

H O U S E M U S I C

Electronic musician Moby talks about his architecture blog.

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)
Portrait photo [Alexei Tylevich](#)



'I GREW UP POOR IN A WEALTHY TOWN, SO I WAS OBSESSED WITH HOW PEOPLE LIVED'

moby's home in Beachwood Canyon – a castle (really) built in 1927 – is known locally as 'Wolf's Lair', after its original owner, L. Milton Wolf. The Beatles, Marlon Brando and a monkey allegedly rank among its previous inhabitants, and entrance through the castle gates reveals a spectacular view of the Hollywood Reservoir to the left and a 1962 guesthouse designed by John Lautner to the right. To be sure, Moby's LA-based home is much like his LA-based architecture blog: a confluence of differing aesthetics. On Moby Los Angeles Architecture Blog (mobylosangelesarchitecture.com), the musician posts his photographs of LA structures and comments on their significance in a hybrid colloquial style that allows sentences to begin with 'ok' and end with 'Marcel Breuer'. His focus seems to be on evading focus; featured buildings range in style from crack house to craftsman, and adjectives like 'grimy' and 'random' further underscore the blog's ambiguity. In a white corner of his fortress, Moby tells me why he thinks architecture could stand to be a little less self-assured and discusses the bigger picture behind the little ones he posts.

What is your background in architecture?
Moby: I grew up very poor in a very wealthy town, so I was always obsessed with how people lived. Our house was tiny and run down; my friends' homes were big and well maintained. That triggered my obsession with space. Later, in the early '90s, I started to teach myself more about the history of architecture. Being in New York, I knew Bernard Tschumi and had a lot of friends from that Columbia School of 'Bobbies'. It must have been '93 that I was out drinking with some architect friends when I realized that how they talked about architecture had nothing to do with how people actually experienced it. They were talking about the World Trade Center, which, in their estimation, was terrible. I thought: Sure, but most New Yorkers disagree with you. They were citing certain ratios and so on, and I said, 'But when you're in Manhattan and need to

know which way south is, what do you look to? What about the bar there?' I went on, trying to make a case for the daily utility that architecture has in people's lives, but my ideas seemed to be very divorced from my friends' opinions.

Of course, my own background is in music. When I was young, I played classical music and studied music theory; then I played in punk-rock bands. And when I took some experimental music courses in college, I realized that the academic approach to music has nothing to do with music. In the academic context, it is a self-involved, insular discipline, and I came to understand the same is true of architecture.

Does your blog challenge academic architectural criticism?

I can't speak that knowledgeably about the history of architectural criticism, but what's true in any other field of criticism seems to apply to architecture; it's mostly just critics talking to other critics, using a lexicon relevant only to those somehow 'evolved' in their discipline. There are certainly some populist magazines like *Dwell* and *Wallpaper*, but they are still informed by more academic, refined sensibilities. Their criteria are clearly those of people who spend a lot of time studying contemporary architecture. That exists in music as well, but since music has a very populist element to it, its criticism automatically has an audience beyond academics. That's why you have people like Greil Marcus, and other famous music critics, who write as fans. Maybe that's how I'm trying to write about architecture. And, really, LA is the place to do it.

But you also live in New York and tour frequently. Why focus on LA?

Because this city is a mess. To write about LA in a more formal, academic way would be to miss its point completely. If you apply formal academic criteria to Los Angeles, you'll probably conclude that it's a disaster of a city. I mean, a friend of mine who works for The City of Los Angeles recently did a study on major global >



23 April 2012

so, every now and then i like to back away from the strangeness of l.a. and take pictures of houses and things that are just simple and nice. like this house.

i drive by it almost every day, and it always strikes me as a perfect little hill-perched mid-century house with awesome little dr seuss plants in its tiny driveway.

someday my hope is that i'll actually get invited in to one of these houses so that i won't just feel like some creepy house stalker.

