FIVE POINTS OF "INFORMAL" ARCHITECTURE: TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE OF ABUNDANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the invocation and use of the term "informal" in architecture, particularly when used to describe non-Western cultures, peoples, and spatial practices. When discussing "informal" architecture, particularly open-air markets and bazaars, architects have too often conflated economic definitions of informality with definitions of architecture form. In post-socialist contexts, the complex history of retail spaces exposes how friction between local economies and global supply chains can create unique architectural experiences. Through an ongoing study of open-air markets and bazaars in Ukraine, this essay proposes five possible points of informal architecture in an attempt to change the narrative from scarcity to abundance: (1) localized formality, (2) organizational intelligence, (3) color material, (4) adaptation and disruption, and (5) experiential excess.

This paper engages two examples of recent architectural projects in Ukraine, one designed by Outpost Office and one by Ukrainian architect Alex Bykov, both of which use Ukrainian bazaar culture and collective spatial practices to inform contemporary works of architecture. The case studies presented here provide useful examples of how architecture can serve an infrastructural role for the informal, providing a framework for the organization of objects, an attitude toward the use of materials, and strategies for utilizing informal economic and social networks.

> I think that if you go into social criticism, you put poor people where you feel they belong. You are judgmental yourself; it's you who makes the categories. I think that the judgmental look is in the eye of the beholder.[1]
>
> — *Marjetica Potrc*

As capitalism expands to new territories in post-socialist contexts, shopping spaces are caught in the transformation of economic systems, giving formal characteristics to economic relationships. The result is a spliced condition of public and private spaces—mini shopping cities with their own regulations, security forces, currencies, and social hierarchies. The space of shopping is neither democratic nor free; it can require negotiation or provide anonymity. Shopping can lead to regret or disappointment, but also to the fulfillment of desire. As Sharon Zukin has noted, "Cultural theorists are only half right when they say that by choosing products, we create our identity. Our identity is formed by the whole activity of shopping—an activity that we experience as both freedom and necessity."[2]

Markets are the original fulfillment networks—analog systems of procurement, processing, storage, and distribution—and increasingly relevant as architects work to understand how intertwined global and regional forces create spaces where architecture is not merely the result of specific conditions, but is an active agent in the network itself.

Informal markets, those with non-Cartesian arrangements of market stalls, stands, kiosks, and other street vending elements, are considered outside the architectural canon. It is not that these spaces lack architectural interest, it is that contemporary architectural training does not equip architects to interpret them within our prescribed vocabularies and modes of viewing. Ukrainian bazaars, the focus of this essay, are not necessarily chaotic, as often described; in fact, their logic is a physical manifestation of layered economic, social, and political forces, each with its own physical requirements.

What anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss defined as "bricolage"—making do with institutional and cultural contexts—is a particularly useful term to consider in the Ukrainian context.[3] Architects have explained this phenomenon similarly, as in Koetter and Rowe's use of the term "collage," Charles Jencks's "adhocism," or more recently, Keller Easterling's "architectural entrepreneurialism."[4] Lévi-Strauss's "bricolage" is preferred in this context, as it encompasses both the individual material acts *and* the collective social networks associated with their production. In addition, the anthropologist Anna Tsing's use of the term "friction" provides a more nuanced understanding of how "regional-to-global networks of power, trade, and meaning" are productive relationships, not one-sided exchanges. An architecture of abundance reveals the tension between the individual and the collective; it utilizes part-to-whole relationships in both formal and social constructions. It results not in a "series of parts" or a "whole" form, but in a form through which forces (visible and invisible) are made material. An architecture of abundance is neither continuously emergent nor static; it is a constant state of transition, without a beginning and endpoint, where transformation is a constant state of being.

