

Photography by Central Office of Architecture

Fabulous

By David Leclerc

"Architecture is social art," Gregory Ain once said. "Its aesthetic power must be derived from a social ethos."

Ain is among a group of

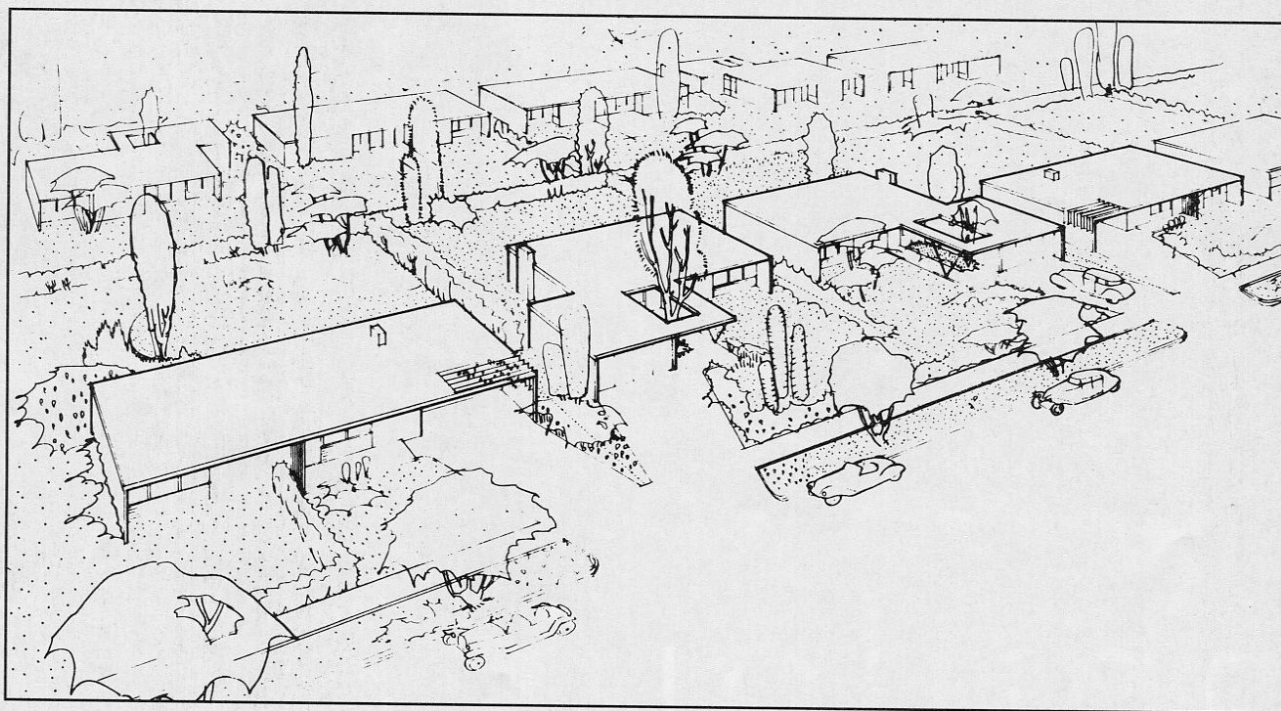
architects commonly called the "Second Generation," whose contribution to Southern California modern architecture has long been overlooked (as opposed to the first generation of European immigrants who came out here in the 1920s to preach the gospel of modern architecture). His Mar Vista Housing, on Beethoven Street near Marco Place in Mar Vista, turns 50 years old this year and is a stunning example of his genius.

The project was designed between 1946 and 1948. It is composed of 52 houses occupying 2 1/2 blocks of the city grid. It stands in stark contrast with its surroundings, a jumble of houses that proudly exhibit their various front porches, roof shapes, stucco colors and personalized front yards. As you drive down Beethoven, Ain's project appears as a row of 10 flat-roof houses forming a low and continuous facade that stretches from one end of the block to the other. **What strikes you at first glance is the sheer horizontality of the architecture,** which seems inspired by the expansiveness of the urban experience itself. There are no front porches, bow windows, nooks, recesses and projections; just a continuous wall simply interrupted by entry doors and strips of clerestory windows running below the flat roof. The feeling is of introversion and privacy. The abstract geometry of the facades creates a quiet background for the lush landscape and large trees planted in

front of it. **A closer look reveals that what may seem the product of a simple cloning of the same house is in reality a more complex assemblage.** While all the houses are bound together by the same height, four different types of houses oriented in two different directions create eight different facades. It's consistent but not monotonous.

A graduate of the USC School of Architecture, **Ain worked for Richard Neutra until 1935 but would confess in private to being moved by the sensuality of Schindler's architecture.** But, in contrast to Neutra's obsessive quest for fame and Schindler's utopian idealism, Ain's belief in architecture as a means toward social progress led him onto another path. As early as 1937 in his Dunsmuir Flats (in the Miracle Mile), he masterfully demonstrated the ingenuity of modern architecture by designing four two-storey housing units on a narrow lot sized for a single home, without sacrificing any aspects of the American dream. By the 1940s Ain had developed a reputation as an innovator in low-cost single-family housing, and by 1950 one of his prototypes was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Originally planned for 100 houses on a 60-acre site, Mar Vista



Bird's-eye perspective of Mar Vista Housing Units by Ain, Johnson and Day (1946-48).

Housing had difficulties obtaining financial aid from the Federal Housing Agency because of the prejudices against modern architecture. A first construction phase of 52 houses was finally approved for testing, but it turned out to be the project's final stage.

How to make a comfortable three-bedroom house in 1000 square feet is a puzzle for any architect and requires an almost scientific approach. In the Mar Vista houses, the limited size of the rooms is visually increased by the sense of openness and transparency to the outside. The back yard is conceived as an outdoor living space in continuity with the indoor space. Sliding partitions further allow the interior layout of the house to be reconfigured, thus providing a real flexibility of use; a bedroom opens up onto the living room while the two remaining adjacent small bedrooms can be joined together to make a single one. Every detail is designed to maximize the use of space. The dining room, for example, is reduced to a table set in between the kitchen and the living room. But it functions also as a preparation area for the kitchen, a desk for the living room, and a service hatch between the two rooms if meals are served outside. What else can you get out of a horizontal plane? Surprisingly, these constraints did not lead to a dry, functional space. There is a real sense of balance, comfort and joy of living.

Of course, we are in LA, the city with no guardian angel for architecture, where houses get bad facelifts overnight. Mar Vista did not survive completely intact. Over the years, the infamous symptoms of **the LA vernacular appeared**, transforming Ain's egalitarian dream into a more eclectic environment. Drive by Mar Vista today, and you'll see a garage wrapped in dark wood siding, a facade covered in yellow cottage-cheese stucco, a front yard featuring a rococo stone fountain (!) and a fleur-de-lys picket fence. One owner went as far as to paint his garage door in Pollack-esque acid green drippings. But despite these deviations, Mar Vista Housing still inspires, and some of the houses recently on the market have been restored back to their original state. And even with all of the changes in family structure and way of life over this past half-century, Ain's concepts of spatial flexibility and outdoor living are more desirable today than ever.

At a time when architecture seems self-absorbed in producing formalistic objects devoid of human and urban concerns, Ain's social agenda and economy of means remind us of more purposeful design. Mar Vista Housing illustrates what Los Angeles could have been with a bit more thinking, planning and trust in modern architecture. It is worth the detour, and if you find yourself converted into an Ain fan, you can also visit the Dunsmuir Flats of 1937 and the Avenel Housing Cooperative of 1948 in Silver Lake. You will not be disappointed. ✎