

REVIEW

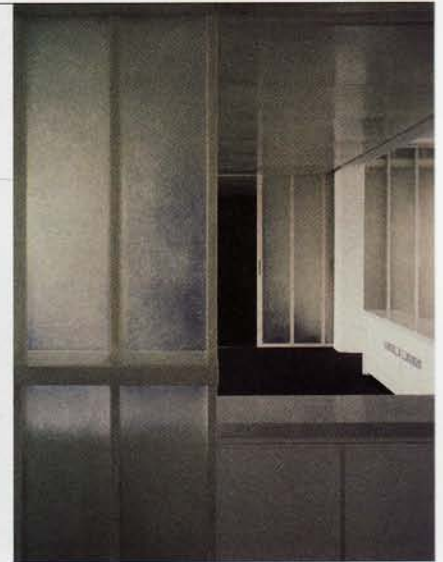
EXHIBITION

By Enrique Gualberto Ramirez

New Practices London.
At the AIA Center for
Architecture, 536
LaGuardia Place, New
York, until 27 October



1.



2.

The American Institute of Architects' Center for Architecture in New York may be small, yet the scope of its current exhibition, 'New Practices London', is anything but. Tucked into the centre's double-height mezzanine gallery, it features the work of six London practices 'whose work shows invention and promise'. The projects range from installations and residential schemes to larger-scale urban investigations and fantasies.

At the smallish end of this spectrum is 6a Architects' Hairywood tower – a periscope of a building complete with laser-cut facades and a seating area that provides an unusual vantage point for its users. Made of plywood, and of limited purpose, Hairywood reads as an interesting folly, but

one can understand 6a's comment that – with this and other projects – they surprise themselves.

And indeed, much of the work featured in the exhibition continues this trend, defying expectations and assumptions. Take Carmody Groarke's Coney Island Parachute Pavilion, winner of the Van Alen Institute's 2005 Open Design Competition. Although the brief called for a future vision for Coney Island, the practice's project is fascinating for its ability to summon the past in thoughtful ways.

The Parachute Pavilion is shaped like an amusement-park attraction. From generic pink programme volumes, a slender element reaches skyward and blossoms into a polygonal canopy. The metal scaffolding and impressive geometries recall

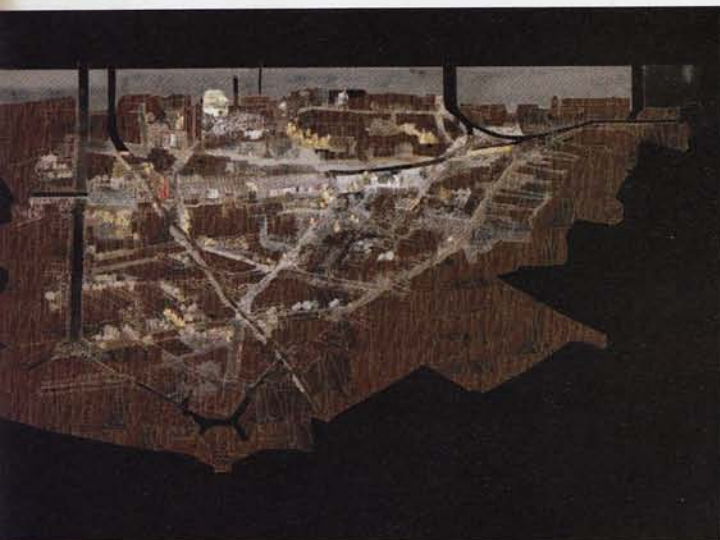
Konrad Wachsmann's post-war space frames, as well as 1920s Russian Constructivism. In this sense, it is a wayback machine, but – like Rem Koolhaas' musings on Coney Island in *Delirious New York* – also an example of how a nod to architectural history can be transformed into a vital statement.

