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Toward a Newer Brutalism,
Or the Undecorated Shed

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VA Building 701 MacArthur: A Postwar Machine

Gehry's New and Newer Brutalisms

One way to view some of Frank Gehry's early buildings would be to align them with the values of New Brutalism, proffered by Alison and Peter Smithson and outlined by Reyner Banham in the postwar period, a decade or so after the end of World War II. Consider Santa Monica Place (1980), Cabrillo Aquarium (1980), and Temporary Contemporary (1983): they were materially honest, imageable, inexpensive, and explicit about their stacked modes of construction.¹ Public gestures of supersized graphics, chain-link volumes, and concrete ramps housed various things nonhierarchically: art and cars, children and fish, polished concrete and mechanical equipment. Oversized joinery, exposed framing, and topological experiments became more dramatic in Gehry's middle period. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997), DZ Bank building (2001), and Walt Disney Concert Hall (2003) were still materially honest, but they were more expensive and expressive: refined methods for portraying horse heads, billowing sails, and twisted boxes displaced the brutality of "*je-m'en-foutisme*" construction principles.²

In the years between these two groups of buildings, a genre of discourse known as "theory" shifted the methods and terms of design in North American practices and schools.³ Among the core texts in this movement was *A Thousand Plateaus*, by French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Armed with mathematical metaphors and territorial tactics derived from this text, architectural theorists argued for displacing historical quotations of postmodernism with new formal manipulations. Some architects began to advocate for "smooth" spaces, promoting discussions of interpolated digital surfaces and "folds" that went against normative contexts laid out by city grids or grounded in traditional methods of formal composition.⁴ While New Brutalism's interests in topology and decentralized plan making resonated in this work, the computational turn

1. Reyner Banham first defines the three qualities of "New Brutalism" as "1. Memorability as an Image; 2, Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3, Valuation of Materials 'as found,'" in "The New Brutalism," *Architectural Review* 118, no. 708 (December 1955): 361.

2. Banham's term for "I-don't-give-a-fuck" sort of Brutalism. *Ibid.*, 357.

3. There are many histories of this movement: K. Michael Hays, for example, edited the source book, *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

4. Gilles Deleuze published *Le Pli – The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* – with Éditions de Minuit in 1988; five years later, Greg Lynn guest edited the March-April 1993 issue of *Architectural Design* with the title *Folding in Architecture*.

repressed that movement's material concerns. In "paperless" studios, critics attempted to produce a change in practice toward high-resolution digital models that exhibited low-tolerance tectonics in immaterial forms.

In practice, Gehry Technologies (GT) exemplified this trend, developing a software called Digital Project that would provide technical and managerial support for the work produced at Gehry Partners, LLP (GP).⁵ In addition to developing parametric associations and cohering part-to-whole relationships, expressed by a building's structure and cladding, this software infrastructure also expanded the labor of the design office to "fold in" consultants, engineers, and fabricators through a multilayered digital interface. Architects aligned with Deleuzian theory saw this as a realization of their idealized vision to translate digital projection into material construction.

This logistical shift also contributed to a collaborative approach to labor and to the synchronization of consultant work, facilitating the office's management of compounded buildings and campus projects, like Facebook (2018), Children's Institute (2022), and the Colburn School Expansion (under construction). In their public orientation, campus projects are accessible, collaborative, and contextual by nature, which requires the architect to pay increased attention to the landscape, circulation, and gathering spaces, as well as to the management of environmental and community reviews, client groups, and financial sources. Alongside expressive iconic designs, GP's heterogeneous work has continued to operate within the aesthetic constraints of their early projects that revel in what we might call "the background." But the cohering structures holding up these buildings are not limited to the visual realm, which can be analyzed formally and at some critical distance; more fundamentally, they are infrastructural, financial, and political, and therefore difficult to see, thus necessitating up close and personal description and documentation.

