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Ezgi İşbilen

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Essay

Desert Dreams and Techno-Utopian Nightmares

The Complex History of California City and the Colonial Gaze Toward the Desert

Ezgi İşbilen
Bilkent University

Despite being some of the harshest environments to design for and inhabit, deserts are considered some of the most malleable in our imagination. Countless military bases, proving grounds, gunneries, and practice fields that simulate other locales prove that in military imagination, deserts are nondescript proxy spaces waiting to be filled with the character of whatever location they are to imitate. The developers' imagination is not far behind. Through a historical case study of California City, an ambitiously planned but only partially built desert development project, and unpacking of the terms "desert" and "wasteland," this essay examines the colonial gaze towards the desert that often shapes our perceptions of this unique environment and exposes the fallacies in our thinking that lead us to imagine deserts as a blank slate waiting to be transformed. The paper also highlights the dangers of overconfidence in technology to create techno-utopias and the need to acknowledge the reality of the desert's harsh environment in any planning or development.

Keywords: California City, desert, wasteland, colonial gaze, technocratic solutions

Despite being some of the harshest environments to design for and inhabit, deserts are considered some of the most malleable in our imagination. Countless military bases, proving grounds, gunneries, and practice fields that simulate other locales prove that in military imagination, deserts are nondescript proxy spaces waiting to be filled with the character of whatever location they are to imitate. The developers' imagination is not far behind. This essay unpacks some of our misconceptions and thinking fallacies that prevent us from capturing deserts' reality through a historical case study of an ambitiously planned but only partially built desert city.

California City is located in the Mojave Desert, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. By land area, it is the third largest city in California and the eleventh in the US. It is a legal entity, and a fragment of it houses a small community. However, its population is minuscule in comparison with its land area. This "urban" environment is dominated by empty streets, which bear pretentious names borrowed from American car companies or Ivy League schools (Figure 1). The story of California City and its designers' conceptions demonstrate how environmental constraints trigger a self-colonial mindset, making the desert effectively an outlaw territory.[1] The scarcity of resources triggers an absolute utilitarianism in which people are as much a resource as water or shade. Architecture is reduced to a branding practice obsessed with matching iconic images to mechanical solutions.

A Short History of Land Use in the Mojave Desert

The American West is both a geographical region and a mythic concept. It was the last frontier, the closing of which Frederic Turner announced as the end of an era in American history.[2] This era of 'American Progress' was visually depicted in a widely circulated print by John Gast.[3] In it, the mythic figure of Columbia takes a westward stroll laying railroad and telegraph lines on the way. The homesteaders push the Natives, and farmers tame the west. This history of progress, entangled with the American identity, was a myth that did not match the reality of the challenge of taming a land that is so poor in water and so rich in salt.[4] "Greening the desert" was a kind of Christian ideal.[5] However, in the words of Walter Prescott Webb, the West was "a semidesert with a desert heart," whose soul was too dark to be genuinely converted.[6]

Figure 1. Satellite image of the uninhabited part of California City with streets drawn in the desert sand. Image © Google Maps.

The challenge Webb described with a religious analogy was due to the natural conditions that determine life in the West differentiating it from the east of the 100th meridian, where American institutions, orientations, and habits of thought assumed applicable for the West were originally developed.[7] For homesteaders in the West, the quarter-section unit of land area, which was an adequate size in the farmlands of Iowa or the prairies of Wisconsin, was "a mathematical expression whose meanings in relation to agricultural settlement were disastrous."[8] Moreover, due to the scarcity of water and the unreliable precipitation patterns, the equation of the proper land size for agricultural settlement could not be solved without including the variable of location.[9] In the West, small but strategically located plots along rivers could close off the access to critical resources and render large stretches of land uninhabitable. Bernard Devoto argues that the sum of institutional and regulatory changes required to make the westward expansion work "was so great that the American Mind did not take it in—and went on believing that there must be some way of 'defeating' climate or that climate would adapt itself to men's desires."[10] This cognitive impasse marks the history of the American West. Nevertheless, the "messianic" efforts to "convert" the desert made the first and most prominent land divisions.

Other decisive lines were drawn by the railroads. In 1870s, the Southern Pacific Railroad forged tracks through the area. The federal government granted the railroad corporation alternating sections of land on each side of the rail line for the construction and maintenance of the railroad, "carving the landscape into the pattern colloquially described as the 'checkerboard'."[11] This checkerboard development selectively displaced the Native population along the railways route, and dotted it with towns, some of which make up the longest standing "official" settlements in most of the desert.[12] The Indigenous populations, which had their own settlements, trade routes, cultural alliances, traditions, and ceremonies, were violently displaced, disconnected from each other, and often isolated from the vital resources they required.

While mining activity precedes the railroads by two decades, until the railroad connection the mining camps, some lingering, others ephemeral, were isolated frontier outposts. Although their environmental and social footprints were huge, at times deadly, for the local Indigenous populations whose vital resources they extracted, with miniscule financial significance and long-distance dispersion these mining posts were far from an organized effort that systematically shaped the desert ecosystem. Motivated by the advantages of mining discoveries along their service routes, railroad companies did not only increase accessibility and connection to the larger commercial networks but actively promoted new sites, increasing their detrimental environmental and social impact.[13]

The Great Depression renewed interest in mining. In the 1930s, many mines were discovered, and

old ones were reworked. From the mid to late 1930s, two major east-west highways and most major desert roads were constructed.[14] Large areas were set aside as park-lands. With the rise of aircraft, first as reconnaissance tools and later, upon fitting with machine guns, as a significant tactical weapon for aerial warfare, came military interest in the desert. The lack of vegetation, high visibility, and the year-around clear skies were considered ideal for pilot training. In 1933, the Muroc Bombing and Gunnery Range, which eventually became the Edwards Air Force Base, was established on the east side of Rogers Dry Lake.[15]

A second wave of homesteaders headed for the desert after the Small Tract Act of 1938, a federal government program that offered to lease "up to five acres of public land for recreational purpose or use as a home, cabin, camp, health, convalescent, or business site to 'able-bodied' U.S. citizens."[16] Unlike the original homesteaders, the act did not require people to live off the land, and the only requirement for claiming the land was improving it with a small dwelling within three to five years of the lease. This popular midcentury homestead movement illustrates the American desire to claim territory and possess a piece of land, even if the area in question is nearly 'worthless' from an economic and governmental perspective.[17]

The perception of the desert as a 'worthless' wasteland goes hand in hand with the one that sees it as a limitless resource waiting to be tapped. The Small Tract Act shows this dynamic. The wasteland for which the state had no use was offered to individuals for a financial return, and the individuals who acquired the land also did so for a financial return. Although it gave many renters a chance to acquire land, very few dwelt in the desert, making these houses or, to be precise, their lands, pure financial instruments.

