Ecological crises are everywhere, and it is precisely this pervasiveness, this immersion, that a growing number of artists and architects today aim to address—delving into the complex interchange between our built environment and the natural world. A range of exhibitions on view this summer, such as MoMA PS1’s “EXPO 1: New York,” probe the potential of participatory art practices to address environmental concerns; while this year’s “Pacific Standard Time” initiative, organized by the Getty Research Institute, focuses on architecture in postwar Los Angeles—a city famously dogged by the severe pollution that resulted from its specific historical and geographic circumstances. Artforum invited architectural historian David Gissen to reflect on the relationship between LA’s architecture and its environment, revealing the latter’s profound, if often little understood, influence on the city’s urban landscape, its gleaming towers and industrial wastelands.
LOS ANGELES IS DEFINED less by its skyline than by its city—the actual air that hovers above the city. Indeed, the smog-capped basin surrounding LA has long provided a peculiarly iconic image of the metropolis, along with the urban and environmental conditions beneath it: the ecology of the concrete-channeled Los Angeles River; the interstitials of the city’s conurbated highways, postindustrial factory precincts, and polluted harbors. All these denigrated elements have appeared, too, in critiques of the city’s environmental and spatial history. They deftly mix environmental and spatial history. They have featured prominently in countless chronicles of the city over the past half century, many of which have relied on often sentimental invocations of a world of innocuous and comfortingly familiar flora and fauna. In contrast, we might see postwar LA as one of the epicenters of subnatural architecture.1 What I call a subnatural architecture attempts to negotiate a milieu that is less than natural, one potentially threatening to human existence as we know it and therefore to the material formations and ideas that constitute architecture as we typically conceive of it. The subnatural lurks below even the most immaculate facades of the city: It is everywhere to be found if one wants to look. And yet we have almost always understood LA’s modern built environment as a “clean” architecture, suppressing any underlying mark. The buildings that flourished in LA in the decades preceding and immediately following World War II—the Case Study houses operated by the House program of John Entenza, the modernism of Cesar Pelli and Anthony Lumsden, who developed buildings sheathed in reflective coated glass. They responded to the type of setting theorized more recently by Peter Sloterdijk as “atmo-terrorism”—a phrase the philosopher uses to describe an external world so compromised, harsh, and even hostile, so as to necessitate a violent separation between it and a highly regulated interior environment. In the case of LA architecture, the term Silver clearly denoted the slick skins of this work but also the wealth of the clients who commissioned it, hinting that responding to atmospheric imperatives through isolation and withdrawal was a strategy available only to a few. In turn, a group of emerging architects countered the Silvers. Designers such as Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, Michael Rotondi, and Eric Owen Moss attempted to integrate subnature into the seemingly sanitized forms and discourses of modernism. This subnatural project was an intellectual one, too: Various writers, historians, and critics—Reyner Banham, Pern Pilgrims, Mike Davis, John Nash, and Kazys Varnelis—aimed to interrogate the more hostile aspects of LA’s “nature” as a critical component of its environmental history. They described the city’s...
architecture and its surroundings as “industrial,” “grunge,” “twist,” “trashy space,” “dead tech,” “freakology,” or even “gangster,” capturing the city’s louche, postapocalyptic decadence and subversion. And in all their aberrant experimentation, the design of Gehry, Hadley, Mayes, Moss, and others revealed the ways in which subnature encompasses both the natural and the man-made. Subnature is both biological material and technological material, nature and industry, organic and synthetic and seepage.