most of the houses in the hollywood hills present fairly tough phalanx-like facades to the street, but they open up with walls of glass to the gigantic views.

but as i'm a creepy house stalker i usually only get to take pictures of the phalanx-like facades.

granted, they're nice facades, but someday maybe someone will let me into their house to actually take pictures of the parts of the houses that don't look like bunkers.

but as for this house: as i said, i drive by it almost every day and i think it's a perfect little mid-century house.

more than that i can't say (or, well, write).

like, per usual: i don't know who designed it, nor do i know if it has an amazing, storied past.

although as this is the land of make-believe let's pretend it was designed by pierre koenig and that jimi hendrix and aldous huxley used to live here in a late 60's acid fueled version of the odd couple.

oh, and have a good weekend.

if you go to coachella make sure to bring sun block or a big floppy hat (not for late 80's rave fashion, for sun protection).



'HOW ARCHITECTS TALK ABOUT ARCHITECTURE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE IT'

25 April 2012

so, sunday i was driving home and i happened to pass by a castle for sale.

what made this especially great:

1. it was a block away from the soul-sucking sunset strip.
2. it had a hand drawn 'for sale by owner' sign taped to the gate out front.
3. it's a really nice quasi-castle.
4. it overlooks a frank lloyd wright house.

see, years ago i was a committed architectural modernist. i loathed ornamentation, and i thought that year-zero for architecture began with corbusier.

anything ornamented or traditional or non-rectilinear was kind of loathsome to me, as i was a true believer in modernism.

and now? well, life is short and i've come to view extremism (on my part and anyone else's) with suspicion and distaste.

the extremist (whether religious or musical or architectural or political etc etc) usually is saying a lot more about themselves and their unresolved issues than they are about the object of their allegiance.

which leads us to wacky for-sale castles a block away from the sunset strip.

it's ornamented, it's traditional, and it's amazing. a modern house that looks like an l.a. interpretation of an 18th century fantasy castle from the rhone valley.

or 17th century.

or 16th.

i have no idea. except that whoever ends up living there is probably going to be pretty happy to jump around in the pool in the shadow of their quasi-castle.

◀ urban destinations like Times Square, Piccadilly Circus, Champs Elysees and Hollywood Boulevard. Theoretically, Hollywood Boulevard is in the same league as these other places, but tourists spend by far the shortest length of time visiting it. Time spent in every other place is measured in hours, while Hollywood Boulevard has an average tourist stay of 19 minutes. Why? Because it's a dump. It's full of pawnshops and Army Navy stores – right there, in the centre. In other major cities it's usually easy to find the good stuff. You can't miss Central Park or the Chrysler Building. Whereas in LA amazing architecture is often hidden, and ugly architecture has hidden meaning. This city is incongruous, insane, organic and unfathomable, and I want my writing about it to reflect that.

Of course, that's not to say there isn't beautiful, iconic mid-century modern architecture in LA, but in only focusing on that, you limit yourself tremendously.

This might sound like heresy in the world of architecture, but I think a parking lot can be just as interesting as a building. If the goal is an anthropological approach – trying to figure out a place and its inhabitants via what they've built and where – then you have to be able to go far afield and document everything. In a way, I'm inspired by Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*.

On your blog, you might post a Niemeyer one day and an empty swimming pool the next. Ultimately, do you place different values on different structures?

I think often about the semiotics of architecture. Basically, all buildings do the same thing, right? Let in light and keep the bugs out. So in a very reductionist way, a space is a space, and when we ascribe value to it, it tends to be about the decorative elements. There's a certain collective subjectivism that tells us that the strip mall across the street is ugly.



