THE MYTH OF NATURE

> Substance is eternal.
> —Lucretius, *De rerum natura*

> But these are all landsmen; of weekdays pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?
> —Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Mythologized nature is now architecture's most precious commodity, canonized and invested with messianic powers. As a code of conduct, allegiance to the myth of nature has permeated every crevice of media culture, overtaken the sanctions of practice, and addressed itself to the alleviation of our collective guilt. At the same time, the illusion that emerging technologies will recalibrate our relationship with nature, and that architecture can be their handmaiden, holds us in thrall. Yet much like the object and subject myths discussed in previous chapters, these current guises of nature mask a set of practices and products that defer to the hegemony of capital, and continue to support our highly stratified, postindustrial economy.

Historically, nature has been cast as an enigmatic "other." But primordial nature as that which preceded (and precedes) civilization

and culture is necessarily mythic; it disappeared at the very moment that it became so explicitly defined. Positioned in opposition to culture, the concept of nature is itself a cultural invention—constructed around the vicissitudes of human history alternately as antagonist or ally, as a subject of fear or of pathos, cast into exile or placed in protective custody.[1] Nature's place in the discipline of architecture is particularly striking: it is both celebrated and excluded. The acanthus leaves of a Corinthian column and Peter Zumthor's wet stone walls celebrate nature; caulking applied to windows and levees constructed around delta cities are intended to exclude nature's most powerful forces. The floods of Hurricane Katrina forced a massive exodus from New Orleans, a deterritorialization accompanied by a reterritorialization *by the flood waters themselves*. "Yea, foolish mortals," Melville cautioned, "Noah's flood is not yet subsided,"[2] and years after the storm the question persists: do we reclaim New Orleans from the Gulf waters once again, or retreat to higher ground? In anticipation of ongoing climate change and the inevitability of rising water, one of the great debates is whether to include or to exclude—to periodically recalibrate our plans for harbor cities as the ice caps continue to melt, or to preempt the effects of the flood with engineered barriers against rising tides.

> "Yet this great flux is made of all such things as you have known or might have known. This vast irregular sheet of water, which rushes by without respite, rolls all colors toward nothingness. See how dim it all is."
> —Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos, or the Architect"

These are the waters of the mythic river Ilissus. Here Valéry places Socrates and Phaedrus, their dialogue adhering to strict Platonic form, but their ephemeral selves transported by literary license to the afterworld of the early twentieth century.[3] Mere shades in death, and with all eternity before them, they meet in that dim landscape where "nothing is clear." Phaedrus introduces the subject of architecture through his remembrances of an architect named Eupalinos,[4] whose precepts become the provocation for an extended debate on the distinctions between *constructing* and *knowing*. We soon discover that Socrates' fascination with these questions is not merely academic. In that realm where ideas flow freely without the support of substance, he expresses some regret for his mortal life of pure thought, and wonders how he might have contributed as an architect.[5]

At the close of the dialogue, Socrates delivers a tour de force soliloquy in which he casts himself as "the Anti-Socrates" and imagines himself in the role of "the Constructor." He begins by describing the circumstances before God intervened:

> Note, Phaedrus, that when the Demiurge set about making the world, he grappled with the confusion of Chaos. All formlessness spread before him. Nor could he find a single handful of matter, in all this waste, that was not infinitely impure and composed of an infinity of substances.

Here is the quintessence of Deleuzian smoothness. Socrates continues:

> He valiantly came to grips with this frightful mixture of dry and wet, of hard and soft, of light and gloom that made up this chaos, whose disorder penetrated into its smallest parts. He disentangled that faintly luminous mud, of which not a single particle was pure, and wherein all energies were diluted, so that the past and the future, accident and substance, the lasting and the fleeting, propinquity and remoteness, motion and rest, the light and the heavy were as completely mingled as wine with water, when poured into one cup. The Great Shaper was the enemy of similitudes

> and of those hidden identities that we delight to come upon. He organized inequality. . . . He divided the hot from the cold and the evening from the morning; He squeezed out from the mud the sparkling seas and pure waters, lifting the mountains out of the waves, and portioning out in fair islands whatever concreteness remained.

