To the Usonian! He is the American citizen. For him our pioneer days are not over! Perhaps pioneer days never should be. But the American frontier has shifted in many ways.

—Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (1958)

IN THE SPRING OF 1977, the architect Gunnar Birkerts delivered a lecture at the University of Detroit’s School of Architecture, some twelve miles down Woodward Avenue from his office in the suburb of Birmingham. He opened his talk with an anecdote about another lecture, one he had delivered a month or two before at Columbia University. He had shown several of the projects that made his name in the early 1970s, among them the recently completed Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis, which floated ten floors of office space over a plaza with a massive suspended catenary, and his IBM Information Systems Building at Sterling Forest (New York). The firm was also about to break ground on a major addition to the University of Michigan’s Law Library. “After the lecture,” he tells his audience of Detroiters, “someone stood up and said, ‘Mr. Birkerts, out of all of the Saarinen crew, you are the only one left in that place.’“ Birkerts pauses and repeats with mock contempt: “IN THAT PLACE!” He continues the student’s question: “‘What is the reason? What do you find in Detroit? There is nothing going on.’”

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In this sense, Birkerts was less in tune with the previous generations of Detroiters than with another ardent Midwesterner and dogged individualist—one who had similar things to say about the overheated discourse of the East Coast, the virtues of agrarian life, and the possibility of an organic architecture based in processes of growth—Frank Lloyd Wright.7

Wright casts long shadows in American architecture, and to invoke his presence in Birkerts’ work risks reducing both to a set of all-too-familiar tropes—romanticism, heroic individuality, integration into landscapes, didactic social reform, and conflicted relationships to the cities of the northeastern seaboard. But the comparison is not made lightly, and Birkerts had a uniquely sustained dialogue with the heritage of Wright, in ways both overt and implicit. Between 1971 and 1984, Birkerts undertook a series of projects that sought to revise and recuperate Wright’s Usonian ideal—“to project Wright into this century,” as Birkerts put it, perhaps unwittingly corroborating Philip Johnson’s infamous dismissal of Wright as the “greatest architect of the nineteenth century.”8

Taken together, these arguably neo-Usonian projects offer a portrait of a young architect navigating the architectural challenges of the long 1970s, in which we find Birkerts engaging with Wright but also Aalto, Doxiadis, and Saarinen; organicism, corporatism, and megalopolitanism; the University, the Bomb, and Domino’s Pizza. But this is also simply the story of a committed adherent of the Modern Movement—“born, more or less, under the same constellation as Modern Architecture; and very near to the birthday of the Bauhaus”—trying to make sense of the American Midwest after mid-century modernism.9
some frequency—of an East Coast architecture scene that he saw as dogmatically theoretical and “cannibalistic.” Metropolitan parochialism aside, though, the student had a point. This wasn’t the Detroit that Birkerts had so eagerly sought out after finishing his education at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart in 1949. He’d hardly even waited to graduate—two years before finishing, he was in contact with the dean of the University of Michigan’s College of Architecture and Urban Planning to see about transferring. After his arrival, at the tail end of 1949, in New York (whose skyline “looked just like a Hugh Ferriss rendering” but held little romance for Birkerts), he headed straight for Bloomfield Hills in Michigan and the office of Eero Saarinen. Saarinen gave him an audience, the story goes, at three o’clock in the morning, while enjoying a scotch with Minoru Yamasaki; Bloomfield Hills was the place to be. But if Albert Kahn, Eliel Saarinen, and the founding of Cranbrook marked the first generation of what’s been called “Michigan modernism,” and the younger Saarinen, Yamasaki, and Cranbrook students like Charles and Ray Eames were the core of the resounding theme in his own self-understanding. “Well, I am one of the last remaining in the Bloomfield area,” he admitted in another 1977 lecture, “and I love it.” Being an hour and a half by plane from the eastern megalopolis was just right: “far enough to be foiled from the sounds and noises coming from it. We do hear the clear sounds and disregard the noises. And I am happy because they do not interfere with hearing my own heart beat.” The landscape and its temporalities imbued his design process—and perhaps even his entire purposefully repetitive rhetorical style—with a measured slowness:

Whether you see the plain or the Midwestern sky or the Great Lakes, in every case, it means dimension and distance. To me, the interesting Midwestern phenomenon is time, not only to overcome a distance. Time is needed between when the seed is put in the soil and the crops are taken off the fields. It has to be realized that the process of growth cannot be hastened, it takes time. It takes time to collect the crops. In the Midwest you cannot speed the clock, and somehow this is also creeping into architecture.  

In this sense, Birkerts was less in tune with the previous generations of Detroiters than with another ardent Midwesterner and dogged individualist—one who had similar things to say about the overheated discourse of the East Coast, the virtues of agrarian life, and the possibility of an organic architecture based in processes of growth—Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright casts long shadows in American architecture, and to invoke his presence in Birkerts’ work risks reducing both to a set of all-too-familiar tropes—romanticism, heroic individuality, integration into landscapes, didactic social reform, and conflicted relationships to the cities of the northeastern seaboard. But the comparison is not made lightly, and Birkerts had a uniquely sustained dialogue with the heritage of Wright, in ways both overt and implicit. Between 1971 and 1984, Birkerts undertook a series of projects that sought to revive and recuperate Wright’s Usonian ideal—“to project Wright into this century,” as Birkerts put it, perhaps unwittingly corroborating Philip Johnson’s infamous dismissal of Wright as the “greatest architect of the nineteenth century.” Taken together, these arguably neo-Usonian projects offer a portrait of a young architect navigating the architectural challenges of the long 1970s, in which we find Birkerts engaging with Wright but also Aalto, Doxiadis, and Saarinen; organicism, corporatism, and megalopolitanism; the University, the Bomb, and Domino’s Pizza. But this is also simply the story of a committed adherent of the Modern Movement—“born, more or less, under the same constellation as Modern Architecture; and very near to the birthday of the Bauhaus”—trying to make sense of the American Midwest after mid-century modernism.4

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4 As a student, Birkerts was most inspired by Eliel Saarinen, who died in 1950, but his work with Eero would be formative for his later practice. Kay Kaiser, The Architecture of Gunnar Birkerts (Washington: The American Institute of Architects Press, 1989), 11.
5 Gunnar Birkerts, Speech Template, 1977, Box 1, GBC BHL.
6 Gunnar Birkerts, “On Midwest,” panel discussion with Walter Creese and Glen Paulson, University of Illinois, Champaign, 1983, Box 1, GBC BHL. Minor changes to punctuation and capitalization have been made from the typescript.
7 Neil Levine structures his comprehensive survey of Wright’s work around his “constant preoccupation” with nature, and Levine’s distinction between the “abstract” relationship of architecture and nature in the Prairie Houses and the more “immediate” naturalism of his later work is useful in thinking about Birkerts’ multifaceted engagement with Wright’s organicism. Neil Levine, The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), xvii.
8 Gunnar Birkerts, interview with Jim Schwartz, 6 November 1986, Box 2, GBC BHL.
Domino’s Farms also claims the title to being the longest linear office structure in the world, at nearly a kilometer in length. It is structured as a series of linear “tracks,” each twenty-eight feet wide and variably infilled with rentable space, but from afar, the prevailing sense is one of incredible horizontality. This angle was a favorite of Vincent Scully’s, writing after seeing only the first volumes strung across a rolling landscape shaping, as it were, the whole continental space.” Those roofs—broad and elongated hipped bands of weathered copper with red-wood soffits—evoke Wright’s Prairie Style, as do the ribbon windows directly abutting the soffit and a bounty of pseudo-Wrightian framing into a texture of individually expressed volumes strung across a rolling landscape in a profusion that Wright would likely not contemplate.

