



Photograph by Flickr user Jason Pier in DC.



GEOFF NICHOLSON

The Code of the Desert

In one of those bits of LA synchronicity that no longer surprise me much, I happened to talk to Ed Ruscha at a party in John Lautner’s “Chemosphere” the day after I’d watched the 1972 documentary *Rayner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. Ruscha appears in the film, discussing the aesthetics of the gas station. In our conversation, Ruscha reminded me—not that I needed much reminding—of Banham’s assertion that people in the desert are very respectful of things that belong there and have a tendency to shoot things that don’t.

The relevant passage appears in *Travels in America Deserta*, where Banham writes: “Whatever reasons Americans may pretend for taking a gun out into the desert, most of them are going to fire at road signs, water tanks, memorial plaques, wind pumps or old beer cans. . . . Even if it is no more than a symptom of mindless vandalism, this mania for shooting at human artifacts is not quite senseless: the identifiable humanness of their origins gives these objects a different status from everything else in view. The works of man inevitably attract the attention of mankind.”

I would add a couple of things. First, certain items are taken into the desert specifically so that they can be shot at: those beer cans, of course, and various domestic appliances, televisions, and computer screens, all the way up to cars and trucks. I’d also say that I’ve seen quite a few cacti and Joshua trees that have been on the receiving end of “the attention of mankind.”

But in general terms, I think Banham was on to something. Most of us have our own, very specific idea of what does and doesn’t “belong” in the desert. And if you see something you think shouldn’t be there, then sure, why not shoot it? When it comes to architecture, in the broadest sense, to desert structures, whether domestic or commercial, or industrial or military, the question of “belonging” becomes far more complicated. An open-pit borax mine is clearly a blot on the landscape, in my view, but then, if you ask me, so is a solar farm.

We might not want to shoot out the windows of that James Bond villain house that somebody’s built on the top of an otherwise untouched desert outcrop—all villains live

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in modern houses, as singer-songwriter Gabriel Kahane observes—but in some cases, we definitely wish somebody would take a bulldozer to it.

It's now the best part of thirty years since I first stepped foot in the California desert, as one more Englishman living out his own, still no doubt rather derivative, desert fantasy. To say that I immediately fell in love with the desert isn't quite accurate, since in many ways I was already in love with it, or with an idea of it, long before I ever arrived.

Like most Europeans, and indeed a great many Americans, I first knew the desert from photographs, movies, and literature. I'd done my time looking at the desert photographs of Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange, watching *Vanishing Point* and *Baghdad Café*, and even watching Roadrunner cartoons. I'd read *Travels in America Deserta* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. And in due course I traveled to Barstow solely because of that opening: "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." Inevitably, some of these depictions of the desert were a lot more "accurate" and "authentic" than others, though the desert of the real made them all suspect, including my own firsthand observations.

I was drawn to the forms of the territory, the beauty and the emptiness of the desert itself, but I was always far more moved by a landscape that contained some human element, an intersection of the natural and the manmade: a road, a prospector's cabin, an isolated motel, a gas station, a store that might or might not still be in business.

I could see there was a contradiction here. In one sense, you might think "naturally," I wanted the desert to be pristine, uninhabited, untouched by human presence. But how could it be if I was seeing it through the lens of images somebody else had made of it, reading descriptions by people who had been there before me? The human presence was inevitable and was, in fact, part of my attraction to it, but it also felt like a kind of desecration. The paradox is one I have never quite been able to escape.

My first desert trip was remarkably free-form and aimless. It involved a lot of driving, a lot of walking, and a considerable amount of confusion. A lot of the time I didn't know what I was looking for, and I usually didn't know what I had found. In this state, I came across the strange, chunky, elemental, abandoned cabins strewn around Wonder Valley, east and north of Joshua Tree. I now know that they exist in other parts of the Mojave, too.

There was, and remains, something both improbable and archetypal about those cabins, their strangely perfect, geometrical proportions, sometimes with muted, dusty pink, stucco walls that stand out against the pale yellow sand, sometimes not much more than wooden skeletons. They looked utterly out of place in one sense; but given the patina of time and neglect, they also fit right in. I had the sense that some careless, god-sized giant had been using the Mojave as his own personal model railroad layout, and these were the miniature buildings used to add scale and detail. There was also, if I'm honest about it, something a little scary about them.

