



HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

The Collective that Radicalized Urban Design in the 1970s with Slides

A collection of color slides from 1970s LA captures the sights and sounds of a city and its urban landscape.

73

Claire Voon

2 days ago

Shares

73
Shares



1.15

21

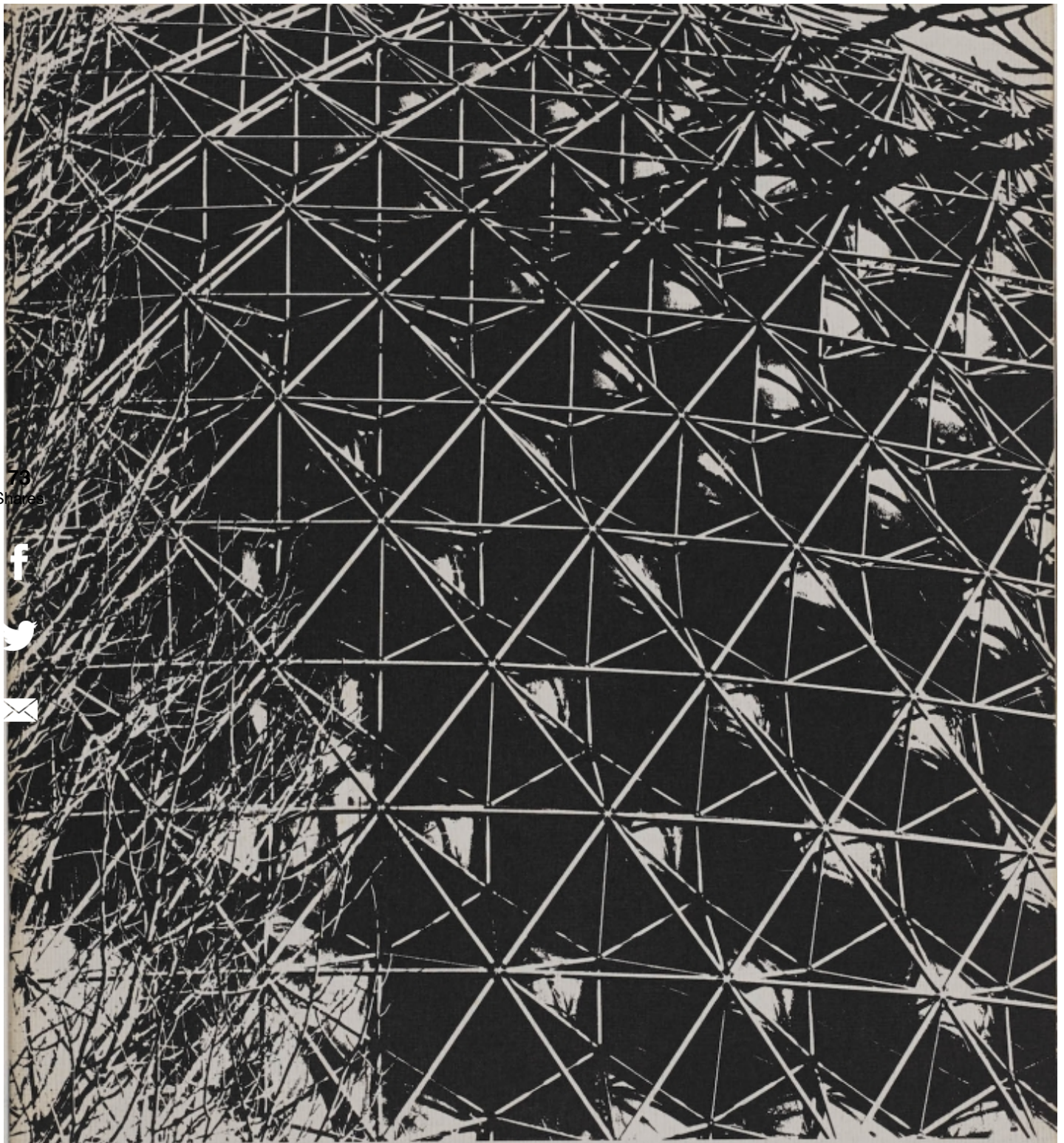
111

3001

R.S.S. GUTMAN

Environmental Communications' slide from a survey of inflatables (all images courtesy LAXART)

