

Peder Anker  
& Mitchell Joachim

# Burning Down The House

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.”<sup>1</sup> His modest self-built cabin by Walden Pond served not merely as shelter but also as a speculative device, a purposeful act of spatial withdrawal aimed at interrogating the foundations of human life. For Thoreau, the house was a framework for asking the central question of dwelling: How shall we live? Thoreau’s answer was a praxis of inhabitation, grounded in uncompromising resistance to the waste and vanity of ornamental architecture. At the same time, he described the household of nature as a self-sufficient, harmonious, and morally instructive order, devoting page after page to the intricate choreography of the ecological diversity surrounding his simple cabin.

Today, the planetary economy is overleveraged, and our resources are heavily depleted. Nature is increasingly impoverished, with species vanishing, industrial farming expanding, monoculture forestry prevailing, and pollution spreading unchecked. It is no longer possible to describe the household of nature in the same manner as Thoreau once did. Climate change–driven bush and forest fires have consumed entire communities, including nouveau riche Los Angeles houses with decorative columns and opulent ornamentation. Entire neighborhoods have been reduced to ash, leaving behind vast concrete hellscapes of burned-out basements. Nature has become the mirror image of architectural modernism.

In a landscape where fire is no longer seasonal but constant, adaptation has reached its material and ethical limit. It’s hard to adapt as the speed and scale of the damage overwhelm every possible response. To build for survival now would mean constructing brutalist bunkers stripped of vegetation, community, and livability. Anything that can burn *will* burn, and the question is not *if* but *when* there will be another fire. Dwelling in the climate crisis is a crisis of both material and meaning.

Wildfires are no longer confined to the arid West Coast, but threaten homes and lives across the United States and beyond. In 2024 alone, there were about 65,000 wildfires in the US, burning close to nine million acres of land, well above the five and 10-year averages.<sup>2</sup> In 2023 alone, wildfires destroyed more



Terreform ONE, Fab Tree Hab, New Windsor, New York, December 2023 (bottom) and June 2024 (top). The structural scaffolding and live plant grafting for the Fab Tree Hab “terrestrial reef” phase were completed in early December 2023. The living structure will continue to grow and mature over the next decade. Photos courtesy the architects.

1. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 98.

2. National Interagency Coordination Center, *Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report 2024*, 11.



The architects anticipate removing the scaffolding and completing the interior for independent human use within five years or less. Photo courtesy the architects.

than 2,500 homes across California, Oregon, New Mexico, and Texas, while smoke from Canadian fires shrouded much of the Midwest and Northeast in a toxic haze for weeks. The frequency, intensity, and unpredictability of these fires are directly linked to climate change, which has created hotter, drier conditions, extended fire seasons, and increased lightning strikes due to atmospheric instability. In this landscape, the idea of safe dwelling is increasingly untenable. As fire becomes a permanent feature of American geography, the act of dwelling shifts from permanence to survival. To live deliberately, as Thoreau aspired to do, has changed from a state of rootedness to one of constant evacuation *readiness*.

To continue to treat a house as a private sanctuary, insulated from environmental systems and abstracted from carbon politics, risks turning living into a slow ecocide. The house, in this condition, is a tomb with central air. Until the climate crisis is resolved, not with rhetoric, but with radical redesign, every structure inhabited carries with it the promise of collapse.

This line of inquiry on fire resonates with contemporary attempts to reconceive housing not as enclosure but as ecological cohabitation. In our own work at Terreform ONE, the Fab Tree Hab project explores the architectural implications of living systems by proposing structures grown from grafted and pleached willow trees rather than constructed from inert

3. Javier Arbona, Lara Greden, & Mitchell Joachim, "Nature's Technology: The Fab Tree Hab House," *Thresholds* 26 (MIT Press, 2003): 48–53.

4. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 1–15.

5. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65–107.

6. See Jane Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

materials.<sup>3</sup> Unlike conventional architectural forms, Fab Tree Hab does not aspire to permanence or monumentalism. It is not built *over* nature but cultivated *within* it. Here, the multi-species habitat becomes a *biotecture*, an entangled organism that resists the dualism between the artificial and the organic. The project reflects a shift from designing *for* humans to designing *with* other species.

