

Karina Nimmerfall

1953

Possible Scenarios of a
Discontinued Future

Edition Camera Austria



In 1953, Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander's master plan for a new modernist form of utopia – a city within a city, for a population of 17,000, at the site of Chavez Ravine, a location situated just northwest of downtown Los Angeles – was inevitably abolished after causing a vicious local public housing war, initiated by private developers, real estate lobbyists, and the power of the media. Deploying Red Scare politics and propaganda, this local battle eventually affected housing programs throughout the nation, representing the end, as well as the beginning, of a new era ...





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Discontinued Future

















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POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF A DISCONTIN

Assembled from historic records
1942-1962

Karina Nimmerfall

Stills from the architectural 2-channel video installation "1953: Possible Scenarios of a Discontinued Future." Filmed on site at Elysian Park, North San Pedro, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the VDL Research House (Cal Poly Pomona College of Environmental Design).

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Camera: Jeff Luckey

2013

1953

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF A DISCONTINUED FUTURE

Assembled from historic records:
1942-1962

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2013

FADE IN:

1. EXT. LOS ANGELES - AERIAL VIEW - DAY

MAN'S VOICE
(radio broadcast, voiceover)

This is a personal note. No editorial we's. I just dialed Weather 3-1212. The official temperature at 2 o'clock on this Saturday is 95 degrees. That makes it about 100 in your NHC headquarters, conditioned by air blasts from the street. But all of this is downright frigid when compared to the boiling temperatures within your reporter. This morning, the Senate-House Conference on the Independent Offices Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year 1954 tied the noose on the low-rent public housing program.

They agreed, for this fiscal year, on a program of 20,000 new units, to be made from existing loan and annual contribution contracts. No new loan and annual contributions contracts may be entered into. In other words, the program is in the process of liquidation. It has been stopped dead in its tracks. This marks a complete victory on the Washington front for opponents of low-rent housing. It also marks a disastrous defeat for those families living in slums, who believed their government in 1949, when Congress adopted a housing policy of a decent home for every American family.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

SUMMER 1953

2. INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

A group of men in suits are seated on comfortable, modern mid-century chairs, in an early 1950s-style television studio environment. Along with the men, we see one woman in a pencil skirt suit. A heated discussion is in progress.

CUT TO:

Close-up of a man (short grey hair, handsome, in his sixties). He speaks confidently in fluent English, but with a thick Viennese accent.

ARCHITECT
(in a defensive tone)

This was not a "dream" project. It was fully detailed and specified over three years of extensive staff work, with every particular weighted, deliberated, computed and decided on by me, in consultation with my partner, associates, and collaborators. The site acquired for this new community is in the heart of Los Angeles, surrounded by one of the world's most beautiful hill-side parks, with an area of three square kilometers and magnificent views of both the 6,000-foot-high mountain chain of the Sierras and the Pacific Ocean. 1,200 families were relocated or bought out.

(MORE)

ARCHITECT (CONT'D)

Slums, homes, and land were bought up or acquired through condemnation in order to assemble the entire site for the community, which extends over five or six valleys and along many heights and ridges. On three sides it abuts the park, and in fact substantially penetrates into the park itself. It is also skirted by two first-rate automobile freeways, which intersect one another at the southeast corner.

This immense concentration of three years of labor has been lost to the metropolis of Los Angeles, for which it was to yield the most momentous project of this kind for an American city, and all on a site very unique in the world.

Camera pulls back to a very wide shot of the scene. We see the television studio with a second camera operator and some of the studio equipment. A man (short and stocky, dark hair flecked with gray, in his late fifties, very self-assured) is making a pejorative gesture with his hand.

COUNCIL MEMBER #1
(in a dismissive tone)

This site is big enough for three or four golf courses, which the city needs badly.

COUNCIL MEMBER #2
(shaking his head in bewilderment)

A golf course is a poor substitute for public housing planned for low-income families.

INTELLECTUAL

For months in Los Angeles, there has been a misleading campaign by THE LOS ANGELES TIMES and Hearst newspapers, along with the corruption of one council member after another to reverse their unanimous pro-housing vote from 1949. The real estate lobby has pressured the Chamber of Commerce not to accept (now) favorable bids, or to use the already acquired land or the prepared projects of the \$100,000,000 program of public housing and slum clearance, although a firm contract to this end had been entered into with the Public Housing Authority in Washington. The whole thing is a demonstration of national significance against the democratic council's action of four years ago, which tried to clear the city of incredible slums.

