

Urban Constellations

MATTHEW GANDY [ED.]

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URBAN LEXICONS

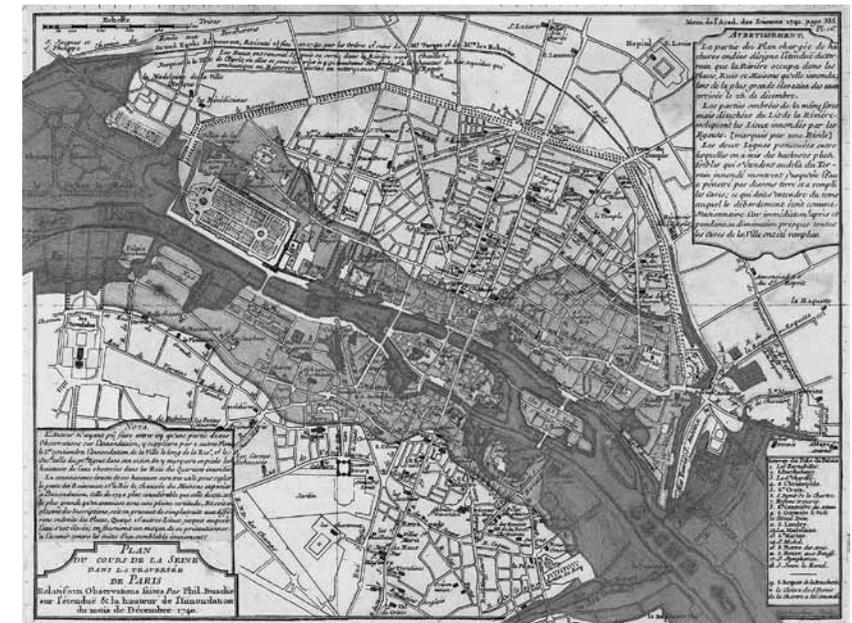
URBAN INTRUSIONS: A REFLECTION ON SUBNATURE

David Gissen

- belle Stengers et Donna Haraway,” Eva Rodriguez (ed.), *A propos de Donna Haraway* (working title) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, forthcoming). In the same book, see also my text: “*With whose blood were my eyes crafted*” (D. Haraway) Les savoirs situés comme la proposition d’une autre objectivité.”
- For relays and connexions between different struggles, see Michel Foucault & Gilles Deleuze “Les intellectuels et le pouvoir,” in *L’Arc* 49 (1972), 3–10. Republished in Foucault’s *Dis et Ecrits* (1994, 2001).
 - The tactic of defining the “us” as being variegated and already active on the ground, be it by sometimes mundane but nevertheless decisive acts, is inspired by the way in which Virginia Woolf brings on the “Society of the Marginals” in *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1938).
 - See their website: www.clubofrome.org > history.
 - On atmospheric reliances, see: Peter Sloterdijk, *Ecumes, Sphères III* (Paris: Hachette, 2006) (first translation 2005, or. Germ. 2003, and the English translation is forthcoming by Semiotext(e) editions); Peter Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun nor Death* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011) (or. Germ. 2001). For the difference between elementary configurations and the maze of interspecific reliances, see: Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire, an ecology of modernity* (Wesleyan University Press: 2004) and especially his critique of Soviet agricultural planning; James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth’s Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Bruno Latour, “A Plea for Earthly Sciences,” keynote lecture for the annual meeting of the British Sociological Association, London, April 2007 (online www.bruno-latour.fr).
 - On Peak Oil, see: Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008); Giovanna Borasi and Miro Zardini, dir., *Désolé plus d’essence: L’innovation architecturale en réponse à la crise pétrolière de 1973* (Montreal & Mantova: Centre Canadien d’architecture & Corraini Edizioni, 2007); James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).
 - Damian White and Chris Wilbert, *Technonatures: Environments, Technologies, Spaces, and Places in the Twenty-First Century* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009). For natureculture, see: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) (or. Fr. 1991). Jennifer Wolch, “Zoöpolis,” Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel (eds.), *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands* (London and New York: Verso, 1998). See also my article: “L’écologie urbaine: mode d’existence? mode de revendication?” in *Cosmopolitiques—Cahiers théoriques pour l’écologie politique* 7 (2004), 137–148.
 - For the fish, see: Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Christelle Gramaglia, “Passions et savoirs contrariés comme préalables à la constitution d’une cause environnementale. Mobilisations de pêcheurs et de juristes pour la protection des rivières,” in *Anthropologie des connaissances* 3/3 406–431. For the organs, see: Katrin Solhdju, *Selbstexperimente: Die Suche nach der Innenperspektive und ihre epistemologischen Folgen* (München: Finke, 2011). For the dunes, see: Stéphane Douady, *Le chant des dunes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). On wastes metabolising, see: Matthew Gandy, “Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city,” in *City 8/3* (2004), 381–387. On the streets’ virtual life, see my book: *Agglomérer: Une anatomie de l’extension bruxelloise (1828-1915)* (Brussels: ASP & VUB Brussels University Press). On the metros’ atmospheric existence, see work by Olivier Thiery: “Diagnostiquer les devenirs du métro à travers ‘Meteor’: Ethnologie et prospective avec Isaac Joseph,” Daniel Cefai et Carole Saturno, *Isaac Joseph: Itinéraires d’un pragmatiste* (Paris: Economica, 2007); “Ethnographie des atmosphères, ethnographie atmosphérique. Éléments pour une reconfiguration de l’enquête anthropologique avec Peter Sloterdijk,” in *Ethnographiques.org* 5 (2004).
 - This emulation by non-humans was taught to me by Bruno Latour, as is the case for many other researchers who have followed his doctoral seminars. See for instance the following collection of recently published essays, Sophie Houdart and Olivier Thiery, dir., *Humains non Humains: Comment repeupler les sciences sociales* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011). Otherwise: Isabelle Stengers, *The Invention of Modern Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) (or. Fr. 1993); Vinciane Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l’agneau* (Paris: La De-