10 Domino’s Farms also claims the world’s largest copper roof, at some 423,415 square feet. See http://www.dominosfarms.com/home.asp

Paul Goldberger, “A Pizza Empire Strives for the Wright Stuff!” The New York Times (1 May 1984). Goldberger argues that Birkerts “had no particular interest in Frank Lloyd Wright before taking on this assignment,” which is only the case to a certain point.

Birkerts also later designed a model Domino’s chain outlet with a disarmingly Pop façade that represents a slice being removed from a pizza-like circle.

Gunnar Birkerts, notes for the dedication of Domino’s Farms, 5 December 1985, Box 2, GBC BHL.

Monaghan’s Catholicism leads Domino’s Farms to be featured prominently in a recent lawsuit against the Health and Human Services mandate to provide contraceptive coverage to the employees of the complex, and also informed Monaghan’s later interest in creating a religiously-oriented town and university in Florida. For a good overview of Monaghan’s later projects, see Peter J. Boyer, “The Deliverer,” The New Yorker (19 and 26 February 2007): 88-111.

The building was designed by Birkerts in 1984 as the headquarters of Domino’s Pizza, owned by Thomas Monaghan, and it was built in phases over the following two decades. There was a stubborn simplicity to Monaghan’s desires: he wanted to correct the unfortunate fact that the sprawling house Wright designed for the industrialist Harold McCormick had never been built, and he wanted it as his company’s offices. Birkerts’ earliest plans stay close to the precedent, with a set of long intersecting bars that frame a central court, while introducing considerably more symmetry than in the McCormick House. At such an enlarged scale, though, the plan’s crossing bars are perhaps more indebted to Birkerts’ 1965 master plan for Tougaloo College, outside of Jackson, Mississippi, than the McCormick House, with the Wright touch confined to the articulation of the section. Monaghan objected to the arcing line of the landscape, and Birkerts took the revisions as a chance to imagine the extending lines of the Prairie Style as a massive inscription onto the landscape, resulting in the due-north-south configuration that would begin construction the following year. Birkerts’ megastructure entered the popular press as a compromise, striving for “the Wright stuff,” as Paul Goldberger put it in the New York Times—“Wright and Mr. Birkerts did not so much fight to a draw,” he argues, “as neutralize each other.” But that description implies the mediocrity of compromise; in the flesh, Domino’s Farms is a fantastically odd blend of historicism and futurity. The building was never quite Wright enough for Monaghan.13 He later commissioned a 1:10 scale model of Wright’s 1956 “Golden Beacon,” which still stands at Domino’s Farms—not far from another 1:10 scale mockup, designed by Birkerts, for a tilted 30-story skyscraper that was quickly and unavoidably dubbed the “leaning tower of pizza,” never to be built. But Monaghan would prove to be on one of Birkerts’ most providential patrons, even endowing a professorship at Michigan that Birkerts was the first and only to hold. “Tom and I had a relationship like Michelangelo had with the Medici,” Birkerts recalls. “To a certain extent it was easier for Michelangelo because Michelangelo preceded Frank Lloyd Wright.”

Monaghan’s own early history is the stuff of American mythology; after his father died on Christmas Eve, he lived in an orphanage for six years, inspiring a lifelong devotion to the Catholic faith—matched only by his devotion to Wright, whose work he discovered at the age of twelve. Like Wright, the occasional stay on the family farm engendered a persisting romance for the agrarian ethos. After a stint in the Marines, he enrolled in architecture school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to learn the trade of his boyhood idol. To provide for that education, Monaghan and his brother bought a failed Ypsilanti pizzeria, Dominick’s, in 1960 (he renamed it Domino’s five years later). His architectural ambitions were quickly frustrated, but the pizzeria worked
Domino’s Farms also claims the world’s longest linear office structure in the world, at nearly a kilometer in length. In 1995—you’ll see a building that lays claim to being the longest linear office structure in the world. Behind an outlandish cell tower—sketched or north on US-23, and look to the right as you drive east out of Ann Arbor on M-14, Gunner Birkerts and Associates, two schemes for Domino’s Farms, 1984, at top, the original scheme based on the McCormick House, and at bottom, the “tracks” scheme (Gunner Birkerts and Associates Archives, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan).

It is structured as a series of linear “tracks,” each twenty-eight feet wide and variably infilled with rentable space, but from afar, the prevailing sense is one of incredible horizontality. This angle was a favorite of Vincent Scully’s, writing after seeing only the first section. Scully describes it as “celebrating and shaping, as it were, the whole continental space.” Those roofs—broad and elongated hipped bands of weathered copper with redwood soffits—evoke Wright’s Prairie Style, as do the ribbon windows directly abutting the soffit and a bounty of pseudo-Wrightian details on the interior. But if the complex has a unified monumentality at a distance, it decomposes as you approach it, fragmenting into a texture of individually expressed volumes strung across a rolling landscape in a profusion that Wright would likely not contemplate. Depending on your angle, you might find a herd of some thirty-odd bison or a stately pair of African long-horned Watusi cattle grazing in the foreground. The building was designed by Birkerts in 1984 as the headquarters of Domino’s Pizza, owned by Thomas Monaghan, and it was built in phases over the following two decades. There was a stubborn simplicity to Monaghan’s desires: he wanted to correct the unfortunate fact that the sprawling house Wright designed for harold McCormick had never been built, and he wanted it as his company’s offices. Birkerts’ earliest plans stay close to the precedent, with a set of long intersecting bars that frame a central court, while introducing considerably more symmetry than in the McCormick House. At such an enlarged scale, though, the plan’s crossing bars are perhaps more indebted to Birkerts’ 1965 master plan for Tougaloo College, outside of Jackson, Mississippi, than the McCormick House, with the Wright touch confined to the articulation of the section. Monaghan objected to the crossing line of the landscape, and Birkerts took the revisions as a chance to imagine the extending lines of the Prairie Style as a massive inscription onto the landscape, resulting in the due-north-south configuration that would begin construction the following year. Birkerts’ megastructure entered the popular press as a compromise, striving for “the Wright stuff,” as Paul Goldberger put it in the New York Times—“Wright and Mr. Birkerts did not so much fight to a draw,” he argues, “as neutralize each other.” But that description implies the mediocrity of compromise; in the flesh, Domino’s Farms is a fantastically odd blend of historicism and futurity. The building was never quite Wright enough for Monaghan. He later commissioned a 1:10 scale model of Wright’s 1956 “Golden Beacon,” which still stands at Domino’s Farms—not far from another 1:10 scale mockup, designed by Birkerts, for a tilted 30-story skyscraper that was quickly and unavoidably dubbed the “leaning tower of pizza,” never to be built. But Monaghan would prove to be one of Birkerts’ most providential patrons, even endowing a professorship at Michigan that Birkerts was the first and only to hold. “Tom and I had a relationship like Michelangelo had with the Medics,” Birkerts recalls. “To a certain extent it was easier for Michelangelo because Michelangelo preceded Frank Lloyd Wright.”

