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RICK CORSINI &
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A Letter from Los Angeles

Immediately after World War Two and just before McCarthyism, ten Communists commissioned a modernist, racially integrated housing co-operative in the Silver Lake neighbourhood of L.A.

THE LOS ANGELES-BASED modern architect Gregory Ain (1908–88) was a pioneer in low-cost housing in the 1930s and '40s. During this period, Ain collaborated closely with the era's design luminaries, including Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Charles and Ray Eames. He developed a series of innovative housing projects that today remain compelling models for high-quality, low-cost housing. Critically successful yet controversial when first completed, these projects, several based on the cooperative model, fused Ain's interest in radical left-wing politics and design to promote social equality and racial integration.

Following the Second World War, the American response to the severe housing shortage was a suburban model intertwined with mass consumption. This model depended heavily on federal investment in highway infrastructure to leverage the private construction of large tracts of mass-produced single-family houses, the

consumption of financial services, and new, industrially-produced consumer goods. A key feature of these new housing developments were restrictive covenants that prohibited rental or sale to Jews, blacks, and other ethnic minorities, effectively establishing a system of racial segregation.

The prototype of this new pattern was Levittown, a community built on Long Island between 1947 and 1951 for returning war veterans. It consisted of 900-square-foot single-family houses on private lots, accessible only by private automobiles. If the Levittown model offered the average white American family affordable housing, it also promoted a new suburban, low-density, automobile-dependent, racially and economically homogeneous way of life where shared civic and communal space was conspicuously absent. For the next half-century, Levittown became the American model for post-war housing development, and consequently its national politics.

Previous page: Street view of the Avenel Cooperative, Los Angeles, CA, designed by Gregory Ain in 1946.

Photographed by Julius Shulman in 1949.

Getty Research Institute (2004.R.10) / J. Paul Getty Trust.

Next page: Dunsmuir Flats, Los Angeles, CA, built in 1937.

Photographed by Julius Shulman in 1949.

Getty Research Institute (2004.R.10) / J. Paul Getty Trust.

In contrast to the Levittown model, Ain's interest in cooperative housing challenged dominant political and economic systems and their demand for incessant expansion and exploitation. Ain spent the prime years of his career developing an alternative model of low-cost housing and neighbourhood planning that celebrated everyday life and diversity. In contrast to the typical suburban model, Ain's approach was to situate housing units in a well-planned neighbourhood environment. In the 1940s Ain designed at least three cooperative housing projects, yet the renowned Avenel was the only one built.

Located in the Silver Lake neighbourhood of Los Angeles, the ten-unit Avenel complex was designed in 1946 and commissioned by a group of ten families, all communists and leaders in the trade union movement, who organised themselves into a cooperative. Each family contributed \$11,000. The cooperative model and Federal Housing Authority (FHA) financing made new construction affordable for these working-class families.

The south-facing hillside site measured 248 feet by 124 feet. Ain arranged two sets of five single-story attached and staggered row houses in two terraces, stepped skillfully into the slope. Each unit was oriented to optimise views, daylighting, and natural cross ventilation, each with its own entrance, private

garden, and garage. The three-bedroom units were only 960 square feet yet felt much larger. Sliding glass panels across the entire length of the living room allowed interior space to flow directly into a private garden. Sliding walls, one between two bedrooms and a second between the parents' bedroom and living room, provided the flexibility of use over time.

Ain's design included a built-in dining table between the kitchen and the living room. This innovative feature was rejected by the FHA but was subsequently allowed in later projects. Ain's vision of a 'servantless house' sought to integrate housework and childrearing by providing sightlines from an open kitchen to the common walkway and through the living room to the private terrace. It also allowed women to be more integrated with social activities in the living room, challenging the conventional gender roles of the period.

During the early 1950s, as the political climate in Los Angeles shifted to the right, this small experimental community of communists and radical thinkers drew the attention of the FBI and other authorities. According to architectural historian Anthony Denzer, at least four members of Avenel were called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.



Aerial view of Levittown, New York.

Photo courtesy of Levittown Public Library.

Street view of Levittown, New York.

Photo by Bettmann / Contributor.





Entry — common walkway looking West at the Avenel Cooperative.

Photographed by Julius Shulman in 1949.

J. Paul Getty Trust.



Gregory Ain's site plan of Avenel, with perspective drawing showing private garden and back of house, c. 1947.