HOUSING AUTHORITY OFFICIAL
(nodding in agreement)

The real estate lobby picked California in general, and Los Angeles in particular, for a campaign to destroy public housing through local action. There will probably never be an accounting for the millions of dollars that have been poured into this effort. THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, THE EXAMINER, and THE HERALD joined the lobby in its fight to maintain the slums. There

(MORE)

HOUSING AUTHORITY OFFICIAL (CONT'D)

have also been some unexplained switches. Two years ago, one council member who had been an articulate supporter of public housing, left the city for a week and returned to announce that he had joined the opposition. Two weeks later, another council member who had supported low-rent housing for twelve years voted in favor of the program on a Friday, only to reverse his position on the following Monday.

L.A. TIMES EDITOR
(hostile)

It took more political courage than is commonly found among legislators to face down the public housing faction, which used every means at its command to break the one-vote majority. It took personal courage, too. For at least one of the majority Councilmen was threatened with physical violence. This was a critical fight. It is the first instance of importance in which a municipality has said no to the infringing federal government and made the "no" stick. The fight, therefore, has had national attention.

ARCHITECT
(frustrated, shaking his head)

It was a cause célèbre, like the Dreyfus case, but it has not found a literary champion like Émile Zola, who wrote "J'accuse...!" and reached twenty million readers. In our case, thousands of citizens and the electorate have been affected and lengthy harangues have been falsely concerned with issues of "Socialism versus Americanism."

JOURNALIST

A top-bracket official from the City Housing Authority, himself a key supporter of the authority's multi-million dollar public housing program, was accused in open court of being an active member of the Communist Party. He, however, refused to reveal names of organizations he belonged to, on grounds that such answers might incriminate him. Soon afterwards, he was suspended by CHA executives. He testified as an expert witness on slum clearance in a condemnation case brought about by the Housing Authority, as the organization was seeking to acquire more land for its Elysian Park Heights public housing site. The City Council immediately reacted by asking the House Un-American Affairs Committee to call upon, and investigate, other members of the Housing Authority.

COUNCIL MEMBER #1
(in a disruptive tone)

The Housing Authority is a natural target for communist infiltration, because the people who are forced to live in public housing units are more apt to be socially maladjusted and dissatisfied, and therefore more susceptible to the blandishments of clever communist recruiting specialists than the average person

(MORE)

TIME CUT:

SPRING 1943

3. EXT. MODERNIST HOUSING COMPLEX - DAY

Black-and-white establishing shot of a large, modernist housing development with geometrically ordered housing structures--a mixture of high- and low-rise buildings broken up by a mountainous topography, lush park land, and panoramic vistas. The white plaster facades of the buildings are combined with unpainted redwood, creating a bold abstract design. A tree branch is jutting into the edge of the well-composed shot.

MAN'S VOICE
(reporter, voiceover)

Coming upon the buildings on the shoulder of the green hills is like coming upon a vision of the future--of a postwar world where all workers will enjoy decent homes and surroundings. The apartments are tilted at angles specified to permit a maximum of sunlight. Each house is so placed that the living quarters face the ocean and the blank ends face the prevailing wind, which is frequently too violent for comfort. The diagonal placing of the units was developed to increase car maneuverability on the access roads and to gain privacy for the tenants.

CUT TO:

3A. INT. MODERNIST APARTMENT - DAY

Black-and-white wide shot into a 1940s-style, modernist living room with a view into a dining bay. The apartment has large panoramic windows and is equipped with simple, modern, yet very special-looking furniture made of wood. An easy chair made of plywood and plastic strap webbing is prominently placed in the frame. The kitchen table is laid out for two. Together with a bowl of fruit, two lit candles, and a vase with flowers, the set-up creates a photogenic still life.