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plans to reassemble it at Domino’s Farms, marking the landscape as a truly Usonian site.18 The third phase of Birkerts’ building included a “National Center for the Study of Frank Lloyd Wright”—alongside the Detroit Tigers Archives and Monaghan’s collection of classic cars—and Monaghan sponsored a series of conferences on Wright at the University of Michigan.20 (Vincent Scully’s essay on Domino’s Farms was commissioned in the aftermath of his keynote at one of these conferences, which also brought figures like Bruno Zevi, Brendan Gill, and Edgar Kaufmann Jr. to Ann Arbor.)21 In short, Monaghan sought to recuperate Wright in architectural discourse as much as in his own headquarters, and in so doing sought to inflect the shape of the profession. On March 25, 1988, Monaghan’s offices released a list called the “Domino’s Pizza Top 30 Architects in the World,” to the disgust of several critics, with the intention that they would each contribute a house design for a new development, adjacent to Domino’s Farms, that would be known as “The Settlement” (anticipating the recent Ordos 100 by some twenty years).22

The next year, Monaghan stepped down as the president and C.E.O. of Domino’s to devote himself to advancing the Catholic faith, and divestment began. He sold the Tigers in 1992 (to another pizza magnate, the President and C.E.O. of Little Caesars’s), he halted construction on his Fay Jones–designed “dream house,” and above all he sold off most of his vast collection of Wrightiana (“some of it at a staggering loss.”)23 The Michigan conferences stopped, the Monaghan Professorship was retired with Birkerts in 1990, and the brief reshaping across the 1980s of Wright Studies—an episode in architectural historiography that found Birkerts never far from the center of it—drew to a close. After financial difficulties at Domino’s, Monaghan returned to right the ship, and in 1998 he sold his controlling stake to Mitt Romney at Bain Capital for some $1 billion. Monaghan kept the building.

**MONAGHAN’S WIFE, MARGE**—she of the delivered pizza that eventuated a marriage proposal—was somewhat less fixated on Wright’s architecture, and by 1989 needed a break from it. She commissioned Birkerts to design a house on Drummond Island, “to see what I could do to forget totally about Frank Lloyd Wright,” as Birkerts recalls. The house, never built, is elegantly faceted four-pointed star, nestled into a moderately sloped site with nary a right angle to be found except at the interior partitions. There were certainly no Prairie Style roof overhangs, with continuously folded copper sheathing on all the exterior surfaces instead. But to leave Wright behind was not as easy as it might have seemed at first blush: “Wright is really all over,” Birkerts said of his ostensibly Wright-less house. “Even if Wright is not in the imagery, he’s in the principles.”24 This is because Birkerts’ chief principle, in 1989, was organicism. This categorization of his work was certainly acceptable, and by 1990 his experiences with Domino’s Farms and a widened appreciation of Wright after years of contemplating him deeply—not for nothing did he call the final Domino’s build-out a “full blown organism.”25 But to look back on Birkerts’ long career is to see a continuity of themes confronted by a restless rethinking of his conceptual terminology, and while he arrives at the word “organicism” slowly, it stems from his student days. His thesis advisor was Rolf Gutbrod, who was educated at Rudolf Steiner’s first school in Stuttgart and steeped in Goethe’s ideas on plant metamorphosis alongside steiner’s anthroposophy. Gutbrod was a fellow traveler of Hans Schäfer and Frei Otto’s, and this cadre of designers gives texture to Birkerts’ call for architectural contempo-raneity without recourse to the so-called international style, a counter-canonical modernism marked by a fluid attitude towards form. “The architects who stayed in Europe—Sven Markelius, 

17 Monaghan mentions this during the discussion period after a lecture by Birkerts at Michigan, after he had been named to the inaugural Monaghan Professorship. Gunnar Birkerts, “Concepts and Manifestations,” transcript of a 12 November 1984 lecture at the University of Michigan, Box 1, GBC BHL.

18 Bugbee, Domino’s Mansion, 11–17.


20 Ibid.

21 Vincent Scully, letter to Thomas S. Monaghan (18 May 1987), in Correspondence Regarding Publications, Box 6, GBC BHL.

22 “It was then that the architectural appointing process reached a new and patently absurd low point. It deserves oblivion because it reflects little more than the self-serving mischief that can be perpetrated by someone who spends a lot of money to get what he wants.” Paul Gapp, “Image is Biggest Prize For New Ringmakers,” Chicago Tribune, April 24, 1988. The article also criticizes the still-young Pulitzer Prize and its $100,000 honorarium, while conceding that it lacks the commercial undertones of the Domino’s Pizza Top 30. See also Goldberger, “A Pizza Empire Strives for the Wright Stuff.”

23 Boyer, “The Deliverer,” 102


25 Birkerts, interview with Jim Schwartz, 5.
Domino’s Farms.18 World Series as he was breaking ground at in 1983, just in time to see them win the and Monaghan bought the Detroit Tigers in 1988, just in time to see them win the World Series as he was breaking ground at Domino’s Farms.18

Monaghan had another industry afoot at this moment, and that industry was Frank Lloyd Wright. He spent considerable sums assembling a collection of Wright furniture and even entire interiors (while establishing preservation guidelines that encouraged keeping extant houses intact). He bought a Usonian house at auction in 1984, with plans to reassemble it at Domino’s Farms, marking the landscape as a truly Usonian site.18 The third phase of Birkerts’ buildings included a “National Center for the Study of Frank Lloyd Wright”—alongside the Detroit Tigers Archives and Monaghan’s collection of classic cars—and Monaghan sponsored a series of conferences on Wright at the University of Michigan.20 (Vincent Scully’s essay on Domino’s Farms was commissioned in the aftermath of his keynote at one of these conferences, which also brought figures like Bruno Zevi, Brendan Gill, and Edgar Kaufmann Jr. to Ann Arbor.)21 In short, Monaghan sought to recuperate Wright in architectural discourse as much as in his own headquarters, and in so doing sought to inflect the shape of the presidency. On March 25, 1988, Monaghan’s offices released a list called the “Domino’s Pizza Top 30 Architects in the World,” to the disgust of several critics, with the intention that they would each contribute a house design for a new development, adjacent to Domino’s Farms, that would be known as “The Settlement” (anticipating the recent Ordos 100 by some twenty years).22

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Birkerts, no stranger to contrarian arguments, posited that the International Style—compromised of “personal idiosyncrasies and highly dogmatic directions”—was on the fringes of modernism, rather than its “steady core.” That core was formed instead by the organic, positioning Wright at the center of a discourse on modernism that, in the postwar era, he seemed increasingly peripheral to. Birkerts liked Vasari’s definition of organic creation: “Non murato ma veramente nato”—not built, but born.26 The phrase was picked up from Bruno Zevi, after his 1985 lecture at the University of Michigan under the auspices of Monaghan’s Wright symposia, and it was only after encountering Zevi that Birkerts freely termed his work “organic.”27

The Goethean overtones are unmistakable in Birkerts’ own language: “A moment arrives when all the information comes together in a sweep. It is a very special time, almost a tender moment,” he writes, “when all the factors affecting the personality of the building come together at the right magnitudes and the building starts to grow like a plant.”28 Recalling Birkerts’ insistence that “it takes time to collect the crops” in the American Midwest, one can begin to see this theory of organismism as a compensation for his own, cultural and topographical dislocations, discovering for a given situation an “appropriate architecture,” as he termed it, no matter the origins of the idea (or the architect).29 He believed that organismism allowed an architecture of individuality without narcissism. Birkerts approvingly quoted Wright on this point: “The ideal of an organic architecture for America is no mere license for doing the thing that you please to do as you please to do it,” Wright argues, “in order to hold up the strange thing when done with the ‘see what I have made’ of childish pride.”30 Birkerts liked to note that Mies van der Rohe had not invited the (organist Wright to participate in the famed Weißenhofsiedlung of 1927, the remains of which, not coincidentally, were next door to Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart where Birkerts received his architectural education. “In any totalitarian dogma,” Birkerts editorialized, “the individual thinker is the most feared.”31 Giving us a taste of how slippery the term can be, Mies had seen the Weißenhofsiedlung as a distinctly organic model of urban form, and in 1959 gave an interview on the subject titled with Birkerts’ favorite two words: “No Dogma.”32