The perception of the desert as an abstract resource is also evident in the military activity in the 1940s, through which its popularity continued, this time as proxy enemy territory. With the entry of the US into World War II in December 1941, the US Army was faced with the need to train many men for combat quickly. The Axis occupation of North Africa required the Allied forces to be trained in desert warfare.[18] The vast and "deserted" land of the Mojave Desert, which the motion picture industry had often used as a backdrop for its 'Arabian' desert movies, was the perfect candidate for the training center.[19] While the army mission in North Africa only lasted for six months, and the Desert Training Center's operation officially lasted twenty-five months, "as U.S. military troops trained nearby, in mock Middle Eastern villages at the Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center," the desert's status of proxy enemy territory continued well into the twenty-first century.[20]

With the end of WWII and the transition from warfare to a welfare economy, the military presence in the desert was subdued. However, the void was filled with the developer's imagination, which competed with the Army in the scale of its operations, and in its capacity to fetishize the desert as a vast resource waiting to be tapped.

The Birth of California City

The birth of California City coincides with the invention of urban design as a discipline through a series of conferences held in 1956 at Harvard Graduate School of Design, which heralded their urban design program.[21] While the history of urban design can be traced back much earlier, the urban design conference at Harvard was a turning point for the recognition of urban design as a field of practice.[22] Many of the contributors discussed the troubles of suburbanization. José Luis Sert, the dean of Harvard University Graduate School of Design, mentioned how the city was seen as the hotbed of all evil, while "everything good and healthy has become suburbanite."[23] Sert stated that "to solve the problems of the cities… city planners turned their backs to them." However, as Sert later added, "the uncontrolled sprawl of our communities only aggravates their problems, and… the solution lies in reshaping the city as a whole. The necessary process is not one of decentralization, but one of recentralization."[24]

In the same conference, Jane Jacobs criticized the planners' inadequacy in creating vitality in the newly designed suburbs and commented that "some very important sides of city life, much of the charm, the creative social activity, and the vitality shift over to the old vestigial areas because there is literally no place for them in the new scheme of things." To which she added: "This is a ludicrous situation, and it ought to give planners the shivers."[25] From a similar perspective, Lewis Mumford criticized "the absolute folly of creating a physical structure at the price of destroying the intimate social structure of a community's life," and Francis Violich complained, among other things, of the "engineering mentality" and the "frontier mentality."[26] But no one marked the troubles that suburbs posed for the city as succinctly as David L. Lawrence, Mayor of Pittsburgh, who stated that "civilization cannot be a string of country villas, or a sprawl across the landscape of incomplete satellites revolving around nothing."[27] Such was the intellectual landscape of urban design on the East Coast. In contrast, the West Coast constituted a fertile field of experimentation.

California City was founded by Nat Mendelsohn, a Columbia-educated sociologist who specialized in rural demography and mass migration. During the Second World War, he worked at the Office of Price Administration in Washington, DC, estimating rural income. He became aware of the population boom in California and the opportunities postwar military downsizing offered through his work. He moved to the West Coast to try his luck in property development. In the late

Figure 2. Opening day in California City, 1958. Photographer unknown. *American Heritage New Pictorial Encyclopedic Guide to the United States* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965).

1940s, he transformed Camp Anza in Riverside, CA, from a decommissioned military camp to a civilian residential neighborhood.[28] Later, he collaborated with M. Penn Phillips, the famous developer of Salton City, to develop the town of Hesperia.

The postwar economic optimism and the success of Mendelsohn's early real estate projects on the fringes of the metropolis gave Mendelsohn confidence in his understanding of urbanization. He believed people would eventually escape the disorder and problems of the densely populated cities such as Los Angeles and San Diego, which were too big to fix. New cities designed and built with the latest tools and methods could avoid the problems of overgrown metropolises and offer the eventual "overflow of people" an ideal city life. California City, a new city to be built in the Mojave Desert, was conceived with such a premise.

California City is located about a hundred miles (~160 km) north of Los Angeles and sixty-seven miles (100 km) southeast of Bakersfield, the closest urban settlement. It is neighboring two private campuses, Edwards Air Force Base and Borax Industrial Mining Facility.[29] The last stretch of Twenty Mule Road, a historic route which was frequented by twenty-mule teams carrying mined borate across Death Valley to the railway connection point in Mojave, passes through California City.

Mendelsohn founded the California City Development Company, which started purchasing desert land in 1956. In May 1958, the first parcels of a future city were sold (Figure 2). Land sales continued in the following years, but few settled in the city. As of 1960, the town recorded 8,000 landowners but only 500 residents.[30] Despite promising reports that Mendelsohn sent the residents throughout the project's early years, listing the company's accomplishments, plans, and the town's coverage in local and regional press, the low settlement rate continued. The hopeful tone of these reports lingers in the name locals call the unbuilt parts of the city—the "second community," after the people who might come one day.

Mendelsohn believed the availability of water, the critical resource for self-sustenance in the desert, was enough to attract the masses. He first targeted the homemaking middle class and, later, retirees, who he imagined were looking for endless recreation. Members of both groups bought land, but neither flocked to the town in masses. This may seem natural in retrospect; however, the city's remote location was considered an asset at its conception.

During the Second World War, the US assembled an interdisciplinary committee of experts known as the US Strategic Bombing Survey. They were tasked with analyzing and consulting the strategic bombing of Germany to target crucial industrial facilities and halt Germany's war efforts. After the war ended, they continued their analysis of the effects of nuclear bombing in Japan. By some mysterious mechanism, the committee's analysis turned to the US. They evaluated it as a potential target of nuclear attacks.[31] Their reports cautioned that the concentration of critical industrial facilities and large urban settlements made the US vulnerable to similar attacks. They advised dispersion. In 1951, one of their reports stated: "Space is the only thing that works."[32]

Dispersion was critical for the Northeast and Midwest, which were the centers of industrial production. However, government incentives such as tax reductions and credits generated a nationwide interest in the program. Eligible dispersion plans were made for almost the whole nation. In the years that followed, the American landscape became predominantly suburban with the addition of several satellite communities. "California City was one of many places where capital derived from tax credits and supporting funds were condensed in the form of a town. It was the residue of a complex set of transactions, calcified on the desert ground."[33]

Designers of the Desert City

Three major sets of architectural designers worked on California City in consecutive and partially overlapping periods: (1) Whitney Smith and Wayne Williams, (2) Konrad Wachsmann, and (3) Robert Venturi

Figure 3. The "creation myth" for California City. Sketch by Stan Repp (1961). Smith & Williams records, Architecture and Design Collection. Art, Design & Architecture Museum; University of California, Santa Barbara, Smith and Williams: 770 California City, 46/1518 IV.D.

and Denise Scott Brown. They delivered distinct ideas and visions which can hardly be recognized in the city today. In 1956, the California City Development Company hired the architecture firm of Whitney Smith and Wayne Williams, landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, and urban planner Simon Eisner to produce a master plan for California City. This team worked on the total design of the city for two years. Their design work spanned from the scale of street signs to the town's infrastructure.

