

From The Atlantic

**CITYLAB**

## What the Instagram of the 1970s Reveals About L.A.

Young photographers infiltrated academic slide libraries with radical images of a changing Los Angeles.

LAURA BLISS | [@mslaurabliss](#) | 12:03 PM ET | [Comments](#)



Environmental Communications/Courtesy LAXART

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Once upon a time, if an architecture student needed a view of a faraway building or town, she'd head to the slide library, where thousands of thumbnail images—towers, houses, city blocks, famous landmarks—sat waiting to be sifted through.

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These images were limited in quantity—students might have to fight over the same Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Kahn transparencies if they were writing similar term papers—as well as in quality. Slides rarely showed much other than buildings themselves, often in the same three-quarter view, so it could be hard to get a sense of the architecture’s environment.

One side effect of this: It reinforced prevailing narratives about a city’s design. In the 1960s, for example, many critics viewed L.A. as a mishmash of architectural styles, whose buildings still managed to sit distant and isolated from one another and the humans that used them. Looking at L.A. through a slide library, it would be easy to leave with that impression that the [city was a stylistic and functional “failure.”](#) compared to the streamlined density of a New York, Paris, or London.

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## EC’s aesthetic quickly became familiar in films, newspapers, and lecture halls—even if the group wasn’t necessarily famous itself.

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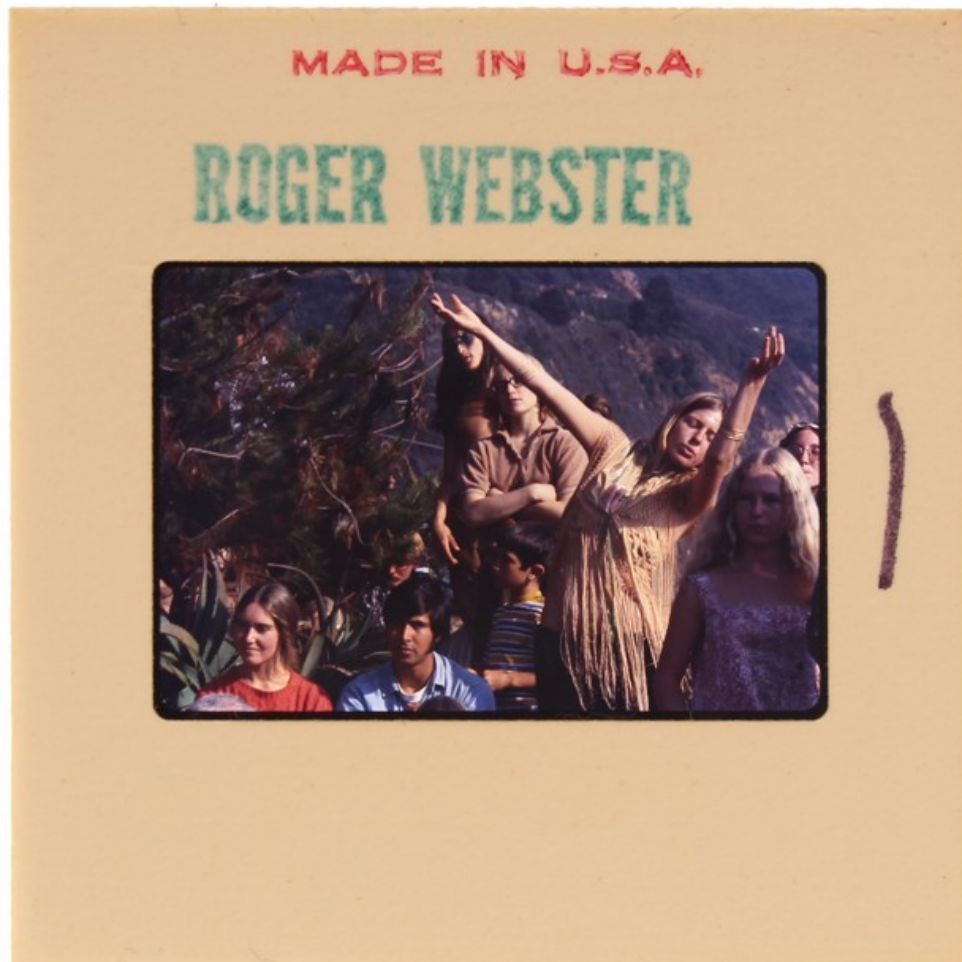
That’s the story that led a group of young, fed-up Angelenos to hijack slide libraries in universities coast to coast in the 1970s, with images that focused on the play of L.A.’s built and living features. Armed with 35mm cameras and a Volkswagen microbus, David Greenberg and Ted Tanaka, two recent Arizona State University architecture grads (Tanaka later [became a well-known architect](#)), Roger Webster, a photographer, and Bernard Perloff, a Ph.D student in psychology, took to the freeways to capture the city’s unique architectural “ecology,” showing how buildings, streets, nature, and people (often young counterculture types) interrelated. Through colorful mail-order catalogs, they sold sets of the photographs printed as slides under the name “[Environmental Communications.](#)”





