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Hollywood Panorama

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On a rundown strip of Hollywood Boulevard, at the confluence of two neighborhoods recently baptized Thai Town and Little Armenia, the artist Sara Velas rented an abandoned fast-food stand with a domed ceiling in 2001, and painted a 360-degree panorama titled *Valley of the Smokes*. For about three years, until 2004 when she lost her lease to a proposed redevelopment, the “Velaslavasay Panorama” stood as a found object in the landscape of Hollywood.

Above: The former site of the Velaslavasay Panorama at 5553 Hollywood Boulevard. Photo courtesy of the Velaslavasay Panorama.

Open limited hours for a small suggested donation, it bore an uncanny resemblance to those (principally European) nineteenth-century structures that housed a succession of proto-cinematic spectacles. The rhetoric, typography and imagery adapted by Velas also referred to this strangely “democratic” period of peepshows, magic lanterns, zoetropes, and other visual marvels.

The building that accommodated Velas’s Panorama, the former South Seas-themed Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda, provided an unusual complement. Built in 1968 in the exuberant Googie style, it was roofed with faded sky-blue shingles and capped with a glowing orange ball. Despite

its interim use as a travel agency, when Velas moved in, a worn sign with a golden crown still enticed passing drivers to stop for pizza and ice cream.

As an icon of local “exotica,” the Rotunda had long served as a landmark for motorists. Yet, despite its visual prominence, its milieu typified the largely bypassed nature of East Hollywood. Adjacent land was partially filled with weeds and rusted car parts. A prop rental agency—Jose’s Art Yard—occupied another part of the property, displaying Aztec gods and Rococo fountains cast in plaster. Behind was a rather down-and-out bungalow court, of a sort common in the area.

Amidst this jumble, the Rotunda appeared to hover like an ultra-modern spaceship, mirroring the form of the Art Deco Griffith Observatory in the hills above. This was no accident, since the Googie style, in celebration of Los Angeles' euphoric car culture of the 1950s and 60s interpellated the driver rather than the pedestrian.¹

In its roundness, the Tswuun-Tswuun also owed a formal debt to the drive-in restaurant. According to Alan Hess, round or octagonal shapes "...allowed carhops to glide from kitchen to car fast enough that the barbecue stayed hot."² "Roundness" also created a sense of panoramic, vertiginous openness, as customers arriving by car could look in on three sides to see their food being prepared.³

In its particulars, the Rotunda could be seen as a more modest, anonymous variation on a recognized icon of the style, the 1953 McDonald's in nearby Downey.⁴ This building was rescued from demolition and listed by the National Register of Historical Places in 1984 (an outcome that was, however, never seriously considered for the Rotunda).⁵

In theory, then, the Velaslava-say Panorama might have opened itself to ironic critique based on the paradox of low-tech effect in the capital of hyperreality. Yet, against all odds, it managed to inhabit the peculiar geographical space of East Hollywood in a natural and affective—one might even say, democratic—way.

An Artwork

The word "panorama" is pieced together from the Greek roots *pan* (all) and *borama* (view). As a painterly form, the panorama originated in England during the industrial revolution and spread rapidly through Europe. Asso-



ciated with geognosy (the production of knowledge about the earth), it developed in a reciprocal relation with surveying tools and techniques.

Stephan Oetermann has argued the modern use of the word to represent a broader pattern for organizing visual experience only developed, "...when the technical terms coined to denote a new type of round painting came to be applied generally to mean 'circular vista, overview' (from an elevated point) of a real landscape or cityscape; this was very soon followed by metaphorical use to mean a 'survey' or 'overview' of a particular field of knowledge."⁶

From its beginnings, panoramic painting was also conflated with the built container. Robert Barker's patent application in 1787 read: "There must be a circular building or framing erected, on which this drawing or painting may be performed; or the same may be done on canvas or other materials, and fixed or suspended on the same building or framing."⁷ A late-nineteenth-century dictionary of building terms similarly defined panorama as "a

building in which a painting referred to as a panorama is exhibited, that is to say painted on the inside wall of a rotunda, covered by a cupola or cone-shaped roof."⁸

