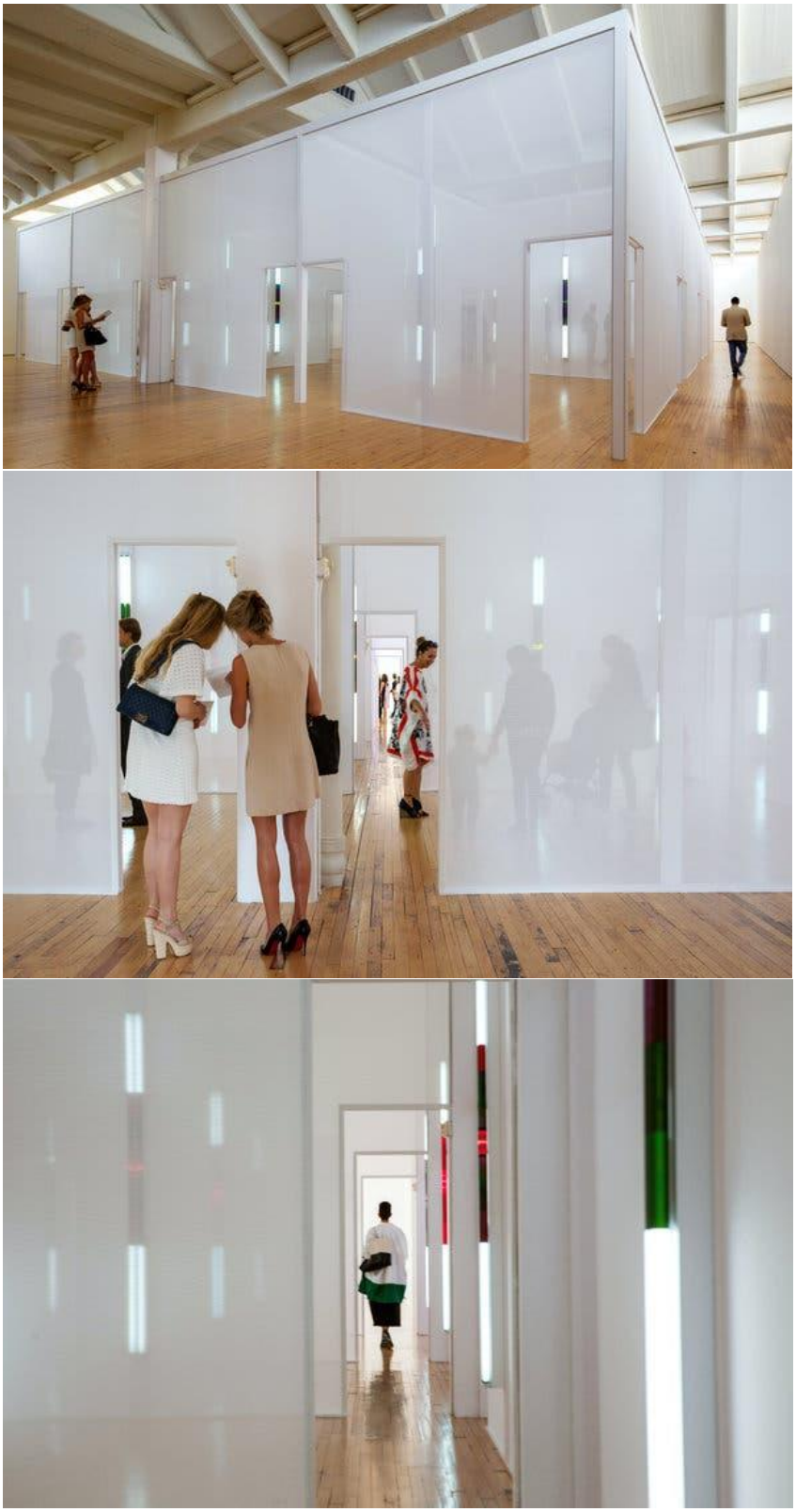


Fig. 21-22-23. Robert Irwin, *Excursus: Homage to the Square3*, Installed at Dia Beacon between 2015 and 2017.



Fig. 24. Doug Wheeler, *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12* (2012), David Zwirner Gallery.