The difficulty of obtaining goods in the Soviet Union created a cultural network of alternative methods of procurement, and an enormous amount of time was spent in the pursuit of everyday items. The result was a culture of *blat*, an informal economy of favors that were required to obtain certain goods or services.[5] Blat—a personal fulfillment system—relied on relationships and loose social networks. According to some scholars, "the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics might be seen as the most entrepreneurial society ever" in that it "forced all citizens to become micro-entrepreneurs, to enact entrepreneurship in even the most mundane facets of everyday life."[6] This micro-economic activity in many ways kept the economy from collapsing and provided a way for citizens to self-organize and procure the necessary goods to cope with shortages and poor distribution networks.

The culture of micro-entrepreneurship survives today in Ukraine in many aspects of daily life, and is maybe most clearly articulated in the physical form of markets and bazaars. Informal economic networks were in place during the demise of the formal state in 1991 and heavily influenced the economic and architectural development that followed.[7] The result was an architecture that gave form to economic systems, materialized loose social networks, and offered collective solutions to the issues of scarcity. In a vacuum of planning regulation and enforcement, contemporary bazaars and markets in Ukraine recall Koetter and Rowe's vivid description of seventeenth century Rome in their book *Collage City*: "that inextricable fusion of imposition and accommodation, that highly successful and resilient traffic jam of intentions, an anthology of closed compositions and ad hoc stuff in between."[8]

Although shopping in America has been almost exclusively "formalized," it often avoids form (as a permanent condition) and instead focuses its efforts on crafting the experience of shopping through a network of designed objects, platforms, and mediated relationships. In America, the farmers' market is a rare, seasonal, and highly regulated event. Handcrafted goods are now more typically bought and sold through global digital platforms such as Etsy or Amazon Handmade.[9] Terms like "small batch" or "slow", once the province of local artisans, are used today to increase the market value of an item by drawing attention to the performance of labor. Indeed, the search for an "authenticity" in the products we purchase has driven us to some contradictory (and ironically humorous) practices. Despite America's fascinating culture of mass consumption, and nearly twenty years after the publication of the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, there still remains surprisingly little discussion of shopping in U.S. architectural academia or disciplinary practice.[10]

As Ukraine recovers from the economically devastating 1990s and transitions to a market economy, it has adopted some of the consumer and infrastructural norms of the West: namely, the recent popularity of big-box supermarkets. Supermarkets no doubt have certain advantages over open-air markets, including modern refrigeration, availability of parking, climate-controlled interiors, and a large selection of products

in a "one-stop" shopping experience. However, as more big-box stores open in Ukraine, open-air markets and bazaars have not disappeared as they have in some other post-Soviet countries. Supermarkets are not necessarily *better or worse* than open-air markets; they serve different social functions and exhibit distinct "material ethics," a term used by Rosalyn Shieh to describe a cultural attitude toward material use.[11] Bazaars may appear to the Western-trained eye as exotic spaces filled with wonder and delight, but to the average consumer they are spaces of daily interaction and source of material fulfillment. They are not *wild*, but typical. Not chaotic, but logical. Not noisy, but acoustic. They do not represent scarcity, but celebrate alternative abundances.

The East and West have a long political, social, and artistic history of highlighting each as the Other.[12] For the purposes of this essay, we should consider both in a vacuum free of value judgments, simply as various degrees of *different or similar*. As Slovenian curator Zdenka Badovinac has noted, our histories and identities are not without collision; in collective thought and daily practices, the East and the West are tied together by our parallel, crisscrossing, and at times, interrupted histories. As Badovinac writes, the struggles of Eastern Europe are shared with "the whole of the non-Western world—a world that, for political and economic reasons, has not been able fully to integrate the processes of modernity—among which processes we can include the system of historicization itself."[13] As we consider the spatial practices and specific sites of consumerism, we must recall the general economic prosperity of the West in recent decades and the struggles of many post-Soviet countries during the same time.

By its very name, informal architecture categorizes all architecture by its supposed level of formality. While seemingly harmless in concept, in practice it is important to recognize that the term *informal* is most often used to describe non-Western cultures, peoples, and spatial practices. The informal is indicated only by the absence of formality, and therefore cannot be defined on its own terms. On the one hand, one rarely describes a notable singular building as formal architecture; rather, more descriptive terms are used to describe the specific form, material, or aesthetic composition of a work within a subcategory (minimal, ironic, indifferent, heroic, activist, figural, etc.). On the other hand, among works categorized as *informal* there is typically little attention paid to a deeper understanding of the structural characteristics and cultural particularities of a work.