The absence of external geographic references and the resulting "superficial neutrality" challenged the designers. With only the size of the land and the planned number of residents as data, they faced an arithmetic and geometric problem of land division. To redefine their challenge in terms more resembling a design problem, Smith and Wayne came up with a creation myth for the city that builds on the prevailing myth of 'American Progress' associated with the American West long ago. In a series of expressively rendered drawings produced by Stan Repp in 1961, they represented the discovery of the settlement as Old California meets the freeway (Figure 3).[34] In the absence of place, they imagined it as a temporal meeting point between past and future. The concept renderings showing their vision for the city are equally constructed. While their vision was internally coherent as a world-building practice, its lushness and green expanse do not comply with the reality of the desert environment (Figure 4).

Smith and Wayne's renderings center on the recreational facilities of the city. In a modernist fashion, they believed the measure of successful city planning was the facilities for recreation and well-being. In the absence of housing, they "generated comprehensive guidelines for future development, executed through deed restrictions and covenants."[35] In the 1960s, "California City became not so much a thriving community but a compelling proxy for it."[36] Instead of the physical environment, architects produced a plethora of documents, images, drawings, and guidelines that substituted it.

Sometime in 1960, Mendelsohn commissioned Konrad Wachsmann, a German émigré architect, with whom he worked during his first stab at real estate at Camp Anza. Wachsmann arranged the division of army barracks into smaller units of housing and community spaces. Erstwhile the chief architect at Christoph & Unmack, one of Europe's largest prefabricated timber construction companies, Wachsmann had specialized in army barracks and temporary structures. His experience working with military organizations was not limited to interwar Germany. He was also one of the architects of the German Village, which replicated the contemporary residential buildings in German urban industrial districts in a military proving ground in Utah for testing incendiary bombs prior to largescale attacks near the end of the Second World War.[37]

Mendelsohn commissioned Wachsmann with a monthly retainer. However, they did not set any terms of employment. Wachsmann was not commissioned for a predesignated plot or program. Instead, Mendelsohn asked what he would propose for the community. Though he received various documents, plans, reports, and promotional materials that the development company sent, Wachsmann did not have the chance to discuss these with Mendelsohn or the design team for months. He first considered an ambitious plan that starts with analyzing the regional plan and developing "a city planning project" which will include "general research for civic centers, business centers, industrial areas," as well as organizing the "distribution of traffic, walkways, green belts, schools and hospitals."[38] Due to political and practical reasons, Wachsmann eventually settled on designing a civic center on a preconfigured site (Figure 5).[39]

In the California City Civic Center project, Wachsmann aimed at creating a "complete open space, neither disturbed nor penetrated by any kind of column or support either inside or at the perimeter, to create an 'ultimate' space."[40] Under the building's generous roof, "spaces can be created as needed, increasing as the

Figure 4. Smith and Williams, concept rendering of the recreational center of California City's first community. Smith & Williams records, Architecture and Design Collection. Art, Design & Architecture Museum; University of California, Santa Barbara, Smith and Williams: California City collection, Box 46, Folder 1521.

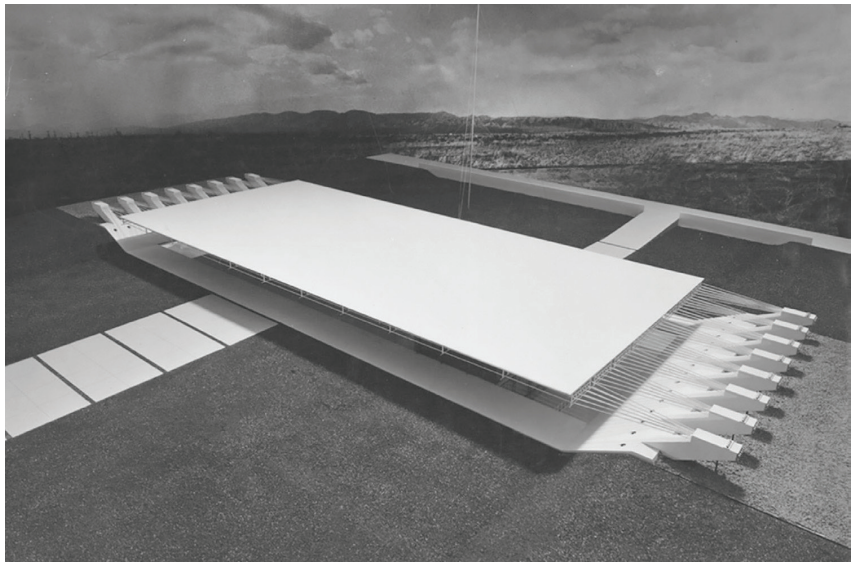

Figure 5. Konrad Wachsmann, California City Civic Center project, 1966–72. ©Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Konrad-Wachsmann-Archiv, Nr. 140/14. Courtesy of Ray Wachsmann.

city grows."[41] The building would be a piece of infrastructure for the sparsely built California City. The few programmatic spaces under the roof were placed underground to allow the building's profile to act as a framework for partitioning in the future.

Wachsmann interpreted his task as designing the city hall of a new community, which, in the vast desert and the optimistic atmosphere of the postwar economy, would know no limits to its growth. His primary response was creating a large open space. However, to cultivate a functional democratic society, a "lifeline of communication" that delivers "the spoken word at the council meeting, the accompanying gesture of speaking person expressing his thoughts" to every house of the community was needed.[42] He integrated the infrastructure of the new medium of communication in the building.[43] The building became a Civic Center that the residents would not visit to engage in city politics; instead, the building ensured that they would stay away and listen to it from a safe distance. The building is an unintended confession of the fact that most landowners were unlikely to become residents.

