



Fig. 2.6
Soot stains on the
Reliance Building,
Chicago, Illinois, circa
1910

Fig. 2.7
A portrait of Ludwig Mies
van der Rohe smoking,
Life magazine, 1957



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Page from *Subnature*,
indicating soot stains on
the Reliance Building,
Chicago, 1910.

Examining Architecture's Other Environments: Dankness, Debris Et Al

A Conversation with David Gissen on
Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments

In his book *Subnature*, David Gissen examines the idea that humans can never recreate a purely natural world, free of the dirty, untidy elements that constitute nature. In this interview, he talks to Melany Sun-Min Park about the radical challenge of going beyond green architecture.

Interview by Melany Sun-Min Park
Images as credited, courtesy of David Gissen

David Gissen describes his book *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* as a “non-dissertation book”—an accumulation of written and visual material collected during his PhD that was never intended for publication as part of his dissertation. (His PhD was on the exploration of nature in modern buildings in New York City in the 1970s.) Interestingly enough, this trove of researched material, which intersects the discourse of architecture and nature, has culminated in a book that surfaces the rather sordid aspects of nature, which architecture, architects, and inhabitants often cannot escape from. Put under the umbrella term “subnature,” the book is divided into what Gissen describes as “sections out of a building inspector’s book”—dankness, smoke, gas, exhaust, dust, puddles, mud, debris, weeds, insects, pigeons, and crowds.

Following his recent lecture at RMIT in Melbourne as part of the Architecture+Philosophy series (<http://architecture.testpattern.com.au/>), Gissen divulges his passion for the anti-naturalistic approach in architecture, as well as his thoughts on the future of architecture publication, where the real lived experiences of architecture with its “less-than-perfect” encounters with the natural environment often remain backstage in its current visual representations.

S A Singapore Architect
D G David Gissen

S A Can you give us (in a few sentences) your definition of “subnature”?

D G If we use the term “supernatural” to describe a world of super-human miracles, and the term “natural” to describe the setting within which human experience is set, then “subnatural” describes a setting that cannot support human society as we currently conceive it. Subnature is a type of disturbing thing that is produced by human society that doesn’t provide material support to society.

S A Would you say that the term “subnature” is an entirely a new concept or terminology?

D G I wish! But when I was finishing my book and settling on the term “subnature” to describe things like dust, smoke, and debris, I began to wonder if people had used the term before me. The most interesting use (of the two) that I could find was by an American literary critic. He described the language and stage-sets of Samuel Beckett’s plays as “subnature.” If you think of the content of his plays, which seem to bring human interaction to a stand-still, and the stage-sets, with their rubble and heaps of dust and dirt, this is very close to what I’m thinking with subnature.

Just as the subnatural existed in the purified Paris of Hausmann—deep beneath the streets in the city’s sewers and in the city’s hinterlands—the subnatural must be somewhere in Singapore and its environs. I would challenge architects in Singapore to find it, explore it, and make a building that engages with it!



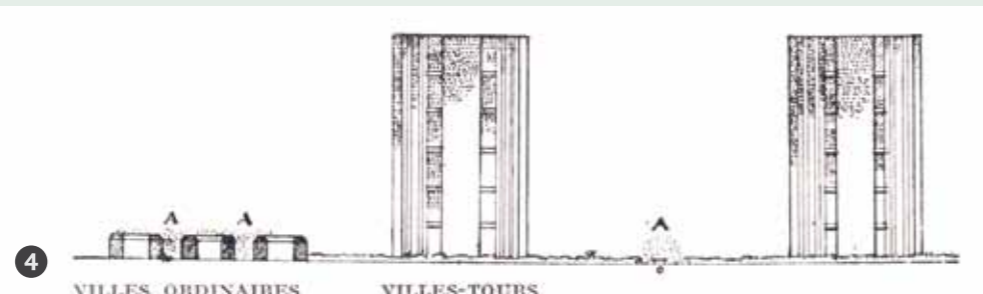
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Irish Pavilion, 2000
Venice Biennale,
dePaor Architects.



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Subnature is an
accumulation of written
and visual material
collected during
Gissen's PhD.

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Dust permeates the old city
and is isolated in the new
city of towers.
Le Corbusier, *City of
Towers*, From *Vers une
Architecture*, 1923.

