Urban Constellations
INTRODUCTION 4

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9 The tactic of defining the “us” as being variegated and already active on the ground, he is sometimes mundane but nevertheless decisive act, is inspired by the way in which Virginia Woolf brings on the “So- ciety of the Marginals” in Three Guineas (London: The Hogarth Press, 1938).

10 See their website: www.clubofrome.org > history.


15 This emuliation by non-humans was taught to me by Bruno Latour, as it is the case for many other researchers who have followed his doctoral seminars. See for instance the following collection of recently pub- lished essays, Sophie Houdart and Olivier Thiery, dir., Hommes non Humains. Études anthropologiques en sciences sociales (Paris: La Découverte, 2011). Otherwise: Isabelle Stengers, The Invention of Modern Science (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 2005) (or, Fr. 1993). Isabelle Stengers, Quand le lapin habite avec l’aigle (Paris: La Décou- curte & Steul, 2002). In a more hands-on and collectively brainy manner, see the group Rotor (www.rotor.org), which initially worked on wastes and waste only and who now, more broadly speaking, brings connections to everyday materials. See our collaboration at the Archite- ture Bienne de Venue and also two of their other books: Rotor, Arante d’Hoop and Benedikt Zanotto; Une substance (Bruxelles: éditions de la Communauté française de Belgique, 2010); Rotor, Coproduction (Bruxelles: CIVA & A16, 2010). Claudio Martines and Katja Schoenen (eds.), Deutschland im Herzen, a project by Rotor (Kraichtal: Ursula Blickle Foundation, 2008).


17 See also Félix Guattari, Choming, op. cit, on surging desire, historical subjectivity and the events of Berlin and Tiananmen as being, amongst others, the starting point for his book.

18 Desire is an upholding theme in political movements and collective claims. See, for example, an anonymous and collective leaflet: Chez Nous: Le désir ne s’obéit pas (Bruxelles: Éditions d’une certaine Gaie- ti, 2011). It literally means “Coming Out” as “Chomeurs,” i.e., jobless people who advocate the right to be jobless and to choose the activities and engagements they’re involved in, as well as claiming and redefining the solidarity between workers in a more general sense. Apparently, the title was taken from the following article: Véronique Marago, “Le désir ne s’obéit pas,” Chimères 3 (1998). See also the part on ‘Élis la volontier plus’ in: Vinchiane Depret and Isabelle Stengers, Les faireurs d’histories: Que fait les femmes à la pensée (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

19 See the “Écologie de Pratiques” developed in: Isabelle Stengers, Cornes- polaques: Pour en finir avec la nature (parue 7) (Paris: La Décou- verte, 1997). English translation is forthcoming at University of Minnesota Press, the first three parts have already been published in one single volume.

20 On the difficult and even hateful relationship of intellectuals with the masses, on the disdain for popular knowledges, see: Jacques Rancière, La Histoire de la démonstration (Paris: Fabrèga, 2005).

21 Especially in France, Deterministic or Structuralist or what is also called Systemic Left have been poignant present. I remember being a student and participating in a seminar at the EHESS—École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, at the end of the 1990s, where it was impossible to object to the precise and timed predictions of.Capitalist Downfall given by Immanuel Wallerstein without being accused of betraying the ideals of Science and of Marx. It is not surpris- 22 ing that Félix Guattari, in Choming, op. cit, felt compelled to criti- cose structuralist and determinist thinking and pleaded for a tran- sition from the Scenic Paradigm to the Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm. In other words, this part of the article should be put into a French, Continental, context where Deterministic, Structuralist and Systemic thinking have been extremely important for the Left.

23 Donna Haraway, When Species ... op. cit, 3. Taken from a recent conference paper by the anthropologist Graziella Stella on her work on daughterhood and architecture, where she re- fers to Vinchiane Depret saying: “La parole constante n’est pas tant d’interroger les autres qu’a une façon d’interroger ce que peut notre cul- ture quand elle les rencontre ou ce que cette rencontre saute comme invention,” taken from Vinchiane Depret, Ces inventions qui nous fabri- quent. Éthnographie des situations (Paris: La Seuil & La Découverte, 1999) (translated into English: Our Emotional Making: Ethnopyschologi- st and Selffold).

24 This is directly inspired by a sentence in Félix Guattari, Choming (Paris: Gallimard, 2005): “La seule finalité acceptable des activités humaines est la production d’une subjectivité auto-enrichissante de façon continue son rapport au monde.” (38).
Within the body of writings, drawings, and photographs that constitute the theory of architecture and urbanism, nature appears in at least three iterations: as the supernatural, the natural, and the subnatural. These may not be the only three categories, but they dominate. Similarly, stating them in this order is not intended as a way of uncritically validating their separation or suggesting that they have some type of hierarchy. These three forms of nature move through the writings of surviving medieval texts on architecture, Renaissance architectural theories and drawings, eighteenth-century Romanticist and Picturesque theories and images, and Modern and late-Modern architectural theories, manifestos, and photographs. They appear in the writings and images of Villard de Honnecourt, Leon Battista Alberti, Richard Payne Knight, Le Corbusier, and Hundertwasser, among many others. The subnatural is the only one of these three that is not named as such in the texts, being a recent coinage. It was first used to describe the plays and sets of Samuel Beckett—the sense of utter natural collapse one sees in the dialogue, but also more literally in heaps of mud, rubble, and barren trees. Only recently has it been explored in an explicitly architectural context (see note 1 below). Once you know what to look for in subnature, you begin seeing its distant history. More important, unlike the other terms, it contains the most potent possibilities within a future architecture and for those that imagine the cities within which buildings are set.