Where Thoreau built a simple house within an ecologically rich household of nature, the Fab Tree Hab does the reverse. It's an ecologically diverse structure situated within a natural environment where biodiversity has become depleted. The Fab Tree Hab is a living architecture grown rather than built. Its structure is coaxed into being through the grafting of native woody plants, soil-based scaffolding in upper-level planters, and symbiotic plant systems. The system utilizes controlled inosculation between living willow scions to generate a self-reinforcing volumetric diagrid structure, wherein grafted junctions form a continuous lattice of vascular matter, creating an integrated, load-bearing system of woven, pleached biomaterial clusters. The micro-habitat crocheted jute wall modules stand as an homage to intrinsic elements, integrating nests, dens, burrows, and hives to accommodate a vast community of life. Over time, the architecture matures, thickens, and transforms, continuously reshaped by the organisms it shelters. The result is a dwelling that functions simultaneously as raft, refuge, and reef. It serves as a living scaffold for biodiversity to flourish amid the destructive forces of the modern world.

Such multispecies design strategies echo Donna Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble," a phrase that advocates for livable, entangled futures rooted in becoming alongside nonhuman others.<sup>4</sup> Her "Cyborg Manifesto" critiques binaries of nature/culture, self/other, and human/machine that continue to structure architectural discourse.<sup>5</sup> To accept Haraway's premise that we are already cyborgs – hybrids of flesh, code, and infrastructure – our homes, too, must embody this hybridity. The dwelling, in her terms, is an interface: a space of relational entanglement across bodies, materials, technologies, and destructive fire.

This vision is complemented by the ecological ethics of Jane Goodall, whose primatological work has radically expanded our understanding of animal intelligence, tool-making, and nesting behavior.<sup>6</sup> In recognizing the dwelling practices of chimpanzees, Goodall challenged human exceptionalism in this area and offered a broader, more inclusive

Roof plan and elevation drawings anticipate the multispecies habitat as becoming a biotope. Drawings courtesy the architects.

concept of home as grounded in sociality, environment, and shared lifeworlds. This ecological ethics has been expanded on by Emanuele Coccia, whose investigations into the lives of plants deepens our understanding of their critical role in biodiversity.<sup>7</sup> Thoreau, in his communion with loons, woodchucks, and pine trees, anticipated this expanded framework. His home was simple, neither hermetically sealed nor ideologically human-centered. It was porous, perceptual, and provisional.

The recent philosophical provocations of Timothy Morton further extend Thoreau's vision. Morton's object-oriented ontology destabilizes the anthropocentric architecture of the modern house. In *Being Ecological* and related works, Morton dissolves the boundary between subject and object, arguing that all entities – houses, ponds, insulation foam, spores – exist on a flat ontological field, possessing agency and affect.<sup>8</sup> A home, then, is not simply the background of human life; it is itself a “strange stranger,” a “mesh” of interacting objects, constantly withdrawing from total apprehension. Dwelling becomes a form of coexistence with withdrawn, unknowable things.

