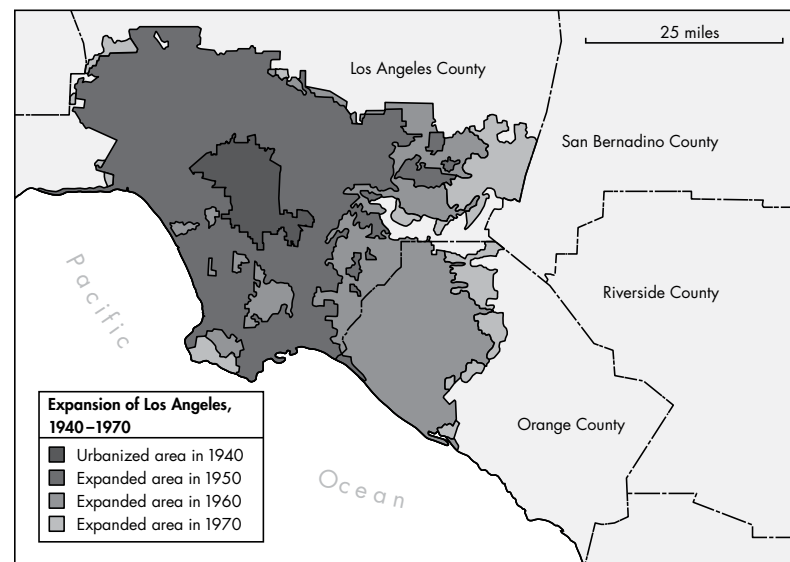


in and around Los Angeles, together with vast new armaments industries, drew millions of new residents, of all races and ethnicities. And with the laying down of the a new highway system based on the Los Angeles Master Plan of 1941, the scene was set for renewed explosive growth in the postwar period. The population increased ten-fold between 1890 and 1920, doubled between 1920 and 1940, and doubled again from 1940 to 1960, when it reached about two and a half million. Some of this increase was due to the annexations (of both unincorporated towns and incorporated cities) that increased the size of the city from 28 square miles in the 1890s to 469 square miles in 1932. Los Angeles was larger in area than most other cities in the world in the 20th century, and larger in both population and geographic extent than all other US cities but New York in the same century. Huge, sprawling and diverse, comprised of ethnic enclaves, historic neighborhoods (some long-established), multiple cities, towns, and communities (some very recent), Los Angeles has often seemed “incomprehensible to outsiders”.³ Perhaps as a result, the history of housing and urban development in the Los Angeles megalopolis has tended to be written by local specialists, and to be comparatively neglected by non-Californians. This has been true of the area’s architectural history, too.⁴ Yet Los Angeles provided American housing—and American architecture—with many innovations, and almost every innovator in Los Angeles building “came from somewhere else”.

Fritz Burns (1899–1979) was certainly not “typical” of American builders in his accomplishments: through his work and contacts in Los Angeles, together with his leadership in the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), he was for a while (ca 1942–1955) a dominant force in the nation’s housing industry. But he belongs at the beginning of this account: his wide-ranging significance has not been fully understood even by California scholars, and certainly not by architectural historians, or historians

49. Los Angeles, map of development. Nathanael Roesch from census data.



of housing. If American builders in other parts of the country were looking to any models outside their own regions, or to any national design authorities besides the FHA, it was to Burns’ work and to the standards and goals set by the NAHB. If they were reading magazines with a national circulation, they were reading NAHB publications and those that were most directly influenced by the NAHB.