In 1965, California City was incorporated as a municipal service district under the control of the development company. The first elected mayor was a former sales associate named Jim Riley. According to a *California Sun* article published in 1963, the Riley family represented the city at every venue.[44] Under Riley's leadership, the council rubber-stamped the plans that the development company had made half a decade earlier. Soon after incorporation, the council floated bonds for the construction of municipal infrastructure, including golf courses, a park, a lake, and even an island. Mendelsohn's personal correspondence shows that financing the development via bonds was planned as early as 1960: "the first $400,000 of [one million dollar] bonds were purchased by the Bank of America on the basis of a 20 year period at an average rate of interest of 5%."[45]

After securing the financing, Mendelsohn ran a new round of promotion. Unlike earlier, when the salespeople were pitching an opportunity to get in on a dream project at cheap rates with the story of a future city complete with a university, healthcare facilities, and light industry, the new campaign advertised California City as a functioning city and a holiday destination. Pictures of the lake, golf courses, pools, and recreational infrastructure dominated the promotional matter. Wachsmann's design was part of this second campaign.

In 1969, Mendelsohn and his associates sold the development company to Great Western United Corporation, a Denver-based sugar and mining company. Mendelsohn became an officer of the new parent company but concentrated on pursuits away from California City. At thirty-one years of age, Great Western United Corporation's young CEO William White, a "precocious Wall Street wheeler and dealer," conglomerated distinct businesses in mining, sugar production, and land development, invested in restaurant chains, and in "creative marketing" adventures.[46] But his adventures did not go as planned. In 1970, only a year after its founding, the company reported a thirty-five percent decline in its earnings.[47] The land sales in California and Colorado recorded most of them. A year later, Mendelsohn left the company for good.[48]

In crisis management mode, White centralized corporate management in Denver. Land development proved worthy of investment as the only profitable operation amidst financial turbulence. Hoping to attract more buyers, White commissioned new architects. He hired Venturi & Rauch, better known today by the firm's later adopted name Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates. Their vision cast a stark contrast against their predecessors' works. Robert Venturi, the firm's founding partner, was a loud critic of corporate modernism and its architectural ideals of simplicity, order, and unity.

Venturi criticized architects for designing for the future at the expense of today. For him, the industrial scaffolds designed without symbols and ornaments were empty gestures. He also disdained the "misplaced technological zeal"—technological sophistication passing for architecture.[49] He argued that many elegant structural systems, though efficiently relating stress to material and economically spanning large industrial buildings, failed to keep to their budget for programs of more prosaic and ordinary architectural commissions.[50] To counter, he argued for a "pop architecture" that makes necessity a virtue, favors the immediate over the speculative, and does not claim technological advancement beyond its means:

> Architecture always relates to practice before speculation. Like the politician, the architect is expedient because he deals with things as they are. As an artist, he is the maker whose impetus comes from the immediate over the speculative. His question is 'Does it?' rather than 'Ought it?' His visions are only incidentally visionary. This inherent dichotomy is exaggerated today.[51]

In 1968, Venturi and Scott Brown published "A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas," which celebrated learning from the existing landscape as a revolutionary act.[52] The following fall, they took the students of their graduate architectural design studio at Yale to Las Vegas to perform the revolutionary act of studying the commercial strip, a component of the automobile-oriented sprawl found at the fringes of most American cities. For Denise Scott Brown, Las Vegas was to the commercial strip what Rome was to the piazza. Once architects stop pretending to be the gatekeepers of taste and culture and start focusing on the ordinary and mundane, they would learn from the strip as much as from the piazza. *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), which publicized some of

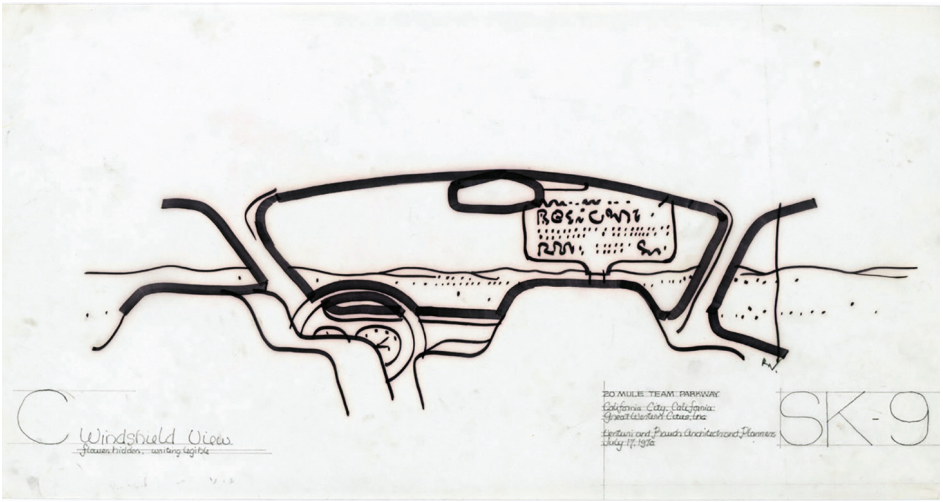

Figure 6. Twenty Mule Team Parkway, windshield view, July 17, 1970. California City Project, 1970–71. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

the stickiest terminologies of twentieth-century architectural criticism, grew out of their Las Vegas studio.

The duck and the decorated shed comprise the book's most prominent additions to architectural criticism. The duck category included buildings in which signs and buildings are amalgamated, manifested as big signs for small buildings. They argued that a large, detached sign and a small conventional building would function just as well. The architecture of the strip and the archetype of commercial architecture demonstrated a cheaper and more practical solution.

In 1970, when White hired the firm to design some public facilities necessary to attract potential buyers, they immediately started studying California City. An office memo from this period reveals their criticism of Wachsmann's proposal for the Civic Center. The memo read:

> The architectural scale of the building is deceptive and therefore not a little ridiculous since its method of construction implies the size and span of a dirigible hangar yet its real size is that of a medium supermarket; the real building will not look like the picture.[53]

Their proposal showed the city perceived from a moving car passing through the city. They redesigned the Twenty Mule Road as a path with a series of stops, where "the salesman could pause with his clients to recite another chapter in his sales pitch."[54] In the fashion of the blazing signposts of decorated ducks, Scott Brown designed brightly colored advertising boards featuring flowers native to the area on top and advertisements of the amenities and businesses of California City at a lower height. Corporate management immediately embraced the signposts. White was even inspired. He announced a new "creative marketing" idea:

> Why not have the signs going out to Galileo hill blank as you drive out? It might be a very interesting technique to have the people on the bus see the blank backs of signs, be unable to twist around and read them and be teased by wondering what they saw.[55]

The architects rejected this suggestion, for it would mean giving up the opportunity for delightfully positive image-building communication through flowers, and they added that it would look like a mess. In Las Vegas, the architects had observed, "If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway."[56] Similarly, the boards they designed for California City did not signal places. Instead, they substituted for them for the subject viewing it at driving speed (Figure 6). The "delightfully positive image-building" was precisely that, image-building for a nonexistent, therefore unimaginable, city.

