In Southern California, the imagination of Arcadia includes the sun as well as moderate temperatures and the orange tree. But what kind of light is characteristic of the area? Today we bemoan the loss of “a pre-smog Los Angeles of sharply contrasting sun and shadows,” which one historian describes as the atmosphere necessary to appreciate the Weights’ concrete-block architecture of the 1920s. Yet in the early 1900s William Faulkner, in his only Los Angeles short story, “Golden Land,” describes how “the sun, strained by the vague high soft almost nebulous California haze, fell...with a kind of treacherous unbrightness.”

We may misinterpret his observation. “Trapped down here,” John Rechy laments in City of Night, “by the Hatred of smog and haze locking you from Heaven,” we feel guilty about filtered light. But the Spanish explorers of 1542 described what is now the port of Los Angeles as the Baia de los Fumos because the smoke of campfires was trapped in the basin’s characteristic inversion layer. Photographs of the San Gabriel Valley taken more than a century ago show the mountains veiled, today we might say “choked,” in haze.

By contrast, recent photographs taken during occasional Santa Ana conditions have publicized a Los Angeles of dazzling but rarely observable. The photos do not show the searing wind, which reverses the normal marine breezes that modulate the desert’s aridity and veil its relentless transparency. In his 1942 novel A Place in...
the sea, Frank Fennom writes. “The lingering mist of morning fog was rising
and in the fog there was the salt flavor of the sea.
Then the strata of fog
melted and the great yel-
low and white city lay at
the mercy of the sun.” In
pre-air-conditioned Los
Angeles, the haze might
have seemed like a shield.
Part of it is natural and will
remain after, if ever, the
air is purged of its filth.

The theatrical lights of
Los Angeles furnish writers with
convenient metaphors of
dissolution. “The dry
waves,” writes Christopher
Isherwood from the crest
of the Santa Monica
Mountains, “and the lights
snap on in their shimmery
colors all over the plain.”

“Los Angeles,” complains
Raymond Chandler’s
Philip Marlowe, used to be
“just a big dry sunny place
with ugly homes and no
style,” but now (in 1949) is
a “boom-lighted sheen.”

Los Angeles “smelled stale
and old like a living room
that had been closed too
long,” Marlowe observes,
“but the colored lights
fooled you. The lights were
wonderful. There ought to
be a monument to the man
who made neon lights . . .
There’s a boy who really
made something out of
nothing.” Marlowe does
not sound fooled himself.

In Los Angeles literature,
the beginning of wisdom is
to “see through” the bright
lights to the shabby sub-
stance, and then angrily
and bitterly to denounce
those lights as deceptive
and insubstantial.

Those who actually
look at Los Angeles, how-
ever, may discover that its
lights say something else.

In Julius Shulman’s gla-
rious and thrilling photo-
graph of Pierre Koenig’s
Case Study House #22
(1959) in the Hollywood
Hills, an elegant pavilion
overlooks the vast, gridded
flatland, echoing its lineari-
ty and brilliance. Floating
in their successive wraps
of evening gown, crystal box
and illuminated space, the
luxurious young women
complete an image of a vast
and dramatic natural set-
ing transformed and per-
fected by the arts of design.
The picture is a vision of
the heights to which
money, technology and the
International Style can
convey a citizen in Los
Angeles. Here is no no-
nostalgia for sunny orange groves
and no sense of a dream
betrayed; on the contrary,
the dream has been real-
ized, and its medium is
(artificial) light.

Natural or electric, light
is a contested zone in the
landscape of desire.

Notes
1. John Ruskin, “A Kent Wright’s Sencenla House,” Fine Home-
buiding, April/May 1983, p. 67.
Faulkner (New York: Random
House, 1950), 706.
3. John Rich, City of Night
(New York: Grove Press, 1963),
47.
4. Frank Fennom, A Place in the
Sun (New York: Random House,
1945), 101.
5. Christopher Isherwood, A
Single Man (New York: Simon
and Schuster, 1945), 112.
6. Raymond Chandler, The Little
Scribe (New York: Ballantine
7. Ibid., 99.

Pierre Koenig, Case Study
House #22, Los Angeles.
Photo © Julius Shulman.

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cover of Los Angeles, Califor-
nia. Illustrated. (Compiled by
Cyrus M. Davis and T. Neuman, published by Press
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