



François Roche –
R&Sie(n) Architects

Profile



Instead of their faces R&Sie(n) show a strange being created from their own faces and those of their team.

The same hybrid in the year 2050.



„We have had enough of architects being treated like stars,“ is how François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux explain why they do not have any photos taken of themselves. Instead of their faces they show a strange being created from their own faces and those of their team. A hybrid, rather like the name R&Sie(n), that dissolves the identities of the individuals in the group, simultaneously creating a calculated element of confusion.

It all started in Paris in 1989, when, after graduating, François Roche (born in Paris in 1961) and Stéphanie Lavaux (born on the French Pacific island of La Réunion in 1966) set up a joint studio. Partners in both their private and professional lives, they attempted to blur the boundaries of architecture from an early date. Armed with a color photocopier, they alienated buildings, refused to adhere to scale and blended them with the landscape to such an extent that they eventually ended up becoming one with it. Pioneers of hybrid architecture, the computer became their tool of choice as long as 15 years ago – at a time when many of the avant-garde were still messing around with rapidographs instead of immersing themselves in digital worlds.

However, although R&Sie(n) were pioneers of the blob they refuse to devote themselves entirely to it. Indeed, their approach is anything but formalist or stereotyped. As bizarre as some of their designs appear, they are always context-related, without descending into superficial regionalism. Instead of taking their lead from postmodernism and integrating local shapes into their own formal repertory, François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux counter with a markedly contemporary interpretation. In this way, they provoke, as well as producing a great deal more than a merely arbitrary foreign body.

The design of their information center „Water Flux“ (as of 2009) intended to document the disappearance of the glaciers in the middle of the Swiss Alps, is reminiscent, with its countless tentacles, of a bacterium; it almost looks like a living being. And François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux have long since made these an integral part of their work.

HYBRID MUSCLE

Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2002



For their project „Hybrid Muscle“ (2003) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, they devised a study and exhibition room intended to produce its energy itself. However, their solution envisaged nothing like the use of the usual solar cells, declaring a genuine buffalo to be the generator of electricity for the building. What happened was that this buffalo used its muscle power to raise a metal weight. Then, as this dropped down again, electricity could be produced around the clock – even at night, when the buffalo was sleeping. The building, which became increasingly soiled with the animal’s excrement, also reacted to the living being inside it by being able to set its facade panels in motion using pneumatic pumps and, in this way, to transport a minimum of fresh air into the symbiosis of animal, building and machine.

François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux also succeeded in questioning the link between nature and civilization in their project „l’amlostinparis“ (2008). Since this date they have been breeding a culture of aggressive bacteria in drop-shaped glass bulbs which they have fitted to the wall of a townhouse in Paris covered in greenery. These bacteria kill off the plants that surround them. Here too, the intervention, which, at first glance, appears almost decorative, has taken on a complex and dangerous momentum of its own. It is even threatening to spiral out of control at any moment.

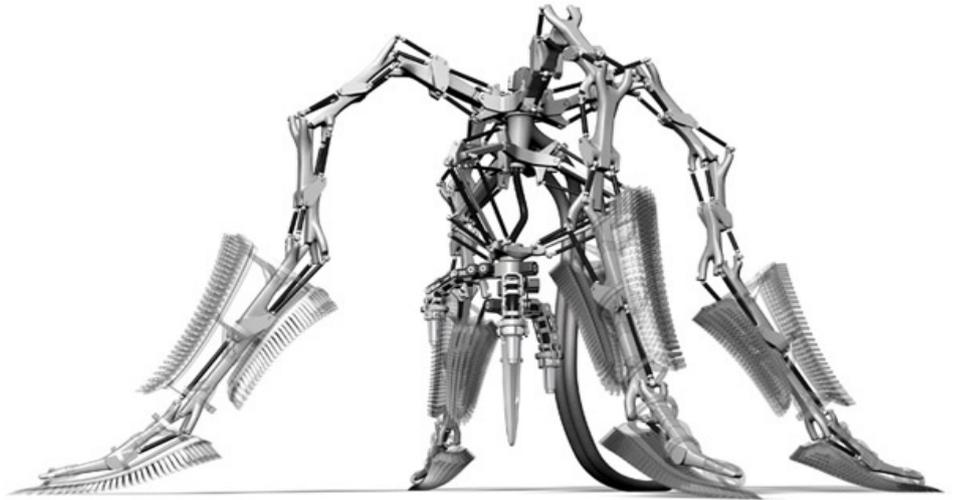
„We have no intention of spending four whole years of our lives building a totem pole,“ is how François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux explain their predilection for projects beyond the architectural mainstream. For them, buildings represent a “narrative practice“ that can, certainly, appear confusing or threatening. Accordingly, in „ Asphalt Spot“ (2003) they designed a multi-storey car park in Tokamashi, Japan