The world is organized, stratified. That original "nature" created by the demiurge is defined by its segmented quality—materials and binary attributes separated and in opposition. Socrates describes an orderly yard of building materials, ready and desiring to be set in motion again. He has set the stage for the art of architecture to begin:

> But the Constructor whom I am now bringing to the fore finds before him, as his chaos and primitive matter, precisely that world order which the Demiurge wrung from the disorder of the beginning. Nature is formed, and the elements are separated; but something enjoins him to consider this work as unfinished. . . . He takes as his starting point of this act, the very point where the god had left off. —In the beginning, he says to himself, there was what is: the mountains and forests; the deposits and veins; red clay, yellow sand, and the white stone which will give us lime.[6]

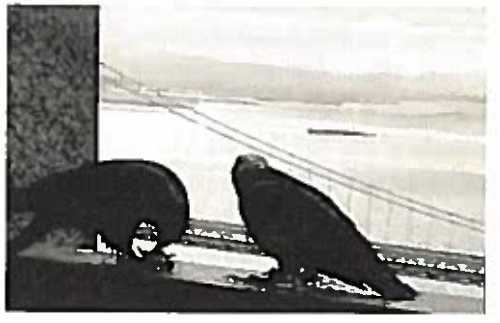
Architecture has evolved as the art of putting things together, of collage and montage and of making assemblages. In the beginning it was stone upon stone, primitive assemblages of a single material. Eventually, ornament and color were applied to tell stories that brought elements of nature into a deliberate, cultural narrative. Builders still worked this reciprocity between nature and culture at the time that Valéry wrote his dialogue. But as we have continued to build more (and more) buildings, more (and more) separate products have been brought into play. With each advance in product development (also thoroughly profit-driven), architectural details have involved greater numbers of materials and things. Within every building, proliferating layers of construction employ their separate syntaxes. This language has become heavy with modifiers and clauses, overwrought with the implications of competing aesthetic and functional decisions. These complex grammars are the thinly veiled relations of a competitive marketplace.

Our challenge is to deterritorialize and reterritorialize, to engage the minor mode within these complicated, oversaturated assemblages, and to approach that point where "language stops being representative in order to move toward its extremities or its limits."[7] In order for us to do this, a complicated building must be made to reveal its simple, "natural" form.

> There are peregrine falcons uptown, downtown and midtown. They zoom through the canyons of Wall Street and perch on the gargoyles of Riverside Church.
> —*New York Times*, June 15, 1995

In 1972, only a few peregrine falcons existed east of the Mississippi River, and none in the west.[8] Our pervasive use of DDT had caused the chemical to seep into the birds' habitats and hence into their food supply, causing eggshells to thin and crack before hatching. When wildlife biologists proposed transplanting the few remaining birds to high-rise buildings in urban centers, where the food supply (mostly pigeons) would be free of pesticides, their plan was greeted with skepticism. Yet over the course of the next two decades, more than fifty cities in the United States and Canada eventually participated in the program, depositing pairs of birds (the falcon mates for life) on such clifflike promontories as the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, Toronto's Sheraton Hotel, and the Fisher Building in Detroit. In 1992, with

over nine hundred pairs counted, the peregrine falcon was removed from the national endangered species list.



If we did not know better, we might think that the falcons had appropriated our colloquialisms of urban canyon and urban jungle for their own purpose. But the falcon's reading of this urban landscape is literal, not metaphorical. World cities of commerce are formed by clusters of tall and densely packed buildings, built topographies that echo the natural cliffs, canyons, and plateaus that form the falcons' indigenous habitats, where they can dive at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour for their prey. These raptors responded without prejudice or preconceptions to the *physical* conditions of vertical distance and craggy footholds; they perceived the simple forms. Their responsiveness to what all assumed would be an alien landscape has much to teach us about how to redefine "nature" in the context of the contemporary metropolis.