Venturi and Scott Brown proposed an alternative civic center. They initially thought of "replicating Eiffel tower in 7/8th scale to bring renown to [the] city."[57] Eventually, they devised an equally imposing proposal: a 90'x90'x90' reflective glass cube sitting on a flowerbed in the flat desert (Figure 7). They also suggested transforming the site to deviate from the ubiquitous grid of the city. With a circular plaza, with buildings in its center, and streets radiating from it, this scheme suggested monumentality. In a meeting in August 1970, the firm emphasized that "the design proposed would not be a building but a monument of glass."[58]

Learning from California City

Neither the lush recreational city center Smith and Wayne proposed, nor the free, open, and protected Civic Center Wachsmann designed without any structural elements that would limit its growth meet the desert where it is. The former projected an imported aesthetics onto the desert ground. The latter implies a dream space exempt from gravity. With the TV tower and broadcasting, it also implies a space that is free of spatial hierarchies. While criticizing their predecessors' inattention to context, Venturi and Scott Brown designed with a similarly "placeless" mindset.

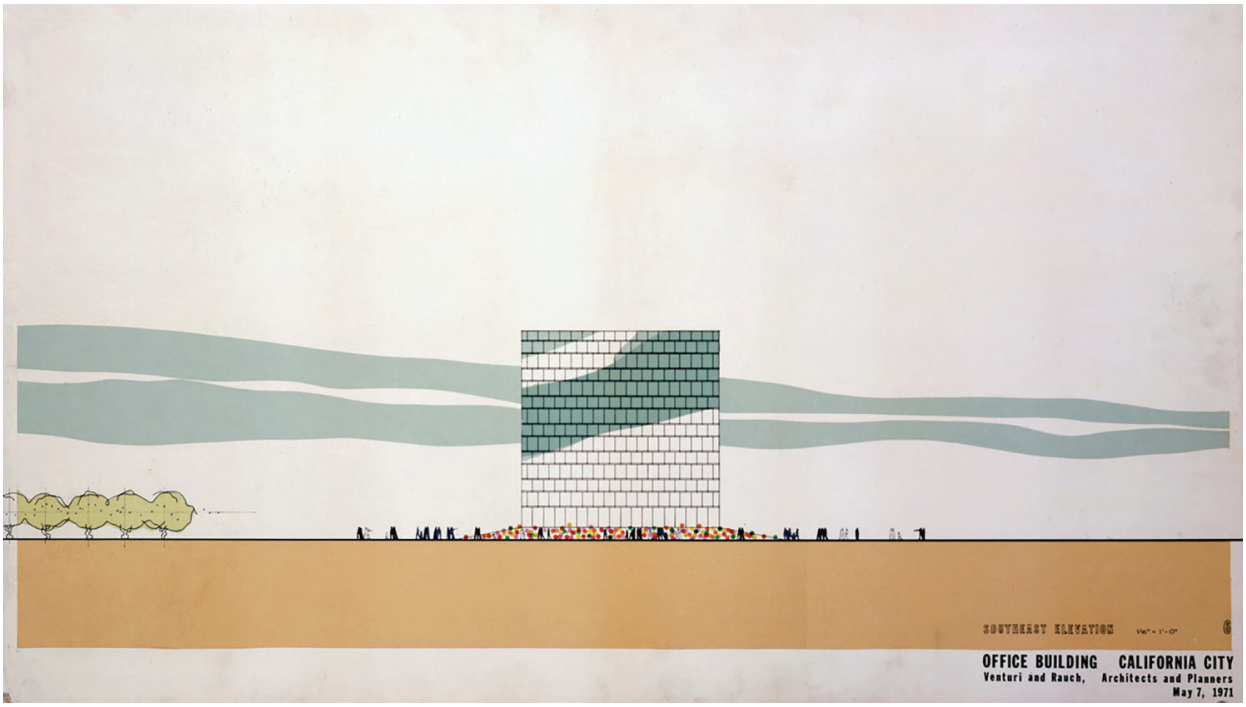

Figure 7. Office building, southeast elevation, May 7, 1971, California City Project, 1970–71. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Their composition of signs along the highway, paired with secondary and generic buildings, and their proposals for a civic center, as a scaled replica of the Eiffel Tower and the monumental glass box, were equally dismissive of the context. Their attention to context was limited to utilizing the natural flora and history of the Twenty Mule Road for advertising and marketing purposes.

Why did these figures, holding distinctly different disciplinary positions, all fail to incorporate the land into their proposals? The various representations of the city's most utilitarian and symbolic structures they produced had been the subject of intense speculation and professional rivalries, yet none got built. In a sense, the architects' multimedia production, drawings, renderings, deeds, and descriptions eclipsed the production of buildings. The settlement never grew past a suburb, which, by definition, is a parasitic form dependent on other urban settlements.[59] The sociologist/developer's experiment in community building through land development failed.

Looking at their architectural proposals, one cannot help but think that the designers involved in the city at various times all attempted to ease and fasten movement across the city. Whether it was the movement of the passing salesmen or the speed at which the spoken word in a city council meeting made its way in the air, they were assisting an escape from this unfamiliar and hostile environment. Their disregard for the realities of the desert went as far as proposing a glass cube as a city hall—either a sour irony or a violent act that can be interpreted as a murder attempt. Despite the designers' immense confidence in their ability to transform it, the desert won. What is it about a "desert city" that makes it hard to imagine and even harder to build?

Starting from the second half of the compound, part of the problem was the supposed rational/economic nature of the city. This equates the city with its material manifestations: houses, roads, parks, buildings serving education, transportation, and government, which, then, given enough data about the number of residents and features of the site, can be designed to its finest detail and built respectively. However, cities are "willed artifacts."[60] The dynamics that govern their growth depend less on the quasi-natural law of economists than "the interplay of the conscious and unconscious that we find in dreams."[61] Moreover, neither the material entities that constitute the city, nor the agency of people whose will were to give them shape, can be conceived without the ground on which they stand, and the climate in which they live.