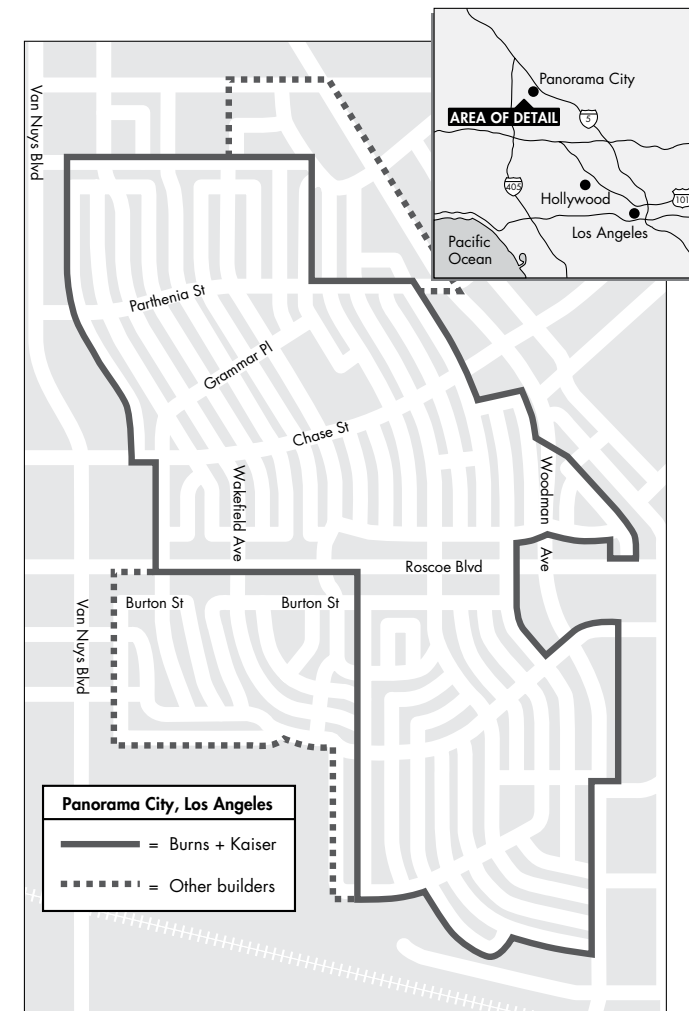
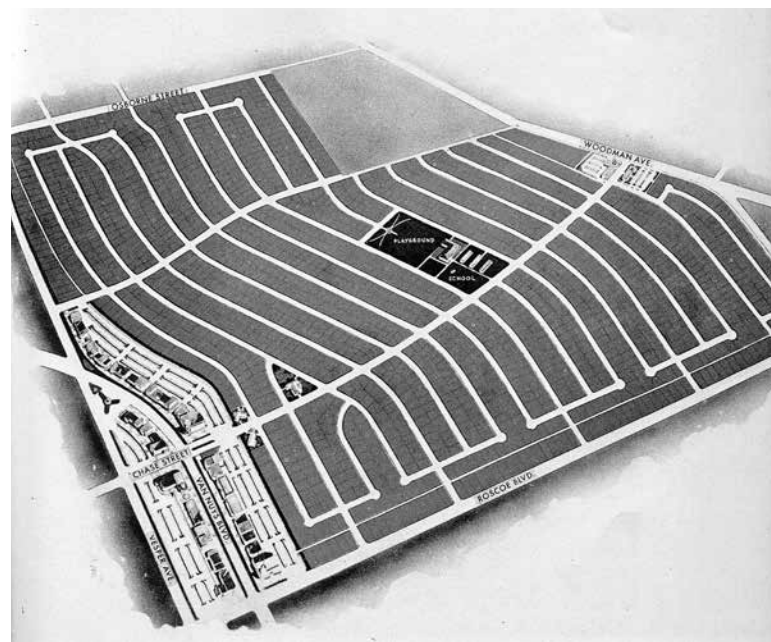
The NAHB was founded by Fritz Burns and other leading builders in 1942, as a break-away organization from the National Association of Real Estate Boards (which had been founded in 1908). Among the other early leaders of the organization were David Bohannon from San Francisco, J. C. Nichols of Kansas City and William J. Levitt “of Long Island”.⁵ In 1942, building materials were scarce, and private builders were jockeying for government contracts to build war housing. Leading politicians and government administrators wanted to give the tasks of building war housing to public housing agencies. In the early 1940s, Burns successfully led a lobbying effort against the “socialistic” plan of the War Production Board to restrict all defense contracts to public agencies.⁶ Absorbing the earlier National Home Builders Association in 1943, the NAHB rapidly became the leading trade association for builders and members of building-related enterprises. Chief among its publications was *The Correlator*, a monthly journal for members, renamed the *Journal of Homebuilding* in 1957.⁷ *The Correlator*, and its successor, published NAHB prizes, house designs that its editors approved of, and a large amount of information about building products. It reported extensively on the annual conventions held in Chicago and New York, as did the newspapers of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The organization soon established its permanent headquarters in Washington, DC, and proved to be an effective lobbying organization there. Fritz Burns was the organization’s vice chairman in 1943, and in 1945 was made its “honorary president.” With centers in three major metropolitan areas and a leadership drawn at least in part from California, the NAHB established a high profile among the nations’ builders. In addition to its prizes for neighborhood planning, the NAHB sponsored competitions in house design, and supported college-level degree programs for homebuilders.

