IT’S IN YOUR NATURE
I’M LOST IN PARIS
R&Sie(n)'s installation *I'm Lost in Paris* (2008), a disturbing take on the ecological house, epitomises the preoccupation of the French architect François Roche with the contradictions of modern nature. **Javier Arbona** tracks how Roche’s notion of nature as ‘a partly human artifice’ which is both alien and personalised play out in his various projects, capitulating between attempts at overcoming alienation and heightening it.
‘One touch of nature may make the whole world kin,’ famously wrote Raymond Williams, adding ‘but usually, when we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves?’ Of course not, he argued. On the contrary, a more precise encapsulation of the human condition may sound more like this: ‘One touch of alienation may make the whole world kin,’ though as Williams warned, neither alienation nor nature are ever experienced by all people exactly the same way in a stratified world. Thus, ‘If we alienate the living processes of which we are a part, we end, though unequally, by alienating ourselves.’

According to this and other subsequent theories of historical eco-materialism, this life-sustaining role of nature collides in various ways with the configurations of the social world, especially under the uneveness of capitalism. This makes our contacts with the natural a contradictory mixture of contemplation, dread, exploitation and withdrawal, to name a few.

François Roche’s work fits, albeit uneasily, into the production of a milieu of artists and architects (several featured in this number) united by a Williamsonian enquiry into the contradictions of modern nature: a partly human artefact upon which we materially depend, extending our being and life, but also foreign and strange, not to mention privatised in myriad forms. Giant water systems are a classic example of this. The creations of Roche, along with Stéphanie Lavaux and various other design partners over the years – most recently operating under the R&Sie(n) moniker – seesaw between attempts at overcoming alienation (the condition of being expropriated from our very own means of labouring in and with the earth), and also heightening it.

Sometimes R&Sie(n) emplace the subject face to face with what Roche calls ‘local scenarios’. These expose an obscured human history in nature, but then troublingly reveal a decayed state and a global collapse of life-sustaining exchanges. Projects such as Aqua Alta 1.0 and 2.0 (1998 and 2000), for example, transform Venice’s polluted and smelly water into a building envelope and a clean, consumable product, respectively. At other times they adopt a chilling, callous meta-alienation that exploits the futility of common tropes of human progress over nature in order to derive their meaning. Mosquito Bottleneck (Trinidad, 2003), a house that harbours virus-laden mosquitoes, pulls from a larger context – the animal’s habitat and its harmful evolutionary trajectory – to express the absurdity of trying to conquer nature.

Or, it could be all of these conceptual means at the same time, as the house they’ve dubbed ‘I’m Lost In Paris’ (2008) helps evince. This planned experience of architecture is fraught with oppositional experiences of alienation’s amelioration and intensification for the subjects – real or imagined – of these spaces. In their projects, the architects provocatively leave open the possibility that the experience of architecture could be irregular across the span of race and class, as in the Soweto memorial-museum and library to Hector Pieterson (Soweto, 1997), where postcolonial researchers would confront the grave of a martyr, perhaps questioning their capacity at remediation for the past through contemplative research.

Small wonder that this outfit has been considered outré in the profession. It does not help that much writing about R&Sie(n), and no less Roche’s own texts, tend to mystify rather than elucidate the practice. However, what they have accomplished is nothing short of a restoration of an age-old philosophical materialism, long absent from mainstream architecture, caught up in the faux references of Postmodernism, the intellectually devoid Neomodernisms, the semiotic escapism of Deconstructivism, and the recent positivism of digital fabrication. No surprise, then, that R&Sie(n) shock sensibilities – even of those who claim to practise a ne’er-do-wrong ecological architecture.

Strains of sustainable and green design merely reaffirm that separation between humans and nature, even while seeming to close it. These entities enshrine a benevolent natural cycle that they rationalise – with a full array of industrial technologies – based, ironically, on an already domesticated (and degraded) first-world nature. On a basic level, most green architecture spatialises nature either as a neatly bounded territory where, in isolation, it shall regenerate. Think of Shuhei Endo’s otherworldly shrines, or of Michael Sorkin’s deterministic eco-footprint cities that supposedly leave a larger wilderness space alone.