MAN'S VOICE
(reporter, voiceover)

Following the teachings of the Bauhaus movement, local products have been used wherever possible. Colors are lively blue-greens, and rust reds, with touches of deep wine red and occasional cadmium yellow. Rugs are reversible jute, with narrow stripes of color, varying from room to room. Furniture wood is white pine, bleached a light blond and finished with two coats of lacquer. Note particularly the two easy chairs--one with arms and one without--that skip the whole problem of substitutes for steel springs with the aid of five fabric straps and a loose cushion. A number of fundamentally sensitive architects have testified that they are comfortable. Each tenant can supplement by adding color through hangings, spreads, throw cushions, and other incidental items chosen according to his taste. The easy chair was constructed to eliminate all doubtful upholstery substitutes. In manufacture, it runs as low as \$9.50 and will replace in wear and comfort an upholstered chair for \$30. The small room sizes make it difficult to get optimum use of space

(MORE)

MAN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

without having furniture directly designed to fit restricted areas. Therefore, much consideration has been given to traffic lines, to door swings, to the location of electric outlets, and to all those factors which determine proper size and placement of furniture.

CUT TO:

3B. INT. MODERNIST APARTMENT - DAY

Black-and-white medium close-up shot of a young woman (very attractive, about thirty years old, pinned-up brunette hair). She is wearing a 1940s-style white blouse with padded shoulders, tucked in the high waist of an A-line skirt.

TENANT
(enthusiastically, to reporter)

I had never realized before how much we live by our senses, and how pleasant a good design can make that living. What is visible and what is not; from where and how the light falls, and on what; what good illumination really means--all these count so much on maintaining a "balance of nerves." I don't understand all the technicalities of rheostatic control and gradual intensification, but I can tell you that headaches and eyestrain are forgotten ills at our house. And so are colds. Sometimes I think the best thing of all is our extensive heat-radiating floor and ceiling. No attempt is made at our house to "heat and moisten a large volume of air," and then to live in that stuffy blanket. And it does make a difference if the whole neighborhood is planned, as well. Practically, we don't live on a street at all, but on a park; no windows open onto anything but our own grounds.

CUT TO:

3C. EXT. MODERNIST HOUSING COMPLEX - DAY

Black-and-white establishing shot of one- and two-story modernist housing units surrounded by a beautiful, sloping, landscaped outdoor area. The complex seems new, and the small trees and bushes recently planted. A park path winds its way through the frame in a picturesque manner. We see the back of a girl (blond, shoulder-length, disheveled hair, about six years old) on roller skates and a boy (about four years old, dark blond hair) passing by on a tricycle.

MAN'S VOICE
(reporter, voiceover)

The one-story, two-family house is more spaciouly conceived than the usual project unit. The three-bedroom apartment for example, is provided with seven closets, including a large storage enclosure in the kitchen and a smaller tool closet right outside the door. The unusually wide bedroom closets with sliding doors have come to be regarded as the designing architect's trademark. The horizontally sliding windows are inexpensive and they are easy to maintain. A further improvement is the arrangement for privacy, with the

(MORE)

MAN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

windows of each apartment well screened from those of adjacent units. For those who claim that mass housing can have no individuality, that all housing projects must inevitably look alike, this project is instructive.

BACK TO

3D. INT. MODERNIST APARTMENT - DAY

Black-and-white medium shot of the young woman talking to the reporter. She is pointing demonstratively to the closets and cupboards to her left.

TENANT

The whole house is a cinch to keep tidy. For one thing, look at all the closets and cupboards we have. Believe me, things can't get lost in this house, nor is there any excuse for not putting them away. The whole theory of storage has changed so much since you and I were growing up. At that point we didn't use many things every day, but we had reams of "static possessions" of almost mystical nature, which were dug out--usually after some searching--on rare occasions or never at all. Our pleasure came not from using these things, but simply from the idea that they were there and that they were ours. Remember all that venerable china and silver that our mother cherished, and the sets of stemware, and the treasure chests for things we didn't even look at from one season to the next. Even books used to be displayed behind leaded glass to impress everyone with their value. And remember those dark catch-alls known as hall closets, with umbrellas and baseball bats sharing honors with old magazines and limp sweaters and overcoats.

Now our belongings, which we value most because we can use them, are where we can find them fast. Out of sight, behind opaque rolling doors, we have sliding trays and drawers of transparent plastic so we can see at a glance what we want. As a double check against failing memories, our storage spaces are indexed. Even the bathroom--remember the old-fashioned, midget medicine chest and clothes hamper--has room for all the things needed to care for two small children. For a government project, this is incredible.