Fritz Burns was twice a millionaire when he took over leadership of the NAHB, but he came from very humble beginnings. He was raised by Catholic German and Irish immigrant grandparents in Minneapolis; at an early age he went to work for a Minneapolis real estate firm. Unenthusiastic about formal schooling, he attended a three-year business course instead of high school, and served briefly in the army in World War I. In 1919, he enrolled in Wharton School of Business (University of Pennsylvania) for a year and then began prospecting for land (for Dickenson & Gillespie, a Minneapolis firm) along new streetcar routes in the east, Midwest and far west. He soon settled in Los Angeles as a real estate subdivider and salesman (he was not, at this point, a builder); by 1929, his extraordinary skill at finding and selling land had brought him his first million dollars. In the stock market crash and early years of the Great Depression, he lost nearly everything, and eked out a living as a kind of beachcomber. But the discovery of oil in 1934, on one of his few remaining parcels of beach property, laid the financial basis for his

Boulevard was not yet a major through road during this period, and the later layout shows a great deal of consistency in terms of north-south street arrangements, so I think it is correct to look closely at this latter plan.³⁸ The engineer who laid out the streets in both the north and south portions of the community was Thomas A. Jordan of the Los Angeles Engineering Service Corporation, a man of long experience in planning, and the author, among others, of the plan for hilly Hollywood Hills in the 1940s.³⁹ The plan is a rather curious affair, a kind of bent and twisted version of a typical Los Angeles grid, with most of the long north-south streets forming T-intersections before they reach the major boundary thoroughfares. At the center of the northern section, eleven acres were set aside for a school and playground facilities; other parcels were sold at cost to churches and private schools.⁴⁰ No parks were included in the plan, aside from the central area around the school.

The site of Panorama City is flat, so these street arrangements were dictated by contemporary concerns with street and neighborhood planning, rather than by site-specific considerations. In 1936, 1938, and 1941, the FHA had published guides to successful neighborhood planning, which emphasized the importance of open space, community facilities, and streets protected from through traffic. Radburn, New Jersey, with its curving streets, had been held up as a good model in these publications (see fig. 43).⁴¹ The importance of curving streets had been endorsed by the NAHB at an early date; many of the larger builders of the first postwar years adopted these patterns in their housing developments.⁴² Burns and Marlow had employed slightly curvilinear plans (on a much smaller scale) at Windsor Hills in 1938, where curves were required by the hilliness of the site, and in the second

58. Panorama City, first plan, 1946. Los Angeles City Planning Commission. Permission to come.



phase of Westchester. Whatever the proximate sources of the Panorama City plan, it won Burns a prestigious award for neighborhood planning from the NAHB early in 1949.⁴³

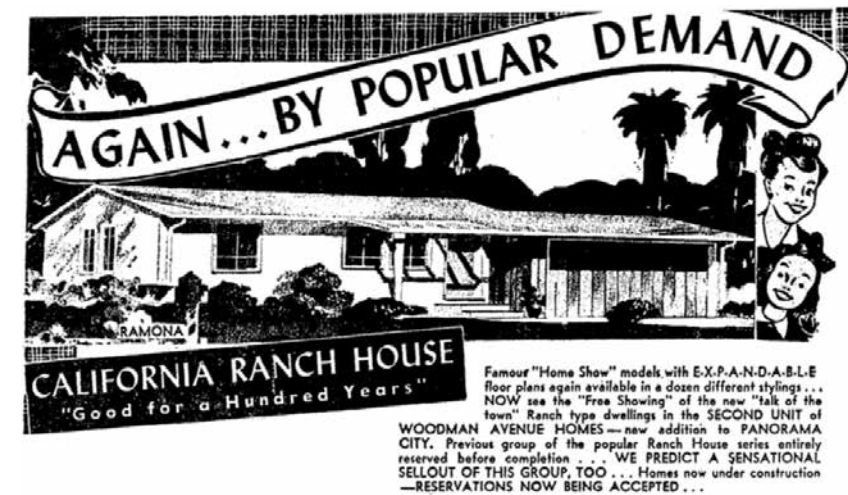
At Panorama City, one can already observe the full-fledged sales and advertising techniques that would be characteristic of tract house marketing in the fifties and sixties. Full-page ads invited readers to showings of model homes, listed their contents and offered exterior drawings. When one “unit” of houses was sold out, the next would be “opened” with a “new line” [seldom different from the older one]. Repetitive phrases and slogans gave readers mottos to remember: Panorama City offered “homes for the thrifty” with “innovations never before found in any house”; it contained “22 miles of homes”; it was “a city where a city belongs”. And Burns was a magnificent huckster: low-flying aerial photographers took pictures of moving vans converging on a single street (the presence of the vans had been artfully orchestrated beforehand); an early house at