By 1995, Birkerts would disavow organismism. In a lecture entitled “Unclassified Architecture,” he put it in no uncertain terms: “If I would attempt to place my architecture in any kind of classification, it would be dangerously close to ‘organic,’ that rational-romantic facet of Modern architecture. It is not, however, organic. I would call it expressive, individualistic, and one of a kind formalistic.”33 Instead of leaving Wright behind, however, Birkerts was following him still further, and if the words changed, the principles didn’t. A few years before “declassifying” his architecture, Birkerts dubbed a cassette tape copy of a radio interview in which Wright argued that the path forward for architecture was to be found in individuality: “I can’t see any future in anything BUT an individual architecture,” predicts Wright. “If the Declaration of Independence in America means anything, and democratic life means anything … that’s practically what it means.”34 This expressive imperative, grounded in Usonian politics (broadly construed) as much as the Usonian landscape and temporalities of growth, was Wright’s chief legacy to Birkerts, not the architectonic cues deployed at Domino’s Farms.

Birkerts’ Other Major Building in Ann Arbor feels more like a well-sprung surprise than a self-conscious monument, hidden in a Collegiate Gothic quadrangle that houses the University of Michigan’s Law School. (A 1920s rendition of Oxford in the 15th century, the Law Quad is by the architects Edward York and Phillip Sawyer, who cut their teeth at Mies and White.) Enter the vaulted chapel of the Law Library and head east, where a tongue of carpet laps over the otherwise sober cork floor. This carpet leads the visitor into an oblique cut in the hall’s flank and down into Birkerts’ 1981 addition—entirely underground—three floors of subterranean stacks connected by an atrium that brings light down through the terraces.

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27 Gunnar Birkerts, Organic Architecture: The Steady Core of the Modern Movement,” notes for a 4 June 1987 lecture at Ball State, Box 1, GBC BHL. Vasari coined the phrase, incidentally, to describe the Villa Farnesina in Rome.
29 Birkerts, Process and Expression in Architectural Form, 34.
30 Birkerts, “On Midwest.”
31 Birkerts, “Organic Architecture: The Steady Core of the Modern Movement.” The passage is from Wright’s “In the Cause of Architecture,” Architectural Record 35, no. 5 (May 1914): 406, an article that critiques the “New School of the Middle West” for being insufficiently organic (and thus arguably, by extension, insufficiently Middle Western).
32 Gunnar Birkerts, “Talking to myself…” Unpublished Manuscript, 11 November 1985, in Sources Used for Publications, Box 6, GBC BHL.
35 Frank Lloyd Wright on a radio program, tape in the possession of Gunnar Birkerts, Box 4, Container 2, GBC BHL.
Gunna Asplund, and Alvar Aalto—made my edges a little softer,” he would later claim. 26 But if Aalto was always Birkerts’ self-described master, Wright was never far in the background as he sought out a way of building suitable to his adopted terrain.

Birkerts, no stranger to contrarian arguments, posited that the International Style—comprised of “personal idiosyncrasies and highly dogmatic directions”—was on the fringes of modernism, rather than its “steady core.” That core was formed instead by the fringes of modernism, rather than its “steady core.” That core was formed instead by the edges a little softer,” he would later claim. 26 Instead of leaving Wright behind, however, Birkerts was following him still further, and if the words changed, the principles didn’t. A few years before “declassifying” his architecture, Birkerts dubbed a cassette tape copy of a radio interview in which Wright argued that the path forward for architecture was to be found in individuality: “I can’t see any future in anything BUT an individual architecture,” predicts Wright. “If the Declaration of Independence in America means anything, and democratic life means anything… that’s practically what it means.” 28 This expressive imperative, grounded in Usonian politics (broadly construed) as much as the Usonian landscape and temporalities of growth, was Wright’s chief legacy to Birkerts, not the architectonic cues deployed at Domino’s Farms.

BIRKERTS’ OTHER MAJOR BUILDING

In Ann Arbor feels more like a well-sprung surprise than a self-conscious monument, hidden in a Collegiate Gothic quadrangle that houses the University of Michigan’s Law School. (A 1920s rendition of Oxford in the 15th century, the Law Quad is by the architects Edward York and Philip Sawyer, who cut their teeth at McKim, Mead and White.) Enter the vaulted chapel of the Law Library and head east, where a tongue of carpet laps over the otherwise sober cork floor. This carpet leads the visitor into an oblique cut in the hall’s flank and down into Birkerts’ 1981 addition—entirely underground—three floors of subterranean stacks connected by an atrium that brings light down through the terraces.
It is an astonishing space, cavernous and yet lighter than the aboveground original; dynamic in its section. The millons of the massive canted skylights are wrapped in mirrors, entrancingly fragmenting the Gothic stonework above. The mix of interior vivacity and exterior discretion is precisely the point; rather than facing down the certain negotiation that an aboveground building on a beloved site would entail, Birkerts cannily opted for invisibility—and with it, substantial freedom. A lurid green carpet washes down switchback stairs and spills over the floor surface of the interior trays like a replica of the seemingly untouched ground plane above.

At the building’s opening, the law students speculated that the carpet was meant to evoke Astro turf; perhaps an “architect’s attempt to bring in a feeling of the outdoors.” Birkerts denied the charge, claiming that if he had to do it over, he might just as well select a “gentler” shade.36 And yet—the color specified by Birkerts’ office was, in fact, “Grass Green.”37

Birkerts’ office was, in fact, “Grass Green.”37 The building was met with widespread acclaim—probably the most esthetically satisfying large underground building to have penetrated American soil,” wrote one critic—and it seemed to mark an innovative advance in Birkerts’ portfolio.38 But in another sense it was more of a culmination than a departure, and the building’s underpinnings stem from a familiarly and largely forgotten body of research that Birkerts had recently amassed on underground structures. This research project, funded by the Graham Foundation and published in part as Subterranean Urban Systems (1974), began with a somewhat surprising premise for a man who believed in “individualistic architecture,” but one that helps to explain the willing modesty of his Law Library Addition. “There are too many individual buildings today,” Birkerts wrote in a press release for Subterranean Urban Systems in 1975. “We have to impose a ‘birth control.’”39 (Although not directly acknowledged, the latter phrase, if not much of the project, was inspired by Malcolm Wells, who did more than any other architect to promote an aesthetics of earth-sheltering beyond the survivability of the 1960s and early 1970s. “Now for my pitch line,” Wells says in an article read by Birkerts. “Now for my talk on the need for birth control, the need for limited city-size, the need for underground construction outside the cities.”)40 Birkerts, as with Wells before him, was referring here to urban sprawl, not well-appointed university libraries, but there is a conservation-minded sensibility and a body of technical expertise in the library that arose from his ruminations on the state of the American city.

