

## Los Angeles Islands – a description of activities 2003-2005

The research initiative “Los Angeles Islands”, LAI, started in 2003 as a collaboration between architects, artists and researchers at the School of Architecture, Lund University, Sweden. The project investigates American architectural influence in the Malmö region of South Scandinavia. In a set of chosen sites within this expansive region, issues related to city planning are approached through a co-reading of architecture and architectural debate in Los Angeles. Despite the obvious differences in size, culture and historical development, there are links, and similarities, to acknowledge. Like the City of Los Angeles, Malmö hosts a dense and ethnically diverse population and shows an internal East-West problematic of wealth and status. Both cities are located politically and geographically at the “other end” from the capitols and economic centres of their respective nations. On an operational scale, Los Angeles-based planners and architects are invoked in redevelopment schemes around the newly finished Oresund Bridge connecting Sweden and Denmark, including for instance a Frank Gehry-designed hotel and a new theme park partially conceptualised by the Los Angeles-based consultant ERA (Economic Research Associates).

So far, the Los Angeles Islands Research Group has mainly approached urban design as affected 1) by land use classification, 2) by mode of urban investigation strategy, and 3) by secrecy and security policies. The aim of the project is to present its objectives and results mainly through exhibitions, or through events like bus tour seminars and performance/reading acts.

Since part of our research agenda has concerned the mode of presentation itself, it is here sufficient to give a brief description of the presentations made hitherto. This description will also provide a brief view of the content of the works produced.



Official City Planning Office, Los Angeles, 2004

### **Bus Tour Seminar, Malmö (Nov. 2003)**

In the fall 2003, the Los Angeles Islands Research group (Nina Aronsen, architect; Per-Johan Dahl, architect; Sara Ericsson, architect; Annelie Nilsson, artist; Gunnar Sandin, artist and researcher; and Lars-Henrik Ståhl architect and researcher) made its first public presentation through the seminar *Los Angeles Islands: Malmö*. The seminar was performed as a bus tour event in Malmö (with approx. 50 partakers).

After a short introduction at Lund University, School of Architecture, the tour visited a set of urban sites chosen for their tendency to evoke issues of land use or architecture that could relate to concrete American links or to an interpretation of Americanness. During the bus tour the following preliminary studies were presented:

- 1) Motorway systems around Malmö as land use limitations
- 2) Background and discussions concerning a possible establishment of a theme park in *Hyllie*, in the south part of the City of Malmö.
- 3) American influences and the political/financial co-operation in the 1950s and 1960s behind the creation of the 25 storey building *Kronprinsen*, once known as the first “skyscraper” in Malmö.
- 4) The history behind the erection of the new police house in Malmö, presented in the light of recent security paradigms and their American parallels.

The seminar bus was equipped with monitors that showed material specific to the seminar’s sites of interest. Reading acts and improvisations were held using the built in audio facilities of the bus. The bus tour seminar finished with a debate and film program at the cinema Panora in Malmö.



Invitation Card for Bus Tour Seminar, Malmö, Nov. 2003



From Bus Tour, Los Angeles Islands: Malmö, Nov. 2003

### **Study visit, Los Angeles (March, 2004)**

In March 2004, the LAI research group travelled to Los Angeles to visit individuals, institutions and selected urban areas. The journey was critical for the establishing contacts. The group visited *Sciarc* (Southern California Institute of Architecture), the *L.A. City Official Planning Dept*, and had meetings with Dana Cuff, professor at the

Dept. of Architecture and Urban Design, *UCLA*, as well as with the architects Niel M. Denari and Kevin Daly at their offices. Further, the group paid a visit to *ERA* (the planning consultant involved in the establishment of a theme park in Hyllie, Malmö), and was taken by David Bergman (ERA) on a personal guided tour with focus on the historical expansion of Los Angeles. Photo documentation was made in urban areas that had been targeted for urban planning debates and theorisation, such as Ballona Wetlands, South Downtown, Watts. Two specific visits were made to houses designed by Rudolf Schindler, visits that highlighted the social differences connected to the fragmented urban structure of Los Angeles. We also took part in two congresses: *Southern California History Conference* (about the first establishments and growth of the city of Los Angeles), and *A Gathering by Design, An International Architecture Symposium* (a panel discussion concerning the rebuilding of the Bunker Hill Area in Downtown L.A., with the participation of the architects Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Greg Lynn, Jean Nouvel and Kevin Daly). Last, but not least, the group held a collaborative public presentation of the Los Angeles Islands research project at *CLUI* (Center for Land Use Interpretation). The event hosted roughly 30 participants and was arranged by *Los Angeles Urban Forum* in co-operation with the art-based organisation/network *Nomads+Residents*. The study visit facilitated a confrontation with our pre-conceptions of LA as a possible discursive architectural/sociological model for the studying of the Malmö Region. From the point of view of getting to know better the decisive forces and the social circumstances important for the development of the City of LA we had the opportunity to get insight into very different levels.