AOC's work also touches upon historical precedent, but in subtle ways. 'New Practices London' features three of its projects, all firmly rooted in giddy 1960s London. The Lift, AOC's 'New Parliament', namechecks Archigram's pneumatic projects and uses bright, vivid isometrics to show the project's flexible programme. The firm's most vividly realised project, however, is Polyopoly, which takes the idea of ludic urbanism to the extreme. Here,

in a format resembling Monopoly, a board game interrogates globalisation's strangest manipulation of urban form: the Special Economic Zone.

In its other inclusions, 'New Practices London' never ceases to surprise. DRDH Architects may describe its work as 'strangely ordinary', yet its skilful manipulation and exploration of space at different scales can be downright thrilling. This deftness is visible in the material nuances of its Kahn House, as well as the exploration of building setbacks in its Limerston Street housing in London's Chelsea. Such nuance is also a feature of Witherford Watson Mann's Neo-Brutalist fantasies and Ullmayer Sylvester's sparkling curtain walls and beautifully quiet interiors.

1, 2 & 3. Gage/Clemenceau's design of the exhibition tends to overpower the contents, which include DRDH Architects' Rich Mix Cultural Foundation (left) and Witherford Watson Mann's Bankside Urban Park (below)



3.

But there's a problem. The exhibition design, by form-obsessed Gage/Clemenceau Architects, overpowers the content – for instance, in the way that models are placed atop Gage/Clemenceau's sweeping, ribbed, purple glowing boxes. But each firm does have the chance to present its own views and methodologies in a little book called 'process' that sits next to its models, while, flanking one side of the glowing boxes, cards with low-density images and tiny fonts give more insight into each practice's work.

In its exhibition materials, Witherford Watson Mann points out that 'British architects used to be very plugged into the United States – think of Norman Foster being taught by Paul Rudolph and Serge Chermayeff'. It's a

statement that evokes a golden era at the Yale School of Architecture.

Yet 'New Practices London' hints at something rather unsettling. It happens that Mark Foster Gage is currently in charge of the M.Arch course at Yale, so in a sense his firm's design of this show undoes the equal exchange of ideas that Witherford Watson Mann adores. The emerging London architect is not plugged in as much as it is overpowered by the audacious formalism of American academia.

All in all, the work of these six emerging practices is beguiling. But actually seeing and appreciating it is hard work indeed.

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CRITIC'S CHOICE

By Andrew Mead

One of photographer Mark Power's past projects was to record the interior of the Treasury in London's Whitehall during Foster + Partners' remodelling of it. Now Brighton-based publisher and commissioner Photoworks has issued Power's *26 Different Endings* (£40), which is based on a simple but productive idea. Power has taken a copy of the *A-Z London Street Atlas*, tagged all the pages that show the outermost reaches of the city, and then visited them systematically to document these 'endings' – the fluctuating fringe of London, where any semblance of urbanism finally expires.

The images are simply titled by the A-Z page number and grid reference – V 12 North, R 93 East – but whichever compass point Power heads to, what he finds is pretty bleak. Some partly boarded-up garages overflow with junk; a rain-washed scrapyards gleams under a grey sky; burned-out cars disintegrate in a nondescript field; an artificial ski-slope, seemingly abandoned, is shown for the crude contrivance it is. Pictured above is Z 22 West.

Housing here ranges from downmarket 1960s semis to more recent middle-class developments such as Cherry Croft ('Resident Permit Holders Only'), with eccentric interlopers on the way – a pebble-dashed house with bizarrely steep roofs, as if snow was a continual menace in south London. Meanwhile, nature does strange things on these margins: trees are weirdly pruned and contorted or, covered in creepers, seem to loom malignly. Almost everywhere looks like a crime scene – banal but rather sinister.

All of the images are specific (the map reference) but they're generic too – this could be the edge of any UK city. But it's worth remembering that what they represent is not an absolute fact but a point of view – what Power has chosen to see. Threading its way past Power's sites is a long-distance path, the London Loop, which stitches fields and downland together with what its promoters rightly describe as 'secret ribbons of greenery'. You could make a book of photographs here which looked like a rural idyll; these fringes are multi-dimensional. But that doesn't diminish the strength of Power's collection (www.photoworksuk.org).

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