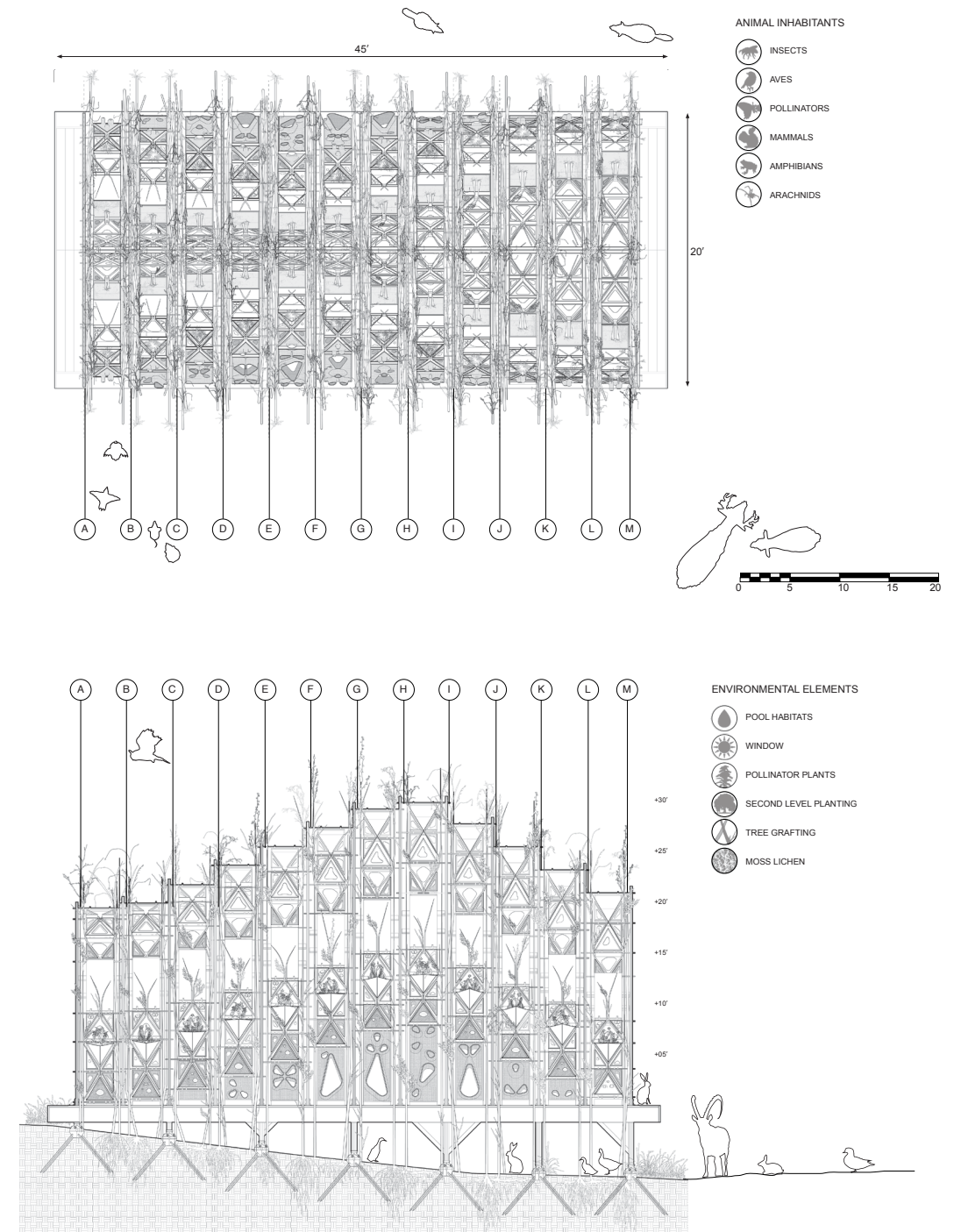
Morton's flattening of ontological hierarchies invites us to reconsider architecture, not as a human-centered imposition upon inert matter, but as a participant in a network of living and nonliving actors. This perspective clarifies the conceptual gulf between projects like Stefano Boeri's Bosco Verticale in Milan and the Fab Tree Hab. Bosco Verticale successfully realizes a vision of integrating vegetation into high-density urban living through a facade-based afforestation system, where thousands of potted trees and shrubs are installed in a conventional high-rise structure. In contrast, Fab Tree Hab proposes a more salient bio-integrated paradigm: rather than attaching vegetation to an inert frame, the form itself is cultivated from living trees that grow, adapt, and sequester carbon over their lifetime.

In a time of global housing crises exacerbated by climate volatility, migration, and economic inequality, rethinking the house cannot be limited to questions of typology or style. It demands a fundamental reorientation. As anthropologist Tim Ingold has suggested, the house is perpetually “under construction,” a site of becoming shaped by flows of labor, matter, and meaning.<sup>9</sup> The house, in this view, is a socioecological process. It is not a singular possession but a shared and shifting arrangement across species, materials, and time. The dwelling is no longer the endpoint of architectural production, but its beginning, a node in a larger network of ethical responsibilities.