During the nineteenth century, before the advent of commercial cinema, painted panoramas achieved significant popularity. Yet their production provoked a certain tension, and some panoramas were criticized as pandering to the masses, in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—the great skill and artisanship involved in their creation.⁹

Panoramic painting also raised a series of ethical questions about truth and vision that would become better elaborated in early film criticism. In his 1807 *Handbuch der Aesthetik*, J.A. Eberhardt criticized the panorama for evoking nausea and vertigo, and for the lack of freedom to escape the

Above: The Panorama gardens contained such "supplementary attractions" as a mock Avian Alcove, a mobile camera obscura, and furniture salvaged from a Polynesian-themed restaurant by Armét and Davis. Photo courtesy of the Velaslavasay Panorama.



painterly illusion.¹⁰ Thus, viewers of seascape panoramas sometimes complained of seasickness, and the panoramic experience was said to provoke hysterical reactions in female viewers.¹¹

Before setting out to produce her own work, Velas, a one-time intern at the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Venice, California, studied the great painted panoramas still in existence: Alpine landscapes in Austria and Switzerland, sweeping battle scenes in Scandinavia, and so on.¹²

To achieve the proper perspectival illusion, early panoramists frequently

used artificial devices such as an “Alberti’s veil,” a square frame with string stretched across it, or even a camera obscura. The invention of daguerreotype allowed naturalism to be achieved at considerably less expense. But for her part, Velas worked from preliminary charcoal drawings that she stretched over the rounded wall as she developed her ideas.

The visitor to Velas’s Panorama first navigated a semi-dark corridor. Inside, her low-key, earthy *Valley of the Smokes* offered a fantasized, naturalist view of the Los Angeles basin in the nineteenth century. The work depicted a series of hillsides, with native plants and small brush fires emitting curls of smoke that faded

into a calm sky. It was quite moving in its sparseness, and it made no effort at glitz or glamour.

Velas’s painting was decidedly unironic. When viewed in context of a work like Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz*, one might wonder what it did *not* say about the lived reality of early Los Angeles as a space of labor struggle, racism, and genocide toward the indigenous population. But, fundamentally, *Valley of the Smokes* was about the land, about Los Angeles as a collection of sparsely inhabited microclimates or ecologies.

An interesting sidelight to many of the early panoramas was that they offered adjunct spectacles for the price of admission: gardens, statuary,

Above: Installation view of the panoramic painting *Valley of the Smokes*. Photo courtesy of the Velaslavasay Panorama.



costumed ushers, simulated meteorological conditions, sonorous effects, or appropriate odors diffused into the air. A “visit to the panorama” might have included a variety of different sensory experiences not limited to contemplation of the painting itself.¹³

In a sweetly parodic register, the Velaslavasay Panorama paid homage to such supplementary attractions. It boasted an Avian Alcove, where “exotic birds,” some painted on a backdrop, some sculpted or stuffed, emitted calls recorded on a lo-fi soundtrack.¹⁴ Pet rabbits could be seen hopping around the yard. And Velas and her friends often sat outside on wrought-iron furniture, where the landscaping included elements salvaged from a Polynesian-themed building by Armét and Davis, the supreme masters of Southern California kitsch.

Velas also added a mobile camera obscura to the Panorama grounds. It allowed spectators to view the building and its contents from various angles, projected with crystalline (one could almost say, digital) clarity on an interior screen, but upside down. The effect was extremely disorienting, since even with the naked eye, the Panorama seemed to waver, its edges slightly blurred, almost as if surrounded by a haze of gasoline.

A Building

Viewing *Valley of the Smokes*—which appeared rather squat, especially compared with its apparently infinite width—one couldn’t help think of the various technologies of wide-screen cinema. In fact, the Velaslavasay Panorama explicitly referenced the Cinerama Dome on Sunset Boulevard in its publicity materials. Even more resonant, however, were the associations produced by its execution inside a prominent Googie building.

