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BEYOND GREEN

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"Design today must find ways to approximate these ecological forces and structures to tap, approximate, borrow, and transform morphogenetic processes from all aspects of wild nature, to invent artificial means of creating living artificial environments." —Sanford Kwinter

For a journal that has focused on built or buildable work, this PRAXIS ventures into new territory. Our call for "Ecologics" submissions explicitly solicited "more radical and visionary solutions" for addressing environmental issues architecturally. The search for more speculative work created a paradoxical question of our own making: can projects be at once buildable and visionary? Moreover, we asked ourselves: is it possible to consider, or rather reconsider, what is currently accepted as sustainable architecture without including anything "green?"

This last question presupposes that contemporary "green" architecture—if we can agree that there is such a thing—inadequately addresses critical environmental issues. Indeed, we would argue that much of what falls under the catchall and often ill-defined term "sustainable" offers an aesthetic solution (i.e., green walls, double skins, and "natural" materials) without asking demanding questions of current building practice. The majority of these buildings in the US today rely on the use of "green" materials or technologies to achieve silver, gold, or platinum awards from a for-profit agency. Plaques sporting certification statuses combine with a few trees and ferns to literally green-brand buildings, and alleviate our collective guilt. The image of green supersedes the actual environmental performance of green—much the same way that the modernists' aspirations for buildings as efficient and hygienic machines became an alibi for adopting the look of the machine; the "machine à habiter" literally transformed into the "machine aesthetic."

In contrast to these now-conventional solutions, we are advocating for a change in approach that steps back from superficial preoccupations to consider a more fundamental question: what if we replace the notion of environment with ecology? While ecological thinking has a history within the architectural discipline, it has typically been framed urbanistically, as in Reyner Banham's *Four Ecologies*, or the more recent *Ecological Urbanism* conference and publication. At the architectural scale, the substitution of ecology for environment transforms our perception of architecture as something distinct from its external conditions to an understanding of architecture in relation to its surroundings and ultimately its environment. Rather than seeing buildings as static elements, set apart from an objectified, scenographic nature, ecological thinking links an object to its environment as a dynamic organism. Understanding our current problems as ecological rather than environmental uncouples the binary opposition of nature—culture (i.e. nature as a distinct and pristine "other" to be protected from the cultural product of architecture.) The logics of ecologies reconstruct these relationships so nature becomes a cultural artifact and culture a natural one. As Bruno Latour has argued against the problematic separation of nature and culture; "if nature is not made by or for human beings, then it remains foreign, forever remote and hostile."¹

Deploying the "logics" of ecology provides an opportunity for architecture to intervene in a larger system on multiple scales. The use of scale—or rather design that operates through the simultaneous inter-

action of multiple scales—emerges as a critical tool. Even the smallest projects include an awareness of their relation to and within larger ecologies. Joyce Hwang's Bat Tower, for example, questions how the construction of a fifty square foot "house" for bats affects population health over a tri-state area, and, reciprocally, how the bats migratory patterns translate to the scale of the individual structure. Kiel Moe's StackHaus—a 350 square foot solid wood structure in rural Colorado—is a precise study in reducing the geographic range of its source materials. Conversely, urban or regional proposals such as the WPA 2.0 competition entries or Urban-Think Tank's work in Caracas often begin with the smallest scale of interventions such as public toilets and billboard water collectors. The scalar consideration of a project's relation and response to its larger environment moves beyond the green-decorated object in a static environment to an eco "logic."

These multi-scalar projects also embrace the "radical and visionary." Mark Wasiuta and Marcos Sanchez's smog reconstitution project designs a process to accurately reproduce smog conditions documented in the Los Angeles city archives. Weightless City constructs a balloon field in the air-rights space of adjacent property owners to obstruct a third runway at London's Heathrow airport. These projects use rigorous research to adopt an absurd, playful, yet pointedly polemical stance. Philippe Rahm's Meteorological Encyclopedia also questions architectural convention—the presumption that a consistent temperature be maintained across various spaces within a building. Floating bathrooms, smog chambers, and balloon cities: all share a commitment not only to the prophetic but also to the pragmatic. Building on the legacy of last century's experimental environmentalism documented in the EcoRedux archives, these projects test the limits of the discipline. Yet, performance takes precedence over appearance as they are informed by precise and specific attention to R-values, air rights regulations, date-specific particulate content, and pollutant gases. Could we imagine approaching the urgent issues facing our planet through a similar responsible radicality?

In 1968, Robert Smithson prefigured Latour and others, writing: "nature is simply another 18th and 19th century fiction."² If nature is indeed a fiction, then perhaps we are now liberated—even obligated—to intervene in what we formerly considered untouchable. Nature becomes something we must design or at least curate. Rather than simply acknowledge nature's artifice, this issue argues for the varied and uncertain condition of nature, its unpredictability, its surprise, its "wildness," —to use Kwinter's term—as something to be "transformed" by design. Such "wild" possibilities are inherently contained within ecologies, systems that operate in and affect fields of multiple scales. We cannot save a pristine nature that no longer exists, but perhaps by embracing its logics we can design the possibility of wildness, or radicality, even as we remain responsive to and responsible for architecture's participation in a scalar ecology.

1-Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 30.

2-Jack Flam, ed. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996): 85.