l’MLOSTINPARIS

Paris, 2008

whose parking spaces were slightly wavy as if they had been shaped by an earthquake. Most of the vehicles only have three of their wheels firmly on the ground, thus threatening to set themselves into uncontrolled motion and almost becoming living beings.



ARCHITECTURE DES HUMEURS

Le Laboratoire, Paris, 2010



HYPNOSIS ROOM

MAM Musee d'Art Moderne
Paris, 2005

Whereas architects such as Diller Scofidio & Renfro, UN Studio and Asymptote, who also use hybrid techniques in their work, have long since moved on to large scale projects François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux appear almost hesitant in this respect. Should their ideas really be set in stone for all eternity? What represents a declared objective for most architects almost appears to represent a threat for them. When François Roche talks about Gilles Deleuze he does not sound insincere. On the contrary. They are considered two of the few people in their generation who have retained the experimental and theoretical spirit of their early years right up until the present day. The slightly chaotic and, at the same time, highly self-critical quality visible not only in their work but also in their numerous essays, lectures and publications has allowed them to put together an unusual and wide-ranging portfolio. And it has also saved them from following the gold rush to Dubai and dissolving their ideas in pure formalism.

In speculation, François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux have found a strategy for avoiding the latter's constraints. Alongside numerous teaching posts, including ones at the Bartlett School in London in 2000, the Technical University (TU) in Vienna in 2001, the ESA in Paris in 2005 and the University of Applied Arts in Vienna in 2008, François Roche has been heading the „Advanced Studio“ at Columbia University in New York since 2006. Here, they have been able to test their motto of thinking of „practice as fiction“ and „fiction as practice“ together with programmers, biochemists and nano experts in an interdisciplinary think tank. The result of these investigations are not only incorporated into their work but, at the same time, are also presented in their own exhibitions. Here too, their commitment goes far beyond normal expectations. For the exhibition shown in spring 2010 in Paris „Architecture des Humeurs“ (Architecture of moods) they stopped working on their architectural projects for three months and devoted themselves entirely to staging this exhibition, together with their 15 staff members. Something that contradicts all entrepreneurial principles. And yet, in this practice François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux are very true to themselves. They approach their work with a great fund of knowledge and an equal measure of great naivete, often not knowing exactly what is waiting for them at the end of a project. But this is exactly the source of their strength. They are curious enough not to reach a goal over hastily.

Interview



Office R&Sie(n) in Paris

It was late afternoon when I entered the R&Sie(n) studio— a former shop just a few steps away from Boulevard de Belleville. At the entrance there is a group of large cushions. The walls are covered with transparent bubble wrap. Like a weir, a narrow hall leads to a large room in the back. Here too, the walls are concealed behind foil and would almost look medically clean were it not for the countless sketches and renderings they are covered in. A laboratory, a studio, a factory? Perhaps a bit of everything. Seated on the cushions by the entrance, we finally started our interview with 20th Arrondissement Parisian life passing by on the other side of the window looking out on the street. An interview about buildings as fiction, new territories and prickly aliens in the Swiss mountains.

François Roche, together with your colleague and partner Stéphanie Lavaux you founded R&Sie(n) in 1989. Since then you have not published any photos of yourselves but instead display a computer-generated hybrid. Why this game of hide-and-seek?