Photo from Gregory Ain Papers, Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Many of the original owners that founded the cooperative in 1946 lived at Avenel until their last days. They were defiant of, or indifferent to, the consumerist dictum of the American real estate market: buy a small ‘starter home’, move up to a large family home, downsize with an ‘empty nest’ home. Modest in size but thoughtfully conceived for flexibility over time, Ain’s rigorous design served families through all cycles of their lives.

Since the 1990s, after Avenel was converted to a condominium, a new generation began moving in that lived side by side with many of the original residents, initiated rehabilitation, and applied for and received national historic status. By the early 2000s, as ‘mid-century modern’ became an increasingly recognisable and fashionable style, units at Avenel became objects of desire, commanding sales above asking prices and significantly higher than comparable properties in the already costly Silver Lake neighbourhood. By the 2010s, the transformation of the Avenel Cooperative was complete — from a practical and elegant solution for post-war affordable

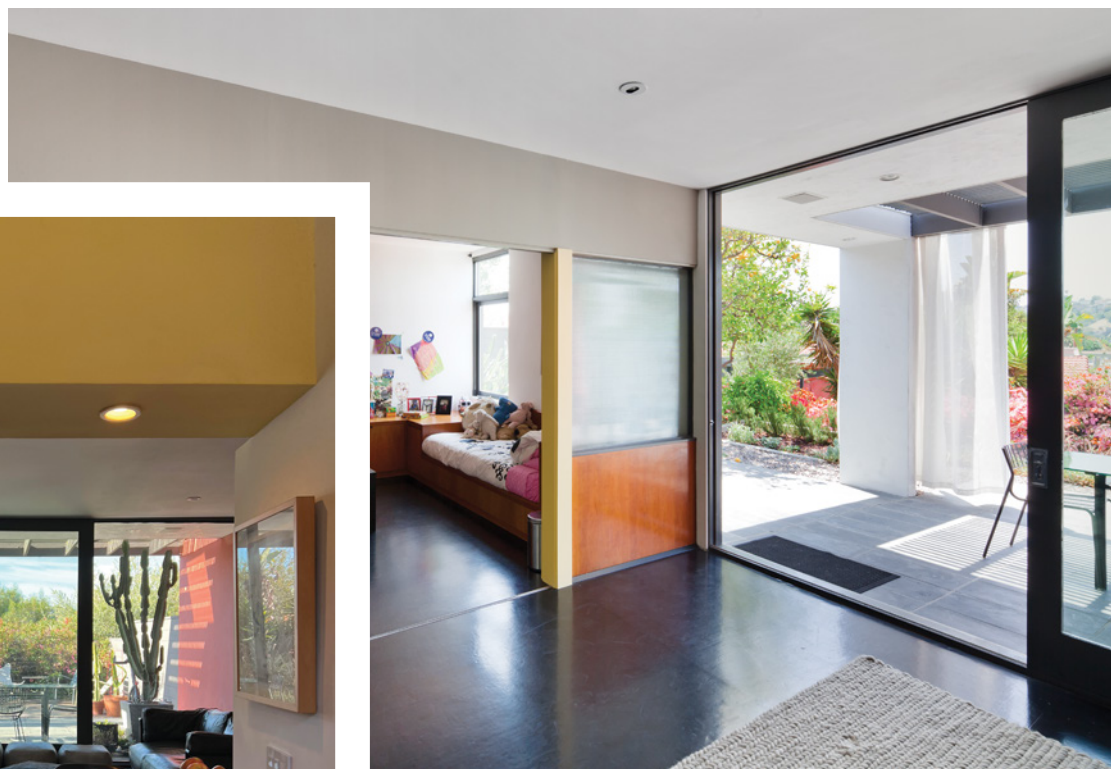
housing for communist families to highly sought-after trophy properties for well-heeled design aficionados.

The cooperative model of development, where a group of people pool their resources to build housing that suits their particular needs appears viable yet remains exceedingly rare. Perhaps bank financing of such an unorthodox arrangement is the obstacle, or the complexity of the approval process in many jurisdictions for inexperienced developers. Or perhaps gathering six, eight, or ten like-minded individuals together with sufficient financial and emotional wherewithal to endure the tribulations of the contemporary development process is the greatest hurdle.

The most interesting opportunity would be for architects to take the lessons of Avenel vertically to urban scale densities of fifty to a hundred dwelling units per acre, supported by high-capacity transit, while elaborating Ain’s holistic social, economic, environmental, and aesthetic vision. This is particularly critical as Los Angeles matures and densifies into a world city. ♦

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View from kitchen to terrace.

Rick Corsini, Avenel Cooperative.

The ‘Flexible House’ concept, with sliding panels in closed position.

Photo by Kyungsub Shin.