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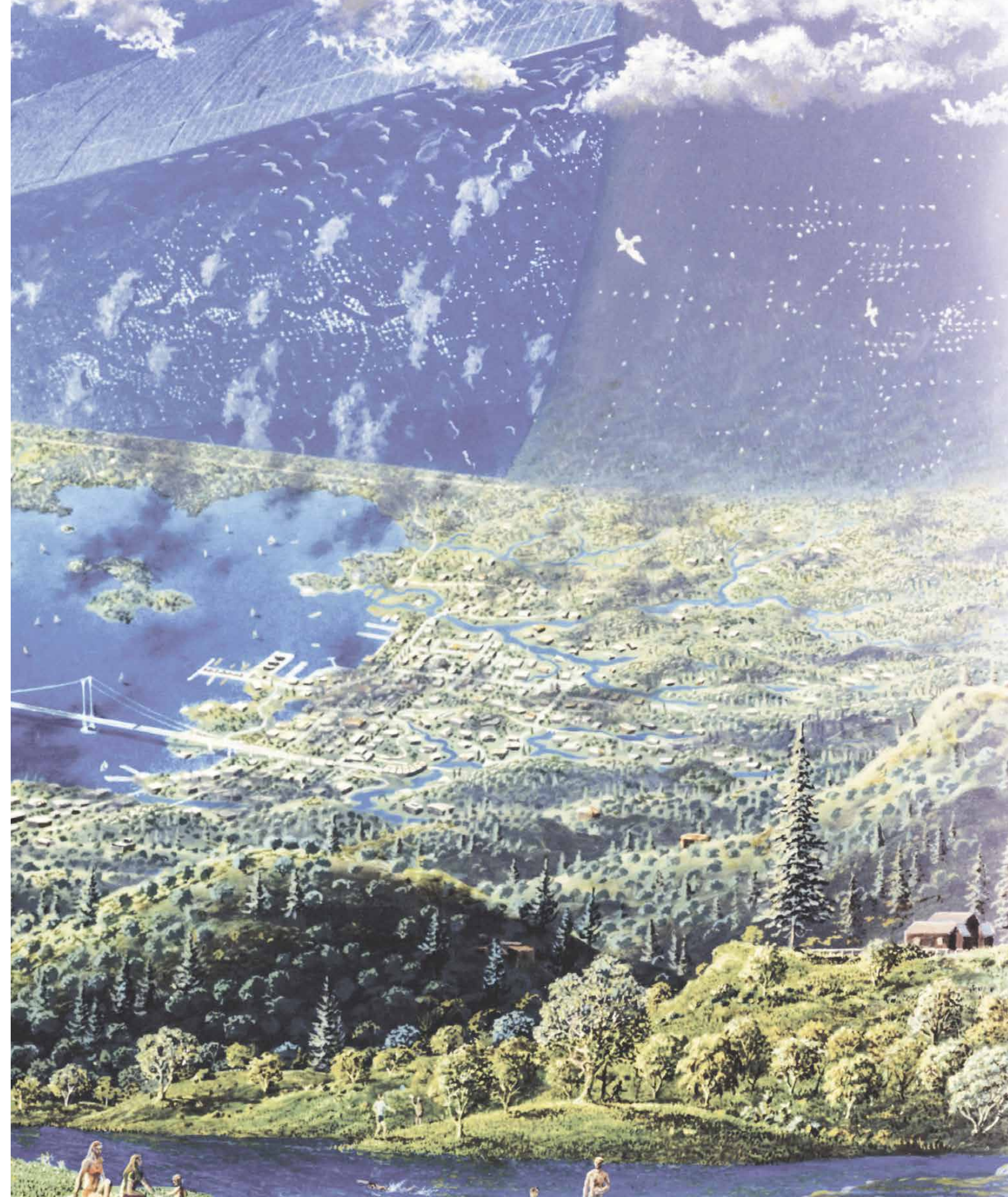
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CENTERING



THE FRINGE

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+ REAL ESTATE, LAND PLANNING, CONSERVATION