Centre of Los Angeles, Opera House (Frank O Gehry)



Neil M. Denari in his office



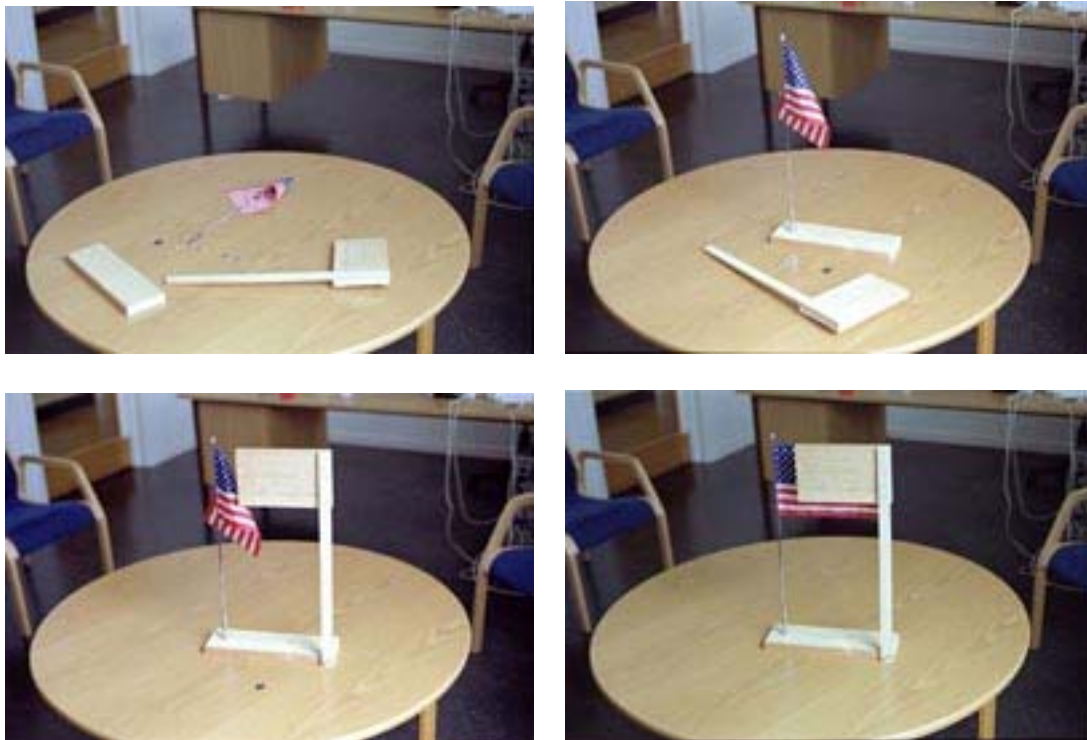
Visit at ERA's head office, with D. Bergman



Model, Playa Vista, close to Ballona Wetlands

### **International congress in Lyon (July, 2004)**

At *The 8th Congress of the Association of International Semiotic Studies* that took place in Lyon, France, July 2004, Gunnar Sandin and Lars-Henrik Ståhl presented a paper with the title *Los Angeles Islands: Architecture and Americanness*. This contribution considered the ground for American influences from a semiotic perspective. While reading the paper, Sandin and Ståhl assembled a specially prepared wooden construction, including an American flag. Thus, the assembly act became a performative part of the paper presentation. Semiotically, the wooden flag object worked both as holding and hiding the American flag, thus corresponding to a discussion in the paper saying that the ground for the appearance of Americanness is both part of, and rejected by, the receptive region. (Reading1, reading2 and flag act can be seen as 3 versions on a theme, a deliberately introduced redundancy)