Googie, also known as Coffee Shop Modern, was a style often characterized by “Mesozoic” (“Flintstone”), space-age or atomic details, vibrant colors, and tropical vegetation set off with floodlights. Although Googie was related to organic forms, it was deliberately not supposed to look natural. Indeed, at its best, it appeared to defy gravity.

In contrast to mid-century minimalism, Googie buildings shunned “high” modernist glass and steel, and made use of plastics or any available materials. For this reason, the term “googie” soon evolved into a pejorative that critics associated with sloppy workmanship and cheesy materials.¹⁵

But Googie style has also been hailed as genuinely American and democratic, something that “brought

modern architecture down from the mountains and set ordinary clients, ordinary people free.”¹⁶ Like the “dingbat” homes scattered around Hollywood, it was meant to be widely accessible: inexpensive, a bit ludicrous, an exciting antidote to the boredom of the postwar office inhabited by the man in the gray flannel suit.

Googie represented a freedom to consume joyfully, and pluralistically. And in the case of Southern California, traces of such freedom can still be found—as can a few extant remnants of the style—in overlooked areas, small corners of underdeveloped space such as that once occupied by the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda.

A Neighborhood

Shortly after I completed a first draft of this essay, Velas announced that her Panorama would be forced to close. The land it occupied (along with the adjacent prop yard) had been purchased by the developer of a large mall at Sunset and Vine (as well as a smaller one at Sunset

Above and following pages: The panoramic painting *Valley of the Smokes* was on view at the Velaslavasay Panorama from 2001 to 2004. It was approximately 60 feet in circumference (18.3 meters). Photo by Lawrence Underhill.



and Western—where a Walgreen’s had replaced the former Pussy Cat Theater). The announcement forced me to shift from present to past tense, and to consider the importance of Velaslavasay Panorama as a phenomenon of limited duration.

When Velas moved in, the neighborhood, while still rather downtrodden, seemed to be on the upswing. Yet, in contrast to other art-developers, she did not seek to turn it around.¹⁷ Likewise, there are few signs of the type of gentrification that usually follows when artists move in. While a few cafes dot the landscape, the area around the intersection of Hollywood and Western has no art galleries, studios, mid-century-modern furniture stores, or hip bars.¹⁸ And it is still common to see homeless wheeling shopping carts and elderly residents buying wilted produce from the back of trucks.

Nevertheless, the City of Los Angeles is undergoing a crisis of conscience and planning, as regional population growth brings a radical realignment of its semi-urban, semi-suburban space. The Panorama stood at the vortex of transformation, more as a witness than a catalyst.

As part of this urban restructuring, the developer of the Rotunda site, the Bond Company, plans to build

a Whole Foods Market there. Like Starbucks, Whole Foods styles itself as ecologically considerate, youth oriented, and politically conscious.¹⁹ But its New Age, organic aura veils an aggressive corporate growth strategy based on demographic research, conservative labor policies, and strategic real estate investment.

By contrast, the Panorama was a unique landmark, not because it was architecturally or historically significant, and not simply because it was atavistic. Rather, in the play between its interior and exterior, its high-art concept and pop-culture form, its historical and futuristic referents, it improved its environment without displacing residents, destroying characteristic structures, or imposing new levels of consumption.

