

This photographic art project examines contemporary embodied activity and urban development in California City, California outside of Los Angeles. The photographs critique the notion of development and the kinds of embodied livelihood it supports according to the cultural imagination of wonder and real estate.

Noritaka Minami, University of Chicago, United States of America,
nminami@uc.edu

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CALIFORNIA CITY (REAL ESTATE) AND CALIFORNIA CITY (WONDERLAND)

Noritaka Minami

This photographic project examines California City, a master planned community in the Mojave Desert conceived by sociologist-turned-real estate developer Nathan Mendelsohn in the 1950s. This project aims to explore the gap between the image that was projected onto the desert landscape by Mendelsohn in the 1950s and the image of California City that exists today in reality in order to question whether his vision for a wonderland would have been sustainable in this environment. This city was envisioned as the next major metropolis in California in response to the population and economic growths the state experienced after World War II. Mendelsohn presented California City as a logical location for the overflow of people and industries that would eventually spill out of the Los Angeles Basin and San Fernando Valley. This development was based on the belief that even in a harsh desert landscape, mankind had the power to produce a built environment that provides all the essential needs for a modern life. Mendelsohn and his associates carefully designed the layout of 187 square miles that is to this day listed as the third largest “city” in the state in terms of land size. The early promotional materials for California City specifically employed water as a recurring motif to emphasize the city’s appeal to potential homeowners. The land was touted as having the largest concentration of water wells in the entire Mojave Desert, capable of producing “more than 20,000,000 gallons per day” to create a “water-rich” city.

Today, California City exists as a place that has yet to meet the original ambition of its developer and the idyllic image that was promoted to the public. Moreover, the claim that the land was rich with underground sources of water was found to be largely unsubstantiated. The aerial photographs from this project focus on a vast section of California City that is mostly uninhabited, despite having a complex network of streets that stretch across the landscape and are already named. The photographs present the scale of the vision Mendelsohn proposed on this site and the unintended legacy he left behind on the desert floor. The endless miles of paved streets without any homes are a vivid reminder of the vision that was projected onto the landscape and remains unfulfilled to this day. The photographs show the site seemingly suspended in time, clearly there to host a city in the future but also without any

signs indicating whether that future will ever arrive. The photographs shot on the ground reveal how these streets are being used today but in a way that Mendelsohn could have not foreseen. This unbuilt city is now a haven for off-road vehicle enthusiasts. During holiday weekends, the population of the city temporarily explodes as over fifty thousand people descend to this normally uninhabited land and take advantage of the streets with their recreational vehicles. The thick haze of dust that blankets the air from this use of the land only emphasizes that this city is anything but “water-rich.”