The falcon introduces porosity into the city—not the shadowy porosity of Benjamin's Naples, but instead a city shot through with wildness, a city reducing its mass by introducing small pockets of decidedly nonhuman use. Animals operate according to their own time frame, and the nesting box on the roof of the PG&E building in San Francisco sat empty for seventeen seasons before being discovered and claimed by a falcon pair in 2003. Since then, a web cam has entertained us with the daily urban life of falcon parents George and Gracie and their yearly offspring.[9]

Driven from their habitat, driven to the brink of extinction, the falcons' transplantation to the city is a reterritorialization of the first order.[10] Reterritorialization erases property lines and other abstract geometries; it introduces mobility and blurs urban segments into newly integrated ecologies. And remarkably, neither falcons nor humans need deterritorialize one another. For us as for the falcon, the constructed city can take on a palpable and primal existence, empty of symbols, meaning, history, and memory. To engage the practice of minor architecture is to reterritorialize by first partly forgetting those values firmly affixed to provenance (history) and to preservation (materiality). In the case of the falcons, the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric interests that have historically defined the function of the city itself are partly relaxed; the intellect of urbanism as a discipline embraces its sensual, better half.

In a story by Anita Desai,[11] a sick man named Basu is suffering from the stifling heat of his apartment bedroom. He asks his wife to bring his mattress up onto the roof of their building. The bedroom is deterritorialized, the roof reterritorialized. Under the stars, he gets his first good sleep in weeks. As day begins to break, he delights in the view of pigeons silhouetted against the morning light. Basu leaves his stuffy bedroom; the falcon leaves the contaminated mountains. Though they approach from opposite directions, each finds a certain wild territory on an urban rooftop. In both cases, reterritorialization is an exit to the outside.

> Architecture is a collection of ruins that closes at six o'clock.
> —Jennifer Bloomer and Robert Segrest, "Without Architecture"

Ruins are the evidence of things become obsolete, projects halted, capital exhausted. It is no longer simply the collapse of a building that makes it a ruin; it is the collapse of a symbolic order. How sad that architecture (the "useful" art) becomes the physical, visible manifestation of that which is no longer useful.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the abandoned buildings of obsolete industries, tough high-ceilinged spaces once the sites of blue-collar work, were quite suddenly romanced and coveted as living spaces for an urban gentry. More recently, unfinished high-rise towers in Bangkok, Shanghai, and Caracas have attracted the attention of bloggers and photographers as vivid "follies" of globalization. The more banal (and completed) buildings of the neoliberal economy have yet to receive much similar attention; but in 2003 the pathos of dead and dying malls attracted the interest of a group in Los Angeles, who sponsored a national competition inviting architects to speculate on the malls' physical and cultural futures.[12] Even more recently, the six thousand Circuit City retail stores that were closed in 2009 became the site for a collaborative thesis project in the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley.[13]

These are but a few of many possible contexts for minor architectures, settings not so much for salvage operations as for nearly authorless insurgencies. As an archaeology without artifacts, the process of spatial reclamation is more low-tech than high, and privileges the passions of labor over the physics of materials. At the same time, other forces may be brought into play—forces of weather, systems of drainage, even migration patterns of birds. These may yield new concepts for workplaces not so "pent up in lath and plaster," more open to outside air and with more connections between buildings—opportunities to make architecture less stable and more porous. These practices may produce unlikely juxtapositions, assemblages of spaces rather than of things. Of course such transformations already exist. They are mostly undocumented—this too is in the nature of the minor mode. But some, like the circulation system through the downtown buildings of Minneapolis that allow one to navigate the city above ground and indoors in the cold months, are well known as innovative urban infrastructure. (In Houston, there is instead a subterranean network that provides respite from the sweltering heat.)