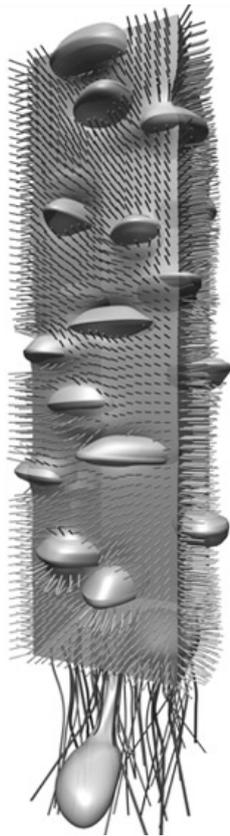
François Roche:

We do not want our work to be associated with a particular person or face. In a way, we want it to be unidentifiable. The image we show of ourselves is a hybrid of Stéphanie, myself and people who worked in our office at the time. We wanted to show that what we produce is a hybrid. For us, this is a criticism of what is common practice: Nowadays many well-known architects represent themselves, above all. Instead of buildings, they design an image of themselves.

They orchestrate themselves as brands.



Architecture is a battlefield where conflicts are dealt with.



UNPLUG

La Défense, Paris, 2001

Our work is practice as fiction, fiction as practice, speculation, research. It is polymorphous.

François Roche:

Indeed, they are like L'Oréal or some laundry detergent, while their architecture should also be able to do without them as a person. We graduated from university in the late 1980s. Perhaps this is why we are a little sensitive when it comes to celebrity cult, because at the time everything was cannibalized by advertising which, in turn, created its own stars. The fascination with these shamans, which architects and designers have since purported to be, has continued to this day. We were fed up with this self-marketing and are now trying a different approach.

What does R(&)Sie(n) stand for?**François Roche:**

Here, the same holds true as for our portrait. R&Sie(n) is the arbitrary combination of the initial letters of several names. Those of Stéphanie and me, as well as people we worked with at the time. We wanted them to get a mention too. It is important for everyone's opinion to be taken into account. Architecture is a battlefield where conflicts are dealt with. We experience this in our office every day. What I like about the name is that it can be pronounced differently in every language. In German, it sounds a bit like "Hören Sie" ("Listen!") and the letters "R.S.I." could also be seen as an acronym of "reel, symbolique, imaginaire" – the title of a colloquium headed by Jaques Lacan, who was a major influence on us. We are children of 1970s French philosophy born just a bit too late, as we only discovered it in the late 1980s. Philosophy has never been taught at architecture school, and is still not. There has to be something of this longing in it.

How would you describe your work?**François Roche:**

It is practice as fiction, fiction as practice, speculation, research. It cannot be broken down to just one element. It is about thinking that reality is also partly fiction. It not only consists of what we see, but at the same time hides another reality, a dream or phantasm. Something that at times can even scare us. We are interested in the question of how we can develop aesthetics from this. As such, reality becomes a narrative strategy.





I'MLOSTINPARIS
Paris, 2008

We design buildings that fear their own appearance. They convey their own fragility.

For your project “lost in Paris”, for example, you grew aggressive bacterial cultures in glass bulbs made specifically for this purpose and installed them in the garden of a Parisian townhouse. The threat thus became part of the project, which at the same time developed its own momentum.

François Roche:

The idea was to create bacteria on the building’s façade which would cause some of the plants around them to die. This is not a form of ecology that comes from Disneyland or befits the middle classes. However, these occurrences also constitute a very natural process, though it can of course lead to problems with the neighbors. We found the dynamics and fluency of the substances highly intriguing in terms of architecture, the identity of which is, at the same time, questioned in this way. Its boundaries become blurred.

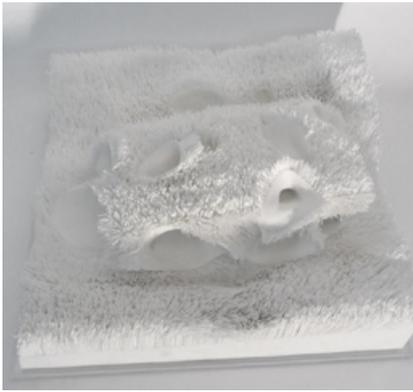
You also caused slight irritation with your parking structure “Asphalt Spot” in the Japanese town of Tokamashi. Its parking spaces follow a dynamic wavy design, so that most of the vehicles stand on three wheels only. Where does this zest for risk come from?

