SOUPERgreen
Architecture and Design Museum of Los Angeles
February 12–April 14, 2011
Group website: http://www.soupergreen.com

SOUPERgreen was a collectively curated exhibition by five similarly minded architects who presented five distinct designs for single-family houses.\(^1\) The projects by Doug Jackson, Wes Jones, Aryan Omar, Steven Purvis, and Randolph Ruiz all demonstrated a unified will to foreground sustainable design that directly engaged architecturally scaled devices and mechanisms.

Exuding punchy energy—SOUPERsized five times over—the exhibition emphatically proclaimed a “critical alternative to the prevailing image of environmentally conscious architecture, with its uninspiring, normative application of technology or exotic, superficial bio-mimicry.”\(^2\) To be sure, the five projects on view, each comprising a suite of exquisitely crafted, brashly and colorfully spray-painted models scaled at a quarter-inch to one foot and stunningly illustrated display panels, amounted to vigorous prototypes of technologically engaged dwellings. And spoiling for a fight with both the discipline and the profession, SOUPERgreen aggravated the already bilious relationship between the two with an assertive exposition of environmentally “souped up” versions of “Boss Architecture” that proudly externalized design intelligences far more interactive and enthrallingly interdependent than those supported on the crutches of the conventional wisdoms of sustainability today.\(^3\)

To wit, the often-heated gallery discussion held near the end of its two-month stint at the museum in the Miracle Mile district of Los Angeles—across the street from one-time Godfather of “Boss” Renzo Piano’s new addition to LACMA—demonstrated that not only had the five architects made good on the exhibition’s provocations but had done so with such dexterous artistry that they reminded everyone of the inspirational and uncommon potency that the term architecture should, and can, command.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Wes Jones, ELOV based LA Tod, 2011. Photo: Taiyo Watanabe.

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Indeed, wowing its audience with amazing illustrative and narrative virtuosity, SOUPERgreen brought to mind the populist polemics of influential twentieth-century practices whose ideas and projects cross-pollinated modern architecture with industrial design and technology to project fresh metropolitan lifestyles and life-support systems alert to the systemic matrixes and cycles of the planetary ecosystem. Evoking the zippy cartoons of Archigram or Craig Hodgetts’s spirited storyboards for a film adaptation of Ernest Callenbach’s Ecotopia, SOUPERgreen updated such fascinating inventiveness of the 1960s and 1970s with contemporary sensibilities of its own. Imaginatively calibrating five variations of experientially instrumental and environmentally interactive dwellings, it rendered them with the consummate stylization of graphic novels by Stan Lee, Manga by Keiji Nakazawa or posters for a Wes Anderson movie.

Echoing the tectonic bravura and optimism of the glazed, steel-framed, panelized, and screened boxy physique of modern architecture, SOUPERgreen renewed a vision of architecture as an excessively charged construct that exaggerates the relationships between artifice and nature, consumption and production, and movement and stasis. Activated by the qualitative interactions of its inhabitants, each house operated as a situated sustainable machinic device, a manipulable interface between matters of environmental concern and matters of daily existence. Part Ralph Rapson and part Jet Propulsion Laboratory machine, each house coupled an evidently durable, flexible construction assembly with a specific array of environmentally responsive appliances, applications or devices.
Collectively the five projects were reminiscent of the pioneering optimism and libertarian vigor that had so attracted historians like Reyner Banham to the technical ingenuity of industrial design, manufacturing and pop-culture synonymous with the very idea of the United States in the twentieth century. The projects also evinced the character of quintessentially American suburban garage culture, where kit car and D.I.Y. enthusiasts unselfconsciously merge the standard and bespoke, customizing the mass-produced with informal ingenuity and self-motivated agency.

Likewise, daring architecture to more directly engage its transformative technological dimensions with ecosystemic parameters, the SOUPERgreen five reopened the doors to historically important work that derived its affects, characters, and physionomies from inventive appropriations of industrial construction vernaculars. To sense SOUPERgreen’s historical resonances with Jean Prouvé, Cedric Price or Pierre Koenig was not, however, to see its ideas or content mired in regressive nostalgia or sappy sentimentality. Rather SOUPERgreen brought to life Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s exhortation that retroactive reflection should not conserve the past but redeem its hopes.5