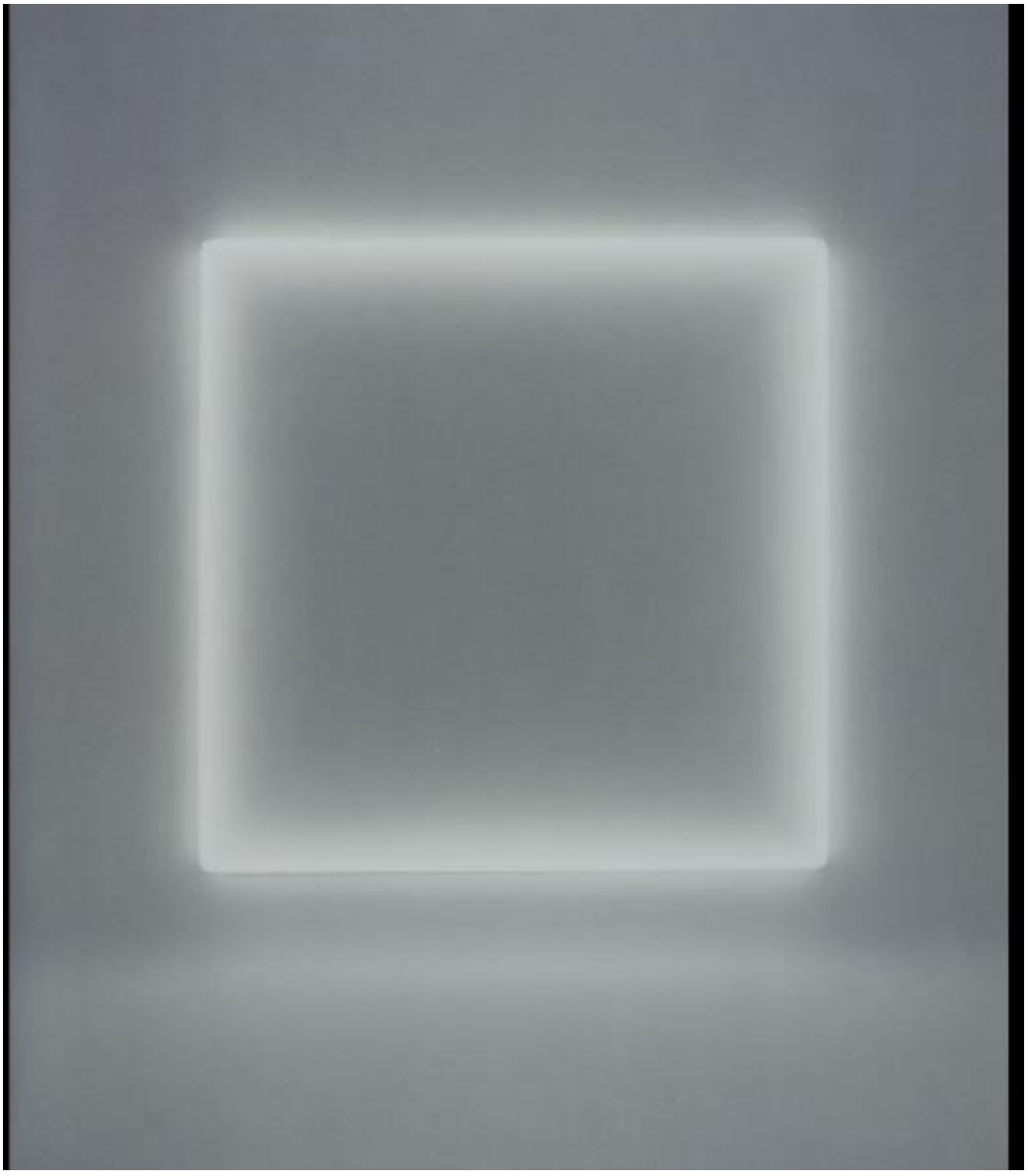


Fig. 25. Doug Wheeler, *Untitled (Environmental Light)*, 1970



Fig. 26. James Turrell, *Sky Space 1*, 1974, Villa Panza, Italy.