Deserts pose a particular challenge to the Western mind. The harshness of the environment justifies a level of abstraction that we reserve only for the desert. It is almost always taken as a technological challenge and a problem to be solved, inviting simple architectonic orders imposed on human societies and positing a level of abstraction that can reduce the people to another element in a system of resources and expenses. Mendelsohn chose the site based on two factors. One was

the availability of water, which he predicted based on the agricultural activity on the Mendiburu & Rudnick Ranch in the neighboring Boron Valley on the northeast of Mojave.[62] The ranch had cotton fields irrigated by high-producing water wells. The second factor was the "overflow" of people he expected from Los Angeles and San Diego. Unlike the movement of water, the desires and inclinations of people cannot be scientifically controlled. Many landowners did not become residents because they were waiting for the city to grow into the city they were shown in various architectural representations, realization of which was also dependent on growing the resident body and residential construction. It became a vicious cycle. Mendelsohn made the development company donate amenities, such as churches, schools, and an airport, to make it work, but buildings were not enough to engender the necessary "will" in people.

The trouble Mendelsohn had in inspiring people was related to the first part of the compound mentioned above: the desert. In the Western mind, the desert, as a metaphor, systematically empties the land of its defining features and resources. Mendelsohn's earliest statements paint California City "as a flat, undifferentiated surface, boundless and remote," which justified the opportunity and necessity for "an unprecedented level of total design and speculation."[63] British design historian Reyner Banham, a self-dubbed "desert freak," who also wrote a book on the Mojave Desert, saw the desert as a place for fantasies: "In a landscape where nothing officially exists (otherwise it would not be 'desert'), absolutely anything becomes thinkable, and may consequently happen."[64] Jean Baudrillard defined the desert as "a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points."[65] Such superficial neutrality cancels depth perception. It creates a false two-dimensional view, which Mendelsohn saw as a blank canvas waiting to be filled.[66]

In a small book titled *Lettered Cities*, Argentinian scholar Angel Rama discusses the desire for totally designed perfect cities, a popular mental practice among sixteenth-century reformists, seventeenth-century empiricists, and twentieth-century modernists. Rama argues that "colonialism" allowed for the pulling of these cities from the script into space.[67] Seeing the new world as "empty ground" to be cultivated, building a city from scratch becomes a novel practical possibility in the colonizer's eye. Though often inhabited and built, the ground of the new world, which had neither a legal nor cultural presence in the colonizer's view, is considered empty. While the American West is not a perfect parallel of the geographies Rama had in mind, both the attitude of approaching it with the expectations and policy tools developed in the east of the country and the ambiguous status of the land both as worthless and as a priceless resource to be tapped engender a similar dynamic. Following Rama's example, one can argue that the desert inflicts a self-colonial mindset, making it effectively a place of exception. What we associate with the desert, and more importantly what we have trouble associating with it, are culturally constructed. As Menna Agha tells regarding her homeland, the word desert, unknown in her native language, itself is a colonial tool invented by people of other geographies for dispossession.[68] Their categorization as abandoned and uninhabited territories make deserts fair game for repossession.[69]

Webb was on to something with the desert's "dark heart" mentioned earlier. His equation of the desert to a "wasteland" beyond saving is noteworthy. In *Wasteland: A History,* Vittoria Di Palma traced the word "wasteland" in the English language.[70] While the book is mainly about the English landscape, which does not contain any deserts, its linguistic exploration is illuminating about the Western conception of deserts. The term's earliest uses appeared "in the English versions of the *Old Testament, New Testament,* and *Lives of the Saints,* and used to translate the Latin *desertus* or *solitude*. *Desertus* (or *terra deserta*) and *solitudo* imply emptiness; they are lands characterized by absence."[71] Like the desert, the core characteristic of wasteland is the emptiness, which "gives the term its malleability, its potential for abstraction; a vacant shell, it lies ready to include all those kinds of places that are defined in negative terms, identified primarily by what they are not."[72]

Di Palma's linguistic excavation shows that *westen*, the common Old English precursor of "wasteland," had religious connotations: "In early versions of both the Old and New Testaments, the *westen* is a place of bodily danger and hardship" characterized by a harsh climate, lack of sustenance, and presence of threatening creatures. *Westen* tested both body and soul. To survive, one needs divine intervention, which requires "faith and submission to divine will."[73] The *westen* signifies both a place of trial and the site of redemption.[74]

In transition to Middle English, the noun *westen* is often replaced with *wast, which defines a noun and verb.* While *westen* and its successor *wasteland* both denote empty and desolate spaces, the latter also implies that the reason for emptiness is some improper use. The *wasteland* is a "wasted" space that can be saved.

Wasteland, the category to which deserts belong, is a cultural construct and a product of imagination. It is applied to landscapes rather than a characteristic derived from them. It provides "a foil to the notion of a benevolent, tractable, or pleasing landscape."[75] The presence of *wasteland* symbolized "God's wrath." Therefore, its redemption "was a sure path to salvation."[76]

California City constitutes a symbolic redemption of the wasted desert land. In the 1950s, its promise of redemption of souls meant an upward transfer into the homeowning

middle class. So high an ambition deserved the best efforts, tools, and methods. For the developer, this meant laying out an expanse of infrastructure in an enormous network of waterworks and roads. For the designers, it was the mechanical solutions to pump underground water to make and maintain an artificial lake, devising a column-free structure for flexible use of space, or equipping a city hall like a TV station to broadcast the spirit of democracy. Regardless of the nature of the problem, technology was the solution. Even when they supposedly started with the land, what they gathered from it was a set of images isolated and applied as signs in a communication network. If the colonial gaze bolstered by the culturally inherited moral imperative was one side of the coin, the other was an unmeasured confidence in technology, the architects' belief in the modernist techno-utopias.[77]

The redeemers had overconfidence in the technological means to transform the desert. They expected the market would do what people did for cities. Everyone waited for the desert to turn into a garden but expected others to do the tilling. While waiting for their neighbors to build up, and increase the price of their land, they were served images of the garden produced to hide the desert rather than to turn it. While the images negated this impossible bargain, the infrastructure aged. In 2015, the city recorded the largest increase in water consumption out of 400 districts in the state due to failing pipes and frequent leaks.[78] Wasting the most precious commodity in the desert threatens the city's future.