couverte & Seuil, 2002). In a more hands-on and collectively brainy manner, see the group Rotor (www.rotordb.org), who initially worked on wastes and reuse only and who now, more broadly speaking, brings connections to everyday materials. See our collaboration at the Architecture Biennale of Venice and also two of their other books: Rotor, Ariane d’Hoop and Benedikte Zitouni, *Usus / usures: How Things Stand* (Bruxelles: éditions de la Communauté française de Belgique, 2010); Rotor, Coproduction (Brussels: CIVA & A16, 2010); Chus Martinez and Katja Schroeder (eds.), *Deutschland im Herbst*, a project by Rotor (Kraichtal: Ursula Blicke Foundation, 2008).

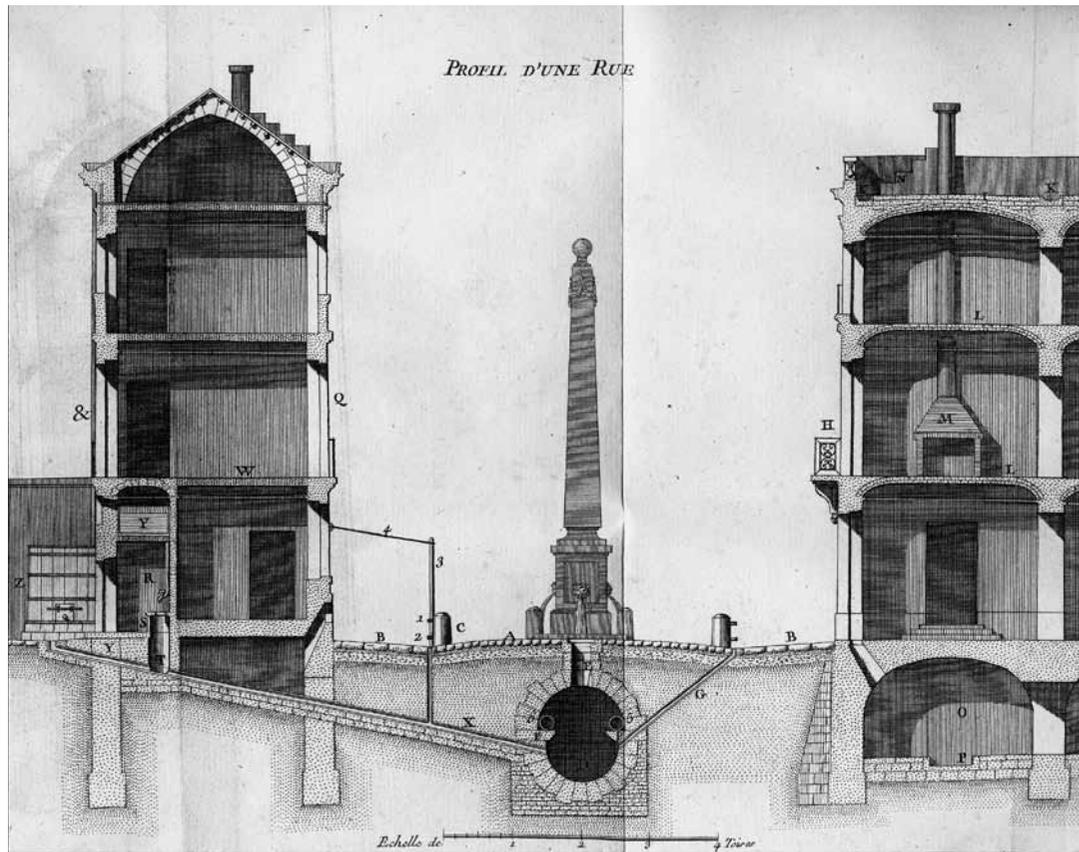
- On the redistribution or reconsideration of the active and passive qualities, see: Bruno Latour, *On the Cult of the Factish Gods* followed by *Iconoclash* (Duke University Press, in press) (or. Fr. 2009); Didier Debaise (ed.), *Philosophie des possessions* (Paris: Presses du Réel, forthcoming).
- See also Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis, op. cit.*, on surging desire, historical subjectivity and the events of Berlin and Tiananmen as being, amongst others, the starting point for his book.
- Desire is an upcoming theme in political movements and collective claims. See, for example, an anonymous and collective leaflet: *Choming Out: Les désirs ne chôment pas* (Bruxelles: Editions d’une Certaine Gaïeté, 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: Valérie Marange, “Le désir ne chôme pas”, *Chimères* 3 (1998). See also the part on “Elles voulaient plus,” in Vinciane Despret and Isabelle Stengers, *Les faiseuses d’histoires: Que font les femmes à la pensée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).
- See the “Ecology of Practices” developed in: Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques: Pour en finir avec la tolérance (partie 7)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997). English translation is forthcoming at the University of Minnesota Press; the first three parts have already been published in one single volume.