There are two reasons architects have misused the term *informal*: first, we have too often conflated economic definitions of informality to definitions of architectural form, and second, we have focused only on the global organization of the built environment, not on the individual unit formations and their collective relationships. Through an ongoing study of open-air markets and bazaars in Ukraine, this essay proposes five possible points of architecture away from singular interpretations and toward *an architecture of abundance.* These points should not be read in the same way as Le Corbusier's "Five Points" (rules to which one must ascribe), but I propose we use these points to identify specific attributes, characteristics, or descriptors that might exist in any architecture, formal or informal.[14] They are points that point toward, not points of regulation.

Bazaars are particularly useful in this pursuit because they are extra-architectural: they evolve more than they are created. They are more than a collection of buildings; they are temporary and permanent structures, complex fulfillment networks, rehearsed spatial practices, and logistical bodies of objects and people. As troublesome as the term informal architecture may be, it would be equally problematic to replace this term with another singular term that would inevitably flatten our understanding of the nuance within a type of architecture that produces variety, difference, and constant transformation in vastly different global contexts. Rather, an architecture of abundance encourages architects to understand more, not less, about the policies, social relationships, and cultural histories that create architecture. This way of viewing architecture brings forward useful characteristics that can be studied and implemented elsewhere. Architecture is not a summation of its characteristics, and strict points exclude future invention. How can we instrumentalize lessons learned from architecture labeled informal in the same way we learn from canonical precedents?

Figure 1: *Rynok Barbashova*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Ashley Bigham

NEW TERMS

There are five terms we can use to discuss, share, and learn from informal architecture to change its narrative from scarcity to abundance: (1) localized formality, (2) organizational intelligence, (3) color material, (4) adaptation and disruption, and (5) experiential excess.

Point 1: Localized Formality (Figure 1)

Formality is a central concern to both the viewer and the curator. Ukrainian markets thrive on moments of localized formality within a sea of formal collage. Markets are not simply typological hybrids; rather, they are assemblages of interconnected formal systems that exist and operate simultaneously. Each modular unit is embedded with compositional logics: symmetry, repetition, attention to scale, rhythm, etc. Vendor stalls are rectangular in shape, with each wall covered with gridded panels or tight shelving, and with the occasional display table or row of symmetrical mannequins. Each stall is oriented to the central singular viewer, indifferent to the neighboring unit: each a singular, immersive world standing alone, side-by-side. Each object is arranged meticulously, its position and placement remaining constant even when the physical infrastructure of the market dictates that objects must be disassembled at the close of day and rearranged again in the morning. The stacking ability of the objects themselves is on display; nested pots form tall columns demanding attention from passersby. The seller's body often completes the symmetrical arrangement perched on a small stool or collection of wares. Everything is in its right place.

Point 2: Organizational Intelligence (Figure 2)

Displays are organized to catch the attention of buyers. They reflect a high level of aesthetic concerns. Jeans are layered and draped to create an overwhelming sense of abundance. Sunglasses are sold in the sun, and umbrellas appear on rainy days. Long aisles of shoe stalls are organized by type: men's shoes, running shoes, kids' shoes, black shoes, knockoff Nikes, shoes with three stripes, shoes with heels, shoes for family members who get along, and shoes for families who don't. Bins of slippers overflow, reminding you to keep an extra pair for guests, signaling households of abundance. Everything is within an arm's reach, or conspicuously just outside its range.