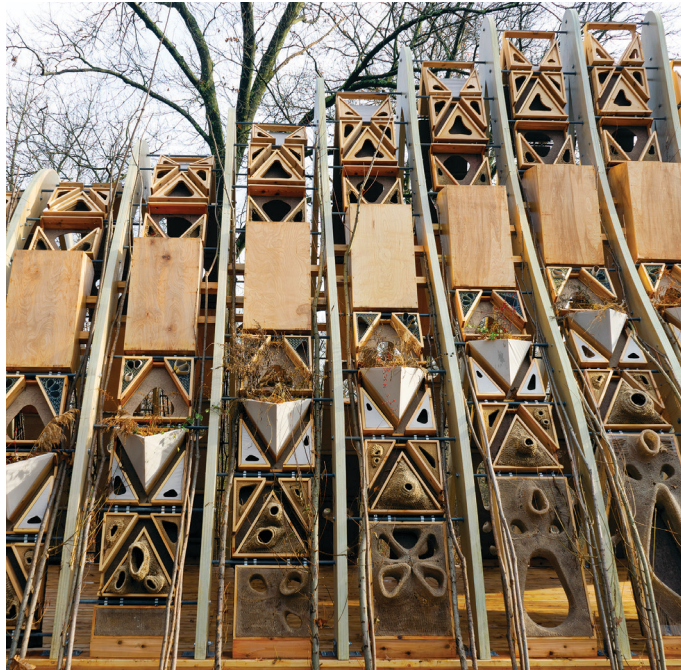
7. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari (Polity, 2018).

8. Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Penguin, 2018); Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

9. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Routledge, 2000), 179–209.



The Fab Tree Hab “scaffold” includes micro-habitat crocheted jute wall modules to accommodate a vast community of life forms. Photo courtesy the architects.



Thoreau’s retreat to Walden was, in this light, not an act of isolation but of multispecies solidarity. His cabin was an early prototype for what the future of home might look like: minimal, ecological, experimental, and deeply attuned to its more-than-human context. Experiments are now needed to make dwelling possible again – not by building bigger or smarter, but by cultivating homes that think, breathe, and entangle. The Fab Tree Hab is an attempt to do exactly that. As a temporal event, it raises, decays, grafts, heals, cohabits, or also burns.

The climate crisis, as articulated by figures such as Naomi Klein and Al Gore, adds a further urgency to the question of dwelling. For Klein, the rejection of capitalism is not merely a political stance but an existential redefinition of home.<sup>10</sup> Her critique of consumerism and fossil-fueled comfort directly challenges the architecture of the Global North, where the house often functions as a sealed enclave of carbon-intensive convenience. Similarly, Gore’s emphasis on systemic environmental degradation (from melting ice caps to deforestation) highlights the planetary consequences of dislocated dwelling practices that treat the Earth as external to the home.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the house is no longer a neutral backdrop to domestic life, it is a front line of climate accountability. Both Klein and Gore insist that to dwell ethically in the 21st century is to recognize one’s home as part of a fragile and interdependent

10. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (Penguin, 2014).  
11. Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Crisis of Global Warming* (Viking, 2007); Al Gore, *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis* (Rodale, 2009).  
12. “Burning Down the House,” by Talking Heads, track 1 on *Speaking in Tongues*, Sire Records, 1983.

planetary system. Their interventions call for an architectural response that transcends efficiency metrics or smart-home technologies to embrace regenerative, biosocial models of cohabitation; a task that is increasingly imperative as rising temperatures displace millions and force us to rethink what constitutes safe and enduring shelter.

In the face of escalating ecological collapse, it is no longer sufficient to rehearse the same ethical debates or perform sustainability as an aesthetic gesture. The eco-discourse of circularity panel discussions, silver bullets, carbon-neutral branding campaigns, and the technocratic promise of “green” solutions leaves the underlying structures of extraction untouched. The time for theoretical dwelling has passed; what is needed now is a radically new architectural stance that refuses to separate design from accountability, and construction from consequence. The climate crisis is not a future to be mitigated but a present to be structurally transformed. Design must proceed as if the atmosphere matters, the soil is sentient, and the house is a living system among many. It’s always vulnerable to fire, though storage of moisture in a biodiverse environment makes living systems slower to burn. To dwell today is to build otherwise: imperfectly, urgently, and together.

Like Thoreau, one may still go to the woods to live deliberately, but the strategies have changed. Where he contemplated the transcendental beauty of divine creation from a modest cabin, the task now is to create dwellings for ecological repair amid industrialized, wounded landscapes. Plant-based structures recast building as an act of restitution, an offering to the more-than-human world, where every surface, contour, and grafted limb fosters the mutual flourishing of all species within our living fabric. The art of building must now be learned anew so that homes become sanctuaries for the living world – while accepting that even sanctuaries, in time, may burn down.

*Hold tight  
We’re in for nasty weather  
There has got to be a way  
Burning down the house.*<sup>12</sup>

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