And hopeful the projects most certainly are. Although set against the backdrop of the deep metaphysical entanglements of life and technology, simultaneously floodlit and over-shadowed by the bright hopes of modernity and dark anxieties of global environmental degradation, they radiate with the promise of pleasurable, instrumental utility and the deep satisfaction of life well-lived and well-examined. Imbued with a modicum of trademark “Boss Architecture” Heideggerian reasoning, they also seem to expand that attitude in a manner more aligned with Bruno Latour’s important reassessment of Martin Heidegger’s essentialist reflections and a compelling reconsideration of Heidegger’s distinction between lowly objects and auratic things. By focusing on Heidegger’s etymological study of “thing,” Latour reintroduces “gathering,” one of its undervalued proto-spatial roots, as that which connotes both something outside of us and something in which we gather. This shift enables a new perception toward alternative horizons where “all entities, including computers, cease to be objects defined simply by their inputs and outputs and become again things, mediating, assembling, gathering many more folds than [Heidegger’s] ‘united four.’” Thus expanding the object, Latour pushes it beyond phenomenological essentialism toward a relational political realm, which he identifies as “Dingpolitik.”6

Similarly, the brash techno-tectonics of each SOUPERgreen house cleverly expand the ethical imperatives of building, dwelling, and thinking while almost subliminally engendering a Latourian sense of empathy with “things” through the very materiality of thresholds and limit conditions of enclosure and exposure. Proudly boasting the attitude that “more engaging, exuberant, awesome, rad, boss, sick, and totally stoked green experiences” might underline the inspirational role of a gutsy, hands-on architecture, each SOUPERgreen house exemplifies a persuasive didactic quotient confidently building a value system based on the imperative reciprocal duties of care and stewardship in the constructed and natural environments. Importantly, it asserts its exemplary character not through radical formal difference but by radicalized formal familiarity.

This exemplary tendency is perhaps best understood by means of brief recourse to Pier Vittorio Aureli’s commentary on Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on the rhetorical mechanisms of the word example, wherein Aureli distinguishes between an exemplar and an exemplum as they were understood in Roman culture. Aureli defines the
example as “something to be appreciated and understood only with the senses,” pointing out that it is therefore destined for imitation. However, the exemplum is “a form whose interpretation requires additional intellectual or symbolic references” and its power “resides in its ability to propose a general paradigmatic framework rather than a set of regulations or commands.” Referring to Palladio’s formal project, Aureli situates its investment “with the representation of an alternative idea of the city within the very space of the existing city.”

That SOUPERgreen operates in a similar exemplary manner in its pursuit of souped-up, interactive, sustainable dwellings is a conjecture best substantiated by the range of generically familiar southern Californian contexts against, despite and with which they perform. Aryan Crawford Omar’s Wind House is stationed “off the grid and off the radar,” on the parched floor of a remote desert wilderness; Steven Purvis’s Eat Me is positioned on a slewing mechanism in a generic lot within a suburban tract; hoisted along the parapet overlooking the roof of a ubiquitous big-box building, somewhere in the ex-urban hinterland, is Randolph Ruiz’s ‘S.T.E.A.D.; clamped onto the concrete walls of a repurposed mass-transit corridor in the middle of a freeway is Wes Jones’s ELOV based LA TOD; and perched off the southwest corner of a
mid-city office high-rise is Doug Jackson’s *Uneasy Green*.

Recognizably of the immediate present each setting plausibly transmits something of the vast, multiplex ecologies in which architecture intervenes here and now. In this sense, such familiar contexts afford the SOUPERgreen architects stages on which to lead by example, hoping to attain the status of what Jones has described as “a vernacular for a world that does not yet exist.” From desert to suburb, through sprawl along vehicular infrastructure, and atop existing urban fabric, this vernacular gains its status not by means of amnesiac Utopian rupture but by virtue of its gritty re-engagements with known things and processes in order to make not only quantitative but also qualitative differences in daily life.

With a range of affects from the pop-philosopher euphoric (Jones) to the restrainedly sardonic (Omar), SOUPERgreen’s vernacular for a coming world can also be understood as a contemporary form of techno-Brutalism. Drifting between models and illustrated panels is a calibration of instrumental robustness, architectonic brusqueness, and pop culture references producing the kind of direct engagements and systemic ambitions that would have pleased past art and architectural iconoclasts like members of the Independent Group.

