

Observer nurtured a deep passion for L.A.

Architectural historian celebrated 'Surfurbia'

Reyner Banham loved Los Angeles. When he died March 19, of cancer at age 66, Southern California lost one of its most perceptive observers. If he was also a dim-sighted apologist at times, well, who could ask a true lover to openly criticize the object of his passion?

It took Banham, a British architectural historian and critic, to identify the quintessentially American uniqueness of Los Angeles.

His book, "Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies," had an enormous impact immediately upon its appearance in 1971. In it, he argued that the old, European model of the rational and livable urban environment was useless in any study of Southern California. A new model, of an equally rational and perhaps even more livable city, would be necessary.

In his own field of architectural history, Banham's most influential concept was that the city could be examined as an integrated whole — not as a series of independent monuments, but as a system, or a set of systems. By that measure LA could be seen as "one of the world's leading cities."

His "four ecologies" hardly need more explanation than their names: Surfurbia (the beaches), Foothills (from Pacific Palisades to Monrovia), The Plains of Id (that's us) and, intertwined among all the rest like a vast irrigation system or the electron routes of a computer motherboard, Autopia.

Each of these, he showed, has seen its own, uniquely Angeleno development — a development which was the fulfillment of "the dream of the urban homestead, the dream of a good life outside the squalors of the European type of city."

Banham also was among the first, as Paul Goldberger wrote in his obituary in The New York Times last week, "to give the same degree of attention to the architecture of the everyday landscape that scholars give to monuments and cathedrals."

From this perspective Banham was able to see, for instance, that Southern Californians have radically reinterpreted such a traditional architectural element as the front drive of the house. He noted that, psychologically, an LA trip is only as long as the time we spend on a freeway; the drive on surface streets is no more to us than a leisurely amble up to the house or business.

"Coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors," he wrote. "A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one's destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway."

It wasn't only architecture specialists who read "The Architecture of Four Ecologies," the most famous of his four books and numerous articles.

Banham's writing was accessible and, when he wanted it to be, quite funny. He coupled this style with a wide-ranging curiosity and knowledge. The bibliography of "Four Ecologies," for example, cites mystery and science fiction novels, Hollywood films, artists' books by Ed Ruscha and an Eldridge Cleaver story in Playboy among the more predictable architecture books and essays.

As a result, his influence is felt today in geography, history, literary and art scholarship, as well as in the most casual of coffeehouse analyses of life in SoCal.

At a time of widespread criticism of Los Angeles for its unplanned growth and total obsession with the automobile, Banham declared the history of planning "a giant wastebin of sumptuously forgotten paper projects" and pointed out that a pattern of roads could be "more characteristic than any building type of the San Fernando Valley."

Reading Banham, one wonders at times how anyone could have been so blind to the problems here, even — perhaps especially

On Art

Charles Desmarais



— in the Los Angeles of 17 years ago. He felt that to limit the proliferation of tacky signs and billboards in LA "would be like depriving San Gimignano of its towers or the City of London of its Wren steeples."

He couldn't understand complaints about traffic jams — didn't London have hold-ups on the suburban railways? — and dismissed concerns about smog because "for the concentration to be high enough to make the corners of my eyes itch painfully is rare in my personal experience."

And he couldn't have known what new challenges his favorite city would face in less than two decades: that his beloved freeways would be nearing total gridlock; that the dominant, Europe-based society which had shaped things thus far would be peering down the barrel of a demographic shotgun.

The book is dated — even a little quaint — with its references to hippies and people wanting to "do their thing."

But the pride Banham fostered through his seminal book has played a major role in the development of our image of ourselves, directly affecting the work of artists and writers and architects. The lasting effect of his thought has been a re-evaluation of the worth of Southern California, and a source of the cultural vitality which has made our region a world center of ideas and art.

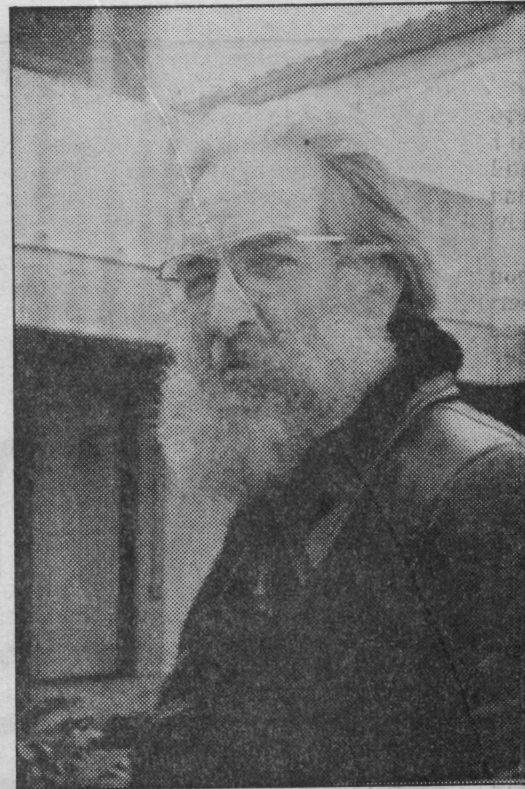
"(The) sense of possibilities still ahead," he wrote, "is part of the basic lifestyle of Los Angeles. It is, I suspect, what still brings so many creative talents to this palm-girt littoral — and keeps most of them here."