François Roche:

What is interesting here is that when you are parking you have to observe the way your own car responds. It assumes something animal-like – as if it were a horse. The topography creates a danger without actually being dangerous. Yet it triggers something in the observers that inevitably relates them to their built environment. We aim to design buildings that do appear isolated, but that to some extent also fear their own appearance and autonomy. They follow the aesthetics of the provisional and unfinished, even if they were designed on a computer and boast ingenious details. They convey their own fragility.



ASPHALT SPOT
Tokamashi, Japan, 2003



BI[r]O-BO[o]T

International pavillion, Biennale
Venice 2008

Our form of utopia is based on speculation. We visualize a specific future scenario and aim to approach it with the help of technology.

Listening to you one would almost think you are slightly scared of the architecture yourself.

François Roche:

We have a very complex and difficult relationship with our own authorities in the field of architecture, be it in the administrative bodies, or institutions. We always say that we are "immigrants by birth" in our own country. On the other hand, we are not outsiders to the system either. In August, we will be taking part in the Architecture Biennale in Venice for the eighth time and we teach at the Columbia University in New York and the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. But we attempt a different approach. The laboratories in which we work at the universities explore a lot more than just architecture. In the field of robots, for example, we have been looking into how they could serve us as an active tool in the transformation of cities. The results of this research are exhibitions that each focus on one specific topic.

Like your exhibition "Architecture des Humeurs" which was shown at the beginning of 2010 at "Le Laboratoire" in Paris and which explored the interfaces between architecture, neurobiology and mathematics.

François Roche:

Yes, for this project we spent three months collaborating with a team of ten scientists, among them mathematicians, programmers and robot designers; we even put our architectural projects on hold for it. This part of our work means a lot to us. We not only aim to devote ourselves to professional practice and planning buildings, we also wish to take the risk of establishing links with science and new technologies.

What role do digital media play in this? You started using computers for your planning processes early on.

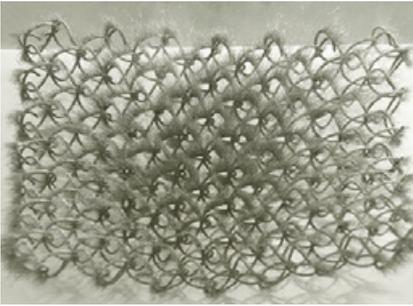
François Roche:

When we discovered computers in 1995, we were almost the only ones who worked this way. As architects who were born with a Rotring and experienced everything from the first Mac, Windows 95 and then Windows 98, we witnessed how computers became a democratic tool. We were able to integrate the metamorphosis of the tools in our working process in real time. Since then, we have been trying to consider the digital as a different territory which, at the same time, allows us to draw conclusions about reality. A bit like "Utopia" by Thomas More.

Who in his 1516 novel of the same name describes a better society on a distant island...

François Roche:

Yes, for utopia is crucial for architecture. It allows the distance necessary to look at the present with a critical eye. The fact that Utopia is set in the present makes More's novel so interesting. For him it was not a projection into the future, but a possibility that existed then, but in a different place. We have always been interested in this type of utopia. Not the utopia of futurists or of the 19th century which was in some way religious. Today, we accept being subjugated in order to be freed in the future, when everything will be better. This is the mechanism the modern age has adopted from religion. Our form of utopia is based on speculation. We visualize a specific future scenario and aim to approach it with the help of technology and through our collaboration with scientists.



DUSTYRELIEF / B_MU
Bangkok, Thailand 2002



How do you approach a project?

François Roche:

We approached the great dimensions very carefully. We have to identify a property, examine it, and deduce a scenario. Many architects have an enormous fear of the location and still bank on international and interchangeable architecture. We prefer developing a project in situ and based on a specific location. However, this also means that we are not able to repeat something we have done before, which, in turn is extremely time-consuming and expensive. But maybe this is the romantic side of us. (laughs)

What projects are you working on at the moment?