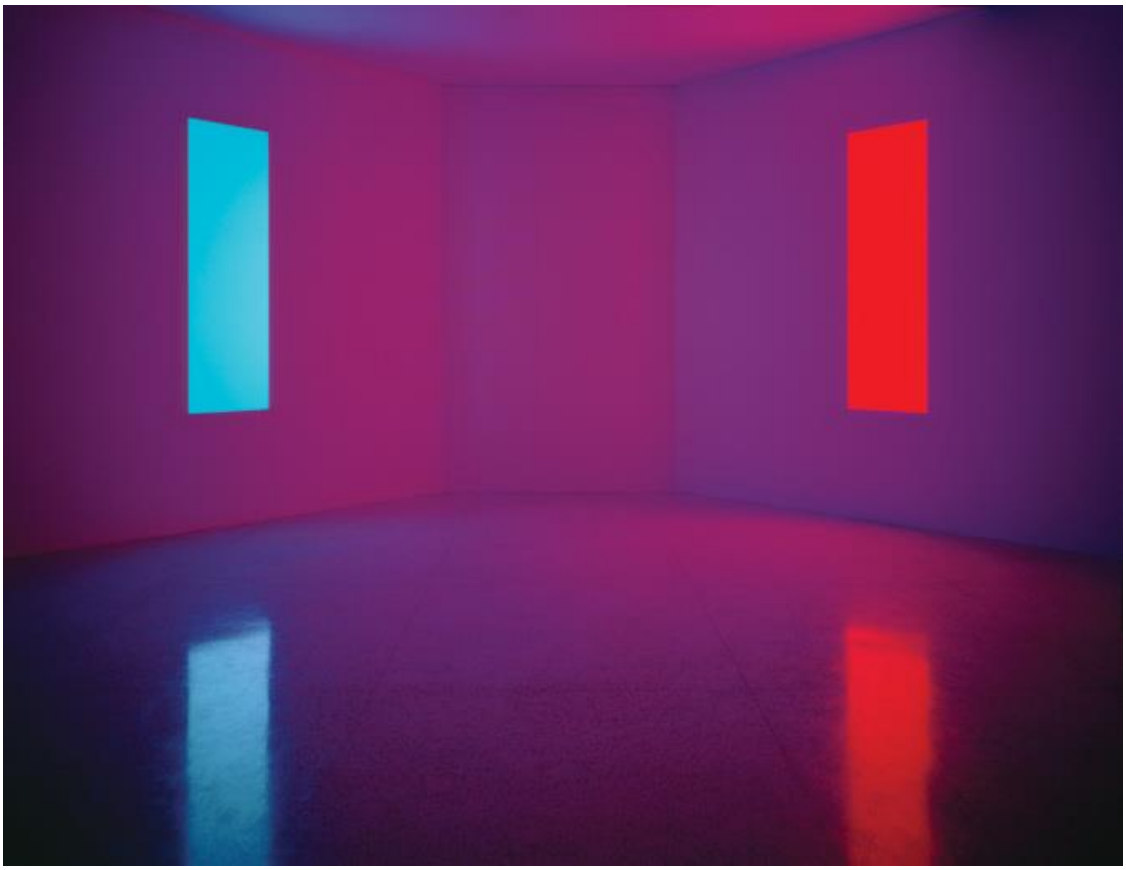


Fig. 27. James Turrell, *Stuck Red, Stuck Blue*, 1970. Installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in 2011.