The majority of those cabins were in quiet ruin when I first saw them, and they looked as though they'd been that way for a good long time. I had no idea who had, or ever could have, lived in these cabins, but I imagined some grizzled, snaggle-toothed, half-crazed, desert rat. Not exactly.

In 1938 Congress passed the Small-Tract Homestead Act, giving away five-acre parcels of land to those who agreed to build a small, habitable structure within two years. The scheme didn't really take off until after World War II; but once that was out of the way, there was a minor building boom in the Mojave. People like things that are free. Some built their own cabins from scratch. But local contractors also came up with schemes for ready-designed buildings that fit the government guidelines.

Homesteading had been used historically to distribute land to farmers, but clearly there was no farming to be done here. In fact, there wasn't much of anything to be done, and few reasons at all for many people to want to live here full-time. Consequently, many of the new owners, rather than grizzled desert rats, tended to be Bohemian Angelinos who wanted vacation homes conveniently located a couple of hours from the city. Most people, however, evidently didn't find them as convenient as all that, hence the abandonment.

Today, many cabins remain, sometimes in a state of gorgeous ruin, and are occasionally used for art projects and activities of one kind and another. Poking around in them, as I sometimes do, I often see evidence that somebody has crashed or squatted there in recent times, but these days even the most rugged individualists tend to want something a bit more substantial, a shipping container, a trailer, a box-car, a prefabricated metal building, complete with solar power and swamp cooler. And who can blame them?



Photograph by Flickr user Jason Pier in DC.

Occasionally, people complain that the homesteader cabins are cluttering up the desert and should be demolished and cleared away, the desert made clean and spotless again. It's easy enough to see their point and easy, too, to feel a genuine ambivalence. Sure, in one sense they're utterly out of place, but they look so good, so picturesque. Fortunately, inertia plays a big part in desert life. Bulldozers seem plentiful, but the urge to remove the cabins doesn't seem all that pressing. One way or another, they endure.

Thirty years ago, when I first saw those cabins, I was sure I wanted to own one of them—though since I was then living some five-and-a-half-thousand miles away in London, it seemed the most improbable of dreams. Today, I now live about a hundred and fifty miles away, and although the dream hasn't died, and I've thought hard about it, and looked at a lot of cabins and quasi-ruins along with their attendant five-acre patches of desert, with a sincere view to buying one, it still hasn't come to fruition. Did I mention desert inertia?

One of the more serious drawbacks to owning a five acre spread, is that five acres really doesn't count for much in the wide open spaces of the Mojave Desert. Solitude and isolation are so much harder to come by than you might at first imagine. If you really want to separate yourself from humanity, you need a good couple of hundred acres. If you own a five-acre patch and your immediate neighbor likes to hammer sheet metal and breed pit bulls, you're going to know all about it.

Consider, as a case study, the Black Desert House in Yucca Valley, attributed to Marc Atlan Design, with Oller and Pejic, architects, a blocky low-slung construction, its matt exterior as dark as a stealth fighter. Consider the wording on the website designed to sell it: "Beyond shelter, Black Desert House is an artistic counter-point to a landscape born of fire, and sculpted over the last 100 million years. Conceived to read as a shadow cast within great piles of monzogranite boulders, the residence offers the quintessential desert experience: immersion into the timelessness of the vast desert panorama."

But then the clincher—the killer—that it’s “sited at a cooler elevation of over 4,000 feet on 2.5 acres.” Two and half acres? Dude. That’s nothing. Absolutely nothing. You’re likely to have squads of ATVs running around your boundaries. More than that, you can be sure that at least some of your neighbors are going to be looking in your direction and thinking that this black, million-dollar bunker really doesn’t belong there. Of course, you can also be sure that whoever eventually buys the house isn’t going to care much about what the neighbors think.

When it comes to the presence of art in the desert, there’s a whole different set of issues about belonging. Spray painting faces or skulls onto native rocks we can all agree is just plain bad and wrong. But what about simpler interventions, like spray painting a face on a shack that’s already in ruins? What about land art? Say, rocks arranged into spirals or circles or cairns? There’s actually something deeply moving about walking through the wilderness and coming across an arrangement of rocks or sand, knowing that someone’s been there and taken the time and trouble to signal something for the next passerby. Even if you don’t know what it means, and you don’t particularly like this kind of intervention, it doesn’t seem the greatest of sins. Nature will eventually reassert itself.