Banham was professor emeritus of art history at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

• • •

In a world where power is so often seized by brutal force, one is thankful for the rare instance of inherent, self-assured potency. The sculptural installations of Mineko Grimmer consistently provide such instances.

At the center of a spare gallery, Grim-



The Associated Press

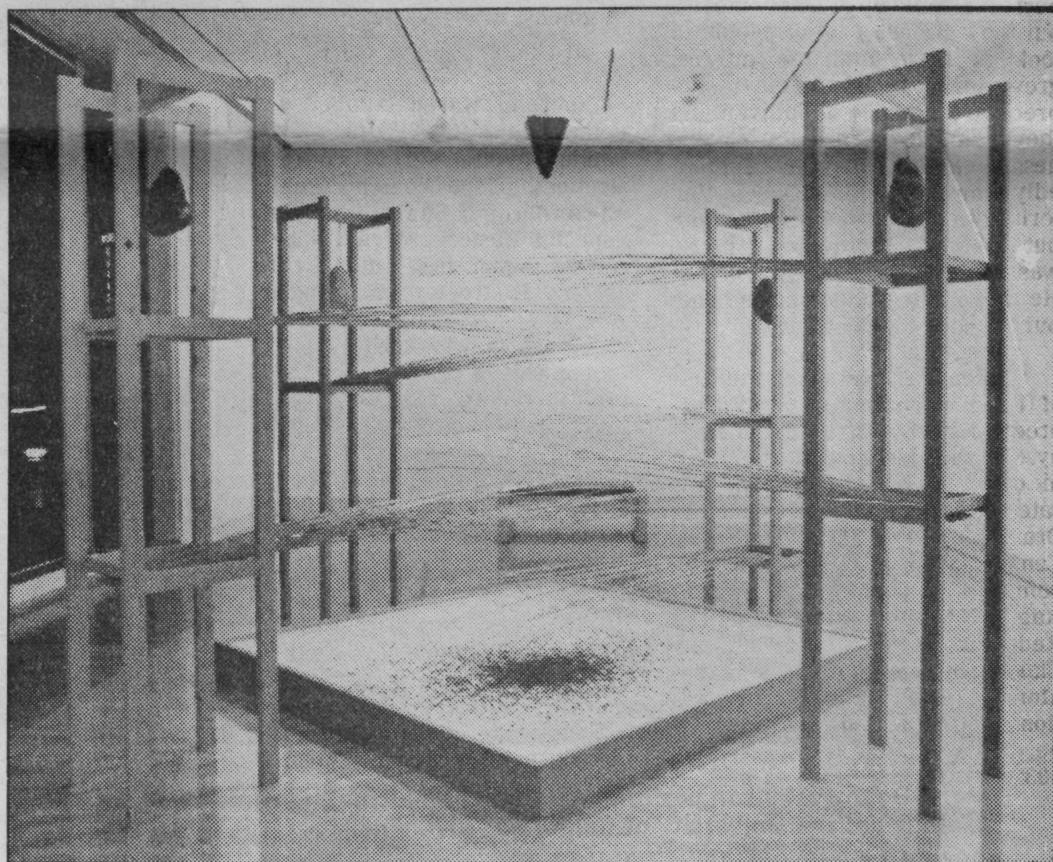
Reyner Banham: "A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one's destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway."

mer's newest piece, "Symposium," stands, spotlighted, steadily filling the room with its bare music.

Technically, the work is simple: a block of ice, studded with gravel, hangs over a small pool. As the ice melts the stones embedded in it fall out, some falling directly into the water, some clattering against the bamboo poles cantilevered over the pool.

The stark visual elegance of the structure, built by the Japanese-born Grimmer using traditional joinery techniques, and the piece's meditative sounds refresh the mind and cleanse the spirit. Once again we're ready for the tougher and meaner, if no stronger, work which abounds.

Mineko Grimmer's "Symposium" and other works are at Koplín Gallery, 8225½ Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, through April 16. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. (213) 656-3378.



STEVEN RUBIN

"Symposium," a sculptural installation by Mineko Grimmer consists of melting ice, gravel, bamboo, wood and water.