Figure 2: *Tsentral'nyy Rynok*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Ashley Bigham

Point 3: Color Material (Figure 3)

Market infrastructure, comprising sheet metal, aluminum frames, crates, cardboard boxes, ceramic tiles, or wooden pallets, are used in its raw form to create a backdrop of neutral tones that can be embellished by items for sale. From ash-colored metal to café au lait cardboard, the stage is ripe for adornment. Thus, the color of each object becomes its most important material property. This is especially true where children's toys are concerned; the number of items displayed at one time depends on how many color variations are available. Objects are advertisements, and color can symbolize the abundance of choices. After all, color is free; a red bike and a blue bike cost the same. Embrace that color is both free and freeing. Color resists the tired narratives of post-Soviet gray. Every color is a material, and every material is a color.

Figure 3: *Tsentral'nyy Rynok*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Ashley Bigham

Figure 4: *7th Kilometer Bazaar*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019 Courtesy: Ashley Bigham

Point 4: Adaptation and Disruption (Figure 4)

Bazaars are designed through political and economic disruptions. All bazaars bear some physical markers of the transition from a socialist to a market economy. The Seventh Kilometer Bazaar near Odesa, one of the largest markets in Europe, offers an urbanism of systematic spatial adaptation. Born of a disruption in modern standardization, the market's main building material and organizational module is discarded shipping containers. As Soviet containers were not compatible with international standards, surplus containers were moved outside the city to become the infrastructure for the rapidly expanding market. Shipping containers used as market stalls can be opened and closed with ease to reveal any variety of interior organization or wares. The market exists within a context of ambiguous regulations, tax exemptions, and "black market" trading, but also offers a website complete with live web cams of the market spaces. These disruptions and adaptations may seem paradoxical, but embracing these constraints can create new material economies.

Figure 5: *Saltivs'kyy Rynok*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Ashley Bigham

Point 5: Experiential Excess (Figure 5)

There are relational, social, and communal aspects of bazaar shopping that cannot be replicated in supermarkets. Citizens have personal histories with places of shopping. You may often hear customers say, "I remember when that market was much bigger/smaller/just starting/only a piece of dirt/filled with pickpockets/the place to find anything/built over a cemetery/where my grandmother worked," etc. These personal remembrances, both positive and negative, can ensure their survival. Some say they specifically shop at bazaars because they are worried open-air markets will become obsolete with the development of supermarkets, or in a specific attempt to support the "grannies" or pensioners who typically sell there. Others swear it is the place to find the freshest organic fruits and vegetables.[15] Choose to create and nurture experiential excess for technical, economic, comfort, and sentimental reasons.[16] Everyone may disagree on the reason, but agree on the action.

TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE OF ABUNDANCE

What can we learn from engaging these alternative points in the creation of new works of architecture? Two recent projects in Ukraine—one designed by Outpost Office, a practice I co-direct with Erik Herrmann, and one by Ukrainian architect Alex Bykov—use Ukrainian bazaar logics and collective spatial practices to inform contemporary works of design. These projects provide case studies for subverting architecture's predisposition to otherize architectures and spatial practices not immediately intelligible as formal, replacing these dispositions with active engagement toward an architecture of abundance.

Open/Work is an exhibition of the work of the first students to complete the first year BA Program at the newly established Kharkiv School of Architecture. It was created through a collaboration between Outpost Office and the students of the Kharkiv School. In this challenging context of bricolage—a design-build project at a newly formed school situated within the economic and political context of post-Soviet Ukraine—this project was both an aesthetic project about display culture at Ukrainian bazaars and a logistical challenge to design using only local materials that were readily available in Kharkiv's bazaars. This design and procurement process not only allowed us to meet the tight schedule and budget, but it also utilized students' informal networks and the institution to develop unique design solutions in real time.

Open/Work implements design tactics and construction methods from these iconic bazaars to produce a suspended field of objects. It deploys organizational methods and detailing to create a system equally related to commercial acts of display and museum storage. The items on display include student models and drawings, as well as items borrowed from around the school including lecture posters, books, pencils, pillows, hard hats, and woodworking tools, highlighting the material abundance necessary for architectural learning. The exhibition is a floating archive that invites visitors to look at objects, touch them, and inspect them more closely. The design encourages visitors to behave as if they are at a bazaar, where testing, touching, and tasting occur before purchasing. The creation act of organizing and displaying objects gives the students the autonomy to speak "through the medium of things," creating both individual and collective non-verbal narratives.[17] Both the act of curation and the act of viewing require a more direct experience of the object itself, resulting in improvised interactions between participants and uncanny relationships.