LA has not been unique among American cities in continuing pollution, of course. But it has an especially curious and troubling environmental trajectory: LA’s smog problem was exacerbated by the geographical features of the basin within which it sits and the city’s sprawling, car-centric patterns of development. As US cities deindustrialized in the ’70s, ’80s, and early ’90s, air quality began to improve in most of them. But this was not the case in LA, even as its urban landscape was becoming increasingly defined by the detritus of former industry. This underlying paradox, in which the symptoms of postindustrialization are treated the polynomial way, is a peculiar and paradigmatic attempt to literalize a building immersed in, rather than representing it. Indeed, even such a canonical postmodern project as Robert Venturi and John Rauch’s 1963 Guild House in Philadelphia is essentially a boxlike form—aesmeyeshurg “[c]ontaminates an architecture immersed in...” —articulated as a pediment-like concrete foundation that renders the stucco unpronounceable as part of Gehry’s work. But the abstruse design is also an early experiment in responding to urban pollution. While there is an entire LA vernacular of stucco boxes, extending back to the work of Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, here the stucco’s boxes, extending back to the work of Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, here the stucco’s affront to the adobe brick has become Mediterranean. Gehry used rough, blown-on stucco in a dismal gray, eliminating the need for frequent repainting as the wall became stained from the street traffic and air. The course texture approximates the execution of stucco planchas on a building surface, while the color matches the staining that results. Gehry’s project is a monumental expression of whose designers called the “ugly and ordinary” embedded within the building’s surrounding social and cultural history. By contrast, in the Danziger Studio, car exhaust is an imminent aspect of a dynamic environment. Both buildings transform environmental impurities into a form of architectural representation, but for Gehry, smog is a powerful and active component of the surrounding city that will ultimately transform architecture, while for Venturi, it is historical—an almost sentimental reference to a disappearing industrial past. Gehry’s transformation of stucco into signifier is simultaneously tied to postmodern architecture’s emphasis on representation. Indeed, even such a canonical postmodern project as Gehry’s Guild House in Philadelphia transformed the semiotic potential of pollution. The building is a housing facility for the elderly, completed shortly before the Danziger Studio and Residence, and, like it, is Essentially a boxlike form facing a similarly busy urban street. It exemplified the landmark concept Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and brown fauvism would later describe as the “decorated shed,” a building in which all ornamentation and symbol reference is compressed into the twodimensional facade, turning the edifice into a kind of billboard. Here this surface is dominated by brown brick, which Venturi, Scott Brown, and fauvism claimed was “darker than usual” in order “to match the smog-smudged brick of the neighborhood.” Through the use of diatomite brick, the Guild House represents pollution as an aspect of what its designers called the “ugly and ordinary” embedded within the building’s surrounding social and cultural history. By contrast, in the Danziger Studio, car exhaust is an imminent aspect of a dynamic environment. Both buildings transform environmental impurities into a form of architectural representation, but for Gehry, smog is a powerful and active component of the surrounding city that will ultimately transform architecture, while for Venturi, it is historical—an almost sentimental reference to a disappearing industrial past.
As Thom Mayne’s or Eric Owen Moss’s buildings incorporated industrial spaces and artifacts, they also transformed our understanding of postwar industry into something considerably more unstable and menacing.

In this reading, Geleray’s work essentially entails Venturi’s decontextualization of industrial rhetoric, which has been a persistent characteristic of post-modernism. Venturi’s work from the 1990s is ambiguously positioned in relation to the suburban: it can be seen as an exploitation of modernist ideas, as an attempt to address the alienation of industrial LA. The Sixth Street Residence—developed by Mayne’s firm Morphosis during this period, from 1994 to 1996—evokes precisely such a tension between coexistence and realism. Like the Danziger Studio, this building was to have a low-maintenance skin (here, cement panels). But it entailed a more direct incorporation of the artifacts of LA’s crumbling industrial infrastructure. As Mayne wrote of the project, in an essay he titled “Dismantle and Fourier”: “[T]he house holds the ground between these two found objects and building. The paucity of discarded machinery or dead tech is impact armor, tension, rib, balance—

a world between utopia and atopia.” Mayne’s house recaptures the post-Fordist urge for reclaiming the interiors of formerly industrial spaces for lofts and museums alike, offering new construction as an archive for the rusted objects of the industrial city, now repurposed as stairs, skylights, and—most surprisingly—a centrally located shower. And in this sense, the project is still connected to the aesthetics of Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson had displayed a similar penchant for derelict and rubble in their 1956 Patent and Pavilion installation in London. There, a variety of orphaned objects from the bomb- ing of East London were scattered around a primitive sheath, in a way that engaged, rather than ignored, the changes and discomfiting consequences of urban transformation. Working for Morphosis on the Sixth Street Residence, architect Andrew Zago collaborated in developing drawings of the structure that foreground the aesthetics of urban dereliction more firmly into new approaches to architectural representation. Zago’s drawings invest an original grammar in which elevation and axonometric views are layered, the sky is dullled out in a postnatural gray that serves as both background and foreground, and the house’s rusted and oxidized industrial relics (rendered in metallic foil) take the place of a renderer’s shade and shadow. Zago’s characterizations of industrial archaeology are far from contemporary architects’ attempts to negotiate the wastelands of industry, particularly the aesthetics of so-called green architecture. In the latter, the harmful elements of industry are transformed either by being surrounded by trees, flowers, and wildlife or through a more scientific image of nature as an all-powerful and positive agent of industrial remediation. Green responses to formerly industrial sites and objects are often predicated on an assumption that industrial architecture can somehow be assimilated into a romantic vision of nature. Conversely, Zago’s suburban drawings admit that nature itself no longer exists in an pristine state in a place like LA.