Ecological concerns were present during all three phases of the architectural imagination narrated earlier. However, they became abundantly clear shortly after Venturi and Scott Brown's tenure when the oil crises hit the world. Bolstered by generous policies of postwar economic transition from warfare to welfare, tailored for the middle-class dreams of home-ownership, and reimagined as a tourist destination with recreational facilities, the city did not have any capacity to generate value other than what value was extracted from its land through speculative development. Once energy crises rendered its remote land worthless, the allegedly infinite potential once imagined for California City was canceled.

The lesson to take from the story of California City is a twofold one. On the one hand, it teaches us to tame our colonial gaze and not to look at the desert with blind eyes. On the other, it also teaches us that what makes a place a city is the people and their will to make things work. When they are reduced to an item in a set of resources and expenses, they are devoid of this fundamental agency. California City is a 130,000-acre warning sign stretched on the Mojave Desert. Its warning is not against inhabiting the desert, but against colonizing it, against overvaluing engineering solutions above architectural ones, and against becoming prisoners of ourselves.

Notes

1 The term "outlaw territory" was initially coined by Steven Brand as "outlaw areas" in a supplement to the *Whole Earth Catalog* that was published in 1968 and later unpacked by Felicity Scott in *Outlaw Territories: Environments of Insecurity/ Architectures of Counterinsurgency.* Brand's original definition listed deserts among the outlaw areas. However, the significance of the term does not lie in its categorization. Instead, the critical insight that Brand's original statement and Scott's careful unpacking convey is the characterizations of these places as "sites of exceptions," where the rule of law is suspended, the boundary between legality and illegality—and between the government and outlaws—is blurred. Brand values these sites as places of invention and experimentation that will enable technological and social progress. However, suspension of law also opens the possibilities of speculation, inequality, and abuses, such as the large-scale land speculation in the case of California City. Felicity Scott, *Outlaw Territories: Environments of Insecurity/ Architectures of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Zone Books, 2016).

2 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893, pp. 197-227.

3 George A. Crofutt, *American Progress*, ca. 1873. Photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, https://www.loc.gov/item/cph6388/. Digitized from chromolithograph printed by George A. Crofutt in 1873, after 1872 painting by John Gast with the same title. 37.6 x 49 cm (sheet).

4 Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

5 Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 40.

6 Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West: Perpetual Mirage," *Harper's Magazine* 214 (May 1957): 25–31.

7 Bernard Devoto, introduction to *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West,* by Wallace Stegner (New York: Penguin, 1992), 16–27, 21.

8 Devoto, introduction, 22.

9 Devoto, introduction, 23–24.

10 Devoto, introduction, 23. In the original text, Devoto used the word "licking" instead of defeating. While both words hold the same meaning, the former felt unfamiliar to modern ears. The word is replaced with a commonly known synonym upon editor's suggestion.

11 Kerwin L Klein, "Frontier Tales: The Narrative Construction of Cultural Borders in Twentieth-Century California," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34: 3 (1992): 464–90, 468.

12 Richard L. Carrico and Frank Norris, *History of Land Use in the California Desert Conservation Area* (Riverside, CA: Bureau of Land Management, California Desert District Office, 1978).

13 Carrico and Norris, *History of Land Use*, 43–46.

14 Carrico and Norris, *History of Land Use,* 87–89.

15 Carrico and Norris, *History of Land Use,* 94.

16 Kim Stringfellow, "Jackrabbits, Ghost Grids and LandBanking+" *The Mojave Project*, September 2020, https://mojaveproject.org/dispatches-item/jackrabbits-ghost-grids-and-landbanking/.

17 Stringfellow, "Jackrabbits."

18 Stringfellow, "Jackrabbits, 98.

19 *Salome* (1918), *The Sheik* (1921), *The Son of Sheik* (1926), *The Veils of Bagdad* (1953), and *Omar Khayyam* (1957) were filmed in the Southern California desert. During and after World War II, Hollywood used the area to shoot

movies about North African desert warfare. For example, *The Five Graves of Cairo* (1943), was not only shot in the region but shot precisely at Camp Young of the Desert Training Center. The army assisted in the staging of battle scenes. In the Academy Award nominated film *Sahara* (1943), some soldiers from the Desert Training Center played German soldiers. Sarah McCormick Seekatz, "Desert Deployment: Southern California's World War II Desert Training Center," *KCET Artbound Blog*, March 15, 2015, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/desert-deployment-southern-californias-world-war-ii-desert-training-center.

20 Sarah McCormick Seekatz, "A Date with Destiny: Southern California's Date Industry and the Creation of an Arabian Fantasy," *Eden: Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society* 24: 2 (Spring 2021): 4–19, 14.

21 In the introduction to the book *Urban Design*, which he coedited with William S. Saunders, Alex Krieger argues that the 1956 Harvard conference "included a remarkable group of participants, and partially because of their stature, the conference is generally acknowledged as providing the impetus for a broader pursuit of urban design and ultimately for establishing Harvard's urban design program, the first of its kind." Alex Krieger and William S. Saunders, eds., *Urban Design* (Minneapolis, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xiii.

22 Urban Design was considered an interdisciplinary field, where many stakeholders interacted, but architects, planners, and landscape architects took the lead. In his opening speech, José Luis Sert remarked on the disciplinary alliance needed between city planners, architects, and landscape architects: I believe we are conscious that city planners, landscape architects, and architects can be only part of a larger team of specialists required to solve urban design problems; but I also believe that our three professions are already very close and that it may be easier first to come to an agreement among ourselves and then, later on, discuss the participation and relationship of the other specialists who should complete the team. "The First Urban Design Conference: Extracts" in *Urban Design,* Alex Krieger and William S. Saunders eds., (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.

23 "The First Urban Design Conference," 5.

24 "The First Urban Design Conference."

25 "The First Urban Design Conference," 10.

26 "The First Urban Design Conference," 11–12.

27 "The First Urban Design Conference," 14.

28 As part of its transformation and to avoid confusion with another South California community, the developers renamed the settlement Arlanza. The area, now a neighborhood in the City of Riverside, still carries this name.

29 In time, two automobile proving grounds owned by Honda and Hyundai, a penitentiary, and most recently, an inland port, were added to the vicinity. While the port is technically in the town of Mojave, it is closer to the Edwards Air Force Base and Borax facility at a twenty-minute driving distance.

30 Nat K. Mendelsohn, *A Report to California City Residents and Property Owners* (Hollywood, CA: California City Development Company, 1960).

31 Peter Gallison, "War Against the Center," *Grey Room* 4 (Summer 2001).

32 Conference of Industrial Development Executives, Executed Office of the President, National Security Resources Board, September 7, 1951, 49-50. Quoted in Gallison, "War Against the Center," 16.