An intimate understanding of the external forces that surround this work is needed to inform the managerial role the architect plays in this context. If Newer Brutalism, as I understand it, brings our attention once again to the Smithsons' postwar bare and functional warehouse construction principles, then we need look no further than the ground zero of our contemporary postwars and the current need for "a combination of shelter and environment" in a literal way.⁶ In this Newer Brutalist twist, aesthetic terms such as *postwar* (modernism) and (New) *Brutalism* regain their concrete

5. CATIA (Computer-Aided Three-Dimensional Interactive Application), a platform developed by Dassault Systèmes, was the backbone for Digital Project.

6. Alison and Peter Smithson, "House in Soho, London," *Architectural Design* (December 1953): 342.



Gehry Partners with Elysian Landscapes, Thomas Safran & Associates, and The Architects Collective, VA Building 701 MacArthur, West LA VA Campus, Los Angeles, 2025. Drawing courtesy Elysian Landscapes.

meanings, such as “after the war” (reality) and (plain) “brutality,” in order to make them familiar once again in a political discourse.

One built project stands out in this context. In collaboration with affordable housing developer Thomas Safran & Associates (TSA), and architect of record The Architects Collective (TAC), Gehry Partners recently completed supportive veteran housing at 701 MacArthur Avenue on the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Campus in West Los Angeles. The simple character of the residential complex, reminiscent of early Gehry work, could place it within the Newer Brutalist aesthetic just for its look. But beneath its bare outward appearance lies an entanglement of relationships with the developer, the landscape designer, the administrative campus, the intended residents, and a number of supporting bureaucracies. In the absence of a welfare state, it falls upon the architect and the developer to mediate the competing powers that dissect the site into one constructive force. Deleuzian theory resurfaces to make sense of this negotiation. “Folded” and “smooth” spaces once characterized a formal adaptation of *A Thousand Plateaus* to the expressive dynamics of a building project. The Newer Brutalist architect can now express theory through work that engages with the dynamics of the massive complexity of a dramatically politicized building process. This housing complex is not the first act of architectural diplomacy on behalf of the veterans, nor is it the last; its construction highlights a recent movement to reterritorialize the West LA VA Campus for residential use.

7. In 1888, Senator John Percival Jones, Colonel Robert Symington Baker, and Arcadia Bandini Stearns de Baker offered the federal government over 300 acres of free land to house the disabled volunteer soldiers from the Civil War. Samuel Braslow, "The Rise and Fall of the Soldiers Home," *Home of the Brave, Long Lead*, June 2024, <https://homeofthebrave.longlead.com/part/2/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-soldiers-home>.

The West LA VA Campus on Deleuzian Terms

Three hundred acres of land, bequeathed by private donors to the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers after the Civil War, became the foundation for what is currently known as the West LA VA Campus.⁷ Now expanded to 380 acres, the campus is bisected by two behemoths – Wilshire Boulevard and the 405 Freeway – creating four quadrants that are occupied by various programs, including hospitals and housing, parks and parking lots, federal administration and democratic demonstration, vehicular circulation and garden rehabilitation. The canopies of Moreton Bay fig trees, groves of eucalypti, and the Heroes Golf Course offer micro-climates within the dry terrain of asphalt. Tectonic plate movements and the arroyos that run through the campus have shaped its land in critical ways.

The deadly 1971 Sylmar earthquake led to the collapse of some of the medical facilities, and the VA thus declared many of its buildings uninhabitable. The evictions that followed brought the northwest quadrant of the campus to near vacancy. In protest, veterans organized sit-ins and hunger strikes, but only a small number of administrative and medical offices remained in operation. This deserted land became a neoliberal *campo marzio*, a sought-after real estate market open to territorial exercises in private speculation. Leases eroded the once-unified feeling of a "National Soldiers Home." The Brentwood School, Breitburn Energy, and UCLA are a few of the tenants now enmeshed in lawsuits with veteran advocates, who seek to give the land back to its intended residents. In the meantime, in their alienation from the government that put their lives at risk in various wars, the veterans have become displaced from their own campus.