Meyn’s appropriations of decaying industry were echoed by other LA-based practices, particu larly those of the Gary Group (1990) or Samitaur complex (begun in 1994) incorporate rusted metal fittings and stucco finishes that approximate the stumps of smog and grit.
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Whether interpreted as cynical or postindus- trial realism, both Mayne’s and Moss’s projects from the 80’s and 90’s fundamentally altered the meaning of industry’s spaces and objects. As noted by historian Ben Campen, twentieth-century industrial space was essentially conceived, much like modern architecture, as a clean and logical. This is particularly true in the aerospace and film production industries of LA, which were closely intertwined with, and often supported by, the project of architectural modernism itself.

Photographs of spaces from the 40’s through 70’s emphasize their cleanliness and some of the order—especially for Poli’s parataxic Tedvue Labs building as New Beetle (designated by Zelner). But as projects such as the Sixth Street Residence and Moore’s buildings for Culver City incorporate industrial elements and artifacts, they also transformed our understanding of postwar industry into something considerably more unsettling and menacing.

And yet despite this aesthetic shift, the attitude toward subnaturalism within Mayne’s and Moss’s work remained unchanged. During the Vietnam era, the radical California architect practice Ant Farm attacked the ecological impact of American modernist practice and industry. Ant Farm brought into question the frightening contact with industrial smog, exposed simulations to pollutants, and, in a fashion of politics, literally buried American automobiles in the US desert. By the 90’s, Mayne and Moss were dealing more with the remains of industry than with its active objects. And their work forced inhabitants into a confrontation with the experience of its manufacturing deities and decay. But the subnatural’s potential power of such experiences within both a larger iconography of eco- nomic rerew (as advocated by Davis) and an ulti- mately romantic conception of history: Industry became both forestal and archetypal, like the aes- thetically subdued rain. By beautifying and even exploiting the grittiness they ostensibly condemned, Mayne and his colleagues never resolved the underly- ing contradiction of romanticizing subnatural mate- rial study.

This dialectic of clean cultural programs set within an industrial context seemingly preserved the modernist’s critical stance on pollution, but it also objectifies smog, pulling it from the sky to hover in contest with the environment for viewing pleasure. The building still provides a protected space, but it also objectifies smog, pulling it from the sky to hover in contest with the environment for viewing pleasure.

How can the actual pollution in the air be preserved as a record of the political struggles over LA’s envi- ronment (and those of other cities)? Writers and architects such as Marcos Sánchez and Mark Wasiuta, Javier Arbona, John Knechtel, and Jorge Otero-Palos have attempted, with mixed success to engage urban ecology into architectural and spatial research. These authors consider the material and pheno- menological questions raised by attempts to consider pollution into history: something once conserved and experience pollution from the past, as in the ‘90s, of new territories of pollution, from the air to the ground, from the environment to the body, from the body to the mind, from the mind to the soil.

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And yet these questions must be addressed if we are to negotiate effectively the complex machinations between the built and natural environment as our cities continue to develop. Perhaps subnatural archi- tecture could eventually function very differently from either a given architecture (with its emphasis on complete remediation), or the recent vanguard approaches of Roche, Sánchez and Wasiuta, and the recent re-imagined architecture that began with Ant Farm, to press us into a direct engagement with it. Such projects have always been engaged with the space created by modernism but also break free from the romanticism that underlined previous attempts to engage with subnature.

Looking to the future of contentious sites. To maintain the building or landscape in a contaminated state, thus reconstituting pollution or preserving it for the sake of aesthetic impact is, unsurprisingly, to enter a mine- field of ethical dilemmas.

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NOTES


7. Davis, City of Quartz, 238.


13. This latter insight is from Teresa Stoppani in response to Campkin’s paper delivered at the Society of Architectural Historians conference in Pittsburgh, 2007.