In the late 1960s, a group of architects and artists in Southern California sought to reshape people's understanding of Los Angeles, whose complex environments it believed architects and urban planners overlooked. Architectural practices in the city typically concerned form and resulted in isolated expressions of mid-century modernism; the collective, Environmental Communications, wanted designers to think about the environment through a much broader lens — as an urban ecology beyond just buildings that also considered denizens and their behaviors in and reactions to spaces.



78
Shares



SURVEY ON DOMES

Cover of an Environmental Communications catalog on domes

Its members's strategy was an ambitious and epic one, targeting the centers of pedagogy: they slyly inserted their work into the slide libraries of architecture schools, museums, and other cultural institutions around the country, hoping to influence students and other curious minds. Armed with 35mm cameras and traveling by bus and even by blimp, the collective photographed their surroundings and turned them into slides. It then sold sets through mail-order catalogues, with the colorful images organized by themes that had titles such as "Human Territoriality in the City," "Eccentric Folk Environments," "Hardcore LA," and "Urban Crowd Behavior." They were, essentially, poles apart from normal categorizations of learning into movements and time periods. Despite this radical packaging, institutions did purchase many of the catalogues, which described its makers as a "matrix" and as "a group, a system, an experience, that documents, researches, and communicates the relationship between man and his environment."

Environmental Collective documented the landscapes of the American Southwest and even Tokyo, but LA ⁷³ remained its main focus of study. Thousands of its slides of the city in the 1970s are currently on view at LAXART in an exhibition first presented in 2014 at Columbia GSAPP's [Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery](#). *Environmental Communications: Contact High* gathers in one place what is today near-obsolete media, once deployed to disrupt dominant definitions of architecture. Rather than straightforward captures of well-known buildings, these are almost like vintage Instagrams, capturing the vernacular of the time to reveal subtle aspects of urban infrastructure: open-air hot dog counters; freeways lined with palm trees; surfers and cyclists sharing the streets; branded benches; and experimental architecture, from inflatables to mobile residences.

TRUCKITECTURE

AHNT

TOP



ORIGINAL

5

73
Shares



Environmental Communications slide of “nomadic truckchitecture”

73
Shares



TOP
↑

ESHT

12

ORIGINAL

An Environmental Communications slide from a set on “Human Territoriality”

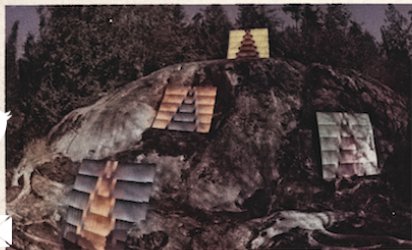
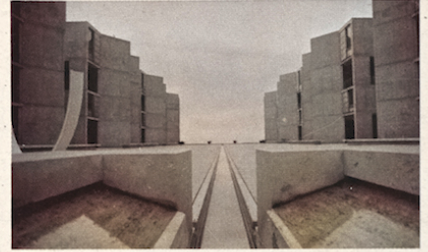
“Environmental Communications’s ‘environmental photography’ consisted of sensitizing oneself to the Los Angeles ‘environment’ to trace normally imperceptible environmental transformations and to penetrate an environmental resistance to imaging,” curators Mark Wasiuta, Marcos Sánchez, and Adam Bandle told Hyperallergic in an email. “Environmental design, a post-World War II pivot of architecture toward the social sciences, had notoriously mimicked the dry visual format of behavioral maps, urban movement diagrams, and statistical observations.

“EC wagered that a new visual syntax adequate to the complexity of the late 20th-century city could be activated by a novel media practice that was at once analytical and experimental.”