To read Deleuze and Guattari's "1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine" in the context of the West LA VA Campus brings new meaning to *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the theorists, nomad science revolves around a governing force – "the State" – that generally seeks stasis but occasionally requires the uncontainable movements that bring about change. Deleuze and Guattari draw on the martial success of the Mongol horseman Ghengis Khan, who conquered large swaths of China and Central Asia before his death in 1227. While the State apparatus produces *striated* space that is measurable – it can be counted, managed, and governed – the *war machine* restructures the territory with disruptive vectors in motion. Steppe nomads' *smooth* space is a variable force field that cannot be measured, only projected, inflected, expanded, and

8. In "Metamorphosis of Axonometry," Yve-Alain Bois mentions that the *cavalier perspective* is an axonometric drawing technique that cavalrymen could theoretically experience while galloping, warping their perception of space into a parallel projection without a vanishing point, *Daidalos* 1 (1981): 49. One could develop a point here on representation – the State would defend a stationary one-point perspective through centralized planning, while the nomads would access the space with axonometric strategies that breached the limit of the horizon line.

9. For more information on HUD-VASH vouchers, read the news release, "HUD and VA Make \$78 Million Available to Help Homeless Veterans Find Permanent Housing," in the HUD Archives, June 3, 2024, <https://archives.hud.gov/news/2024/pr24-136.cfm>.

contracted.⁸ If the VA Campus stands in for the spatial construct of the *State*, then the veterans who once served it are the *nomads* on its territory. Their interdependency can only become palpable in the presence of a unifying momentum that motivates the struggle. For years, the VA-State wished to govern but lacked the logistical ability and managerial resources to effectively serve the veterans. At the same time, the vet-nomads demanded to be housed but lacked the tools to productively disrupt the stasis of the State and breach the impasse.

The veterans who served in the Gulf Wars and Afghanistan are intuitively familiar with this *plateau's* geopolitical push and pull. These military conflicts revolved around governing states and nomadic tribes engaging in power struggles across vast territories and time frames. In encampments surrounding the VA Campus, these postwar troops adopted a nomadic life in contemporary West LA out of necessity. But in recent years, legal attacks and financial investments activated the VA from its stasis. Veteran advocates mounted a lawsuit to exert pressure on private leases, making room for residential construction and a masterplan for campus development. TSA, alongside Century Housing and the nonprofit U.S.VETS, formed the West LA Veterans Collective to win the request for proposals (RFP) for new construction and building rehabilitation. Last year, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the VA allocated 78 million dollars to support an additional 7,000 HUD-VA Supportive Housing or HUD-VASH vouchers for rental assistance.⁹ Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities (AHSC) grants as well as direct allocation of funding for site infrastructure from the VA have been injected into campus improvements this year.

In this context of political and legal momentum, TSA has assembled multiple entities into a complex web of federal, state, local, and private funding. Thus, 701 MacArthur is built on a *thousand plateaus of financial support*. There are many layers in its capital stack, including federal tax-exempt bonds and tax credit equity, a California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVET) state loan, an LA County loan, a construction loan, and philanthropic contributions. HUD-VASH vouchers form the basis of this stack. In this construction scenario, the vouchers are linked to architectural units rather than individual veterans. By bundling more than 100 vouchers at a time, the developer-architect team can mobilize the *vet-nomad* population, making way for unprecedented scales

Subtropical plants mark the entry to the 701 MacArthur residential complex on the eastern edge of the site. San Pedro cacti, skyscraper senecio, desert museum palo verde, and purple fernleaf acacia filter the view to the staircase leading to the upper stories. Photo: Cooper Bluhm.



of residential construction. Together with Gehry Partners, Thomas Safran & Associates have built, after Deleuze and Guattari, what I would call a *postwar machine*.