33 Ezgi İşbilen, "A Virtual City Scratched on Desert Dust: California City and the Allure of the Blank Slate," *Western Humanities Review* 72:3 (Fall 2019): 101–35, 108.

34 Jocelyn Gibbs, *Outside In: The Architecture of Smith and Williams* (Santa Barbara, CA: Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, 2014), 41.

35 Shannon R. Starkey, "The Suspension of Disbelief: California City 1955–1972" (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2019), 20.

36 Starkey, "Suspension of Disbelief," 21.

37 The AN-M50 bomb, which accounted for more than ninety-seven percent (by number) of the incendiary bombs dropped on Germany by American forces, was extensively tested at the German Village. See Historic American Engineering Record, "Dugway Proving Ground, German-Japanese Village, South of Stark Road, in WWII Incendiary Test Area, Dugway, Tooele County, UT," Library of Congress, , https://www.loc.gov/item/ut0664/.

38 Konrad Wachsmann to Nathan K. Mendelsohn, June 27, 1960, Wachsmann Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, #Wachsmann 613.

39 Wachsmann joined the project a few years after the development company initiated the project. There was already a planning and design office led by Wayne Williams. Wachsmann's suggestion of a tabula rasa design project contradicted their efforts. Due to his travel schedule, it was also not practical for Wachsmann to collaborate with the office. Civic Center and City Hall are interchangeably used to denote Wachsmann's design. Both names refer to the same project. For coherency, this essay refers to the project with the title California City Civic Center

40 Konrad Wachsmann, "A New American City Hall," *Art & Architecture (*May 1967): 23–27.

41 Wachsmann, "An Autobiography 'TIMEBRIDGE' 1901 2001" (unpublished manuscript) Getty Research Institute Library, Graham Foundation: 1981.

42 Wachsmann, "An Autobiography."

43 The antenna of the integrated broadcasting system is visible in some project drawings, such as its south elevation.

44 Jim Riley ran the local Democratic Party. His wife Barbara was the elected social director of the community club. Their daughter Regina was crowned Snow Queen of Mojave High School. The family constituted 2.4 percent of the town's population with their recently born tenth child. "What Else Is New With The Rileys?" *California City Sun*, January 15, 1963.

45 Nathan K. Mendelsohn to Konrad Wachsmann, October 15, 1960, Wachsmann Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, #Wachsmann 613.

46 "A High-Flier Comes Back with a Thud," *Business Week*, July 25, 1970.

47 "A High-Flier Comes Back."

48 Mendelsohn left in resentment and said "For a long time, I told myself it was a question of [White and his team] getting their feet wet. Then I found some of them didn't know how to swim. I didn't want to go into deeper water." "A High-Flier Comes Back."

49 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 150.

50 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas.*

51 Robert Venturi, "A Justification for Pop Architecture," *Arts & Architecture* 82:4 (1965): 22.

52 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, "Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas," *Architectural Forum* (March 1969): 37–42*ff*.

53 Timothy Wirth, memo on the subject of [Wachsmann's] California City Civic Center, August 31, 1971, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates Collection, Architectural Archives,

University of Pennsylvania.

54 Ursula Cliff, "Are the Venturis Putting Us On?" *Design and Environment* (Summer 1971): 52–59*ff*.

55 William White, Memo on the design of California Center billboards, August 4th, 1971, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates Collection, Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

56 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 18.

57 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 18.

58 Minutes of a meeting about California City, August 28th, 1970, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates Collection, Architectural Archives University of Pennsylvania.

59 Regarding the parasitic nature of suburbs, Joseph Rykwert noted: "A suburb must always be parasitic on a town or city. Even when it acquires an independent administration, it is never a financial center, or a center of power. Suburbs were rarely meant to be agriculturally or industrially productive." Joseph Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 295.

60 Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place*, 16.

61 Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place*, 17.

62 "Mendelsohn," East Kern Historical Museum Society, accessed May 20, 2023, https://ekhms.weebly.com/mendelsohn.html.

63 Starkey, *The Suspension of Disbelief,* 8–9.

64 Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1982), 44.

65 Jean Baudrillard, *America,* trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2010), 124.

66 The history of the site, the cotton and alfalfa farms that were once there, and the Twenty Mule Trail, which cut across most of the town diagonally, were left out of the picture Mendelsohn initially painted.

67 Rama's 'lettered cities' were inspired by literary experiments, governed by the literate, based on rules imported from the old world. Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

68 Menna Agha, "The Invention of Nubian Deserts," *Funambulist* 44 (2022): 34–39.

69 The issue of abandonment is implicit in the word's etymology. An explicit reference to abandonment is made in a 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannia* entry, which describe deserts as "those parts of the land surface of the earth which do not produce sufficient vegetation to support a human population." An often-quoted implicit reference comes from the word's origin, which "comes from Lat. *deserere*, to abandon; distinguish," quoted in the same entry. *The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information,* vol. VIM, 11th ed., (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), 1910–11, https://archive.org/stream/encyclopaediabrit08chisrich/encyclopaediabrit08chisrich_djvu.txt.

70 Vittoria di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

71 di Palma, *Wasteland,* 3.

72 di Palma, *Wasteland,* 3–4.

73 di Palma, *Wasteland,* 16.

74 *Westen* is where the Israelites were banished to suffer and to atone in the Old Testament, and where John the Baptist and Christ willingly went to test and prove themselves in the New Testament. The *westen* is not simply where redemption happens. It is the vessel "through which redemption can be won." di Palma, *Wasteland.*

75 di Palma, *Wasteland,* 9.

76 di Palma, *Wasteland,* 10.

77 In the age of AI, mass customization, and smart cities, "techno-utopia" might refer to a wider variety of projects; however, California City is a midcentury development project. The use of techno-utopia refers to the twentieth-century sense of the term with an emphasis on mechanical solutions and exaggerated scale, best exemplified in the megastructures.

78 CBS News, "California City: How a Developer's Failed Dream Became the State's Biggest Water Waster," July 28, 2015, CBS Sacramento, CA.

Ezgi İşbilen is an assistant professor of architecture at Bilkent University. She teaches history survey courses and architectural design studios. Her scholarship explores the dynamic relationship between architectural theory and construction technologies and architectural education in the United States, particularly its postwar transformation. Her dissertation, "Universalism and Its Discontents: Konrad Wachsmann's Twentieth Century Architecture," explores these themes through the lens of German American architect Konrad Wachsmann's postwar practice and pedagogy. She holds a PhD from Virginia Tech and an MArch degree from Middle East Technical University.