- On the difficult and even hateful relationship of intellectuals with the masses, on the disdain for popular knowledges, see: Jacques Rancière, *La Haine de la démocratie* (Paris: Fabrica, 2005).
- Especially in France, Deterministic or Structuralist or what is also called Systemic Left have been poignantly present. I remember being a student and participating in a seminar at the EHESS—Ecole 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 surprising that Félix Guattari, in *Chaosmosis, op. cit.*, felt compelled to criticise structuralist and deterministic thinking and pleaded for a transition from the Scientist Paradigm to the Ethic-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.
- This might again take an English or American audience by surprise. But it must be said that in French or Francophone Belgian academic and political thinking, very few non-Western, non-Christian heritages are at work or explicitly taken on. Just to take an example: the world-known ecofeminist Vandana Shiva or the as well-known alter-globalist Arundhati Roy, both women living in India, are simply ignored in French-speaking academia. This is to say that the fourth mutation is an urgent one and will, quite probably, be a slow one in some cultural settings.
- Donna Haraway, *When Species ...*, *op. cit.*, 3.
- Taken from a recent conference paper by the anthropologist Graziella Vella on her work on slaughterhouses and architecture, where she refers to Vinciane Despret saying: “La lecture par contraste n’est pas tant d’interroger les autres qu’une façon d’interroger ce que peut notre culture quand elle les rencontre et ce que cette rencontre suscite comme invention,” taken from Vinciane Despret, *Ces émotions qui nous fabriquent: Ethnopsychologie des émotions* (Paris: Le Seuil & La Découverte, 1999) (translated into English: *Our Emotional Makeup: Ethnopsychology and Selfhood*).
- This is directly inspired by a sentence in Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis* (Paris: Galilée, 2005): “La seule finalité acceptable des activités humaines est la production d’une subjectivité auto-enrichissant de façon continu son rapport au monde” (38).