S A “*Subnature*” appears to be the grungy, insalubrious elements most architects like to neglect in the presentation of their work. What made you believe that “*subnature*” as a topic requires and is worthy of attention and research?

D G It’s history, really. One of the things that defines modern architecture is its engagement with pollution (an important subcomponent of things I call *subnature*). Many architects’ representations of architecture contain images of pollution—the drawings and photographs of Le Corbusier, Mies, Wright, Isozaki, etc. It’s surprising, but I would argue that pollution is as central to modernity in architecture as concepts of space, structure, and programme. We’ve seen those latter things become intensely aestheticised in architecture. But, I wondered how pollution was aestheticised as well? This question drives much of my research. This is something we might associate with a few edgy contemporary architects, such as the work of R&Sie(n), but it has a long history.

S A What is your favourite example of *subnature*’s intersection with architecture?

D G I think that would have to be the Irish Pavilion for the 2000 Venice Architecture Biennale that architect Tom dePaor designed out of Irish bog mud. It’s a very simple project that is about transforming denigration into material. Historically, bog mud was something associated with the Irish landscape but not in a necessarily positive way. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, the ubiquity of the Irish bog was used to imply a level of primitiveness and coarseness to the Irish country and its people. For dePaor to embrace this as a material to represent his nation would be like contemporary Beijing architects making a pavilion out of air pollution to represent their city! It was a humbling gesture, and when the Biennale was over, they donated the mud to Venice, a city that is literally losing earth to the sea.

S A In your book, you proposed that “*subnature*” is the perceived transformation of nature into one that is “threatening,” “primitive,” “filthy,” “fearsome,” or “uncontrollable”—rather abysmal aspects of nature, which architecture sometimes has to confront/deal with. Do you think architects are currently ignoring *subnature* or are they actively working against it?

D G Architects continue to provide the public with a refuge from the subnatural elements in our world, but the approach has changed. For example, early skyscraper interiors were a haven from the grimy industrial aspects of modern cities. Just look at the skyscrapers built in Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the muck of the city appears to circulate around them. But contemporary “environmentalist” architects actually take this in another direction by developing buildings that attempt to clean the dirty things around them—smoke, exhaust, and other grimy things—from the urban air. In some ways we are more Victorian than people 100 years ago! I think the argument in *Subnature* is that denigrated forms of nature—both industrial

and otherwise—are a part of the city. It’s time we developed an attitude that was more curatorial than curative.

S A Can you give a few examples where architecture itself has been capable of producing “*subnature*,” either intentionally or as a bi-product?

D G Another of my favourite projects in the book is by Alison and Peter Smithson. Their Robin Hood Gardens housing estate begun in the early 1970s. When they were clearing the existing site of working-class town homes, the architects had the builders gather all the demolition debris into a huge pile in the centre of the project. It looked like a mountain of demolition and construction waste, but it became a central feature of the housing estate’s landscape. It holds the history of the site, in some ways, while providing a tangible image of what modernity is all about—an endless project of destruction and renewal.

S A As opposed to “green architecture,” which is often seen in today’s context as advancing the field of architecture, “*subnature*” seems to be almost retrogressive, especially the primitive examples you examine such as mud and dankness. If this is the case, how do you think architecture can deploy the less desirable elements of *subnature* as a progressive idea in future projects?

D G We are in the midst of an enormous shift in how human beings perceive their relationship to the “environment.” We may very well be at the end of the environment having any characteristics that are not human made or influenced. Excessive carbon dioxide, nuclear by-products, industrial pollutants, and the muck of oil spills: all of these things are frightening, and they all illustrate the new character of the earth’s environment. I think green architecture attempts to correct environmental damage, but it cannot engage the muck of society on anything other than a technical level. We’ve damaged some aspects of environment beyond repair, and I think architects must also develop a monumental approach to problems of environment and nature. This is an approach that will enable us to contemplate what has been lost and to consider our possible future. Many of the projects in *subnature* have this more monumental component. These projects make us think about what the destruction of nature, environment, and cities is and was, and many of these projects teach us to not fear the future as long as we confront it truthfully. That is one of many progressive and positive contributions found within this book.

S A In rather “pristine” urban environments like Singapore, *subnature* is not well tolerated—it is a culture that is very efficient at purging elements such as dust, mud, and weed out of sight, and the “natural” settings of the parks and greenery are most often intentional and artificial inseminations. So, it seems a fair remark to say that *subnature* is culturally and economically defined. Can you give further reasons as to why you think some cultures have become inured to *subnature* and its effects, whilst others still do not tolerate it?