A van with a plan. (Environmental Communications/LAXART)

Perhaps in the spirit of 1970s campus transformation, universities actually bought them, mixing EC's radically de-centered transparencies into their conventional collections. Imagine, slide one: A row of Victorian houses, perched primly on Bunker Hill. *Click*. Slide two: Two bikini-clad cyclists hang outside a Venice Beach dry cleaner in broad afternoon light. *Click*. Slide three: downtown's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, in all its austere elegance. *Click*. Slide four: On a sidewalk bathed by a reddish street lamp, a young man with outstretched arms confronts a police officer.



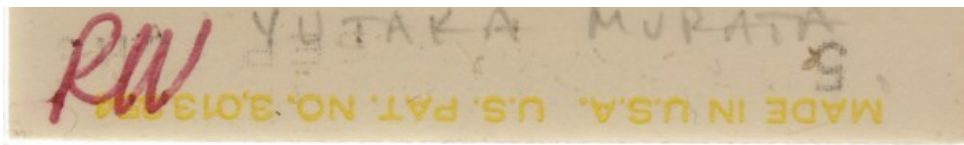
Marcos Sánchez, a co-curator of a major Environmental Communications retrospective (on view now through April 1 [at LAXART](#), a contemporary art space in Hollywood), says the captions accompanying the images were also “extraordinarily different than what you’d normally receive in this format.” Slide pamphlets included super-detailed descriptions of how people moved through the city, at varying scales: to different parts of a bus bench or from the shade of one tree to another; how someone acted in a crowd.

“It wasn’t just buildings or constructed things, but how people behaved in the city, occupied it, made it their own,” says Sánchez. “It was totally outside of the way people learned about L.A.”—or any city, when it came to slides. Environmental Communications saw the West Coast auto-metropolis as fertile grounds for a new set of aesthetic objectives, which “examined the images with combined-eyes, both academic and artistic[,] seeing everything in context,” [writes Greenberg, one of the founding members](#), on EC’s archival website. “The ‘60s created a mandate for change and L.A. was ready for it.”

As the photographs rotated through academic libraries, the collective grew to include dozens of photographers and filmmakers. Its reach broadened, too: soon Environmental Communications was photographing cities and selling slide-sets around the world; at one point, *Playboy* magazine and the U.S. State Department got in touch. With hundreds of thousands of slides to their name, the group was established enough by the late 1970s to be the focus of an L.A. County Museum of Art exhibition, which traveled internationally; they made films and photo-installations for famed conductor Zubin Mehta, media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and futurist architect Buckminster Fuller.







Inflatables at Osaka's World Fair, 1970. (Environmental Communications/Courtesy LAXART)

In an era defined by overthrowing norms in favor of more holistic, environmentally conscious practices, EC's aesthetic quickly became familiar in films, newspapers, and lecture halls—even if the group wasn't necessarily famous itself. But as the careers of its individual members took off, the collective's work wound down by the early 1980s. University slide collections gathered dust with the rise of digitized-everything, and the transparencies fell out of circulation.