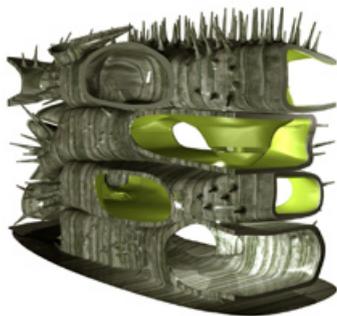
François Roche:

We are currently working on the new building for the "B_Mu" museum in Bangkok, which with 5,000 square meters of usable space and 30 meters in height, will be our largest construction to date. With "Water Flux" we are, moreover, working on a project in Switzerland which will serve as an information center on the shrinking of glaciers. It is a cocoon, being built entirely from wood, with no concrete whatever. A bit like self-supporting bodyworks in car construction. The wood is sourced from the surrounding forests, milled digitally and subsequently assembled in situ. The tentacles on the façade are designed to retain the snow in winter. The building is located at an altitude of 2,000 meters. Given the shape the snow can collect easily on the façade, so the building will change its appearance completely with the seasons. It will work in the opposite way to a tree: In summer, it will be naked and visible; in winter, it will be completely covered in snow.

How would you describe the body of the building, the inner structure of which is configured as a flowing spatial arrangement?

François Roche:

I am interested in architecture the individual parts of are no longer recognizable and which no longer allow for differentiation between structure, membrane, skin, wall or ceiling. A bit like in Hippocrates' medicine, where the body was not yet divided into organs, but understood as a flow of liquids. Gilles Deleuze and Antonin Artaud,



WATER FLUX
Évolène, Switzerland, 2009

I am interested in an architecture the individual parts of which are no longer recognizable. Like the “body without organs” describe by Gilles Deleuze.

too, described this “body without organs”. Today, as it were, neurobiology is coming round to this point of view again, dividing the body into zones, between which the substances flow. Another interesting aspect about this construction is the way we pushed it through.

Are you referring to the approval through the obligatory referendum?

François Roche:

Yes, in Switzerland it is not easy to build a radical structure like this. The isolated village of Évølene with its 2,000 inhabitants is located high up in a glacial valley. A very special form of carnival has survived here to this day. During the carnival, the inhabitants wear monstrous, wooden masks and beat each other. This goes on for three days, during which time the public space becomes a violent space. When the voting was imminent, the mayor told me in advance there was no way it was going to get through. I then took one of these masks to the assembly and explained that the building, which looks a bit like a monster itself, would work in exactly the same way. While the masks serve to drive out the winter, the museum would aim to do the same with global warming. After all, only 20 years ago the site earmarked for the development of the building was still covered with glacial ice. The people liked the fact that I explained the building with a personal story rather than with the functionality of its façade, and ultimately approved it. The fact that a backwater such as this mountain village agreed to such a building caused a veritable sensation in Switzerland. Even we were surprised. (laughs)

Thank you very much for the interview.

Interview: Norman Kietzmann

Norman Kietzmann studied industrial design in Berlin and Paris and writes as a freelance journalist about architecture and design for publications such as Baunetz Designlines, Deutsch, Plaza, Odds and Ends. He lives and works in Milan.