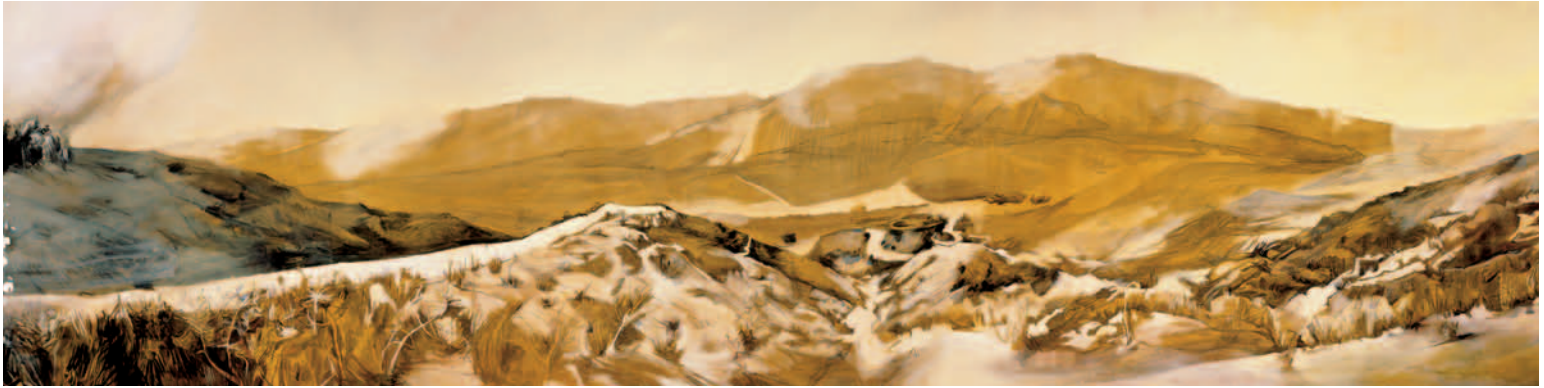
Velas does not feel her Panorama helped pave the way for designer produce and juice bars. And, truthfully, while Whole Foods may be part of a larger process of “revitalization,” it will probably not displace the small Armenian and Thai vendors nearby.²⁰

The area near the intersection of Hollywood and Western has also never had a history, in the words of Paul Goldberger, of being a “grand civic environment.”²¹ A shopping mall was recently built there, but this stretch of Hollywood Boulevard also

features the Downtowner, a low-budget motel with a Flintstone facade, flashing neon sign, and dioramas of exotic plants lit by green-filtered flood lamps.²² There is also the St. Francis hostel and SRO; the Saint Gabriel retirement home—a down-and-out hall with a halo for a logo; Le Sex Discount Shoppe; and the Thai Town Hot Dog stand (the current owners of this establishment made the unusually felicitous decision to keep an existing large hot dog atop their Asian takeout, which is located catty-corner from the Red Line subway station).

Several blocks away Thai Elvis performs. On Western Avenue, a rather dubious-looking, windowless bar called The Study has apparently managed to stay in business next door to a Thai beauty parlor and a casino-dealing school. A Korean church has purchased an arid plot of land filled with enormous candelabra cactuses on a block that also includes the neo-Federal-style Coral Sands Motel, a halfway house, a prosthetic limb shop, and an employment agency with a scrolling red neon sign.

In terms of neighborhood residents, Armenian families generally populate the extant stucco-box apartment complexes between Hollywood and Franklin Avenues. Developers of the mall just within view of the former



Rotunda constructed affordable housing above the stores in accordance with LA's inclusionary zoning regulations.²³ And a complex of senior-citizen apartment units set off by Mondrianesque primary-colored rectangles has cropped up above the Western/Hollywood subway stop, complementing the bare, functional townhouses to the immediate south.

As a work of art, the Panorama did not strive to empower these people or even create new public space for the neighborhood. Malcolm Miles has written about how a new genre of public art "acts as a catalyst for other people's creativity, political imagina-

tion being perhaps as valued as drawing skill." It "reflects a critical realism derived from Marxism, feminism and ecology which implies that artists act for and with others in reclaiming responsibility for their futures."²⁴

Far from developing such a critical realism, the Velaslavasay Panorama appeared to inhabit the landscape passively, waiting to be discovered, existing not as an intellectual monument so much as a quasi-organic growth. It was neither a commissioned, nor a site-specific work. Indeed, Velas's plans to display a painted panorama predated her felicitous location of the Rotunda building.

