Anxious Climate: Architecture At The Edge Of Environment

Thursday, January 31–Sunday, March 9
Reception: Thursday, January 31, 5–7 pm

Maryland Institute College of Art
Meyerhoff Gallery, Fox Building

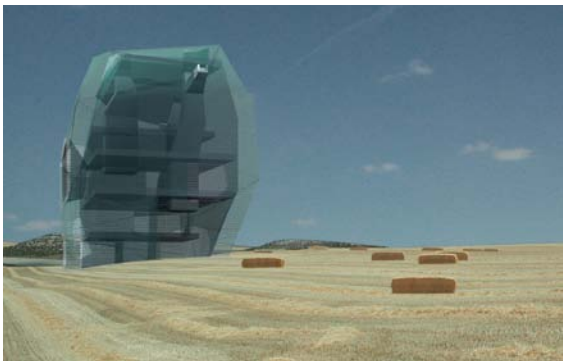
Nature, as we know it is changing. As architects and designers address these transformations their tactics are often limited to the "organic" theories of modernity (attempting to mimic natural forms) or the "green" theories of late-modernity (attempting to replicate natural processes) Both approaches attempt to achieve equilibrium between the natural and social worlds, understood as separate spheres. The three architecture firms in this exhibition —**R&Sie of Paris, Phillipe Rahm of Lausanne and Paris, and Amid [Cero 9] of Madrid**—suggest that there is another, as yet undefined, direction that differs from these earlier approaches. They acknowledge the blurred line between society and nature, they combine robust architectural forms and innovative building systems, developing new environments that challenge social conceptions of a stable natural order.

It is unclear in many of their projects if nature precedes or is produced by their technological systems, building forms, and planning strategies. The resulting work is both exhilarating and unsettling: building skins that incorporate mosquitoes into the domestic apparatus, street lamps that emanate moon beams. The work suggests a combination of architecture and nature yet to come. While much contemporary "organic," "green," and "ecological" design also addresses relations between society and nature, the work in *Anxious Climate* suggests new possibilities for a socio-natural politics based in the built world that contrasts with these earlier practices.

By consistently advancing notions that there is such a thing as "pure nature," which people must relate to more effectively, many contemporary architects fail to acknowledge that it is increasingly difficult to differentiate where nature ends and society begins. While many environmentalist architects claim to advance a progressive and critical design politics, their ideas often articulate a conservative vision of the relationship between society and nature, a reductive view of society itself, or an ironic consumerist vision of space.

R&Sie Architects, *Hybrid Muscle*, 2000, Thailand

Rahm Architects, *Archimedes Housing*, 2005, Computer Rendering



Amid [Cero9], *Endesa Building*, 2004, Computer Rendering, Spain

Philosophers of science, such as Bruno Latour or Donna Harraway, warn us that to bring human settlements "back to nature" we require the most extreme and seemingly un-natural technological tools. While "high-tech" green buildings demonstrate this, even identifying the ozone layer or the warming of the globe is rooted in a vast socio-natural apparatus of instrumentation systems, satellite launches, and media reports. In attempting to maintain an imagined separate "natural world" we have proliferated a messy network of links between nature and society.

Equally troubling, several "green" design approaches evaluate all of human society as if it were just a chemical exchange. Designers such as William McDonough rightly demand that we reduce water consumption, energy use, and carbon outputs in our buildings, but we cannot evaluate society through simplistic metabolic equations alone. Such an approach reduces the vibrancy of urban life to measures of chemical inputs and outputs. Is one city better than another based on its carbon footprint? Can such a reductive measure consider the host of qualitative parameters that inform the human experience of an urban environment? While emerging from well-informed science, such metabolic lenses must be incorporated into a larger metropolitan vision.

But most problematic are the recent consumer-oriented approaches to mending the destructive potential of American domestic and workplace structures on the environment. Ecological design magazines ask us to respond to the environmental crisis not as thinking, political subjects, but as consumers who must, as an act of performance, choose between the recycled and the un-recycled, the low-energy and high-energy, the organic and the synthetic. This may advance a green agenda into public consciousness, but as consumers we often lack empirical data on individual companies' actual efficacy in reaching stated claims. More troubling, this approach supports the status quo by demonstrating that shopping is "good for the environment." Engaging in a more enlightened form of consumerism, we support consumerism itself as the vehicle for political expression to the disadvantage of other more powerful forms of spatial change. Contemporary green buildings may reduce carbon and chemical emissions, but they arguably offer some of the most consumerist visions of space yet realized.

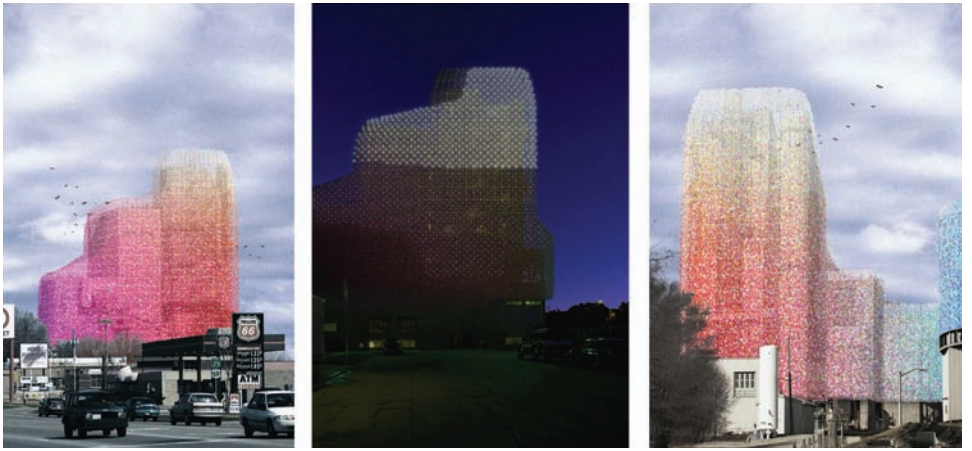
It is within this troubling context that we might consider another approach, partially answered in the work of the architects in this exhibition.