Stills showing assembly of Flag object, presented as part of reading a paper at congress in Lyon, July 2004

### **The show Art+Science, The Concert Hall, Stockholm (Sept. 2004)**

*Art+Science* ([www.artsandscience.se](http://www.artsandscience.se)) was arranged by the *Swedish engineer and science academy* (Ingenjör och Vetenskapsakademin) in collaboration with universities, industry and commerce in the Stockholm region. It took place in the classical Concert Hall in the centre of Stockholm. The Los Angeles Islands contribution consisted of four post card holders, made of fur wood, that were placed in the centre of the foyer. The arrangement made it possible for the visitor to choose six different post cards with motives addressing the research agenda of LAI (land use, police security, etc). The post cards, as well as their holders, were produced by the research group to give a very direct, still hard-to-logically-comprehend, image of the project – this in contrast to the often comprehensive descriptions of research projects. One aim of this presentation was the bringing together of two clichés: the cliché of

form simplicity and nature material as representing Scandinavian design, and the cliché of the postcard as representing a city.



Los Angeles Islands' contribution to Art+Science

**Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen (April, 2005)**

In April 2005, at *Overgaden Institut for Samtidskunst* in Copenhagen, an exhibition also presented a compilation of public material from the City Planning Offices in Los Angeles, Malmö and Copenhagen. The members of the group also presented individual works developed during the course of the project. Annelie Nilsson showed a video documentation of a study visit to LA, as well as a video based reflection on the exploitation of the Hyllie Area south of Malmö City. Nina Aronsen and Lars-Henrik Stahl showed a video documenting the preconceptions and actualities of modelling a street crossing in LA. These video works dealt with the "anthropological" problem of visiting a city for investigative reasons. Two works dealt with the mapping of land use: A photo-based interpretation was made by Per-Johan Dahl of the "leaky spaces" that are left undefined in the official primary maps and land use maps of Malmö; The border areas between residential areas were given a video interpretation by Sara Ericsson. Finally, a photographic comparison was made by Gunnar Sandin, of the Malmö Police Department Building, the Police Headquarters in Copenhagen (Politigaarden) and two police offices in LA: the head office (Parker Center) and the Down Town Central Station.

## Los Angeles Islands

Nina Aronsen, Per-Johan Dahl, Sara Ericsson, Annelie Nilsson, Gunnar Sandin og Lars-Henrik Ståhl

På L. aal viser Overgaden et projekt af arkitekter, forskere og kunstnere ved Lund Universitets arkitektskole. Udstillingen forsøger at problematisere den amerikanske arkitekturs indflydelse i området omkring Malmö.



Los Angeles og USA's vestkyst har gennem 1900-tallet udviklet sig til en slags super-projekt af europæernes forestillinger om det amerikanske kontinent. Denne fascination af og forestilling om Amerika har via en egentlig amerikanisering af europæisk byplanlægning også sat sine spor i svensk byplanlægning og arkitektur, særligt i Malmö. Således sammenlignes Malmö med Los Angeles, og der stilles spørgsmål som: Hvilke mekanismer er virksomme på mikroniveauet i det som, man må formode, er et sociologisk, psykologisk og ikke mindst økonomisk færdigt konglomerat af "amerikadramme"? Hvordan viser de amerikanske utopier og dystopier - Los Angeles Islands - sig i sydvest-Skåne?



Los Angeles Islands behandler området på kunstneres præmisser og har en praktisk orienteret omgang med området i form af modeller og billeder. Udstillingen omfatter forskellige delprojekter, som udgør de medvirkendes research omkring de overordnede problemstillinger.



Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art, excerpt from homepage

## City Rumble

Artistic Interactions in Public Space	Overgaden - Institute of Contemporary Art	
Location and Dates	Artists	
April-ET, Area 100, 2005	Estelle Perle & Christian Olsson	Peter Carlsson
Open	Ingemar Östergren, Maria Holmström & Mia Svaner	Delia Bengtsson & Ina Nilsson
Workshop Schedule, 1 & 2 PM	Peter Carlsson & Christian Olsson	Andreas Schmalzer



Invitation Card, Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art

### The Inaugural Nordic Geographers Meeting, Lund. (May, 2005)

At the congress *The Inaugural Nordic Geographers Meeting*, Lund, May, 2005, Gunnar Sandin and Lars-Henrik Ståhl presented, within the conference stream *Critical Geography*, an updated version of their paper on Americanness and Urban Design. The performance element from the Lyon presentation the year before (the assembly of a flag arrangement) was here exchanged to a slide show consisting of

images covering a wide range of cultural American influence and its contemporary global presence in the design of everyday life, of warfare architecture, etc.