The bulk of Subterranean Urban Systems revolves around creating tremendous infrastructural conduits that relieve the surface of industry, transportation, and utilities. Birkerts started from a simple proposition: “that the established concentric pattern of urban development around a strong center is still valid—functionally, sociologically, and economically—provided the apparatus of industry, services, and transportation is separated from the environment of human social activity.”41 Birkerts saw this as a middle ground between the implausibly megstructural visions of Paolo Soleri—whose “arcologies” proposed massive cores of social settlements with little other impact on the land—and Constantinos Doxiadis’ megalopolitan urbanism, which, in Birkerts words, was “unconditionally accepted by those who mistakenly consider urban sprawl to be inevitable.”42 The method, for Birkerts, was to radically rethink the usual method of allocating property in two dimensions, by developing “distinct layers of space, below ground, at the surface, and above ground.”43 This new city would make use of “concentric, radial, and linear characteristics”—drawn from a range of sources with Kevin Lynch’s “The Pattern of the Metropolis” and George Collins’ “The Linear City” highlighted among them—and would result in the removal of the “mechanical intrusions of the last century” to an unseen underground world.44

Land ownership itself was to be transformed while enacting this multilayer civilization. Birkerts’ direct inspiration was Stockholm, a city in which 70 percent of the land, by 1967, was owned by the municipality. Birkerts traveled to Sweden in 1973 to investigate the country’s land ownership structures and its underground buildings.45 Public land and private buildings, however, was also a lesson learned from Frank Lloyd Wright. “One of the main perversions of the principles of our democracy is to allow land to hold improvements made on it by the man who lives upon it and improves and loves the land,” Wright argues in 1958. “What folly to have turned over his credit, existing only by way of the people of a great nation, to middlemen exalted officially to exercise a broker’s

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37 Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, Original Specifications for Car peting, Michigan Law Library Addition, Box 61, Gunnar Birkerts & Associates Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. This archive is hereafter abbreviated as GB&A BHL.
39 Gunnar Birkerts, Press Release (May 1973), GBC BHL.
43 Birkerts, “Subterranean Systems,” 58. Birkerts pointed to existing legal systems like air rights and mineral rights as evidence that thinking about property three-dimensionally was possible.
46 Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies Faculty Research Grant, Box 72, GB&A BHL.
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Birkerts and his team—a mix of employees and students at the University of Michigan who participated in a series of studios and seminars—compiled extensive documents and bibliographies on daylighting, ecology, flood control, urban planning, the legal and financial issues of eminent domain, the psychological impact of environments, population data, solar energy, and mining technologies; much of the research was done by Constantinos Doxiadis, whose research for the Detroit Edison Company offers a comprehensive, eschatological account of the Detroit region. (Doxiadis was clearly something of a thorn in the side of the Subterranean Urban Systems project, and his work is a frequent point of critique.)

Birkerts’ prime contribution to an infrastructural map that had largely been established before Subterranean Urban Systems is found not in the analysis but in a relentless, fractal-like zooming in from the regional, to the urban, to the neighborhood, to the building.

And in fact, a far more substantial project than what was published in Subterranean Urban Systems languishes in the archives. This is a proposition not just of infrastructure, but of settlement, and despite the stratification of the cityscape into three distinct layers, Birkerts meant for them to be planned in tandem. The strictly metered functionality of the subterranean layer bursts through with Metabolist cores that anchor an assemblage of floating office blocks, realizing the catenary ambition of his Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank at a still more urban scale. Between them, the ground—perforated with holes to provide light below; the most graphically vivid part of Birkerts’ drawings. The color is Grass Green. Bruno Zevi, writing about Wright’s urbanism, favorably compared its open spaces to those found in Le Corbusier’s urban planning. “It was a brilliant idea of Le Corbusier’s to provide terrace-gardens for all the apartments in his skyscrapers, but there is something profoundly unnatural in it.”

Birkerts’s scheme joins these two poles with a carpet of ground; an architectonic technique used to straddle the usual dialectic of rationalism and pastoralism. Nature and artifice at once—just what kind of landscape is this?

In his editorial introduction to the April 1967 Progressive Architecture, an issue that was dedicated to “the art of shaping the earth” (and contained Wells’ call for architectural “birth control”), Jan Rowan faults two architects for a general disinclination to disturbing the earth. The prime offender was Frank Lloyd Wright: “Wright, with his organic theory, made the earth sacrosanct. To change the shape of a mound, to move a rock, or to cut a tree was taboo to his followers. It is the building that had to fit the terrain and echo what nature already provided.”

(Another was Le Corbusier, whose pilotis allowed the ground plane to run continuously beneath buildings, minimizing the need for altered landscapes.) This is a reductive Wright—the man dug foundations, after all—but a symptomatic one, framing the brute reality of altering the ground as an anti-organic if constructive act. The editorial is followed by a primer on earth-moving technologies, a portfolio of recent projects that made use of cut-and-fill (many of which, of course, borrow the language of organicism themselves), and a brief history of underground buildings, parts of which were taken from Bernard Rudofsky’s research on troglodytic dwelling.

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Birkerts and his team—a mix of employees and students at the University of Michigan who participated in a series of studios and seminars—compiled extensive documents and bibliographies on daylighting, ecology, flood control, urban planning, the legal and financial issues of eminent domain, the psychological impact of environments, population data, solar energy, and mining technologies; much of the research was done by J. D. Hilberry, who was working for Birkerts at the time. But this wasn’t just a project in data-gathering, in part because the job had been done in the preceding few years by Constantinos Doxiadis, whose research for the Detroit Edison Company offers a compendious ekistic account of the Detroit region. (Doxiadis was clearly something of a thorn in the side of the Subterranean Urban Systems project, and his work is a frequent point of critique.) Birkerts’ prime contribution to an infrastructural map that had largely been established before Subterranean Urban Systems is found not in the analysis but in a relentless, fractal-like zooming in from the regional, to the urban, to the neighborhood, to the building.

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47 Wright, The Living City, 202. 48 Presentation Notecards, in Faculty Papers—UM Course Materials—Graham Foundation Grant Design Studio 1971-72, Box 8, GB&A BHL.

See Constantinos A. Doxiadis, Emergence and Growth of an Urban Region: The Developing Urban Detroit Area (Detroit: Detroit Edison Company, 1966). A member of the Birkerts research team attended Doxiadis lecture at the Engineering Society of Detroit on November 4th, 1970, where he presented these findings. Many of Doxiadis’ points anticipated Birkerts’ project: “While transporta-
tion systems are put further and further underground, especially high-speed trains, they can go faster and faster,” writes the researcher who attended (likely Hilberry). “Suggests that it is not densities of people which cause hussies in modern cities, but the combination of people densities and machine densities. One solu-
tion: put transportation below grade, to leave open space for people.” But, in the end, Doxiadis’ approach remained insufficiently reformist for the Birkerts team. “Doxiadis has come up with no new solutions, but merely a regurgitation of ideas that were old in 1959. What he is advocating, essentially, is a controlled urban sprawl, but urban sprawl nonetheless.” Notes from Doxi-
adis Lecture, 4 November 1970, Box 72, GB&A BHL.

50 “This can be the future of design-
ing urban structures.” Birkerts told an interviewer about the structural logic of the Min-

51 Zevi, Towards an Organic Archi-
tecture, 101.

52 Birkerts notes in several places that this ground need not actu-
ally be “on the ground.” “The underground layer of the system would not necessarily be located below natural grade. Depending on the local terrain, it could be placed on the existing surface, with a man-made ground level above it. The essential point is the creation of a new layer of develop-
ment which is governed by new policies. This new layer would be under public ownership and control.” Birkerts, Subterranean Urban Systems, 3.