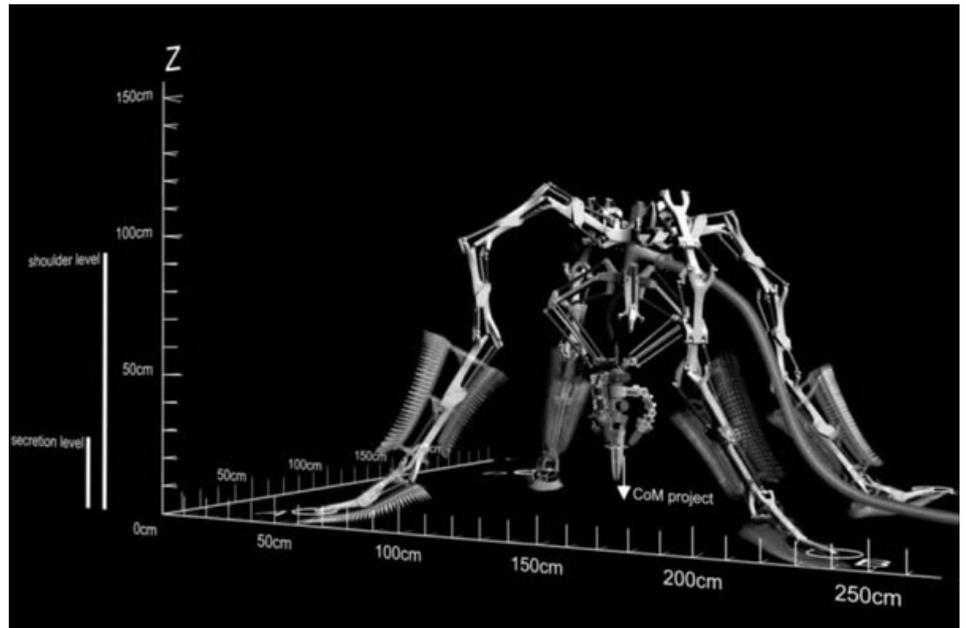
Projektmanagement: Andrea Nakath



Works

ARCHITECTURE DES HUMEURS

Le Laboratoire, Paris, 2010



WATER FLUX

Évolène, Switzerland, 2009



I'M LOST IN PARIS

Paris, 2008



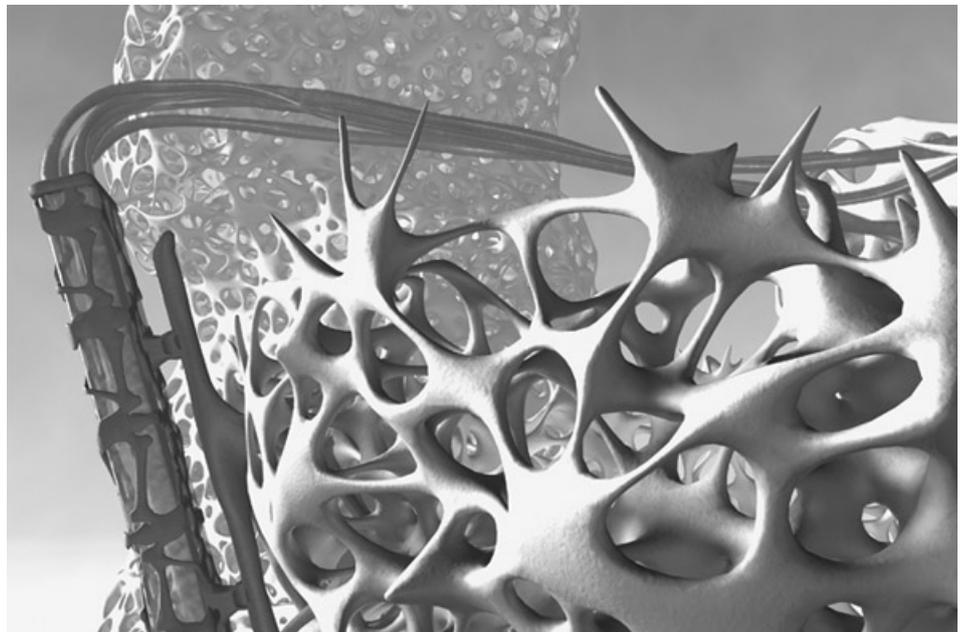
BI[r]O-BO[o]T

International pavillion, Biennale
Venice 2008



I'VE HEARD ABOUT

MAM Musee d'Art Moderne
Paris, 2005



HYPNOSIS ROOM