For example, exaggerating quotidian relationships like that between house and car, Jones’s *ELOV based LA TOD* (Electric Low-Occupancy Vehicle based Los Angeles Transit-Oriented Development) not only involves the design of a prototypical house that would ingeniously receive and dock the car with a clever arm-like mechanism, but also the design of the space-saving car itself (Figure 1). Moreover, Jones designs a related freeway lane graphic system on an opportunistically co-opted mass-transit corridor above which is situated the house, high above the sprawling freeway. The new symbiotic relationships between car, house, commuter as well as the broader ex-urban network commingle both on-grid and off-grid flows, actively and passively channeling and harnessing energies from a spectrum of surfaces and by various means. Although more focused in terms of its systemic engagements, Ruiz’s ‘S.T.E.A.D. is similarly opportunistic in its appropriations of vast existing warehouse rooftops that imaginatively engage agriculture with urbanization (Figure 2). Wind power, hydroponic farming, and rooftop living combine algebraically to create the unlikely landscape of a crop-yielding adaptive reuse assemblage.

Somewhat more concentrated as stand-alone, self-sustaining houses are Purvis’s *Eat Me* and Omar’s *Wind House* (Figures 3 and 4). Both metallic containers stand aloof in their settings (suburb and desert, respectively) with the former more agreeable to conviviality and neighborliness than the latter. Working proudly and effectively as a closed-loop environment, Purvis’s project, at least double the volume of its unassuming cookie-cutter tract house neighbors, is a sun-loving abode that soaks its energy-rich rays from the top of an industrial strength lazy susan. Meanwhile it directs rainwater and gray water for food and drink in an aquaculture loop generating not only sustenance of its inhabitants but a set of symbiotic protocols by which its inhabitants literally make the machine make do.

Omar’s project *Wind House*, formally the most unselfconscious of the five houses for its almost anti-formal rectangular severity, is the poster-project for a techno-Spartan lifestyle and the kind of building that one imagines Reyner Banham cycling up to and waxing lyrically about in *Scenes in America Deserta*. Plugged into the desert with a geothermal pump, it is the very image of self-imposed exile standing as a voluntary act of
removal from urbanity and a rejection of market-oriented “green-washing.” Silently defiant, the house displays a commonsense approach to technology with passive systems and straightforward appliances. Its sole inhabitant rudimentarily fabricates wind turbines from recycled found machine bits and parts, mounting them on the roof to generate power and, as Omar’s brilliantly executed film poster presentation wryly and ironically suggests, simultaneously speaks truth to power in his architectonically and technologically augmented self-reliance.

Less recalcitrant than Omar’s Wind House but equally strong-willed is Jackson’s Uneasy Green, which stands as a parable of the power of technological and natural mutuality (Figure 5). Illustrated with a Manga-like wistfulness, small birds recite its exemplary qualities and effects to an innocent child—nature’s ambassadors reaching out to urbanized humankind. Interactions between the house’s rigid frame and its supple wind- and sun-harvesting skin produces perceptually de-stabilizing effects that literally change the views from the house in a way that compels the occupants to constantly renegotiate their “environmental equilibrium.” By reciprocally framing architectural and environmental technologies, and foregrounding their capacity to act in ways that disturb habits engendered by something as seemingly innocuous as a window, Jackson’s parable foregrounds what he describes as “the false assumption that technology alone can transform current modes of behavior into sustainable ones, and that therefore being green is somehow easy.”

Whether clipping-on or plugging-in, the SOUPERgreen houses actively promote holistic appreciation for concepts like adaptation, consilience, cooperation, and transformation at all scales. By foregrounding its energy generating and harnessing apparatuses, each house becomes a visible and malleable Latourian thing. Formed as interactive overlays, around which the various kinds of environmentally tempering loops and cycles are negotiated and integrated, each house is a lively and enlivening place. Although theirs is definitely an aura of the factory-made and the synthetic, the houses are not autonomous machines. Rather they are semi-autonomous, and as such, SOUPERgreen is welcome and timely in offering architecture a way of resuscitating the moribund projective thrust of post-criticality.

Over two decades have passed since the first concerted denunciations of architectural autonomy
and many well-intentioned efforts to displace its model of cultural resistance—as practiced, for example, by another group of five architects (admittedly more notorious and from the opposite coast in New York). Although this is not the place for a historical account of post-criticality, or an analysis of architectural culture in the intervening period, suffice it to state that efforts to substitute cultural engagement for critical autonomy have provided few favorable returns. Especially when set against the bankrupt, privatized landscape of advanced capitalism in the United States, that history might reveal as unsustainable the post-critical, swooshy Just-Do-It credo and expose as mistaken the sense that post-criticality itself hinged on a disavowal of critical intellection.