Fig. 8.4
Excavated after an atomic
holocaust, *The Patio and
Pavilion* installation, by
Alison and Robert Smithson,
1956



Fig. 8.5
Piles of debris in the Robin
Hood Gardens, by Alison and
Robert Smithson, 1970

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Master's House, Bauhaus,
photographed by Leonardo
Benevelo in the 1960s.

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Page from *Subnature*.
Image above is captioned
“Excavated after an atomic
holocaust, *The Patio
and Pavilion* installation,
by Alison and Robert
Smithson, 1956.” Image
below is captioned “Piles of
debris in the Robin Hood
Gardens, by Alison and
Robert Smithson, 1970.”

D G Somewhere in Singapore lurks the subnatural! Just as the subnatural existed in the purified Paris of Hausmann—deep beneath the streets in the city’s sewers and in the city’s hinterlands—the subnatural must be somewhere in Singapore and its environs. I would challenge architects in Singapore to find it, explore it, and make a building that engages with it! That would be a welcome and radical gesture.

S A Did you ever consider the concept of subnature as a personification of a building’s life? That is, a life subject to relationships with our external environments, unplanned incidents, as well as accumulation of experiences?

D G That’s a slightly different idea. I think that type of concept and argument can be found in a book like *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* by David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi. In their writing, they examine buildings that are registers of external environments and environmental features, such as rain or pollution. My book is more about the building and the environment around it being made or “produced” simultaneously. In *Subnature*, the argument is for buildings to be less of a thermometer and more of a flame.

S A In your book, you have discussed Leonardo Benevelo’s photograph of the puddles in front of the Bauhaus at Dessau taken in the 1970s as a “realistic” depiction of modernist architecture. In today’s context, not many off-the-shelf architecture publications display contemporary architecture in the context of foreboding or denigrated environmental conditions; rather, the glossy snapshots do nothing less than eliminate foulness that may adulterate the “recently unveiled” image of a building. Do you see subnature (puddles, mud etc.) as a tool that potentially dramatises an architectural image, or is it a (subnatural) part of an accurate image-making of a building in its “everyday” context?

D G I am very interested in subnature as a thing and an idea. As an idea it moves through the history of architectural representation. That is, the history of architectural drawing and photograph. At various times in history, architects, writers, historians, and critics have used what I’m calling subnature for different representational effects. When Benevelo photographed the Bauhaus surrounded by weeds and

puddles, he was demonstrating how the Bauhaus is in the world, versus just in an architecture book. So, in this sense there’s an idea of accuracy, in ways similar to your question. When Michael Carapetian developed the official photographs of Alison and Peter Smithson’s Economist Plaza he incorporated puddles and fog. In his photos these things enhanced the budding historicism of the Smithson’s project. He photographed it with a pre-modern image of the urban environment to match the buildings’ aesthetic invocations of pre-modern architecture.

S A The earthquakes in Japan and Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011 have once again proven that society can no longer pre-empt the magnitude of natural forces. The after-effects are in fact more subnatural than anything we have seen in recent times. Having completed your book prior to the horrific destructions, how do you feel that the images arising out of the recent disasters will impact the discourse on subnature? How do you think it will impact the architecture profession as a whole?

D G These recent events have made me very sad, and very upset, and I think we should add Haiti, among many other places, to this list as well. As a historian I often wonder what I can do professionally to aid in these types of situations, in addition to the more typical ways each of us contributes to charity and aid. That’s something I need to think about and it’s something my profession needs to consider more. *Subnature* is filled with examples and images of architects rebuilding the social world—particularly after the devastations of war. So the ideas in the book are completely relevant to the municipalities wondering how to rebuild and the lives of the people coping with urban devastation. It’s about rebuilding our world within its often difficult realities. It’s about understanding the environment as *our* environment and letting go of two main fantasies: the fantasy of a pure and harmonious relationship with nature and the fantasy that some supernatural saviour will fix our current environmental crises and disasters. *Subnature* is about a type of love for our world that has yet to be fully cultivated. ▀

David Gissen is the author of the book *Subnature: Architecture’s Other Environment* and editor of the book *Big and Green*, both published by Princeton Architectural Press.