But how about a ten-acre plot strewn with massive sculptures made from various kinds of domestic and industrial detritus? I’m thinking of the Noah Purifoy sculpture park in Joshua Tree. Part of the land was a gift from Ed Ruscha. The works are frequently ramshackle constructions that often resemble buildings of one kind or another: a theater, a hangar, a bunker, a bridge. Nothing there is strictly speaking “natural,” very little comes from the desert itself, but the works nevertheless do fit quite well. Much of it looks as though it’s falling apart. Purifoy famously insisted, “I do assemblage. I don’t do maintenance.” Some of the locals are no doubt less than entranced by Purifoy’s works. But the attitude I’ve observed in the neighbors who live in the more conventional nearby houses is that they can live pretty happily with the art. It’s the art-loving visitors they have trouble with.

One of the works that best shows Purifoy’s gifts of assembly alongside his sense of humor and irony is a large “architectural” piece titled “Ode to Frank Gehry.” As far as I know, Gehry has never built in the California desert. Purifoy’s work offered to correct this with an assemblage of

white corrugated metal, struts, and a skim of concrete that certainly looks as “deconstructed” as any of Gehry’s work.

Purifoy recently had a major exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and I was afraid that a gallery setting wouldn’t show his work to its best advantage. A patina of desert dust and grime seems to be a necessary part of the work. I think you could argue that a certain amount of over-restoration had gone on. Some of the work looked a little too spruced up, but all in all the show was a triumph. Not least of its attractions, “Ode to Frank Gehry” had, by some transportational magic, been temporarily relocated to the museum’s main courtyard. Did it look out of place there? Why, yes, it did. But it also looked great. You can take the art out of the desert, but you can’t quite take the desert out of the art.

If you were in search of a different structure that looks much like an ode to Gehry, though one built in 1958, several years before Gehry established his first architectural practice in Los Angeles, you could do worse than go to the Salton Sea and take a look at Albert Frey’s North Shore Yacht Club. Here, too, you’ll see corrugated metal and big, basic, curved geometric shapes, though here the overall effect is nautical *moderne*, complete with faux portholes. It was a wreck when I first saw it and still had a sign out front announcing the Aces and Spades club. But now it’s been restored to become what is surely one of the world’s very coolest-looking community centers.

Frey, born in Switzerland and a follower of Le Corbusier, first arrived in the American desert, specifically Palm Springs, in 1934 and five years later moved there permanently. He stayed for sixty years and became one of Palm Springs’s preeminent modernist architects. And who’s to say he couldn’t have been successful in a different city? But he thrived on both the environment and the freedom he was allowed here. When the planners at Palm Springs City Hall looked at the design he’d drawn up for his second residence here, a house built directly into the rock, they concluded that it was crazy, but they didn’t try to stop him.

Palm Springs isn’t such a bad place to be crazy. It was, and in certain respects remains, a fun city, a recreational oasis where people go to play away from prying eyes. The fact that historically many of these players have been movie types with an easy-come, easy-go attitude toward money has only increased the tendency for architectural experimentation. Bob Hope hardly seemed part of any avant-garde, but



Photograph by Robert Gourley, via Flickr.

he lived happily in a house designed by John Lautner that had the feel of being inside the crater of volcano.

Even the banks in Palm Springs look ironic. Whereas in much of the world people want their financial institutions to be housed in buildings of classical solidity, in Palm Springs one of the most exciting buildings I know is the Bank of America. Sweeping white concrete and blue mosaic, it claims to be inspired by Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel. It was built by Victor Gruen Associates.

Baker is, in many ways, the anti-Palm Springs, a rough, poor, but likeable desert town, 150 miles or so from LA, just off Interstate 15, with a population of about 700, a place to stop for gas or lunch. When I first went there twenty years back, it seemed to be striving even as it struggled, and it was home to the world's largest thermometer, 134 feet tall, a genuinely impressive, if nevertheless absurd, structure. It was there to draw trade and attention to the Bun Boy diner and motel. In the gift shop, you could buy a detailed model of the building that housed a thermometer. I bought one.

