

# THOUGHTS ON A HEAP OF RUBBLE

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The accompanying photograph shows Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens Housing Project in mid-construction in London in the early 1970s. The photograph shows the housing project's concrete framework and the building of the impressive rubble mound that sits at its centre. The buildings that comprise the architecture of the project are interesting enough, but the rubble mound is much more provocative. The Smithsons designed this terrestrial artefact to be a dominant feature of the project's landscape and the neighborhood's history. The rubble mound contains the bricks and stones of the nineteenth century buildings demolished to make way for the new project – and most likely, bits of the buildings destroyed during the bombing of London in the early 1940s. The mound remains there today – covered with topsoil, grasses, and weeds.

The photograph is a good illustration of the ways that denigrated mixtures of the social and the natural – what I call 'subnature' – are given form in and through architecture. Here, debris and rubble are articulated through architecture in such a way that they maintain a type of physical presence within urban life. I use the term subnature to describe the lesser status of these typically undesirable and unwanted forms of nature. Other forms of subnature include socio-natural phenomena such as exhaust, mud, dust and weeds. Subnature is a thing, but it is also a realm of thinking which is different from the 'supernatural' and the 'natural'. The supernatural is a

world of miracles and miraculous matter; the natural is that realm and matter that gives us sustenance. The subnatural is a far messier socio-natural condition that is all too real and which cannot easily support us. I use the term in an architectural theory context to describe those forms of matter that are deemed threatening to the ideas and practices of architecture. A pile of rubble is certainly a subnatural thing.

If subnature enables a category outside the natural and supernatural, it also offers us a way of thinking outside the aesthetics that accompany the categories of the natural and the supernatural. In our current theoretical moment we are surrounded by an almost endless barrage of natural and supernatural aesthetics – of life-giving and the living – in vitalist and/or animist architecture and landscapes. This can be found in images of 'green' rooves and walls climbing on proposed urban buildings. It can be found in images of buildings that appear to be made alive. The latter category includes all manner of bio-morphism and emergent formalisms. What a curious time for neo-vitalism, at the very moment when scientists confirm that almost all life on the planet has virtually no autonomy from industrialisation and urbanisation. If natural vitalism is often corny and nostalgic, the supernatural effects are potentially more frightening. Supernatural aesthetics fetishise life forces, or represent a creepy corporate turn to faux Eastern spiritualism.

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Right:  
Robin Hood Gardens Housing  
Project, mid-construction,  
early 1970's, London.  
Alison and Peter Smithson.



By contrast, the subnatural is anti-vitalistic and anti-animistic. A rubble heap is a social work made from earlier social works. The Smithson's heap of rubble appears a-vitalistic, but it is not dead in any fundamental sense. As mentioned, this mound will become the site for grasses and flowers. But life within this context is not aestheticised as some quivering, pulsating, and clichéd image of the living. We can be surrounded by things that are absolutely alive without transforming them into simplistic expressions of life.

I find this anti-vitalistic and anti-animistic impulse critical in the contemporary context. The subnatural enables us to understand a possible aesthetic form of things that exist without any supernaturalist or naturalist

gloss. In many ways, the utopian socialist project is a tempering of our faith in both the supernatural and natural as autonomous spheres. The suspicion of the supernatural is better understood, but the natural entails banishing nature as both the inner essence of life and the external setting for life. Nature is really more of a dialectical formation where we endlessly remake nature, and nature remakes us. We lack an architecture and landscape that revels in this truth, but the subnatural may be such a thing. A future and desirable landscape that represents the truth of life may look less like a dancing skyscraper or pulsating mound of earth and more like a well-formed heap of rubble.