Philippe Buache, Map of the 1740 Paris Flood, 1741. This early example of an urban cartography focused on the

city's inadequate drainage and ventilation, continue into the present.

Source: Reproduced by, and courtesy of *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris



2

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.¹ 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.² Only recently has it been explored in an explicitly architectural

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 emphasises 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

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 recognisable but others from fictional or mythological worlds.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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 gasses, 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.⁶

This rethinking of the urban ground within urbanism also influenced architecture via reflections on the house and its engagement with the earth. Le Corbusier was one architect who railed against cellars as "mediocre spaces, dark or poorly lit and generally damp."⁷ His interest in modern materials, forms, and construction techniques emerged from a spiritually infused vision of modernity, but it also reflected a more materialist disdain for the city's stagnancies. The basement was an archaic space relative to a new modern world, but it also was a space that literally lay outside the modernist milieu of light and air. Any remaining orientations to the vapours and smells of the ground in architectural thought were dismissed as largely historicist, sentimental, and counter-modern.

The post-war reaction against the rationalism of modernist architects and planners such as Le Corbusier is well known, but it is almost always portrayed as a return to the historical fabric of the city or a turn towards Situationist human play (*Homo ludens*). Less understood are the recoveries of the subnatural that also attacked certain strands of modernity. The writings on space by Gaston Bachelard incorporate various recoveries of the smell of the earth and the space of the domestic basement as a way to think outside a modernist abandonment of ancestral, geologically situated space.⁸ At roughly the same time as Bachelard's writings, the artist/architect Hundertwasser called for a non-modern architecture in *The Mould Manifesto*.⁹ Here, mould was both literal and figurative as the unwanted growths that 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 his underground house for Vasivierre, the architect Philippe Rahm created a house with an enormous cellar open to the rooms above it. For Rahm, the room has the sole purpose of pulling "an earthy taste, a slightly brownish tone" out of the ground and into the house—a new (or old) form of domestic experience reawakened out of the history of modernity.¹⁰

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 most 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

- 1 For an excellent overview on the concept of "nature" in architecture, see Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 220–239. On the "supernatural" in architecture, see the recent collection Renata Hejduk (ed.), *The Religious Imagination in Modern Architecture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010). On "Subnature" see David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).
- 2 Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 119–120.
- 3 See Carl F. Barnes, *The Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt: A New Critical Edition and Color* (London: Ashgate, 2009; facs. edn.).
- 4 Robin Middleton and David Watkins, *Neoclassical and 19th Century Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 37–46.
- 5 For overviews on some of this literature, see: Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1986); Rodolfe El-Khoury, "Polish and Deodorize: Paving the City in Late-Eighteenth Century France," in *Assemblage* 31 (1997), 6–15; Matthew Gandy "The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space," in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24/1 (1999), 23–44; Antoine Picon, "Nineteenth-Century Urban Cartography and the Scientific Ideal: The Case of Paris," in *Osiris*, Vol. 18 (2003), 135–149.
- 6 On the development of the grotto, see Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: George Braziller, 1982).
- 7 Le Corbusier, *Precisions: On the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, trans. Edith Schreiber Aujame (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 38.
- 8 See for example, Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 23.
- 9 Hundertwasser, "Mould Manifesto Against Rationalism in Architecture," in Ulrich Conrads (ed.), *Programs and Manifestoes in Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 157–160 (originally published in 1958).
- 10 Philippe Rahm, *Underground House*, Board from the exhibition "Anxious Climate," 2007.