53 Jan C. Rowan, Progressive Archi-
tecture 44, no. 4 (April 1947), 123

an underground airport. “So ardently do we cultivate an ignorance of the ways of life in countries whose inhabitants do not share our philosophy, or the lack of it, that few of we have ever heard of the existence of subterranean cities,” Rudofsky argues in a passage underlined by the Birkerts team. “They bear no resemblance to our world of bargain basements and subway stations, but have been planned from scratch as modern metropolises.”

The historical legitimation of underground architecture held an obvious appeal for a project like the Subterranean Urban System, although Birkerts only followed Rudofsky so far, never proposing underground dwelling. In this regard, he was closer to Soleri. “Man must refute underground living. He is a biological animal of sun, air, light and water. To exist, he needs things, and at least some of them must be placed in the atmosphere.”55 Soleri’s claim is ideal for automated production in need of pressure, vacuum, radiation, heat, cold, rare atmosphere, etc.56

The lack of underground dwelling in both Soleri and Birkerts is not in isolation, in that it allows them to sidestep some of the anxieties that underlay virtually all other contemporary advances in underground construction. Rudofsky, for his part, leaves no doubt as to the environmental and existential stakes of his call for subterranean cities: “Despite the increasing unhealthiness of our surface life—dangers compounded of mephitic air and polluted water, not to mention the ever-present dread of atomization—real-estate agents have so far overlooked some startling opportunities.”56 Little wonder, perhaps, that the image on the cover of the Progressive Architecture issue on “Earth” wasn’t of a building, but an explosion.57 Or, as one of Birkerts’ clippings on Sweden’s underground construction whimsically put it: “When the Martians make it to earth, we may have to greet them apologetically with the explanation, ‘There’s nobody left but us Swedes.’”58

America was an epicenter of this architectural eschatology—a condition that the Internationale Situationiste termed “the geopolitics of hibernation.”59 Across the 1950s, the National Security Resources Board (among other governmental institutions) had pursued policies of decentralization in the name of diminishing the casualties of atomic attack; in 1961, President Kennedy proposed a massive expansion of the Civil Defense Program, which included the development of underground survival dwellings and experimental tests on the psychology and physiology of survival in abodes built underground.50 In a United States Atomic Energy Commission entitled “Why dig? When you can melt a tunnel.” It announced a device called the Subterrene Penetrator. “Melting holes through solid rocks and mountains is nothing new. Flash Gordon and other science fiction heroes often did it to escape from perilous predicaments,” the ARC writes. “Today, however, scientists are actually doing it.”57 The Penetrator purported to heat rock to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, effectively liquefying it and making the massive removal of rock that the Subterranean Urban System entailed seem suddenly feasible.

If the apocalypticism of the underground milieu and the tools that made it largely unspoken in Birkerts work, the ongoing meltdown of urban infrastructure in the early years of 1970s stagflation was distinctly present (but never reconciled) in the team’s research. Urban utilities had reached a crisis of complexity—in 1963, New York City alone had 148,000 miles of underground cable, 62,000 miles of underground conduit, almost all of which required digging up streets to access—and the functional elegance of Birkerts’ infrastructural conduit held an obvious, but in the end quixotic appeal.60 Where Wright’s Broadacre and Le Corbusier’s Ville Radiale both called for the “mobilitation of the land,” to very different ends, Birkerts’ project remained hamstrung by the dictates of industrial capitalism and civic politics, and thus demanded something else: massive governmental investment. At a time when many major American cities were facing down imminent bankruptcy and regular

57 The image is of a blast at a Chilean mine run by the Anaconda Company, which later went through a series of acquisitions and now only exists as an environmental liability belonging to BP.
60 Peter Galison, “War Against the Center,” Grey Room 4 (Summer 2001): 5–33.
62 “The Underground World of Business … It’s in Kansas City,” Flying Colors 6, no. 10: 30–34.
63 Truman Stauffer, Sr., Guidebook to the Occupation and Use of Underground Space in the Greater Kansas City Area (Kansas City: University of Missouri Department of Geology and Geography, 1972).
64 Rough Draft of Proposal for Fellowship Grant from Graham Foundation, Box 72, GB&A, BHL.
65 Press Release, United States Atomic Energy Commission, Washington DC, April 3, 1973, in Research/Mrs. Kanter–Dixon–Birkerts: The United States Atomic Energy Commission entitled “Why dig? When you can melt a tunnel.” It announced a device called the Subterrene Penetrator. “Melting holes through solid rocks and mountains is nothing new. Flash Gordon and other science fiction heroes often did it to escape from perilous predicaments,” the ARC writes. “Today, however, scientists are actually doing it.”57 The Penetrator purported to heat rock to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, effectively liquefying it and making the massive removal of rock that the Subterranean Urban System entailed seem suddenly feasible.
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The lack of underground dwelling in both Soleri and Birkerts is not a suggestion, in that it allows them to sidestep some of the anxieties that underlay virtually all developments, in that it allows them to sidestep some of the anxieties that underlay virtually all development in the decades leading up to Birkerts’ work.61 Subterranean Urban Systems is, in certain ways, a wifull reversal of these trends, despite the underground being colored by; central cities and dispersal, underground and out in the open, his proposals sought a middle ground between the two tendencies. In the end, Birkerts took more of an interest in the commercial and infrastructural possibilities of underground space, taking particular inspiration from an underground warehouse and manufacturing complex in Kansas City that repurposed abandoned salt mines, some of which became tremendous refrigerators with rail sidings.62 Kansas City was designated a Foreign Trade Zone and U.S. Port of Entry in 1973 (curious given its heartland location, but logical as a seasonal port). Some 1,600 Kansas City residents found employment in what were effectively caves—troglocydsic trade if not life.63 Here, the underground was not a site of paranoia; it housed a humming livelihood of making, moving, and maintaining goods.

Birkerts’ atoms were likewise of the friendly variety. In his original proposal to the Graham Foundation, he noted that “sophisticated, computer controlled, remote excavation techniques and controlled conventional and nuclear blasting help make working on a large scale below the earth's surface an economically realistic possibility,” and that “the constant, non-hostile subterranean can harbor a safe, easily controllable and serviceable environment.”64 He was surely delighted to receive a 1973 press release titled "The AEC's Subterranean Energy Commission entitled "Why dig? When you can melt a tunnel." It announced a device called the Subterrene Penetrator. "Meltng holes through solid rocks and mountains is nothing new. Flash Gordon and other science fiction heroes often did it to escape from perilous predicaments," the AEC writes. "Today, however, scientists are actually doing it."65 The Penetrator purported to heat rock to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, effectively liquefying it and making the massive removal of rock that the Subterranean Urban System entailed seem suddenly feasible.

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breakdowns of service, Subterranean Urban Systems was a template for starting fresh, but at an increasingly unthinkable cost.  

IN 1989, the Minneapolis-based American Underground-Space Association published a survey of subsurface construction in the 1980s. Birkerts’ Law Library was the most architecturally significant of the examples given, while infrastructure dominates—highway tunnels, transit hubs, research facilities, even an earth-hermed correctional facility.

“Underground space is the workhorse of modern society,” the editor writes. “North America can legitimately boast about its subsurface surprises, created to meet the demand for space in densely developed areas, to conserve energy, or to preserve surface lands for other uses.”  

The mechanisms that keep the visible world running are tucked discreetly away, and indeed, these “subsurface surprises” tend to be architectural typologies that reveal themselves to the public consciousness primarily in the moments of their failure.