The Michigan Theater in Detroit, constructed in 1926 on the site of the workshop where Henry Ford built his first car, closed its doors and was partially demolished in 1967, then repurposed as a parking garage in 1982. (Ironically, the demise of the old theater is sometimes attributed to a lack of parking.) Unlike the gentrification of

former industrial spaces, this is an example of a prosaic use moving into a space originally designed for more elite cultural functions. Tattered velvet curtains frame a ruined stage, which is merely a backdrop for vehicles casually parked where an audience once sat. The resulting spectacular aesthetic gives the theater its iconic stature as an example of adaptive reuse.

> Half-ruined buildings once again take on
> The look of buildings waiting to be finished.
> —Bertolt Brecht, "Of All the Works of Man"

For fifteen years the ghostly half-finished (half-ruined) Torre de David loomed vacantly over the city of Caracas, Venezuela. The tower was begun in 1990, then abandoned when its patron died unexpectedly. (Its name sounds biblical, but it ironically and unofficially refers to financier and speculator David Brillembourg.) At forty-five stories the tower is one of the tallest buildings in Latin America. It has no working elevators, and no connection to urban utility systems. Several years ago its open floors beckoned to the homeless population of Caracas, and now over 2,500 people live there.[14] Squatters sleep in spaces that were intended to be executive corner offices; some climb as many as twenty-six floors each day. If we squint, the Torre de David becomes a kind of cliff dwelling—where people, like falcons, have recognized the accommodating potential of a vertical urban structure, and taken advantage of its accidental ecology.

The settlement of the tower, like that of more conventional ground-based urban *favelas*, has happened over time. The first group of three hundred pioneers sought shelter from the streets in 2007: "'The night we came in, I was scared, but I was also excited to finally have my own home,' says Jhonny Jimenez."[15] He is a member of the founding group, and is now one of the tower's main social and maintenance coordinators. The building functions as a nearly autonomous urban settlement, with volunteers organizing health services, security, and recreation. People pay a small monthly fee for improvements, which include spaces for child care and a church currently under construction. "Corner" shops are staggered vertically throughout the inhabited floors, and informal live-work arrangements include hair salons and cafes. Water and waste are carried up and down by hand, but civil courtesies prevail. The elderly are given the floors closest to the ground, and larger families are awarded larger amounts of space.

On the partially completed but inaccessible roof, a helicopter landing pad reminds us of corporate ambitions gone awry. Had the tower been finished as planned, it would be silent and complicit—cocooned in acoustical layers of carpets and ceilings, and thermal layers of insulation and glass. Some of the people who are now living and sleeping there might instead be employed on the night cleaning crew. Given the market's decline over the past several years, they would likely be working in a building considerably empty of tenants.

But the availability of this real estate skeleton announced itself more publicly than vacancies within completed structures—a scaffold without skin, presumed empty of function. The tower's half-finished state, halfway to ruin, available for deconstruction, preempted the need for demolition. Meanwhile, the circumstantial geometry of its half-finished state and the ensuing ad hoc development in its density have destroyed all intended symmetries of the original design. The once silent floors have come to life, and robust family activity is exposed to the city as transparently as in a painting by Ralph Fassanella. This recent settlement in Caracas has marked similarities to the informal fifth floor of Corviale, but raised to a higher power. It is

even more aggressively minor and surely has the promise of an even shorter life.

> Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity.
> —Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka*

The dross landscapes of our metropolitan hinterlands are approaching a field of consistency. Already we have seen the wasted margins of the postindustrial landscape become strange attractors. Sites blighted by poisoned soil and vandalized buildings still with the industrial charm of steel sash divided-lite windows are reclaimed as enclaves of an alternative, progressive culture. But more recently constructed buildings (much maligned for their lack of "character") remain stubbornly mute; only the empty parking lots and the estate agents' bold signage give evidence of their increasing vacancies. Their silence is part of the reason we profess to find them so objectionable. They are content and ubiquitous; in appearance they refuse to acknowledge regional styles, climates, or landscapes. Most would prefer to think that these "developer" buildings are not truly Architecture at all (in its most profound, or at least conventional, academic sense). They are not special, they have no provenance. And this is our opportunity: without the anxieties that often accompany architectural transformation, their arid language can be deconstructed and diminished toward language without meaning. (The lush language of classicism has long outlived its ability to propagate, though architectural historians will rightly argue that buildings of the past continue to communicate.) The perceived poverty of these buildings releases us from responsibility to adhere to any laws, covenants, or precedents. This is precisely what makes them vulnerable to minor experiments, and valuable as another kind of "natural" resource. Open to new intensities, these graveyards of capital are the fields, forests, and quarries of our present time.