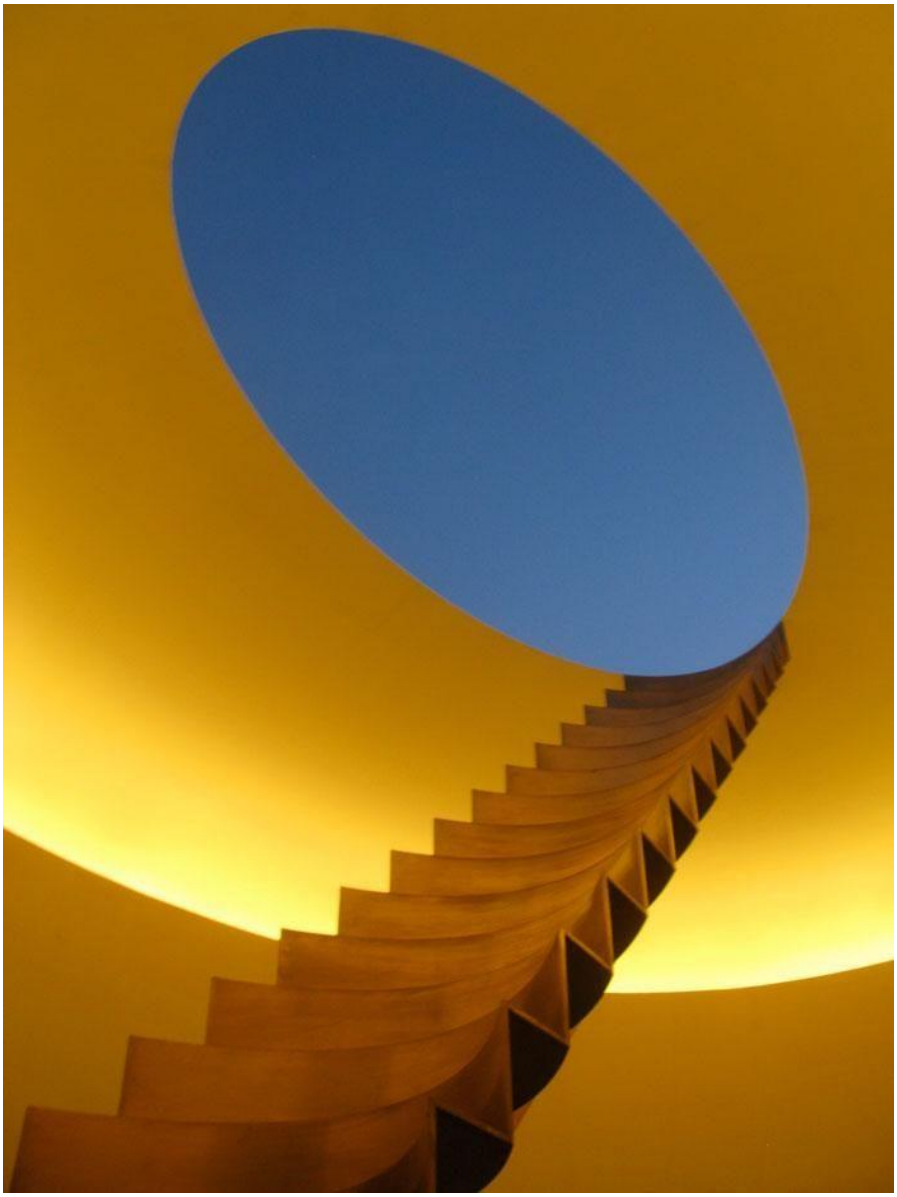


Fig. 28. James Turrell, *Skyspace* at *Roden Crater*, 1977-2022.

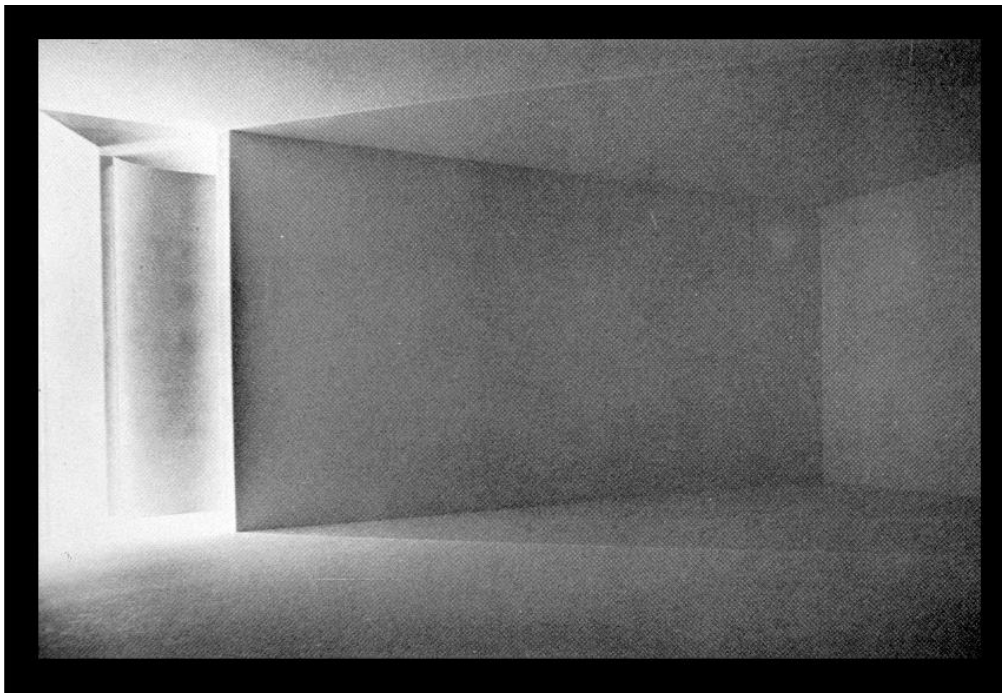


Fig. 29. Maria Nordman, *Irvine Room (Saddleback Mountain)*, 1973.



Fig. 30. Maria Nordman, Exterior of studio installation at 1014 Pico Boulevard, Santa Monica, California, 1972. A mirror coating on the window created a one-way viewing situation.



Fig. 31. Maria Nordman, Exterior of *12839 Washington Boulevard (at Beethoven), Los Angeles, California*, 1979.