The architects in *Anxious Climate* acknowledge the anxiety of contemporary nature-society interactions, but their work does not fall into the traps of recent green design. What makes their work refreshing is their belief in the inherently hybrid nature of social and chemical metabolisms in nature, and their interest in design as an agitator in the structures of contemporary everyday life. Their work is not simply a critique of existing strategies; it is a new strategy for assembling the complicated matter of our anxious time into a strategy that builds new concepts of society and nature. They assemble perverse mixtures of natural material and social material to challenge the calls for stability or equilibrium that permeate contemporary discourse on nature and to call us to engage in a new socio-natural spatial politics.

Three projects from *Anxious Climate* illustrate this emerging form of practice.

In Dusty Relief (2002) the firm *R&Sie* developed a new art gallery that considers the role of the "white box" gallery in the context of a polluted city, Singapore. The gallery is organized into several architectural volumes that maintain contemporary parameters of display; surrounding this multi-level stack of spaces, the architects wrapped an electrostatic skin that attracts the dust and pollution in the air of Singapore, filters the air, and maintains standards of health and conservation in the space within the skin. The structure simultaneously draws pollution to itself—a counter-Victorian image—and creates a context that is protected from the pollution. This project reveals the corrupted environment of a city known for its high degree of environmental control and enables us to see how the experience of art and culture often occurs in a rarified, "cleansed" milieu within often pollution-ridden cities.

The work of *Amid [Cero 9]* examines the capacity for architectural programs to produce new forms of nature. In their project *The Magic Mountain (2002)* the architects proposed harnessing the latent heat emitted from a power generator in Ames, Iowa, to create an environment for a garden of flowers that would festoon the industrial site. The goal was to reconsider the appearance of nature in the city, advance the emergence of nature in unusual contexts, and introduce natural sensations—from robust odors to color—into the urban infrastructure.

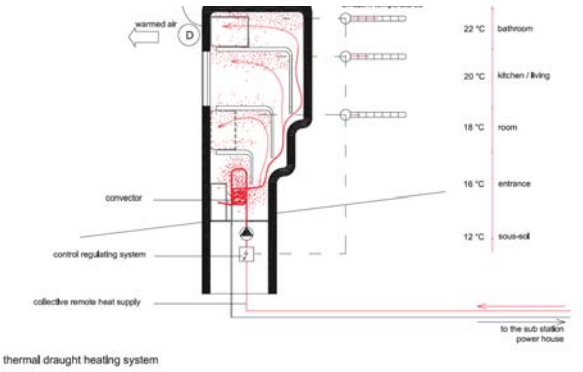


Amid [Cero9] Architects, *The Magic Mountain*, 2005, Computer Rendering, Ames, Iowa.
Heat from energy use is used to grow flowers.

R&Sie Architects, *Dusty Relief*, 2002, Computer Rendering, Singapore.
The electromagnetic skin attracts polution.

R&Sie Architects, *Dusty Relief* (Section), 2002, Singapore.
White box gallery spaces stand in contrast to a polluted exterior milieu.

The work of *Phillipe Rahm* works in the other direction, examining how flows of nature might interact with buildings to reassemble the structure of social and cultural life. In his *Archimedes House (2005)*, Rahm explores how the simple rise of hot air—what architects term "the chimney effect"—might recode the spatial organization of a single-family house into a more energy efficient object. Rahm asks, if heat rises what would we want to be the warmest and most humid rooms and which the most dry and cool? Inverting the traditional home, Rahm's three-story Archimedes House becomes larger as it rises and harnesses heat, with bathrooms on the top floor and living spaces on the bottom. The home is "driven" by a heat exchanger in the basement that links the levels together.



Rahm Architects, *Archimedes Housing* (Section), 2005

Such simple strategies—the harnessing of dust, the encoding of flowers, and a consideration of heat, fuel additional strategies that rebuild the socio-cultural aspects of built space. R&Sie, Phillipe Rahm and Amid [Cero 9] develop complex assemblages among plant, animal, and mineral matter and the social, political, economic, and material facets of architectural production. They link oxen and air-systems, heat and flowers, air and art, steam and trees, mosquitoes and light. Rather than using architecture to "reach out" to nature, they invoke new forms of socio-nature through the unique capacities of architectural design and production.

These firms remain committed to a socio-natural politics while simultaneously remaining committed to a critical view of architecture and its relationship to social processes. By examining their projects we realize that current crises of nature are our opportunity to continue the critical projects within our various disciplines. These projects teach us that as we address our environmental anxieties we must resist any call to revert to a more simple and reductive form of disciplinary engagement, and we must remain committed to producing new forms of nature that address these very fears.

David Gissen, 2007

MICA

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