As J. G. Ballard might have asked, "Why could people not fall in love with the airport Hilton, when they were falling in love with the Louvre all the time?"[16] The buildings we have been referring to (a genre that includes the Hilton) are the products of politics delivered from above. But once realized, they may forfeit the abstractions of finance, hierarchy, ambition, and all the interior object and subject myths we have embedded within them. Ballard's question is not simply rhetorical (though our affection for these buildings may take a different, perhaps ironic form from the aesthetic passions of former times). We are perhaps moving toward an image of how a politics from below might be mobilized within the banal spaces of an airport hotel. Let us reflect upon several conditions that we have already identified—an empty, sealed interior; an object afloat in an arid sea of asphalt; an as-yet-unformed collective that might include a public official, an owner with an unproductive asset, an architect with an adventurous spirit and an open mind. Our starting point is the order and constructed matter of the civilized world. Like the original nature that Valéry's original architect found so unfinished, we see these sites again as a point of departure. We perceive in them latent lines of force, states of incompleteness, things desiring to be taken apart—freed from master languages, all that those languages imply, and the little they allow. Every word, every building lends itself to excavation—not just to discover its formal past, but to exit toward its less formal future.

We have cycled around to a place where the image of the city-as-nature emerges with a sense of urgency. An omega moment returns us to an alpha condition; nature and culture approach each other in a blurred reciprocity that rejects the false and destructive distinctions between them. "'Here I am, says the Constructor, I am the act.'"[17]

But were Valéry writing today,[18] Socrates might become a mere and vague embodiment of the *deconstructor*. He might instead say:

> *The minor architects whom we are now bringing to the fore find before them, as their chaos and primitive matter, precisely that order which the Architects wrung from the disorder of nature. Architecture is formed, and the elements are joined in complex assemblages. Details and intricate hardware, caulks and sealants of refined chemistry and varieties of glass in their unbelievably thin titanium frames—all this seems at first complete; but something enjoins them to consider this work as unfinished, as required to be set in motion again. They take as the starting point of their act the very point where the Architect left off: "We will begin with what is: the buildings and streets, abandoned factories, unfinished towers, highways in lines and loops that slice through cities and carve the once-fluid landscape into segments, malls and megastores in their vast seas of asphalt. In the cities, office towers with too little purpose and too much space; in the suburbs, wasted interior acreages of foreclosed homes and office buildings barely finished before the IPOs collapsed." All this they see as available.*

Here is an infinite amount of hope, even for us. So much space is available!—an embarrassment of riches disguised in mediocrity. What is ubiquitous is also latent with specific desires. Every city has its deep ecology, its geometries of vacancy, inventories of waste, politics of space and consequent lines of flight. The same Indo-European root that gave us the relationship between "door" and "forest" is also the root of "foreclosure"—a contemporary phenomenon engendered through the economic abstractions of development dislocated from material history. The resulting vacancies are already out of balance, space is pressed out the door, listing toward the outside. Like a book no one is reading,[19] a vacant building vibrates with unseen intensities, ready to shed its excess, its burden of overwrought grammars, its syntax of profitability: its closed interior and its brittle shell. If we can, let us imagine emptiness recalibrated, space unfolded toward smooth and slippery and nonconforming use. American cities, in particular, are full of overstuffed assemblages waiting to be unpacked.

So we return to the premise with which we began: minor architectures will emerge through (and as) the substance of architecture. This is their nature.