Of course, curious locals did, on occasion, come to visit. And Velas did distribute brochures in various languages (including Armenian and Thai; but also Korean, Italian, Japanese, and Esperanto). A number of articles also appeared on the Panorama; and Huell Howser, host of a PBS show on California oddities and landmarks, filmed an episode there.²⁵

But while public art groups—notably the LA-based Power of Place—have worked with defined communities to retrieve repressed cultural memories, the Panorama seemed more intent on imposing a fictional American memory on a noncommunity of various ethnicities.²⁶

Epilogue

In the late spring of 2004, friends and neighbors were invited to a wake for the Panorama. The ritual was attended by a heterogeneous group, including "Modcom hipsters," punks, and elderly residents of East Hollywood. Even Huell Howser, himself, attended briefly. Velas gave out cuttings from plants that had graced the yard. Mourners sipped champagne

Above: Thai Town Express takeout occupies a former hotdog stand near the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue. Photos by Bernard Yenelouis.



cocktails and ate slices of homemade purple bundt cake. Someone climbed to the peak of the rotunda and pulled down the orange ball that had glowed there for so many years. It seemed a truly democratic moment.

In early September 2005 the Rotunda was finally torn down. Plans for the site currently call for 42,000 sq.ft. of retail space on the ground floor, with the second floor and rooftop levels used for parking. Drawings show how the two sides of the building will meet in a rounded series of glass bands resembling both the Capital building at Yucca and Vine, and the Staples Center downtown.²⁷

Some members of the local neighborhood council have embraced the project, while others have expressed concerns about parking, congestion, and other impacts. But at the time of this writing it is almost certain Whole Foods will eventually move in.

Meanwhile, Velas has located another venue, the abandoned Union movie theater on 24th Street in the West Adams neighborhood near the University of Southern California.²⁸ Here the salvaged orange ball from the Rotunda tops the marquee, lit at night courtesy of a grant from the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles.

She expects to unveil a new painting in the near future—an arctic scene

accompanied by a timed light show and soundtrack. It is not specifically related to Los Angeles. But, as she explained, it is exotic “without being exotic in a bad way.”

The new work will not fit organically inside the new building. It will instead be installed on rounded walls built inside a square room. Nevertheless, like *Valley of The Smokes*, it promises to engage its environment in interesting ways. Too small and peculiar to transform an entire landscape, its very localness promises to help define and delimit the idea of a neighborhood in the megacity.

Notes

1. Among relevant works on building in relation to the automobile, see Jonathan Bell, *Carchitecture: When the Car and the City Collide* (London: August Press, 2001); Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); and Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr, eds., *Autopia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).
2. Alan Hess, *Googie* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985), p. 39.
3. Another round building that bears mention is Hollywood’s famous Brown Derby. Most of LA’s original hat-shaped Brown Derby Restaurants (a chain partly owned by Cecil B. DeMille) were demolished without fanfare, but the LA Conservancy pushed hard to save the one at 4500 Los Feliz Boulevard. Its site had been proposed as part of a luxury redevelopment

project (ironically also containing a Whole Foods market) that one commentator described as “Spanish colonial by way of Disneyland,” and that (like similar complexes such as The Palazzo at Park Labrea) would create a kind of fortress selling a gated lifestyle. See <http://ggpnc.org/gg-4500lofrenderings.html>.

4. This oldest-extant drive-in McDonald’s is discussed extensively by Alan Hess in *Googie*, pp. 96-107.

Although it is not round in form, the golden arches that were part of the original design bought from the McDonald brothers by Ray Kroc (founder of the McDonald’s Corporation) proved a much more enduring means of expressing the same design spirit.

5. Admittedly, the Rotunda was probably not worth saving, although there was much discussion on the ModCom message board (<http://www.lottaliving.com>) about ways to move it or convince developers to include it in their plans for the site. In some ways, though, the point of this article is that while the structure was not historically significant, its very unassuming typicality made it important in the context of the neighborhood.

6. Stephan Oetermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 7.

7. Cited in Hans Buddemeier, *Panorama, Diorama, Photographie: Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: W. Fink, 1970), p. 163.

8. Cited in Bernard Comment, *The Painted Panorama (Le XIXeme siècle des Panoramas)*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (New York: Abrams, 1999), p. 7.

9. “The artistic elite felt threatened by the panorama: they feared that their artistic activities would be snatched away from them, especially as panoramists were about to venture into territory close guarded by



the academies—that of war and battles—that could be incorporated from near or far away into historic painting.” Ibid., p. 87.