Diner and motel are currently closed, though the thermometer remains and still works, at least some of the time. The Bun Boy used to be one of a handful of perfectly decent motels in town. Some are still standing but closed; others have vanished off the face of the earth. Just one remains in business: the Wills Fargo, a classic, old-style establishment, with a white arcaded frontage that looks OK from a distance. It gets some amusingly terrible online reviews: "The spider webs were nice in the glow of the sunlight coming through the ceiling," writes a Trip Advisor member.

The place I used to stay in Baker, and one of the last to close, was Arne's Royal Hawaiian. It wasn't the Ritz, but the rooms were big and clean, with shag carpet that came part way up the walls, and some fixtures and fittings you could regard as mid-century if you put your mind to it.

The Polynesian theme was pretty much restricted to the motel sign, a few palm trees, and the building that housed the office, which had a wonderful curving pointed roof, clad inside with two big waves of wood paneling. Otherwise,

there was an older section built of cinder blocks, with rooms the size and shape of prison cells. Behind that was a more modern two-story structure where I, and I suspect everybody else, actually stayed.

For a good while after it closed down, Arne's remained more or less intact, but that's changed. When I stopped in Baker recently it seemed that every piece of glass in the place had been smashed, doors broken down, and the whole place thoroughly vandalized, including the empty JG Ballard-style swimming pool out back, although the paneled ceiling was still there, looking great, waiting either for architectural salvagers or more determined vandals.

But not everything in Baker is in decline. There's at least one optimist in town: Luis Ramallo, the owner of the Alien Jerky Store, which also specializes in hot sauce, candy, and space-age souvenirs. It's been there for a little over a decade and business seems to be thriving. There used to be a very homemade-looking space alien and flying saucer on the roof. There's now a full-size UFO parked outside, along with a row of movie-prop-quality aliens holding up metallic sunshades.

There are also several billboards showing plans for the future: blueprints, architectural renderings and artists' impressions of the high-end, thirty-one-room "mother-ship-shaped" UFO hotel that Ramallo plans to build behind his store. It'll be like staying in a space station, with a flight deck, sleeping chambers, and animatronic aliens. An alien-themed shopping mall, futuristic restaurants, and a "space-themed spa" are also in the works.