The interview taking place in Moby's pool house. Photo Alexei TyLevich

'ARCHITECTURE CRITICISM IS MOSTLY JUST CRITICS TALKING TO OTHER CRITICS'



30 April 2012

so, last week i was driving to our nbc tonight show rehearsal and i drove by what looked like the scene of a brutal alien attack on our planet-wide defense and communication systems.

i'm assuming that it was actually just a broadcast center being torn down to make room for a wal-mart, but the dystopian, entropic, futuristic destruction appealed to the stunted, adolescent sci-fan in me. so i stopped and took pictures.

for some reason (maybe because they're cool) i've always loved demolition sites. and in this case i especially love what's happened as it looks, as i mentioned, like the aftermath of an alien attack.

i could put on a highbrow hat and say that i love the aesthetics of specific utilitarian objects when they're unintentionally repurposed (like, say, busted up old satellite dishes). or i could just say that a bunch of huge, old, busted up satellite dishes behind a barbed wire fence look dystopian and amazing. and that they are, accidentally, architecture, in that they define and contribute to the odd urban environment of l.a.

and that last sentence was, in fact, a long and unnecessary run-on sentence.

oh, i'm including lots of pictures of the busted up gigantic satellite dishes because they looked so amazing.

My question is: Why do we agree that it's ugly, and what does it actually represent? The glib answer is that the strip mall represents ubiquitous cheap building materials and car culture. But I think it potentially represents a lot more than that. In Los Angeles, it represents a city's transient nature, and its cheapness can actually be understood to be incredibly democratic and egalitarian.

What is egalitarian about Los Angeles architecture?

Name me any other city in the Western world where people buy land and build houses the way they do here. It just doesn't happen. Los Angeles is so big and so messy that it's hard to have the type of concentrated gentrification that you have in New York, San Francisco, London or any major European city. I mean, Manhattan is where hedge fund managers and tourists hang out. The artists have all been priced out. Of course, there are parts of LA that are also gentrified and very expensive, but Los Angeles County is as big as Belgium. There is always somewhere cheap to live. There is always somewhere inexpensive for artists, writers and musicians to do their work. People can afford to buy land here, which means they can also experiment on it. A friend of mine bought a plot of land in Eagle Rock [northeast Los Angeles] for \$12,000 and built a house for \$200,000. I think, in such cases, the same thing that applies in the film industry applies to architecture. A \$200-million movie is not going to be experimental, because it's too huge an investment. On the other hand, you can take certain risks if a film's budget is only \$200,000. So, given New York's extremely expensive real estate, a new building there can't be truly experimental. Whereas here, experimentation is still possible.

There are many unnamed structures on your blog – is this your way of countering 'name' architecture and highlighting more unconventional experimentation?

There are many builders and designers owed their due in Los Angeles, but often

I really have no idea who's behind some of the things I'm photographing. As much as I research, I just find no record of them. So I put them out there as they are. If you think of Marcel Duchamp putting ready-mades in a gallery, the goal was not to say: Isn't it ironic and clever to put a toilet in a gallery? The goal was to emphasize the remarkable accidental beauty of things that already exist outside the gallery. I guess I'm trying to do the same thing by collecting different kinds of architecture on a page and showing the accidental significance and strange beauty of buildings that are out in the real world. I've received a lot of response. Oddly – or sadly – in the last few months, I've gotten more feedback on the architecture blog than I have on the music I make.

For you, there must be some crossover. Well, one of the things architecture and music have in common is that they're both very form related. There's also a shared confusion in both practices; people think that because one form has been around longer than another, it must have more value. For example, the beautiful city of Florence was built a long time ago, and we ascribe great value to it. But Florence was created by people of a mind-set we can't really understand and a world-view we can't fully share. Whereas, what's fascinating about Los Angeles is that it was built by us. Everything in LA is modern architecture. Even if it looks colonial and old, it's still modern. The other day I posted a picture of a colonial house, and the irony is that it was probably built after some of the Pierre Koenig Case Study houses. This is our city – the 20th-century city – built by weird dysfunctional artists in the last 100 years. What does it tell us about our condition? ◀

mobylosangelesarchitecture.com