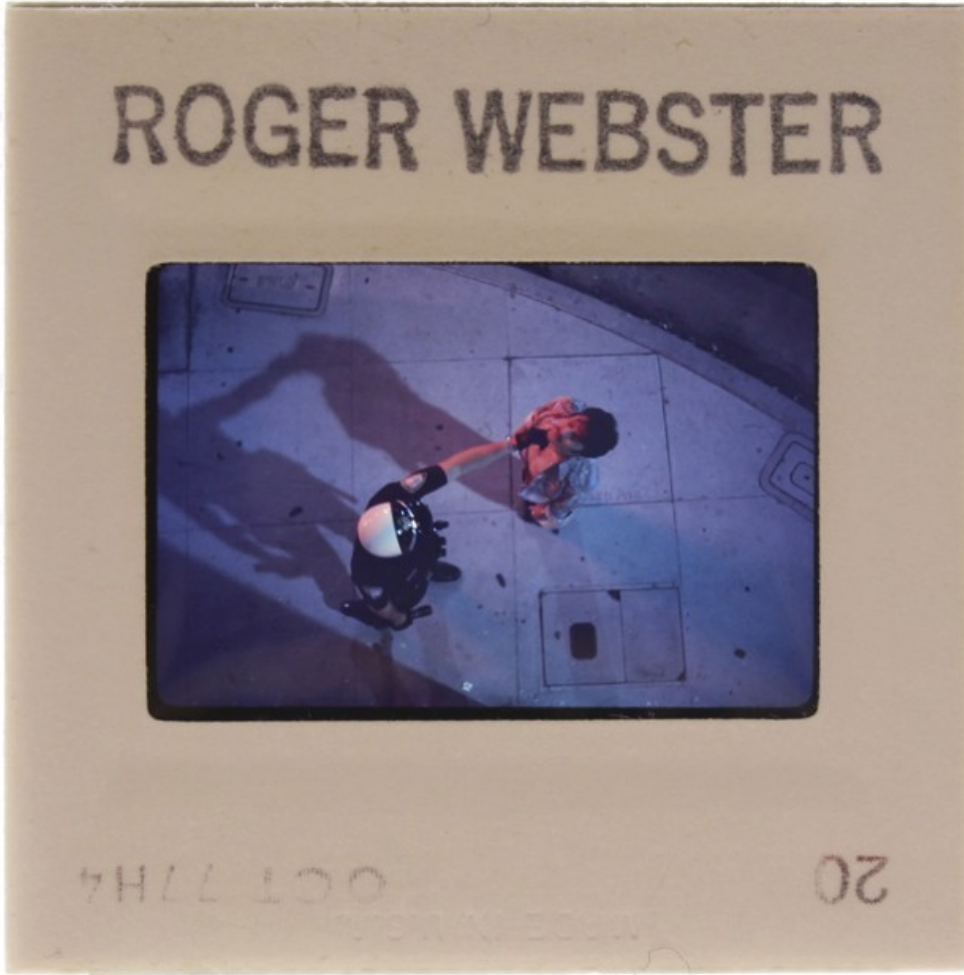
Revisited by 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, the photographs look like '70s-time-warp Instagram; they do not appear particularly radical in composition or concept. But that's partly the effect of these slides, says Sánchez, and EC's sneaky infiltration of teaching institutions. For a full decade, "their tactic was almost to inject a virus into this organism, and change its normal daily functioning," he says—and they met a fair share of success, even if old tropes about L.A.'s self-insulated design die hard.

Could a similar project be brought into action now, with other forms of media? Sánchez says he wonders if some other interdisciplinary group might strategically hack our modern visual or rhetorical conventions. Given the default irreverence of online discourse, that might be a challenge. But, as EC proved, radical cultural change can find a way—and sometimes much faster than you might expect.