Alternatively, other strains spatialise nature as a series of diverging territories where only some are reserved for certain
Algae and water are here drawn into the building envelope through capillary action.

In this speculative proposal, pneumatic tentacles secrete layers of material to contingently build an ever-changing social structure.
privileged humans, freed of most wild dangers and noxious uses (not to mention financed in Faustian bargains with corporate developers). Much of the work under the ‘landscape urbanism’ rubric comes to mind here. In such ways, nature is made out to be mostly independent from other realms in which society, policy, legislation or the economy then reproduce themselves in all their exploitative glory, though certainly nature is called upon when it can be best commoditised to fuel the rest.

In addition, much of the green practices treat technology as another entity with an ambivalent relationship to idealised nature, obfuscating the long lineage where we humans have ensnared nature and technology with each other. Take early genetically modified seeds over a hundred years ago, for instance. Best left as a fetish embodied by the easily grasped gizmo like a Mac, a Blackberry, or a wind turbine, green architecture prefers to pare technology away as something extranatural, if not extra-terrestrial. In R&Sie(n)’s work, by contrast, technology is woven throughout, both visible and invisible, in nature and outside it, obvious and not.

Oddly, it is capturing the seemingly bizarre, cyborgian ways in which nature and technology merge that has given R&Sie(n) the imprint of heretics, a label they gladly embrace. One of the practice’s most sci-fi proposals, I’ve Heard About (2005), is quite literally a building that receives social response in a contingent way, and uses it as code to continually change and rebuild itself robotically through a layering of polymer secretions. Although it sounds weird, this is no more bizarre than trying to stop global warming by reducing carbon emissions (and highway clogs) using traffic cameras and automated signals, as the California Transit Authority attempts to do. In some of their more recent projects, what R&Sie(n) do is look for scenarios that simply heighten the latent cyborgian character of actual material reality.

One such case is I’m Lost In Paris. Here, a single object (a house, in this case) is conceived as an amalgam of larger macro-territories and smaller human-controlled systems that nonetheless feed back into each other, somewhat analogous to Richard White’s concept of the ‘organic machine’. However, all is not peaceful in this feedback, and this sets R&Sie(n) apart from other green architects who are invested in ideas of a platonic natural balance. The house can be interpreted as exemplary of how this cohort negotiates a series of opposing territories in one single work. By the way, perhaps by accident, the title evokes a short film of the same name by Julio Cortázar that shows a sneaky Cortázar playing hide and seek with Carole Dunlop through streets, parks and bridges. This might already hint at how the city conceptually becomes a living territory in which to manoeuvre and avoid capture, but working inside the organism – its rules – rather than overtly turning against it.

I’m Lost In Paris, at first, looks like the cliché of the ecological house – no facades, just plant walls – except that, already, something is a little off. In this case, the plants seem more exaggerated, fertile and wild. It could resemble a potted plant averting trouble with the neighbours, or an animal that plays dead, but then grows into a monster. ‘We evaluate in our work how it is interesting to be dominated,’ says Roche, ‘to be dominated by a situation.’ Before construction, the stealthy plans for a bunker-like box were reluctantly approved by over 70 per cent of the surrounding neighbours, who were only later confronted by this house that cannot stop growing, like a Chia pet. Oh yes, it is natural, but not in the spatialised ways in which urbanites have come to expect.

The plant that grows around the house is a fern, which Roche describes as a ‘dinosaur plant’, a primitive biological body. The neighbours are forced to react to a fear of a primeval nature without humans. Here, once again, we have R&Sie(n) transgressing boundaries, but doing so by confronting society with its own paranoia, rooted in a division from the natural realm. And then the opposing signs continue. It turns out that the ageless fern is not as natural as it seems; it cannot live on its own. Behind the topiary we discover that it must survive by feeding off a nutrient mixture combined with harvested rainwater (another climatological territory tapped into to by this being), controlled and monitored by the inhabitants following an instruction manual, like hydrological engineers.