Imaging the VA Building 701 MacArthur

The VA Building 701 MacArthur is a 120-unit complex that lands, deadpan, on this home front. Its plan is organized around a brightly lit common room at the center of a blooming garden that houses residential buildings, humbly labeled *A* through *M*. Three pairs of freestanding, two-story volumes revolve along the edge of the wild arroyo, once a landfill. Three-story blocks are stitched into stepping slabs, abutting the roads and the parking lots across from the historic campus. The buildings' beige stucco coating accords with the VA's Mission Revival palette. Branching paths extend accessible orchard lanes up steel stairs to common walkways. Every route leads to a front door, marking each veteran's own home. Gray paint coats the metal doors, severe awnings, boxy scuppers, triangular sconces, panelized mesh, rectangular signs, sans-serif lettering, and air vents – utilities that service the prefab interiors. Tripled aluminum windows frame portraits of the gardens. The rooms are filled with light and air.

Crowded by vegetation, the buildings have already begun to recede into the background. Fruit-bearing avocado, grapefruit, and lemon trees, blooming palo verdes and forest

A native garden encircles the gathering space outside the community center at the heart of the complex. Mexican blue palms, silver dollar eucalyptus, gray musk sage, bush monkey flowers, and magenta African daisies attract a variety of birds and pollinators. Photo: Cooper Bluhm.



pansies, and dozens of other species of flora were carefully selected by Elysian Landscapes. One hundred and seventy-five trees sway over the 12,000 shrubs that dwarf the ground-cover carpets. The garden fabric spans the gamut between wild and cultivated plantings, attending to the microclimates formed by the sun, shade, and heat emanating from concrete surfaced fire lanes. Between the buildings are wild zones punctuated by pockets of vibrant pollinators and blurry meadows. A subtropical microclimate fronts the complex on the east, and a native habitat banks the arroyo on the west. Rushing through the garden is delightful, and slowing down in it is therapeutic, as graphic leaves, ephemeral grasses, vivid flowers, ripe fruit, and singing birds feed the senses along its paths.

Cooper Bluhm photographed the project with a Zeiss 80mm Planar f/2.8 lens on a medium format camera. The planar design of this “legendary” lens focuses the image onto a flat (rather than a curved) plane, producing consistent pictures from edge to edge without warping or foreshortening. This stable apparatus captures the scenes at a consistently high resolution deep into the field. In the foreground, the plants are colorful and vibrating. In the middle ground, the stairs are gray and winding. In the background, the facades are beige and flat. All three layers of the image are equally in focus, quietly supporting the daily life unfolding in the

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gardens and along the stairs. Nonhierarchically, these layers of background make room for everything else – a meander through the trees, an encounter on the walkway, a food delivery to a front door. None of this is possible in the project next door, where staples of iconographic construction take over. Snap-on balconets, inoperable windows, shady corridors, and decorative arches symbolize housing without making room for living. These postmodern signifiers of residential construction portray decorum. By contrast, Gehry's minimalism is uniquely imageable, in that early Banham sense of the term. "As found" conditions permeate the photographs, offering a spectrum of sun and shade, a choice of circulation, a difference in orientation, a variety of flora, an anticipation of seasonal blooms. The formalism of the complex offers acute differences – bright signals – through background aesthetics – beige noise. It is a relief to the senses, a place to rest and to come home to.

War is now everywhere. And postwar is everywhere all at once. The West LA VA Campus is the home front where the postwar theater is being played out on a national stage. The 701 MacArthur project is compromising, collaborative, and urgent. We conflate "postwar" with an aesthetics of New Brutalism, but LA's after-the-war reality is marked by the plain brutality of homelessness. Along the main stretch of Wilshire Boulevard on the southeast quadrant of the VA, the 1960s Luckman Federal Building flaunts its New Brutalist precast vertical fins and expressed service core. And on the northwest quadrant, overcoming decades of inaction, 701 MacArthur brings a Newer Brutalist complex to life with another garden, another exposed stair infrastructure, and a lot of collaborative effort. The federal campus reveals the brutality of LA's postwar condition and the optimism behind the developer-architect composite *postwar machine*.

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Matthew Au, David Eskenazi, Mira Henry, Mireia Luzárraga
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*Things found, things cast away.
The story of rejection in a
society identifies strange, even
remote resentments.*

– Alison Smithson, 1984