In this discourse on the subterranean city, there is a certain reciprocity between the “preserved” and the “discarded” advocated by the Underground-Space Association and the effectively concealed machinery of its manufacture, all the more unsettling for its congenial invisibility.  

Here we find an oblique take on Wright’s notion of the “disappearing city.” Wright envisaged a world in which these unsightly workhorses were no longer necessary; there

is no back-of-house in utopia, and existing urban agglomerations were to become a thing of the past. In Broadacre City, industry was kept small, transportation was exquisitely designed, and there was certainly no need for a jail.  

But with the underground and megastructural turns of the 1960s, the “disappearance” of these urban functions takes on a decidedly more pragmatic, more materially intensive, and in the end more architectural character. To liberate the land requires engineering on a truly civil scale, needing unprecedented financing in turn.

Vying a letter to Will Bruder—one who had interned at Birkerts’ office but cut his teeth primarily with Soleri in Arizona—to ask as much. “I am interested, of course, in the design for the project itself,” he writes, “but perhaps even more in the economic and political framework which could make this project possible.” The bureaucratic limits seemed insurmountable.

A hallmark of Birkerts’ Subterranean Urban Systems research is how straightforwardly he takes this very problem. Hilberry ran the numbers on Detroit: given the net worth of the central business district in 1968, he figured that the construction of whole-sale urban environments would cost $10,000 per person (a dubious methodology). This would mean that the cost of building a Soleri-type city for 1 million population would cost approximately 10 billion dollars, he adds in an editorial aside. “This is about 20 times the cost of the World Trade Center. I wonder if those students in Arizona really realize how long it will take to build them?” Birkerts wrote a letter to Will Bruder—who had

67 Wright once “electrified” an audience of prisoners, many of whom had been jailed for resisting the draft in World War II, by explaining how Broadacre’s method of land distribution would obviate the need for war and criminality. The anecdote is told in Roger Friedland and Harold Zellman, The Fellowship (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 277.

68 In 1968, the central business district of Detroit was worth 907 million dollars. 716 million of which was in the land and buildings (with only 55 million being streets and freeways). Memorandum, J. D. Hilberry to Gunnar Birkerts (19 November 1970), SUBS Correspondence, Box 73, GB&B HBL.


70 Wright’s spells it “archology” in the original letter. Gunnar Birkerts, letter to William Bruder (6 October 1970), SUBS Correspondence, Box 73, GB&B HBL.

71 Wright, The Living City, 206.

72 Orr described his new job as “the Olympics of restructuring.” See Matt Helm and Joe Gulley, Detroit’s new ERM ready for challenge—and criticism,” Detroit Free Press (14 March 2013). The late 1960s and early 1970s continue to weigh heavily in Detroit politics—one protest slogan at Orr’s recent appointment referenced Coleman Young, Detroit’s first African-American mayor, invoking the political tensions of the year 1973.
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In 1989, the Minneapolis-based American Underground-Space Association published a survey of subsurface construction in the 1980s. Birkerts’ Law Library was the most architecturally significant of the examples given, while infrastructure dominates—highway tunnels, transit hubs, research facilities, even an earth-bermed correctional facility.

“Underground space is the workhorse of modern society,” the editor writes. “North America can legitimately boast about its subsurface surprises, created to meet the demand for space in densely developed areas, to conserve energy, or to preserve surface lands for other uses.” The mechanisms that keep the visible world running are tucked discreetly away, and indeed, these “subsurface surprises” tend to be architectural typologies that reveal themselves to the public consciousness primarily in the moments of their failure. In this discourse on the subterranean city, there is a certain reciprocity between the “preserved” preserved land and space advocated by the Underground-Space Association and the effectively concealed machinery of its manufacture, all the more unsettling for its congenial invisibility.69 Here we find an oblique take on Wright’s notion of the “disappearing city.” Wright envisaged a world in which these unsightly workhorses were no longer necessary; there is no back-of-house in utopia, and existing urban agglomerations were to become a thing of the past. In Broadacre City, industry was kept small, transportation was exquisitely designed, and there was certainly no need for a jail.50 But with the underground and megastructural turns of the 1960s, the “disappearance” of these urban functions takes on a decidedly more pragmatic, more materially intensive, and in the end more architectural character. To liberate the land requires engineering on a truly grand scale, needing unprecedented financing in turn. Inverting Guy Debord’s oft-quoted definition of spectacle as “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image,” one might say that this massive disappearance of urban systems is capital accumulated to the point of its apparent absence.51

A hallmark of Birkerts’ Subterranean Urban Systems research is how straightforwardly he takes this very problem. Hilberry ran the numbers on Detroit: given the net worth of the central business district in 1968, he figured that the construction of whole-sale urban environments would cost $10,000 per person (a dubious methodology). “This would mean that the cost of building a Soleri-type city for 1 million population would cost approximately 10 billion dollars,” he adds in an editorial aside. “This is about 20 times the cost of the World Trade Center. I wonder if those students in Arizona really realize how long it would take ahead of them.” Birkerts wrote a letter to Will Bruder—who had interned at Birkerts’ office but cut his teeth primarily with Soleri in Arizona—to ask as much. “I am interested, of course, in the design for the project itself,” he writes, “but perhaps even more in the economic and political framework which could make this project possible.” The bureaucratic limits seemed insurmountable.

A community of 2,500 people would ordinarily involve transportation systems and utility systems which would be installed and maintained by a motley assortment of Federal, State, County and Local Governments, as well as by public utility companies, all of which would be saddled with rule books and red tape. In addition, facilities must be provided for schools, fire departments, police departments, all of which are normally government owned and operated, all under more rule books which are meant for conventional American towns and cities. The letter concludes that something “as reasonable as one of Mr. Soleri’s arcology projects” was only imaginable with “a single owner who would be in a position to make design decisions rationally and without consideration for the rule books of agencies and utility companies involved.” This wasn’t just veiled critique; the shared public infrastructures Birkerts proposed opened a similar set of questions, and he took their resolution seriously. Where Wright had extolled “democracy in overalls,” the Birkerts team pondered the possibilities and limits of enlightened managerialism.54 Bruder seems not to have written back. On March 25th, 2013, the city of Detroit was formally placed under an emergency financial managerialist whom had been jailed for resistance. The Society of the Stockholm principles of communitarian land purchasing was the impending bankruptcy of many major American cities. Shirley S. Paasow, “‘Land Reserves and Teamwork in Planning Stock-holm’,” Journal of the American Institute of Architects 36, no. 3 (May 1970), 187.


This critique has been most commonly leveled at Walt Dis-ney World’s subsurface utility corridors—`utilidors’—which opened in the fall of 1973, just as Birkerts’ Architectural Forum was published. The essay was going to press. In a study of two of Birkerts’ early projects, Esther McCoy argues that Disney World was “not a test case because an entertainment center has none of the complexities of a city.” But it should be noted that Disney’s original intentions for EPCOT—standing for “experimen-tally planned community—someday ‘city’”—were very much city-oriented and based in the same progressive technological modernity that undergirds Birkerts’ research. McCoy, Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, 7.

70 Wright once “electrified” an audience of prisoners, many of whom had been jailed for resisting the draft in World War II, by explaining how Broadacre’s method of land distribution would obviate the need for war and criminality. The anecdote is told in Roger Friedland and Harold Zellman, The Fellowship (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 377.


72 In 1968, the central business district of Detroit was worth $907 million dollars. 716 million of which was in the land and build-ings (with only 55 million being streets and freeways). Memorandum, J. D. Hilbery to Gunnar Birkerts (19 November 1970), SUSS Correspondence, Box 73, GB&A BHL.