Drawing on similar themes, Alex Bykov's exhibition "Markets in (post)Soviet Ukraine" transforms a meat counter at the Volodymyrskyi Market into an

Figure 6: *Open/Work*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Erik Herrmann

Figure 7 & 8: *Open/Work*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Erik Herrmann

exhibition space during Kyiv Art Week highlighting the market building's historic, and contemporary, cultural value. According to Bykov, the exhibition and the accompanying series of public discussions "question how trade is organized by a society and how a society is reorganized by trade."[18] This exhibition highlights the improvisation of the actors in the scene, flattening the relationship between the historic site, the active marketplace, and a traditional gallery space.

In an age of material excess, architecture is no longer tasked with the creation of totally new constructions; increasingly, it is tasked with the recombination, reuse, and reorganization of the material abundance already existing in our built environment. The case studies presented here—both the bazaar itself and each architect's creation—provide useful examples of how architecture can serve an infrastructural role for the informal, providing a framework for the organization of objects, an attitude toward the use of materials, and strategies for utilizing informal economic and social networks. These projects show how crafting new relationships between curators, viewers, and content can equalize the act of the creator and the act of the viewer. By embracing these points of "informal" markets, we can bring new understanding to a thriving type, learn to engage social systems of fulfillment, and bridge the current dichotomy between formal types.▪

Figure 8: *Volodimirskiy Rynok*, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2019
Courtesy: Alex Bykov

ENDNOTES

1. Marjetica Potrc, *Next Stop, Kiosk* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija Ljubljana, 2003), 43.

2. Sharon Zukin, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 253.

3. As Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, "…the 'bricoleur' also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only with things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 21. See also Irénée Scalbert, "The Architect as Bricoleur" *Candide: Journal for Architectural Knowledge*, no. 04 (2011): 69-88.

4. See Fred Koetter and Colin Rowe, *Collage City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979); Keller Easterling, "Launch" *Perspecta* 47 (2014).

5. Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 37. According to Ledeneva, *blat* is "an exchange of 'favours of access' in conditions of shortages and a state system of privileges."

6. Alf Rehn and Saara Taalas "'Znakomstva I Svyazi' (Acquaintances and connections) – *Blat*, the Soviet Union, and mundane entrepreneurship," *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 16 no. 3 (August 2004): 235-250.

7. Abel Polese and Peter Rogers, "Surviving post-socialism: the role of informal economic practices," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 31 no. 11/12 (2011): 612-618.

8. Fred Koetter and Colin Rowe, *Collage City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).

9. Despite my frequent trips to Eastern Europe, my Soviet decanter set was bought on Etsy from an antique dealer in Berlin, Pennsylvania.

10. See John McMorrough, "City of Shopping," in Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, and Sze Tsung Leong, eds., *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, Project on the City, v. 2 (Köln: Taschen, 2001) 201. According to McMorrough, "Architecture's antagonism toward shopping is due in part to its historical preoccupation with form and composition. By imagining space in terms of bounded, stable, and unchanging entities, architecture has been largely unable to accept the excessive and formless nature of shopping."

11. Rosalyne Shieh, "It's fine." *Log* 41 (2017): 41. "In place of an aesthetic that represents a culture is an attitude, a material ethics."

12. See Zdenka Badovinac, "Happy End of the Cold War," in *Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2019), 239-262. Although the understood shorthand of "East" and "West" will be used in this text, when possible specific geographic locations will be used, specifically *Ukraine* and *America*.