59. Panorama City, plan based on tract maps, showing final boundaries, and areas developed by Burns and Kaiser. Barbara Miller Lane and Nathanael Roesch.

Panorama City was given away (fully furnished) on Art Linkletter's nationally popular "People Are Funny" radio show, as a prize.⁴⁴ Next to the sales offices, there were fifteen model houses on display (5-14-49), fully furnished by Barker Brothers furniture company, where potential purchasers could make their choices among different exteriors, plans, rooflines and exterior and interior finishes. One could visit the models during the day, of course, but also during "moonlight tours" (ibid). The models had names: the Coronado, the New Englander, the Windsor (moonlight 4-10-49); and the best-selling two- and three-bedroom "California Ranch House" series—the Coronado, the Del Mar, the Catalina, and the Ramona—designed for KCH by architect Welton Becket⁴⁵.

In his earlier housing developments, Burns had not used an architect (though many participated at Windsor Hills); unlike many other states, California did not require an architect's signature as the legal precondition for a building permit. Howard Hunter Clayton, a Los Angeles artist, had appeared as a "designer" in the earlier Burns developments, but Burns was proud of his own standardized house plans as he developed them at Toluca Wood, Westside Village, and Westchester (fig. 52). Early sales at Panorama City were slow, however, and Burns had already got to know Welton Becket in building the "Post War House" of 1946, which had received immense local and national publicity.⁴⁶ It seemed that Becket's name might help sales. Becket, then, was brought in, in the summer of 1948, to "collaborate" in the design of KGH's new "California Ranch House" models at Panorama City.⁴⁷

Becket's ranch houses largely abandoned Burns' earlier standard plan, merging the earlier dining el into an expanded living room (fig. 60).⁴⁸ The storage walls developed at Westchester were retained, but the interior spaces were, within their very small footprint



(750 square feet), much more open. The "Ramona Ranch" version featured a slanted, gable-shaped ('cathedral') ceiling with exposed rafters over the main living space. The ceilings were "tongue & groove planks of Douglas fir, with beams and planks finished in desert colors to bring out the natural beauty of the wood."⁴⁹ Even more importantly, the external profile was exceptionally low⁵⁰, with a sweeping gable roof, so that the Ramona Ranch now for the first time took visual advantage of the low and spreading proportions implicit in the ranch house type (Figs. 61).⁵¹ The ads recognized these formal changes, pointing out the "fresh, clean, sweeping lines and good form of the 'new look' in architecture."⁵² From the beginning of 1949, the great majority of houses at Panorama City followed some of these features of Becket's pattern.

Because Fritz Burns adopted the ranch label for his earliest tract houses, at Toluca Wood in 1941 and in the first phase of his Westchester houses (1941-44), some writers see Burns as the originator of the ranch house form of the 1950s.⁵³ But Burns' earlier houses were not well known outside California at the time, nor were they, at least before the war, intended for lower-income buyers. And while it is possible to find isolated occurrences of large one-story houses with attached garages described as "ranch" houses on the east coast and mid-west from about 1941, these were not yet serving as models for new tract houses.⁵⁴ But the "California ranch house" series at Panorama City represented a turning point in the development of the ranch house, both in California and in the nation. Let us look for a moment at the broader evolution of the ranch house in the US, in order to pinpoint the role of the Panorama City ranches.

The Development of the Ranch House

In contrast to the split-level house, for example, the ranch house has attracted enormous attention in many different spheres. Architectural historians have debated its formal

61. Fritz Burns with Welton Becket, Ramona Ranch, 1948-49. Nathanael Roesch from a newspaper advertisement of 9-10-49.

60. Welton Becket, plan for "California Ranch House" series, Panorama City, 1948. Nathanael Roesch from original in Welton Becket archive. Welton McDonald Becket.