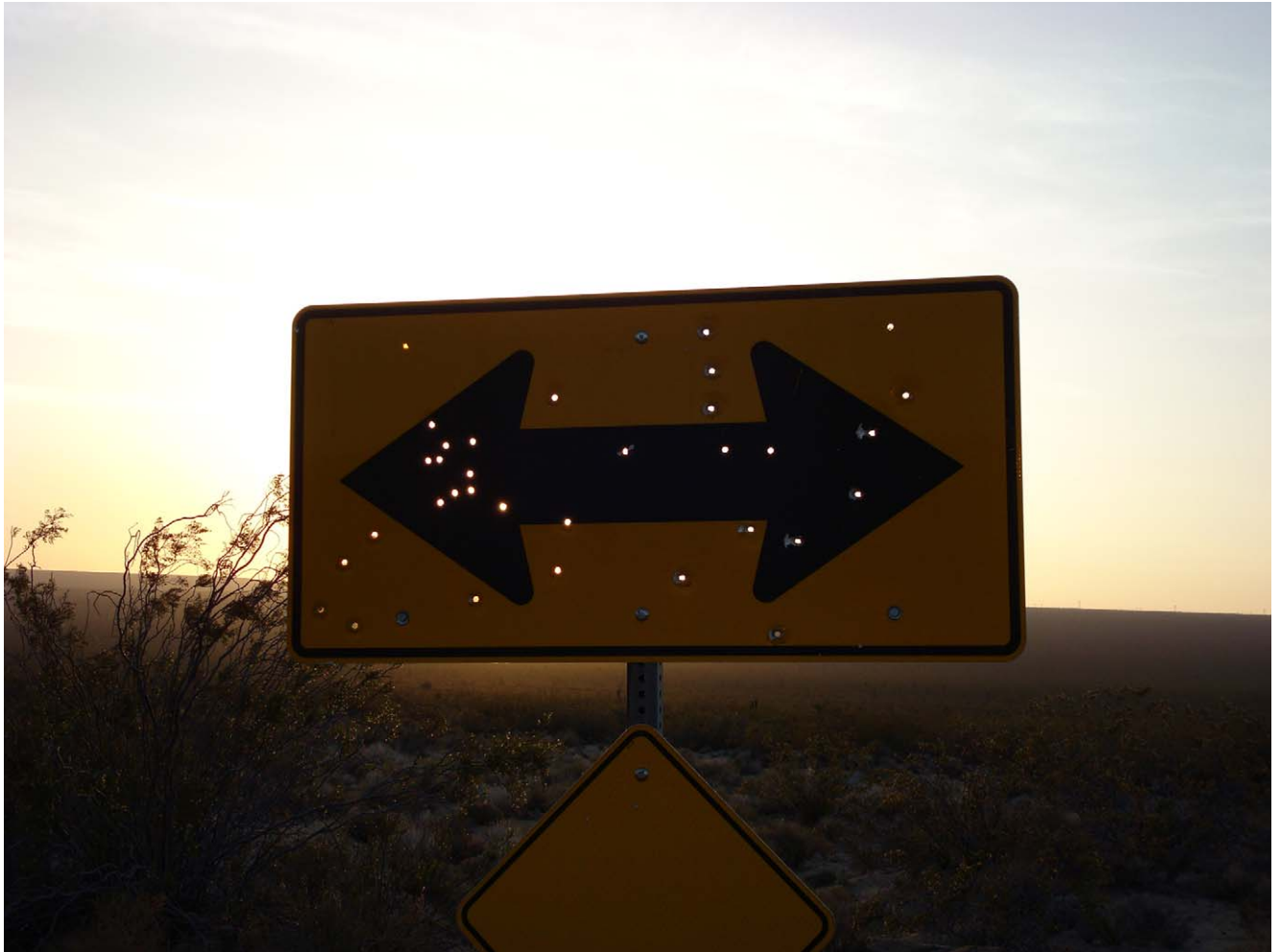
I have no idea whether Ramallo can really pull any of this off, but I really want him to. The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors was certainly happy enough to give the project the go-ahead. And really, who could object? Sure, a UFO hotel in the middle of, say, Brentwood might be a problem, but Baker is in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the desert. Who's going to complain? And if it fails, well, it's going to leave a set of fantastic, futuristic desert ruins, although you might not want to be living in the house next door.

Inspired, or perhaps simply carried away, I again start thinking about owning some little desert shack, by no

means a piece of architecture, just some basic shelter with its own patch of land. It was easy enough to find one online that seemed to fit the bill. "Rustic 400 Sq. Ft. Cabin on 5 acres, close to 29 Palms in beautiful Wonder Valley. Bring your tools and imagination!" It was a very simple, perhaps even archetypal, design: a door in the middle, a window either side, holes in the roof, but the walls intact, though looking a little bullet-scarred. The price was about the same as a well-used Jeep.

The realtor's ad showed it to be the last property at the end of a dirt road, which had its appeal—nobody driving past your front door. And so I made a little desert field trip to go look at the cabin. After a drive along increasingly rutted and sandy roads, I spotted the place in the distance, and I could also see another house on the road, a sprawling, tattered, but apparently inhabited thing, with collapsed out-buildings, a number of wrecked cars, and a sea of detritus surrounding it: building materials, pipes, scrap metal, chunks of wood, oil cans, domestic appliances. A Noah Purifoy might have taken this junk and made any number of fine sculptures from it. But the inhabitant of the house had no such plans, unless he was creating an installation on entropy and chaos theory.

I could also see that the junk was strewn on both sides of the dirt road, and it's certainly not unknown for desert plots to have a road running through them. However, when I got really close, I could see that some of this junk was lying in the road itself; it had, in fact, been deliberately put there and arranged to form a barrier. Lengths of tire-shredding metal ran from one side of the road to the other. And there was an expanse of old lumber that looked like it might be concealing a giant hole for the unwary driver to fall into. It would have been possible to get around these obstacles and drive or walk across the open desert to the cabin, but by then I was deterred. However wonderful the cabin was, would I really want to have neighbors who were trying to block my way and shred my tires? Generally, perhaps especially in the desert, good fences make good neighbors. But roadblocks are a different matter. **B**



Photograph by John Loo, via Flickr.