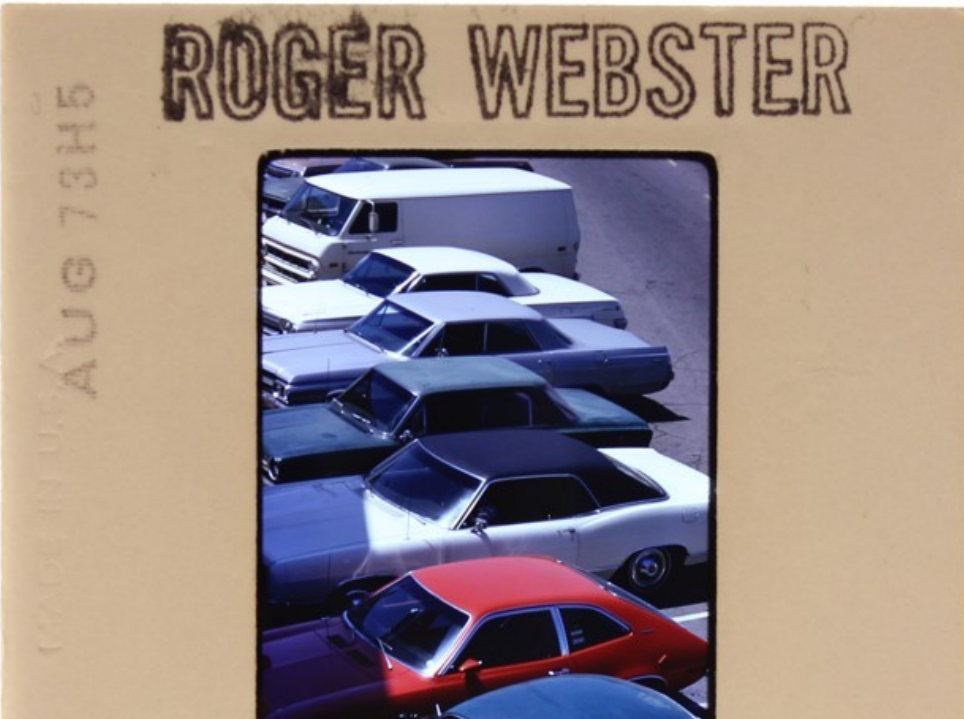


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(Environmental Communications/Courtesy LAXART)

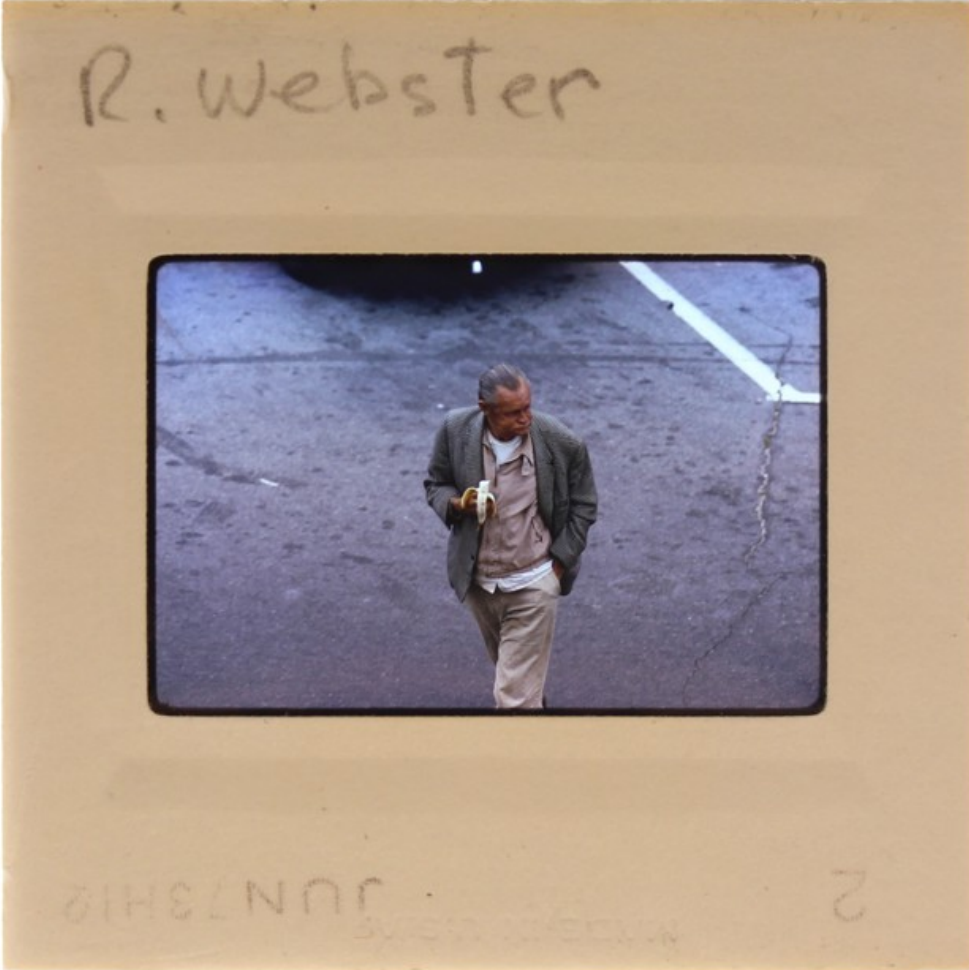


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## About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab.

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