The supernatural is the most distant to us. The supernatural is the superhuman world of miracles; a world that we cannot know or see, except—according to the religious—after death. We don’t live in a time when architects write about supernatural phenomena, but it still appears as a physical, representational residue in certain religiously and phenomenologically oriented projects that attempt to represent the Christian god with effects of light and space. If we consider the supernatural a religious world of superhuman beings and forms, then the earliest surviving work of architectural theory that portrays the supernatural is most likely the “lodge-book” of Villard de Honnecourt, a medieval master builder. Here, a fantasia of strange animals entangles the different elements of cathedrals, some are recognizable but others from fictional or mythological worlds. In contrast to the distance of supernatural concepts and representations, the natural might be one of the most commonly represented and discussed within architecture and urbanism. The architectural historian Adrian Forty traces the concept of nature to the early modern architectural theories of the renaissance. Nature was a concept as much as a thing, an external ideal that represented geometric perfection and the perfection of god. Within the Picturesque aesthetics of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, nature took on additional material dimensions as a setting within which architecture could harmoniously appear. In this way, as Robin Middleton and David Watkin argue, contemporary architectural environmentalism that seeks to nestle buildings within nature may be traced back to the picturesque movement. If we use the term “supernatural” to describe a world of superhuman objects and miracles, and the term “natural” to describe the setting and material within which human experience is historically set, then “subnatural” describes a setting and a thing that cannot support human society as we currently conceive it. Subnature is a type of disturbing thing that is produced by human society, yet doesn’t provide any obvious material benefit to society. Within architectural thought, the subnatural is potentially threatening to inhabitants or to the material formations and ideas that constitute architecture. Subnatures are those forms of nature deemed primitive (mud and dankness), filthy (smoke, dust, and exhaust), fearsome (inundations, gas, or debris), or uncontrollable (weeds, insects, and pigeons). We can contrast these subnatures to those seemingly central and desirable forms of nature—the sun, clouds, trees, and wind. These latter forces are generally worked into the forms, practices, and ideas that constitute the primary realisation of nature within architecture and the city.

Within the history of architecture and urbanism, the subnatural can be found in many places, but we might detect the earliest reflections on this condition within writings and drawings that consider the urban ground—literally the earth beneath city dwellers’ feet.2

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2 Pierre Patte, Proposed Section of a Street, from Mémoires sur les objets plus importants de l'architecture, Paris, 1769. This is the first section that shows a city’s buildings and subsurface as a totality. It also emphasizes the management of urban effluvia, particularly in the city’s sewers. Source: Reproduced by, and courtesy of Peabody Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Johns Hopkins University.
Within rapidly modernising cities, the urban ground emerged as a new problem, a new site of contention. The ground of early-modern Paris and London seethed with miasmatic gases, exhalations, and various vapourous and liquid stagnations. Within these cities, new forms of urban cartography mixed architectural and geographical forms of representation, charting the repulsive matter that clung to the urban subsurface. In the face of the city’s subnature, architects and urbanists began conceptualising their discipline’s engagement with these materials and spaces. If the eighteenth-century “street” was once merely the left-over space between buildings, architects suddenly conceptualised it as a space of flow. Here within buildings and the streets outside them, the unwanted matter of the city would be sent away in conduits and channels. At first, this was a representational project, as in the famous street sections of Pierre Patte, but it soon became actualised within the grand projects of nineteenth-century European cities—in their sewer and water networks. What was left of a pre-modern ground—its wetness and dankness—was simply mythologised within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural writings on grottos. Here the last tastes of the earth could be experienced in well-formed spaces in cities. For Rahm, the room has the sole purpose of emerge from the ground and overwhelm modern architecture and planning. More recently, architects reawaken the taste of the earth in more direct, but equally intriguing ways. In

With each of the above post-war thinkers, we witness how the subnatural that engages with our preconceptions about modernity is a bit abject, but much more significantly, is intensely historical, too. Subnatures are not simply denigrated matter and experiences, but things that require recovery. They are forms of nature from our past that we might learn to cultivate and ultimately adore, however difficult that may be. We’ve already been led away from many of the intense realisations of architectural modernity, architectural theorists dismissed supernatural aesthetics long ago, so where does a concept of subnature lead us today? Ultimately, a concept of subnature promotes a concept of nature within architecture that lacks the passivity and asocial qualities often attributed to architecture’s “natural” environment; it might challenge the reductive and naturalistic aspects of contemporary environmentalist spatial aesthetics; such aesthetics imagine buildings as sites of natural flux—simple conduits of air, sun, and water; finally, a concept of subnature might help us understand any concept of nature as historically driven, especially how certain ideas about nature appear to be produced through the history of architecture. Ultimately, *subnature* is not about what is natural to architecture, but about the natures that we produce through our most radical concepts of architecture.

Endnotes