CUT TO:

3E. EXT. GARDEN CENTER - DAY

Establishing shot of a simple, modernist building structure with a plant dispensary, green nursery, and lath house. In the background of the rolling terrain, we see the distant harbor.

MAN'S VOICE
(reporter, voiceover)

The Garden Craft building is a pleasant invention: a center where tenants can learn landscaping and carry out what they learn. An inexpensive structure, it

(MORE)

MAN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

should pay off quickly regarding tenant morale. As a healthy contrast to the usual day-to-day work of the tenants, such a hobby should develop a high degree of interest among the people in the appearance of their gardens and the improvement of the project as a whole.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

SPRING 1944

3F. EXT. COMMUNITY MARKET - MORNING

Black-and-white wide shot of a group women chatting in front of the large glass façade of a supermarket--a modern building structure with a cantilevered roof and clerestory rear windows. The women (a buxom, little woman with a pug nose and blond pin curls, in her mid-forties; a tall, gaunt woman with red-rimmed eyeglasses, about thirty-five; and a middle-aged Mexican-American woman with a ruttled face) are dressed in simple, early 1940s everyday fashion, with knee-length, high-waisted skirts and functional pants. One of them (a pert and attractive-looking young woman in her late twenties) is wearing dungarees and a blue machinist's cap. In the background of the group we see bold, state-of-the-art aluminum lettering "COMMUNITY MARKET."

TENANT #1

Haven't we got some old farmers among us? Why couldn't some of us start planting vegetable gardens on our back plots to help tide things over, or even some flowers to pretty up the place a bit?

TENANT #2
(with a sneer)

Who wants to plant a garden, when you don't know if you are going to be leaving tomorrow, or maybe next week at the latest?

TENANT #3

Some of us gave up pretty nice homes to come out here. We aren't living here because we want to and we can't be responsible for the kind of people that happen to be living near us.

TENANT #2

Maybe we haven't given her the real reason yet. Isn't that right? At least where we come from, we've got something to say about who our neighbors are!

TENANT #1

I don't see what difference it makes as long as people are clean and friendly.

TENANT #3

But couldn't they put some American music on the radio once in a while? All I get on the one side is Mexican

(MORE)

Assembled from historic records: 1942–1962
Compilation and scenarios: Karina Nimmerfall

Voice of the architect composed from Richard Neutra texts and manuscripts. Permissions courtesy Dion Neutra, Architect © and Richard and Dion Neutra Papers, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

1940s modernist housing community based on historic descriptions and photographs of Richard Neutra's demolished Channel Heights housing project in San Pedro. Tenants' conversations inspired by Henry Kraus' book, *In the City was a Garden: A Housing Project Chronicle* (Renaissance Press: New York, 1951) – describing life and community in Channel Heights between 1942 and 1947.

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COLOPHON

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1953: Possible Scenarios of a Discontinued Future

Publisher: Reinhard Braun

Copy editing: Amy Klement

Design: Satz & Sätze, Graz

Fonts: Times CA, Neutraface, PT Mono

Papers: IQ Print 250g, Magno Gloss Star 115g, Munken Lynx 80g

Printer: Steirische Landesdruckerei, Graz

ISBN 978-3-902911-16-2

First edition 2015

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Vertrieb: Motto Berlin

www.mottodistribution.com

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available online at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

Publisher: Camera Austria

Lendkai 1, A-8020 Graz

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distribution@camera-austria.at

www.camera-austria.at/shop

43/(0)316/8155500

With the kind support of

Bundeskanzleramt Wien; Arts and Culture Division of the Federal Chancellery of Austria; Cultural Exchange Program for Fine Arts of the Berlin Cultural Senate, Los Angeles, Government of Upper Austria, Cultural Department

Thanks to

Doris Berger, Reinhard Braun, Simon Elliott (UCLA Library Special Collections), Thomas Hines, Wendy Kaplan and Lacy Simkowitz (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, LACMA), Norman M. Klein, Barbara Lamprecht, Sarah Lorenzen and Robert Alexander (VDL Research House, Cal Poly Pomona College of Environmental Design), Jeff Luckey, Maren Lübke-Tidow, Sergio Muñoz Sarmiento, Travis Smith-Evans, Michelle Welsing (Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California).

Special thanks to

Dion Neutra, Raymond Neutra

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