10. Ibid. pp. 97–103.

11. I am grateful to Natania Meeker for pointing me to the above sources regarding panoramic vertigo. Another is Adolf von Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1901).

12. More recently she has been invited by the International Panorama Council to speak about her work. Last year she attended a conference and workshop in China, where panoramic painting is still a highly-valued form of public art.

13. Comment, *The Painted Panorama*, p. 87.

14. I want to suggest a conceptual or thematic link between this Avian Alcove and another “exotic” Southern California landmark of the Googie era, Disneyland’s Enchanted Tiki Room. Opened in 1963, it featured animatronic parrots who led the audience in a chorus of “Let’s All Sing Like the Birdies Do.” See Francesco Adinolfi, *Mondo Esotica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), pp. 8, 99.

15. Hess, *Googie*, p. 62. The term was actually introduced in an essay titled “Googie Architecture,” *House and Home*, 1 (February, 1952), pp. 86–88. Also see Ed Leibowitz, “Out from Under the Wrecking Ball,” *Smithsonian* 31, n. 9 (December 2000), pp. 112–22.

16. Cited in Hess, *Googie*, p. 62.

17. When the Panorama was relatively new, an article in *Los Angeles Magazine* recounted plans by developer Urs Jakob and artist/designer Karim Rashid to transform the neighborhood, starting with a hip, upscale hostel in the single-room-occupancy St. Francis Hotel. Since this time, the St. Francis has continued to operate as a mixed-use (SRO and hostel)

building. The lobby still boasts a few mod, curvy Rashid chairs, although they are starting to appear faded.

But over the course of the last few years, Jakob was forced to sell his properties to condo developers. See Ed Liebowitz “From Bleak to Boutique,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, vol. 46, issue 11 (Nov. 2001), pp. 60–65.

18. In “Tall Drinks, Short Hops,” *L.A. Weekly* (Sept. 30–Oct. 6, 2005), p. 58, Caroline Ryder claims, “This intersection is known more for its crack dealers, cheap Thai barbecues and adult bookstores than its hot bar scene.”

19. See Jon Gertner, “The Virtue in \$6 Heirloom Tomatoes,” *The New York Times* (June 6, 2004), Section 6, p. 44.

20. Most of the new market’s affluent customers will likely come down from the hills above, as they have since at least the 1920s and 30s to shop on the “flats.” See Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, p. 83.

21. Goldberger was referring to the transformation of the area around New York’s Union Square. Cited in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 3. Deutsch describes how the change in Union Square from “a deteriorated yet active precinct” to a “luxury ‘mixed-used’ neighborhood” is an example of the recent “unprecedented degree of change in the class composition of New York neighborhoods” (p. 12). There are certain similarities with the area of East Hollywood formerly occupied by the panorama. Yet in LA, residents do not have the same sense of neighborhood history, development tends not to be so immediately politicized, corporate interests are smaller, and class changes occur more slowly and with less visible impact.

22. As an element of vernacular, “democratic,” Los

Angeles architecture, see John Chase’s comments on Flintstone detailing in *Glitter Stucco & Dumpster Diving* (New York and London: Verso, 2000).

23. For the effect of inclusionary zoning regulation in Los Angeles, see Robert Greene, “Welcome to Planning 101,” *LA Weekly* (Nov. 19–25, 2004), p. 33.

24. Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 12.

25. “Visiting with Huell Howser,” program 911.

26. About the Power of Place group’s work in Little Tokyo, Malcolm Miles noted: “whilst this project fits many of the requirements of alternative public art, in collaborating with a defined community to embody memories of place, in dealing with local rather than global history, and in its low-key intervention in the physical environment arising out of a lengthy link to the social environment, it also raises the question: once a community is empowered to the extent of regaining its cultural identity, what do they do with that empowerment to become co-designers of their city, to occupy that place where the form of the city is determined?” *Art, Space and the City*, p. 178.

27. For the upcoming plans for construction, including conceptual images, see <http://www.cajair.com/portfolio/wholefoods.html>.

28. During this transition period, a view of *Valley of the Smokes*, now dismantled, can be viewed at the history section of www.panoramaonview.org.