Of little help to post-critical practices was a propensity for either political abstinence or unquestioning obedience to a neoliberal free market. Now bereft of such sponsorship and patronage by dint of global economic malaise, post-criticality seems to be at an impasse. Nowhere is this abeyance more acutely registered than in the dearth of ambitious projections of bold, alternative visions that might constructively shift the current ethics, politics, and practices of sustainability and give post-criticality a renewed speculative thrust. And although proponents of Landscape Urbanism might submit otherwise, there is regrettably minimal serious disciplinary engagement with the formal and programmatic implications of sustainable design. The profession itself, focused on quotidian serious disciplinary engagement with the formal and might submit otherwise, there is regrettably minimal.

In addition to its compelling ethical and political dimensions, it is also the body politic of SOUPERgreen that deserves salutation. All seasoned veterans of the Los Angeles-based “Boss Architecture” HQ and boot camp, Jones, Partners: Architecture (J.P: A), each SOUPERgreen architect upholds a robust code of conduct and practice and, above all, contributes to a refreshing example of industrious conviviality. An open-content co-op, where individuals continue to advance a set of shared theoretical interests and deeply held values through dialogue, the SOUPERgreen culture is generous enough to both allow each participant his particular authorial focus and flourish and all the solidarity of common propositional ground. Most astonishingly, it is their continued post-J.P: An affiliation and interaction that multiplies the original speculative investment, thereby increasing its rate of return and renewing its currency. By flowing “Boss” ideas through new channels of investigation, filtered through each individual interest, each architect expands the intellectual thrust of the original principal architectonics that were first specifically featured in Jones’s contribution to Pamphlet Architecture 12: “Building Machines” (1987). Now, each architect is both sufficiently expert and single-minded to advance and augment “Boss” logic and techniques and stands guard against complacency and recidivism in terms of cultural potency and relevance.

Importantly, such a command and control structure—more avuncular or collegial than filial—encourages the growth of ideas, the success of idea-driven work and stands as a solid example of how progressive, post-critical design can gain strength in numbers. In this instance, “Boss Architecture” emerges triumphantly and is no longer a province guarded by an “Army of One” but the experimental, liberated territory of a pugnacious Special Ops unit comprising Crawford, Jackson, Jones, Purvis, and Ruiz. These rambunctious five are, like Kelly’s Heroes in an architectural remake of the eponymous 1970 Clint Eastwood film, out on a high-stakes mission garbed in kelly green, safety orange, and screaming pink with a gambit to capture sustainable values far more relevant and profound than LEED gilt silver, gold, and platinum.

To push this brassy analogy further, SOUPERgreen’s exhibition of five feisty machines for living with was a knockout. With superior stagecraft, its exquisite rhetorical choreography of analog and digital artifacts packed a deft one-two punch to business-as-usual sustainability in architectural education and practice. It launched a quick jab to the gilded gut of market-driven certification and an upper cut to the double-chin of formalist signification, whether metaphorically biomorphic or obsequiously consumerist. By the end of this epic match-up, SOUPERgreen not only put green-washing on the ropes, but pushed it out of the ring.

Mohamed Sharif

Notes
1. I have previously written a review of an earlier and unrelated J.P: A exhibition. Please see “Meet the Nelsons” by Wes Jones et al. (Los Angeles, CA: R.A.M Publications, 2010).
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from http://soupergreen.com, most recently accessed July 17, 2011.
4. The panel discussion was held on April 7, 2011. The moderator was Sam Lubell, editor of The Architect’s Newspaper. Panelists included: Erin McConahy, Principal, Arup; David Hertz, David Hertz Architects; Lance

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Concrete Utopias posed numerous questions about the material presence of concrete in urban architectural forms of the 1960s and early 1970s. In panels focused on the Americas, Europe, and Asia, presenters explored the multiplicity of architects’ utopian—and sometimes anti-utopian—aims in response to the frequently embattled cityscape. Simultaneously, plastic and solid concrete acted as metaphor for conflicting architectural ideals in urban contexts. Sometimes sculptural and sometimes functionalist in expression, concrete was a catalytic medium for architects’ intensely varied artistic and pragmatic form languages. In contrast to concrete’s massive solidity, the papers demonstrated that architectural visions were far from monolithic.

Rather, they showed how architects tested the bounds of materiality, structure, and urban spatial organization, always seeking to redefine the relationship between architecture and urban society as a whole.

The subject of the symposium derived from the ongoing research of organizer Michelangelo Sabatino, a professor of architectural history and theory at the University of Houston. In particular, Sabatino’s work on Arthur Erickson explores the influence of the Canadian designer’s urban and typological innovations on the architectural culture of the 1960s and 1970s. In his talk on Erickson at the symposium, he emphasized the humanizing potential of concrete shaped into sweeping, yet...