73 Birkerts spells it “archology” in the original letter. Gunnar Birk-erts, letter to William Bruder (6 October 1979), SUSS Correspondence, Box 73, GB&A BHL.

74 Wright, The Living City, 206.

75 Orr described his new job as “the Olympics of restructuring.” See Matt Helen and Joe Gull-ler, Detroit’s new FNM ready for challenge—and criticism,” Detroit Free Press (14 March 2013). The late 1960s and early 1970s continue to weigh heavily in Detroit politics; one protest slogan at Orr’s recent appoint-ment referenced Coleman Young, Detroit’s first African-American mayor, invoking the political ten-sions of the year 1973. 151

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of millions of hotly contested dollars into rebuilding Detroit, but saw its lesseing under a post-gubernatorial George Romney as he served as Nixon's secretary of HUD. This combination of exodus and disinvestment set the stage for thinking regionally, while rendering those regional ambitions impossible to fund. Birkerts' faith in the city—a faith that had been sorely tested in the preceding decade—exists in tension with the infrastructural arrows that push relentlessly outwards from it, and the project can't help but underpin the central city it purports to bolster.

Democracy is too cumbersome and too inept a process for the management of something as complicated as a city,” opines one typescript in the Subterranean Urban System files. “If a city is badly managed, it should not fall into the hands of the Mafia, it should fall into bankruptcy and be bought out by more successful urbanists.” Bankruptcy, as Orr's appointment to manage Detroit's finances indicates, remains very much on the table.

THE URBAN VISION that emerged from Birkerts' research was a modified Usonia, augmenting Wright's decentralized pseudo-physiocracy with a rationalized industrial underbelly and an ambivalence towards the role of the body politic in shaping the city. Subterranean Urban Systems brought Wright “up to date” with the demands of postwar commerce and mobility, assimilating the “unassimilated creations of the industrial revolution” that had “severely disfigured” the American metropolis while grappling belatedly with the increasing complexity and liberalism of the 1960s that had failed. Even as it appeared to oppose Wright's diagnosis of the city's disappearance, it facilitated it in more ways than one. It sought not to disrupt but to consolidate the "existing patterns" of a de-urbanizing America, even as the call for communal land, and ownership, was played down.

Birkerts' revised project for Domino's Farms, bringing his idiosyncratic Usonianism into sharper focus, might have anchored such dreams. “When fully occupied by a number of going business concerns, it would be flying over the landscape more equally than being dug into,” Birkerts responded. “Perhaps the contours of the finished product will be wafer-thin carpets of Grass Green, populated by a number of going business concerns, rather than being dug into it,” Birkerts responded. “I think my buildings would have been much more high-tech, and they would be flying over the landscape more than being dug into.” Birkerts responded. "I would look maybe closer to the ground. I'm not unfamiliar with ground. I don't have underground." Disavowals aside, Subterranean Urban Systems would find a revealing echo in Birkerts' project for Domino's Farms, bringing his idiosyncratic Usonianism into sharper focus. The roofs are only the most evident piece of Wright's influence; its urban implications offer a subtler link to Midwestern modernity that Wright espoused. Vincent Scully, still pondering the view from the highway, saw the project as Broadacre in miniature: “When fully occupied by a number of going business concerns, and holding its freeway interchange, Domino’s Farms, the long, low-rise office building between the super-highways will inevitably be read as a bold emblem of Broadacre City itself and a glorification of Wright's beloved image of urban decentralization along the automobile roads.”

But there is something stranger, and perhaps even more American, about Domino's Farms. Like Broadacre, it mixes commerce and mobility, individualism and well-tended livestock—but it is grounded in image rather than effect, a late capitalist Usonia of appearances. Although critics derided the use of a residential precedent for a commercial building, this distended domesticity is part of the project’s enchantment, and its blend of nostalgia, futurity, and absurdity points to the deep representational nature of a fictitious pastoralism that began, in Birkerts’ work, with the manufactured ground planes of his Subterranean Urban System.

An interviewer once asked Birkerts how he approached Domino's Farms, if unencumbered by the client's love of the McCormick House. “I think my buildings would have been much more high-tech, and they would be flying over the landscape more than being dug into.” Birkerts responded. “I would look maybe closer to the ground. I'm not unfamiliar with ground. I don't have underground.” The outlines of this version of Domino's Farms are not hard to envision, as Birkerts had sketched its components a decade earlier; the case study corridor in Subterranean Urban Systems, running between Detroit and Ann Arbor, might have anchored such a project. The conduit leads west out of the radial center of Detroit, presumably preserved through decongestion (an ironic proposition, of course, for the contemporary Detroiter.) It follows the New York Central Railroad right-of-way and irrupts the surface with megalithic assemblages at major infrastructural crossroads—Southfield Freeway, Livernois Junction, River Rouge. Beyond the city limits, the core continues in an approximate semicircle: 1-94, stopping off in Ypsilanti before angling to the northeast of downtown Ann Arbor, meeting Plymouth Road with a final interchange, not so far from the eventual site of Domino's Farms.

This counterfactual version of Birkerts' Domino's Farms might well look something like the nodes he designed for just such junctures, a decade before he began working with Monaghan. Soaring office towers above, the “subsurface surprises” of suburban infrastructures concealed below, and between them a wafer-thin carpet of Grass Green, populated by an orderly group of long-horned Watusi. This is neither a “medieval village with modern conveniences,” as one critic put it, nor a utopia of automobile and freely distributed land like Broadacre—that is to say, it is neither simply romantic nor simply rational. If the Usonian imagination always evoked a tension between those poles—in which the relentlessly equalizing machinery of the grid was to be tempered by a heightened attachment to the land—here it delaminates altogether under the duress of postwar urban change.
of millions of hotly contested dollars into rebuilding Detroit, but saw its lesserening under a post-gubernatorial George Romney as he served as Nixon's secretary of HUD. 76 This combination of exodus and disinvestment set the stage for thinking regionally, while rendering those regional ambitions impossible to fund. Birkerts' faith in the city center—a faith that had been sorely tested in the preceding decade—exists in tension with the infrastructural arrows that push relentlessly outwards from the central city it purports to bolster. The roofs are only the most evident piece of the project's enchantment, and its blend of nostalgic futurity, and absurdity points to the deeply representational nature of a fictitious pastoralism that began, in Birkerts' work, with the manufactured ground planes of his Subterranean Urban System.

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76 As with many megalopolitan projects of the period, HUD was seen as a potential client for the Subterranean Urban System, and Birkerts unsuccessfully sought a $100,000 grant from their research division to develop his urban work further.


81 Birkerts, Subterranean Urban Systems. 2, 152 153

82 Gunnar Birkerts, “Where have we come since the mid 60’s?,” Unpublished Manuscript, 1977, in Sources Used for Publications, Box 6, GBC BH.

83 Bugbee, Domino’s Mansion, 8. Foreword by Vincent Scully. Goldberger noted the same, arguing that Broadacre offered better potential for the project than the McCormick House. Goldberger, “A Pizza Engine Strives for the Wright Stuff.”

84 Birkerts, interview with Jim Schwartz, 6.

85 Hubert Meeker, “Industry should be buried, high-rises placed on stilts, says top U.S. architect,” Daily Commercial News and Construction Record (18 April, 1974), A1 and A4. More recent describing a conference was called “Design: The Critical Years,” in which Birkerts discussed his research. Marcel Breuer also presented work but seems to have made less of an impression on the journalists present.