Max fast food restaurant, Lund, Sweden



Architecture project by Neil Denari



Map of Guantanamo, Cuba



Denmark's Minister of Defence in Iraq

## **F24: Critical geography 11: Geographies of transgression 2**

*Room: Geocentrum 2, 229*

### **Session organizer:**

Kenny Jansson, Christian Abrahamsson & Mikkel Schønning Sorensen

### **Chair/Discussant:**

Christian Abrahamsson

**Ragnild Lund & Cathrine Brun:** Constructing knowledge on forced migration - researching conflicting spaces and borderland issues

**Claudio Minca:** Geographies of exception: Agamben and the return of the camp

**Gunnar Sandin & Lars Henrik Ståhl:** Los Angeles islands: On Americanness in contemporary architecture

**Matthias Naumann:** Water market commercialisation in shrinking regions: The case of Brandenburg (Germany)

**Bernd Adamek-Schyma:** Between performance and representation: New cultural geographies of music and art. Examples from Central and Eastern Europe (Poster)

The Inagural Nordic Geographers Meeting, session F24

## **End notes on methodological challenges and disciplinary value.**

The project Los Angeles Islands started partly with the ambition that the results should be “KFoU<sup>1</sup>-specific”, i.e. contribute to an emerging, but perhaps still very young universe of discourse. So far, however, it has most of all appeared in different more established discourses – of architecture, visual art, activist art, geography, semiotics, etc. One meta-issue that the project has had to deal with, is to what extent the KFoU serves best as a synergetic platform for ideas that have their primary impact in other fields, or if it is to be regarded by a larger research community (as well as an art community) as a field on its own. The project has so far led to a number of alternative opportunities for displaying and discussing research results as artistic/architectural work. The experience has also led to an academic approach, expressed in conference contributions and articles, towards the issue of American Influence and its presence in contemporary design and planning. This academic production has been partly generated by the interests/activities in the project. These opportunities would not have occurred without the diversity of the group member’s fields of interest, their networks, etc.

### **The impact of identity – or “What do you see yourself as?”**

A few challenges as regards the carrying through of this project have become apparent, apart from the always present formal difficulties of having practice based, or art based research activities “classified” as leading or not leading to an academic post-graduate, licentiate or doctoral degree. One challenge has been the conflict between the individual freedom and the collective aim as regards the setting of a frame of knowledge. The participants were invited mainly in respect to their earlier projects related to urban design, projects they had dealt with as architects or artists. They were initially stimulated to work intuitively, individually and bring their own ongoing ideas into the project. This meant that the project’s thematic base – the presence of Americanness in a non-American region – had a tendency to be regarded more as a kind of generator of artistic and investigative ideas, rather than as an issue to approach thematically in artistic form. This problem is partly due to the different modes of addressing experience and knowledge in the practice context on the one hand and in the academic world on the other, for instance as implicit vs. explicit addressing of a theme. But the problem in this particular case is not only tied to different types of methodologies between different members of the group, but also related to the fact that the project set out as a collaboration and discussion between persons with their identity tied to different types of practices, practices that are determined by different mechanisms as regards how to maintain a personal identity, how to be critical, how to take responsibility, etc. Therefore, a singular initiative, or result, may for one participant be highly relevant, while for another bear less significance, since they are judged through different frames of context.

Despite these differences of identity, we have slowly learnt that the generative approach for this type of project can be very positive, for instance if the academic writers take their responsibility for producing thematic and creative texts, the prospecting architects their responsibility for alternative approaches to city planning, the exhibiting artists their responsibility for introducing modes of display either related to research as a form of artistic activity, or emerging as unforeseen consequences on a formal level.

---

<sup>1</sup> KFoU, Konstnärlig Forskning och Utveckling