MAM Musee d'Art Moderne
Paris, 2005



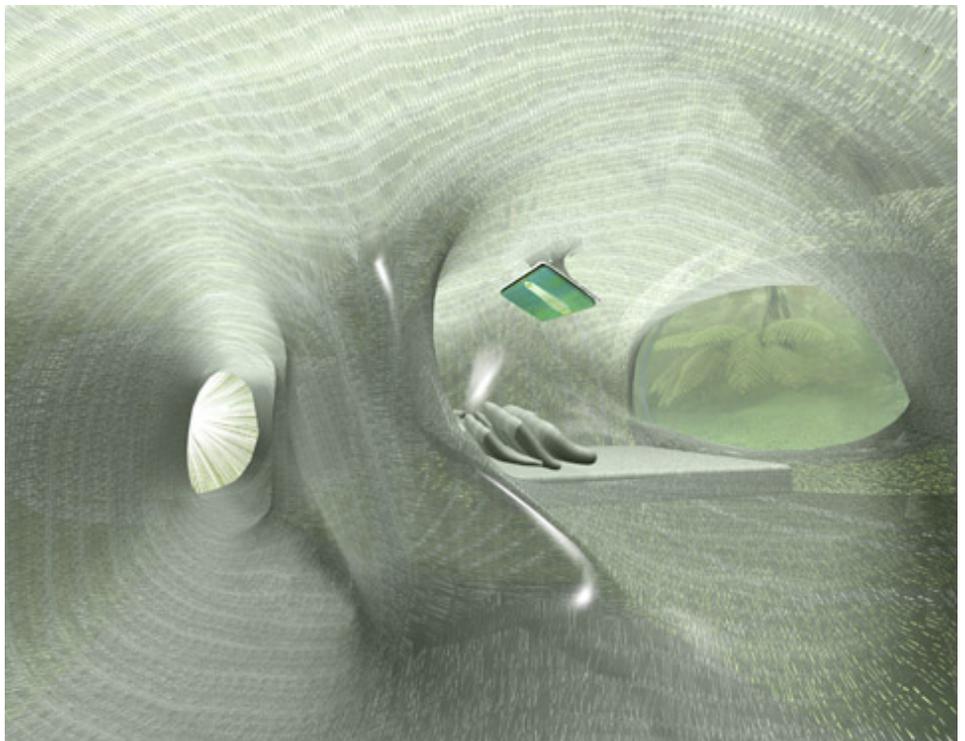
ASPHALT SPOT

Tokamashi, Japan, 2003



MOSQUITO BOTTLENECK

Trinidad & Tobago, 2003



DUSTYRELIEF / B_MU

Bangkok, Thailand 2002



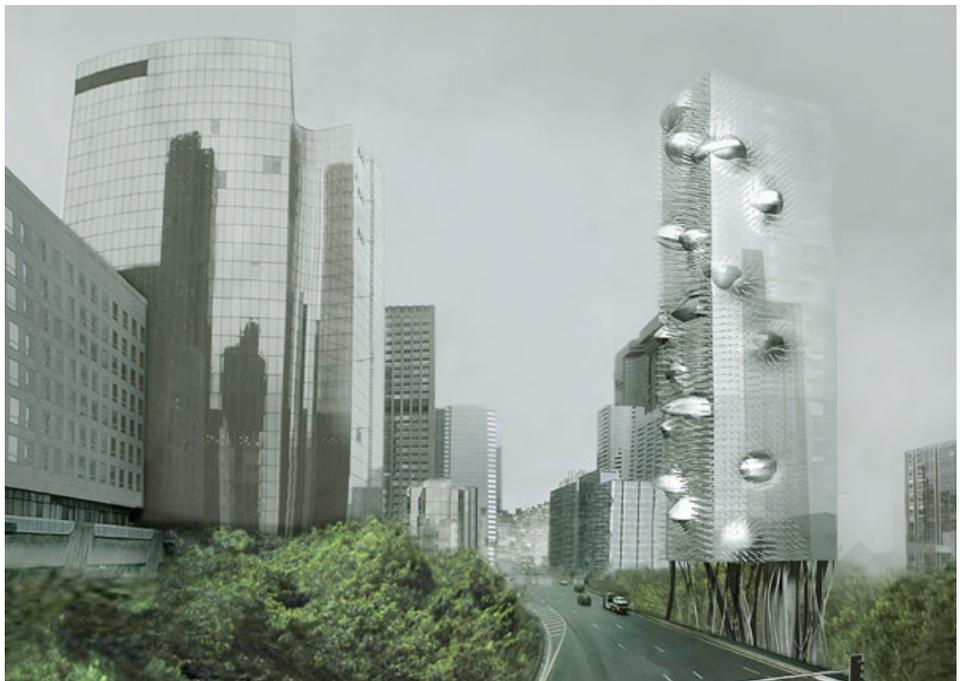
HYBRID MUSCLE

Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2002



UNPLUG

La Défense, Paris, 2001



ALTA AQUA

Venice, 1998