Since the Gold Rush, California has been systematically urbanized through successive waves of speculative settlement, colonization, and peri-urban development. As the economic and ideological aspirations of a rapidly growing human population have collided with the physiographic complexities of the landscape itself, novel urban forms have proliferated along the outermost edges of metropolitan areas where the built environment comes into direct contact with surrounding ecosystems. These areas, officially known as the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), have spread rhizomatically through several decades of real estate speculation and leapfrog suburban expansion to become the fastest growing land use designation in the United States.¹ In California, the WUI is home to more than 11 million people – about one-quarter of the state's total population. By the turn of the next century, this number is expected to double.²

The WUI is a zone of constant conflict and negotiation between opposing worlds—both real and imagined—where the rigid Euclidean logics of land use planning and infrastructure meet the soft indeterminacy of existing natural landscape systems. In California, where the WUI overlaps with some of the world's most biodiverse and ecologically nuanced landscapes, this collision of human and nonhuman dynamics can be especially fraught.

For generations, California's market-driven approach to urbanization has transgressed against environmental common sense, catalyzing dangerous feedback loops between unchecked developer interests and increased exposure to environmental risks.³ In a landscape that has been fundamentally shaped by a formidable list of natural hazards including perennial earthquakes, fires, floods, and mudslides, municipalities and other legislative bodies have done shockingly little to limit development of floodplains, seismic fault zones, and chronic wildfire corridors. As a result, stories of dangerous heat exposure, land subsidence, dry wells, and charred towns reveal the through lines that connect today's edge communities with the historical legacies of speculative development and the increasingly present manifestations of climate change.

During the past several years in particular, these collisions between human settlement and environmental hazards have become especially dramatic as rapid peri-urban growth has pushed deeper into California's most wildfire-prone landscapes. Record-breaking temperatures and extended dry seasons have coincided with a parallel increase in catastrophic conflagrations. Six of the state's 20 most destructive wildfires burned in 2020 alone, with associated costs eclipsing 12 billion dollars.⁴ Experts caution that due to ongoing climate change the state has entered a new era of perennial megafires that will only become more destructive and more costly in the coming decades.

Much of this high-risk rural development has been driven by a severe statewide housing shortage. This scarcity has pushed low-income communities further from urban cores into

unincorporated zones where land values and housing costs are less prohibitive, but where access to employment and social services is often scant. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these pressures have been compounded by fear of exposure and the rapid adoption of remote work scenarios, which have triggered yet another massive wave of exurban migration – bringing yet another generation of home-buyers into California's most precarious landscapes.⁵

Of course, today's cities don't end at their municipal boundaries. They leak out, seeping into adjacent watersheds, altering ecosystems, stretching deep into the most remote hinterlands to extract essential metabolic inputs, and dispersing themselves into the atmosphere through airborne particulate and greenhouse gas emissions. As California and the rest of the planet race to curtail the worst-case scenarios projected by climate scientists, the WUI finds itself at the convergence of ongoing debates about infrastructure, resource management, energy production, and regional resilience.

These transitional peri-urban zones represented by the WUI offer both a spatial and an intellectual platform for reflecting upon the contemporary urban experience for an increasingly comprehensive cross-section of the US population. Most of those moving to cities today are not doing so to inhabit their cores, but rather to compete for space along their sprawling margins.⁶ Yet, these areas of settlement and the landscapes they are situated within continue to proliferate with shockingly little input or consideration from the design community. This conspicuous lack of engagement reflects the degree to which urbanization has become understood as “cityzation,” rather than as an ongoing process of regional interconnectivity, structured and fueled by both city and non-city spaces and their associated communities.⁷

The WUI represents a disciplinary challenge for urbanists because it embodies an erosion of formal legibility. It evades typological standardization and is governed by an asymmetrical assortment of regulatory frameworks and land use classifications. Yet, radical and irreversible transformations are taking place in these vast fringe zones at rates commensurate with the pace of population growth and economic development in today's urban cores.⁸

It is in this context that active engagement with the WUI offers sweeping opportunities for critical disciplinary reflection and creative speculation that move beyond a preoccupation with the city as the essential urban form. By expanding the urban imaginary to include these lower-density morphological expressions of fringe-ness, we can begin to understand how the vibrant nexus of socio-spatial relationships between geographies of capitalism and the landscape itself continues to drive 21st-century processes of metropolitan settlement.