The hydroponic system folds back on itself yet again. The glass beakers for the plants are oddly bulbous and sinuous – and beautiful, like gems. They instantly give away their breeding with artisan human labour, not produced in a mechanical way. R&Sie(n), in fact, seem to also be intent on highlighting this process of making as much as possible through the images
of glassblowing they disseminate for publication and on the Internet. The house is nothing else but the deeply intertwined — sometimes conflictive — relations between all these agents: prehistoric photovoltaic entities, the mechanical systems, neighbours, the human inhabitants, labour and the architects themselves, to the point where it is not clear who spun all of this. The sustenance for the fermes happens inside the unbelievable vases. The nutritional system itself is a hybrid of manual labour (the artisan creation plus the manual operation of the house), and nature's own labour mixed in too. It seems that the architects wanted the structure to be simultaneously a mechanised delight and an organic fright. But the perception of the house is also contingent upon being within one's social and class position, not outside of it (an existential impossibility). Some might feel alienated; some might not.

Staring out from within — symbolic of a larger inescapable social reality, in effect — the subject confronts another scale of nature, different from the one that the neighbours perceive. It is as if someone pulled a curtain to reveal that which wanted to be forgotten — an odious ‘mechorganic’ cyborg — but is always there. And our lives hang from it, like these ferns.

For Roche, Lavaux and R&Sie(n), there is no choice but to make architecture by coiling and blending together a series of conceptualised territorial spaces, even some that are temporarily broken apart (for example, the prehistoric plant’s ecological niche versus the neighbourhood’s idealised image of itself). This makes their work all the more revealing because they offer to show us how geographies have been produced in particular historical and political ways. Meanwhile, most architects and planners today, sustainable or otherwise, remain comfortably oblivious to a whole array of geographical metaphors that they nevertheless apply and reaffirm. In the more common practices these metaphors are based on imaginative and ideal abstractions of one territory from the other, concealing the conflicts of their production behind the moral robes of concepts like ‘responsible consumption’. Thus, sustainable architecture restricts itself to the visible territories of a neatly defined and mapped environmental crisis (brownfields, plumes, receding glaciers and high-tide lines) while conveniently circumventing the social and geopolitical crises that are also there, if we just choose to look for them. 

Notes
5. R&Sie(n) have been complimented for distinguishing themselves from more traditional practices in what seem like unconventional ways. Meejin Yoon explains their method as ‘situations over form’, in ‘Programming Scenarios’, *Praxis: Writing and Building* 8, 2006, p 73. Likewise, K Michael Hayes discusses that they privilege ‘effects’ over ‘modern forces’ in ‘20 Projects’, *Perspecta* 33, 2002, pp 54–71. Meanwhile, Nicoletta Trussi goes as far as calling them ‘post-radical’ because, it seems, they do not get caught up in the moralistic politics of, say, contemporary environmentalism, which is to say (erroneously) that they are a-political; see *Agora – Dreams and Visions: R&Sie …*, L’Arca 170, May 2002, pp 36–47.
6. The following paragraphs on sustainability borrow and revise from my own more extensive critique of eco-architecture that appeared in Javier Arbona, ‘Una arquitectura que se imagina verde’, *Diálogo* 216, March/April 2009, pp 20–21.
7. David Gissen, ‘Anxious Climate: Architecture at the Edge of Environment’ (handout), Maryland Institute College of Art (mica), 2007, downloaded from: http://htcexperiments.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/gissen_anxious-climate.pdf. Neil Smith also succinctly explains how the romanticism of nature is only possible after its major dangers have been pushed back beyond a frontier. He says: ‘One does not pet a rattlesnake until it has been de-fanged; only then does one take it on the road where one and all can marvel at its natural beauty.’ See Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, Blackwell (New York), 1990, p 26.