

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Big Bang Beat L.A.: Environmental Communications and the city as canvas

In the early 1970s, a loose-knit group of architects, artists and sociologists working out of Venice Beach began to look at Los Angeles not as a collection of buildings but as a living, breathing organism. Calling themselves Environmental Communications (EC), the collective set out to document the city's expanding freeways, its smog-hazed skies, its vernacular Pop signage and its exuberant street culture. Their medium was the photographic slide — thousands of them — sent to architecture schools and libraries across the country to redefine how the built environment could be studied and taught.

The Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara revisits that radical moment with [“Big Bang Beat L.A.”](#) (Sept. 13–Dec. 7), an exhibition drawn from the Architecture and Design Collection and curated by [Silvia Perea](#). Installed only months after destructive wildfires swept through the Pacific Palisades and Altadena, the show positions EC's work as both a historical record and a meditation on the city's long-standing environmental vulnerability.

“When those fires happened, we began hearing from homeowners who had lost everything,” said Perea. “It made us ask how our collection could speak to the moment — and perhaps offer a sense of hope. Environmental Communications was the perfect lens. They were already noticing the first signs of ecological stress in the

1970s, when Los Angeles was transforming into a sprawling, consumption-driven metropolis.”

Through their images, EC captured the city’s contradictions: endless car traffic and creative freedom, urban sprawl and radical self-expression. For Perea, the duality still resonates. “Their photographs show overdevelopment and pollution,” she explained, “but they also reveal how L.A. continually responds to crises with imagination and art.”

The exhibition unfolds in three parts.

One gallery focuses on EC’s experiments with early video technology. Using one of the first portable cameras available in the U.S., the group filmed aerial views of the city and layered footage in kaleidoscopic projections. “They were pushing the limits of both photography and video art,” Perea noted. “The results feel psychedelic, amplifying the visual language of their time.”

Another section recovers the essential role of women in the collective’s operation and design. “They ran the business, distributed the slide sets to universities and designed the printed materials: catalogs, leaflets, all the graphic identity of EC,” Perea said. “Their work helped change how architecture was taught, grounding it in the contemporary city instead of ancient monuments.”

A third section situates EC within a wider network of 1970s innovators, from Paolo Soleri’s ecological utopias in Arizona to the DIY ethos of the Whole Earth Catalog and L.A.’s vibrant mural movement. “Venice Beach was affordable then,” Perea added. “Studios were open, ideas were shared and collectives overlapped. EC grew out of that spirit of cross-pollination.”

Visitors encounter that same energy in the exhibition’s immersive centerpiece: a hand-built geodesic dome inspired by the DIY architecture manuals of the era. Inside, slides are projected to a soundtrack of 1970s music and the rhythmic click of carousel projectors. “It’s a multisensory space,” Perea said, “a small echo of the gatherings EC once held when they projected new images for friends. We wanted people to feel that communal atmosphere — the optimism that art and architecture could reimagine the world.”

In bringing their work into the present, “Big Bang Beat L.A.” underscores how Environmental Communications anticipated both the environmental anxieties and the creative resilience that continue to define Los Angeles today.

“The bridge between ecological vulnerability and creative resilience lies at the very heart of what Los Angeles was — and continues to be — and it remains an essential lesson for both students of architecture and practicing architects,” Perea added.

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