¹ Sebastián Martinuzzi, et al., “The 2010 Wildland Urban Interface of the Conterminous United States” [US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station, 2015].

² Michael L. Mann, et al., “Modeling Residential Development in California from 2000 to 2050: Integrating Wildfire Risk, Wildland and Agricultural Encroachment,” *Land Use Policy* 41 [November 1, 2014]: 438–52.

³ Mike Davis, “How Eden Lost Its Garden,” in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* [Metropolitan Books, 1998], ch. 2.

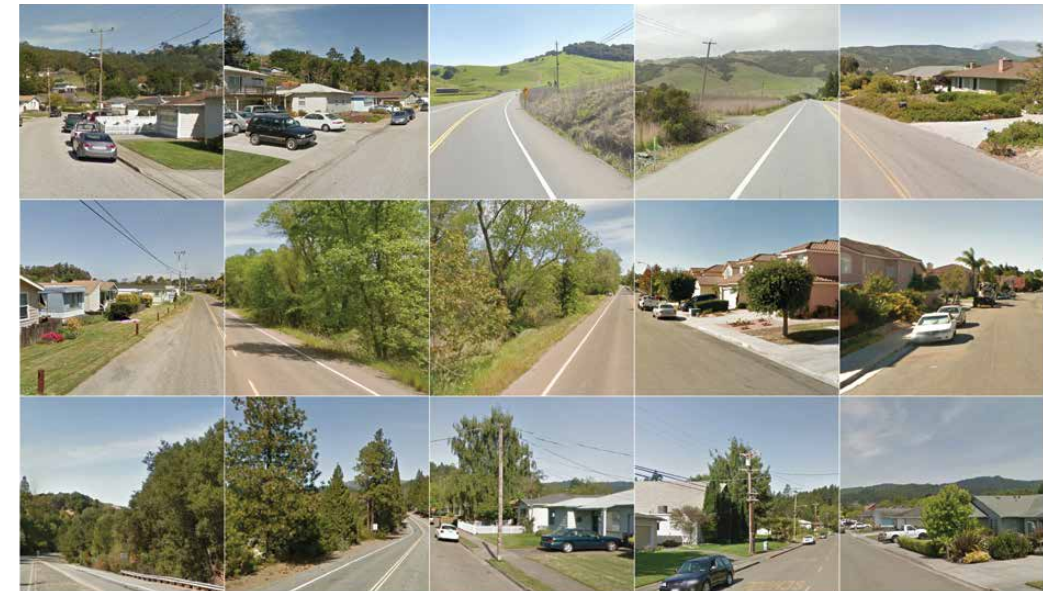
⁴ Geographic Area Coordination Center, “2020 National Large Incident Year to Date Report” [National Interagency Fire Center, 2020].

⁵ Laura Bliss & Marie Patino, “Where Americans Moved Into Fire Danger Zones,” *Bloomberg.Com*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-moves-into-fire-zones/> [accessed November 20, 2021].

⁶ Shlomo Ange, et al., “Densify and Expand: A Global Analysis of Recent Urban Growth,” *Sustainability* 13, no. 7 [January 2021]: 3835.

⁷ Neil J. Brenner (ed.), *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* [Jovis, 2014].

