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In everything there is the trace, the experience of a return to something else, of being returned to another past, present, future, a different type of temporality that's even older than the past and that is beyond the future.

— Walter Benjamin

This Future has a Past... a cross-disciplinary installation reflects upon the elusive histories of Los Angeles and the architect Gregory Ain during an extraordinary, tenuous moment in the United States. His practice had been engulfed by a maelstrom of a post-WW II housing crisis, a heady economic gold rush and a rapid-fire surge of tract development. Not one to embrace indifference, the underpinnings of Ain's practice were sited in a progressive, hybrid approach to urban planning in its co-mingling of «community modernism» and housing development. Ain's ideals were met with stark scrutiny during the fiercely contested narrowcasting of the polarized politics endemic of the McCarthy era. ***This Future has a Past...*** traces this vital and all-but-forgotten milieu – revealing an intimate liaison of architecture and (sub)urban development – one caught within the rupturing social and political topographies of the mid-20th United States

Indeed, the USA is infamous for forgetting its own histories, especially those embroiled in controversy. Ain's narrative aptly reflects the contested histories and mythic stories of American individualism and unbridled capitalism, coupled with the deeply scarred community underpinnings of the mid-century housing shortage. Striking parallels may easily be drawn to this day as we, too, witness a logarithmic collapse and reinvigoration of financial systems, economic difficulties for many, gross income disparities at home, continuous wars abroad, contested issues of privacy, national security, individual civil rights, race and gender relations – all replete with a rethinking of our social contract. It also speaks of a time when many

grasped for a sense of agency over their own lives holding to a principled commitment of a better world, fostering new systems of a social imaginary and depicting a world not that different than our own.

Ain was influenced by the hybrid cultural ambiance of California as well as the austere urbanism of the 1930s Depression. To quote the cultural doyenne of the era, Esther McCoy, Ain was “the conscience of the 1940's.”² His practice was a unique morphing of European modernist formalism and social ideals shared by intellectuals, artists and activist reformers. They sought to create a prototype for a visionary American way of life generated by the open, temperate environs of California. Ain's principled quest for social justice via spatial practices was both imagined and materialized by his low-cost, community-based, racially integrated and sustainable housing developments.

It can be said that Ain's architectural tractions arose from the influences of his youth. As a young child his parents resided in the first cooperative colony in California, the Llano del Rio Company. Established in 1914 Llano del Rio was founded ninety miles northeast of Los Angeles. In the words of its founder, Job Harriman, Llano promised *“to show the world a trick they do not know, which is how to live without war or interest in money or rent on land or profiteering in any manner.”*³

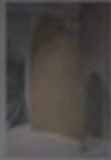
Llano was envisioned along the lines of similar communities that typically held ambitions of achieving economic self-sufficiency, living in greater harmony with nature, and pioneering forms of group-oriented living. It devoted distinct attention to educational, cultural and artistic ventures, experiments with non-authoritarian pedagogies, and delight in lively communal festivities. Underlining these ambitions was a vital desire to create an innovative, idealized urban form, one that could dispel the anxi

Gregory Ain
American, 1908-1988

Wikipedia entry

Getty record

2 works online



Charles Correa, Design
Study for a Community
Center



Gregory Ain
Exhibition House for the
c.1950

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eties, stark discrepancies and squalor commonly associated with major capitalist cities.⁴

Within the specificities of this historicized frame, Gregory Ain was a surprising choice by Philip Johnson, MoMA's Director of Architecture, to design the 2nd MoMA exhibition house, "Our View of the Future" in May 1950. But such is the fate of a blissful ignorance engendered by 3000 miles between New York and Los Angeles. Having been criticized as elitist by his selection of Marcel Breuer in 1949 for the first MoMA exhibition house, Johnson needed to address the pressing housing issues of the burgeoning middle class and challenge the "jerry-riggers" then dominating the privatized markets of housing development. He would present a model of modern, industrialized houses that would be available to all – that is, all the middle class. Peter Blake, MoMA's Curator of Architecture, stated:

*"It was part of Johnson's genius to sense what was cooking in the real world as well as the world of art. He sensed that the American post – World War II dream was a kind of Bauhaus ranch, on an affordable lot, with a mortgage insured by the VA. He was absolutely right."*⁵

For Ain, the project was clearly the opportunity of a lifetime. At 41 years old, he had not worked outside of the Los Angeles area and had never visited New York. Now the young Californian was in league with Marcel Breuer. However, "Our View of the Future" turned out to be Ain's last significant building.⁶

Ain's work had also been in the sights of another prominent American, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI. Hoover's interest was of a different nature. The FBI's years of surveillance of Ain ultimately resulted in Hoover deeming Ain as "the most dangerous architect in America."⁷ This was during the height of the McCarthy era, and a number of Ain's clients and associates had appeared before the HUAC: Lena Horne, Harold Bieberman, Ben Margolis, Dalton Trumbo, and Frank Wilkinson.

Phillip Johnson noted in a much later interview:

*"At the Museum of Modern Art, we were ignorant of the political dimension of the art; for us it was revolutionary, but only aesthetically. Our job as we saw it was to advocate, to sell these new cultural innovations to the wealthy and powerful, to the Rockefellers and others."*⁸

Indeed, Nelson Rockefeller had purchased the 1949 Breuer Exhibition House, moving it to his estate in upstate New York. In contrast, any archival notation of the fate of Ain's MoMA exhibition house following the close of the exhibition is mysteriously absent – abandoning it to an unwritten purgatory. Poignantly, its disappearance ultimately mirrors that of Ain's own promise.

The evocative landscape of *This Future Has a Past...* now allows us to re-imagine and unmask this narrative of disappearance. Through rebuilding this interactive scale model of Ain's MoMA Exhibition House, we encourage a mode of visceral self-questioning – without imposing the singularity of formal, institutionalized history – in hopes that new individuated histories will emerge. "Our View of the Future," was purported to be a metaphorical harbinger of the mythos of the suburban American Dream, a space evoking a myriad of subjectivities, memories and projections. *This Future Has a Past...* offers a visual reverberation of its histories and masked narratives. In a paradoxical attempt to recover a moment in our collective past through our scattered glances, we catch a glimpse of a past that is, at once, unrecoverable but undeniably recognizable.

Credits:

J.D. Zamfirescu-Pereira

Shuzhen Yao

Shinya Kobayashi

Hoang Thong Nguyen

Deepest of Appreciation to:

Richard Corsini, Anthony Denzer, Pier Luigi Serraino & Julius Shulman.

1. Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering Kofman, Derrida, 2002.

2. Esther McCoy, Second Generation, Gibbs M. Smith, 1984.

3. Dolores Hayden, Seven American Utopias, MIT Press, 1976.

4. General Histories: Llano Del Rio.

5. Peter Blake, No Place like Utopia, Knopf, NY, 1993

6. Anthony Denzer, Ain: The Modern Home as Social Commentary, Rizzoli, 2008.

7. Christiane Robbins, The Bauhaus Ranch, Anthony Denzer Interview, 2017.

8. Philip Johnson + Jeffrey Kipnis, Positioning an Avant-garde in America, Autonomy and Ideology, Monacelli Press, 1997.