13. Zdenka Badovinac, "Interrupted Histories," in *Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2019), 89-101.

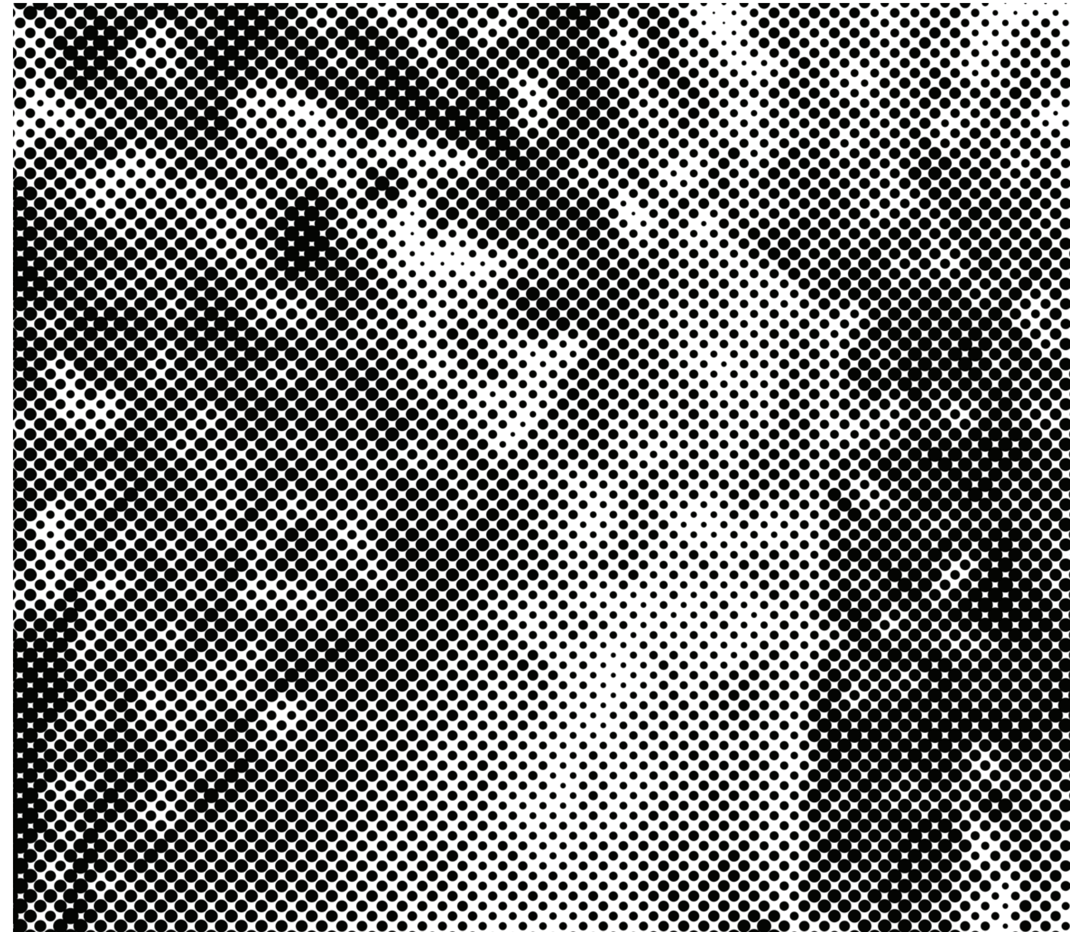
14. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complete* 1910-1929 (Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1964), 128-129.

15. See Abel Polese and Aleksandr Prigarin, "On the persistence of bazaars in the newly capitalist world: reflections from Odessa," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 31 no. 1 (Spring 2013): 110-136.

16. See Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier*, 1910-1965, ed. Hans Girsberger and Willy Boesinger, trans. William B. Gleckman (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967): 44. "Thus we are led to choose the roof-terrace for technical reasons, economic reasons, reasons of comfort and sentimental reasons."

17. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 21.

18. Alex Bykov (architect, photographer), digital correspondence with the author, August 2019.



SUBVERTING PRACTICE

CONTINUUMS OF DRAWING AND BUILDING

CHRIS CORNELIUS INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL ABRAHAMSON

ARCHITECTURE AND THE RIGHTS OF NATURE

JAMES MILLER, ERIC NAY