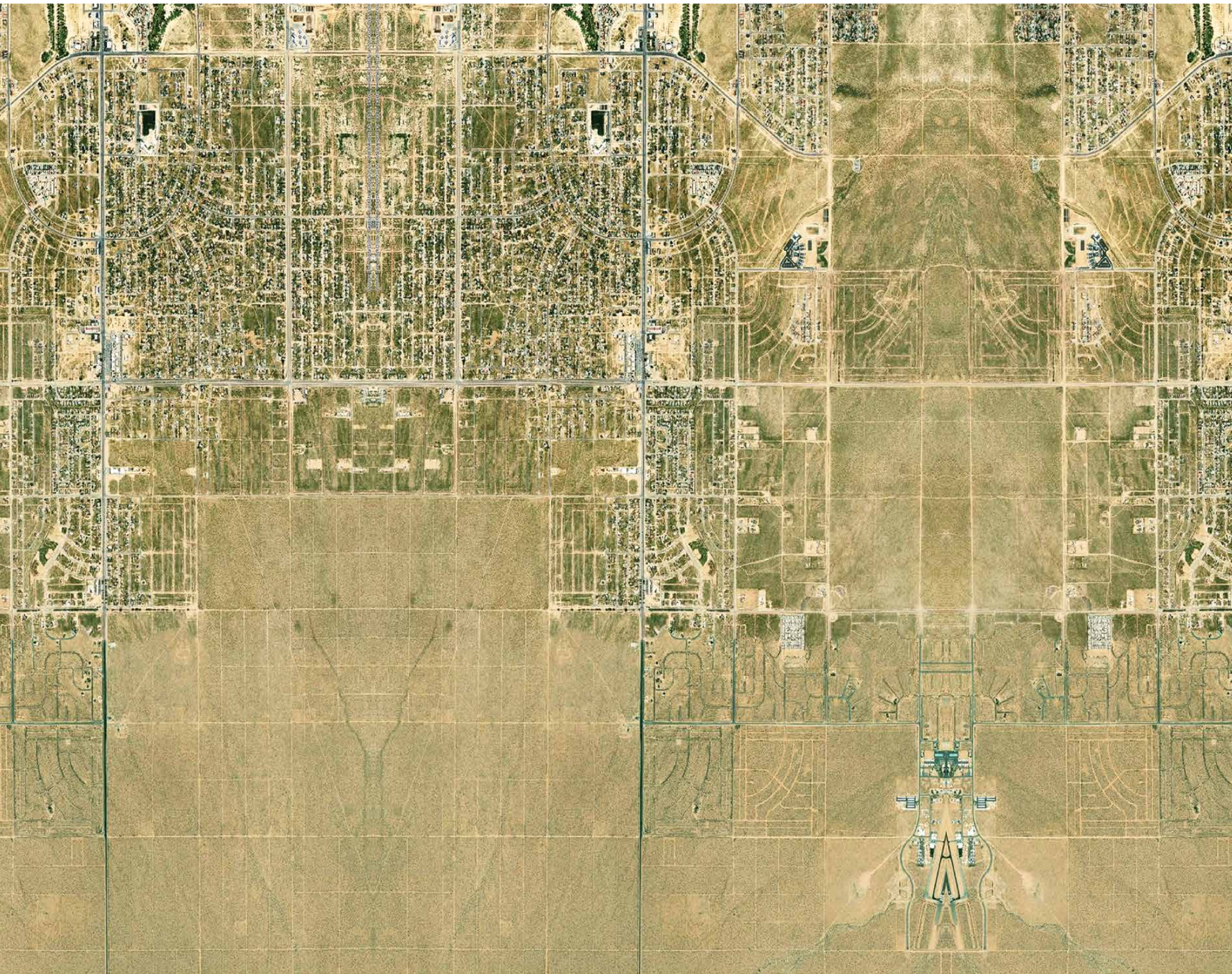
⁸ Shlomo Angel, et al., “Engaging with the Planet's Urban Expansion,” in Alan Berger, Joel Kotkin & Celina Balderas Guzmán (eds), *Infinite Suburbia* [Princeton Architectural Press, 2017], 164–77.



Opposite: Escondido Rock Summit.
Above: Speculative Settlement Composite,
Northern California.



Opposite: Kettleman Valley Crossing.
Above: Speculative Settlement Composite,
Central California.



Opposite: Frontier Lake Trails.
Above: Speculative Settlement Composite,
Southern California.

IMAGE CREDITS



Endpapers

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Editorial

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In Conversation with Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg

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