The number of people involved in Environmental Communications changed throughout its decade-long existence, but the curators have identified at least over two dozen of its members. Its primary leaders were Roger Webster, whose name appears on a number of the slides, Bernard Perloff, David Greenberg, and Ted Tokio Tanaka. Working in the same spirit as experimental media collectives active at the time like [Ant Farm](#), Environmental Communications engaged with their surroundings with an air of performance: photographing cities to create academic resources was an artistic production, but so were the administrative deeds of dealing with orders from institutions and shipping out catalogues.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATIONS

73
Shares



\$1.00 1973

Cover of an Environmental Communications catalog

The collective dissolved in the early 1980s for a number of reasons that included complicated group dynamics and differing architectural concerns and priorities, according to the curators. It's difficult to measure the influence these slides had on students and whether they did shape the disciplines of architecture and urban design, but what we can observe are concrete documentations of sales that speak to the immense institutional interest in the slides.

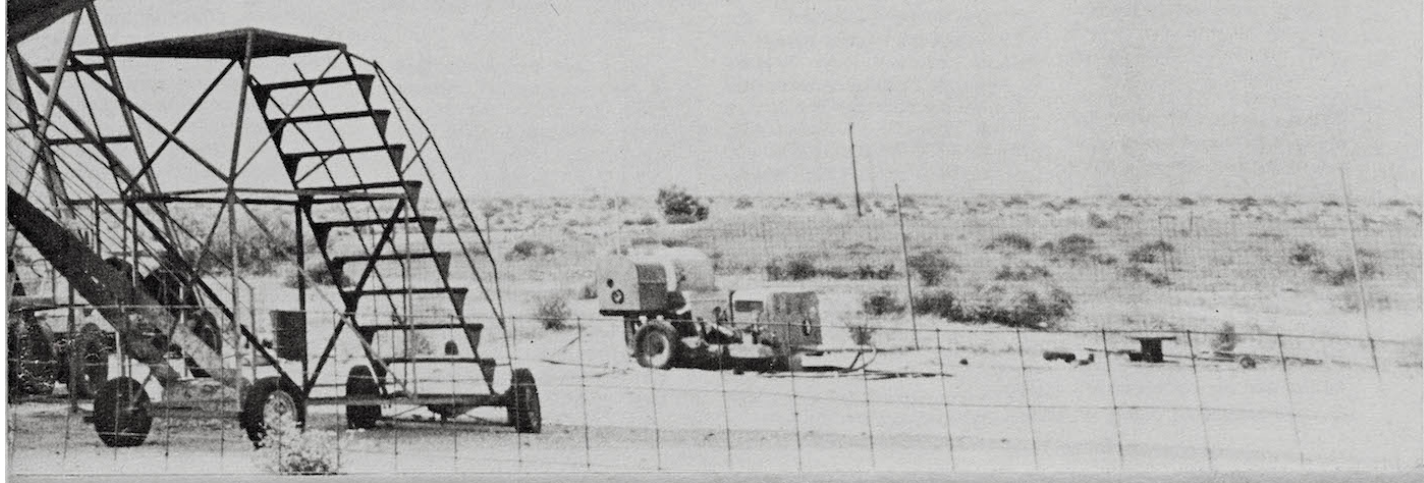
"These records are not merely records of EC's sales capacity," as the curators said. "They are also signs of their strategy of infiltration and the success of their conceptual gambit."

The collective's archive for us today is a vivid and nostalgic window into 1970s LA, arranged according to a clever taxonomy, but its fundamental approach remains relevant. Environmental Collective's efforts to stealthily infiltrate bureaucratic institutions, through what the curators call "the most banal instructional and training methods," offer a fascinating lesson on the role artists and the media may play in subverting these bodies of power and influence.

73
Shares



AMERICAN ROADSIDE POP ARCHITECTURE



Cover of an Environmental Communications catalog on American roadside pop architecture

73
Shares



An Environmental Communications slide from a set on "Human Territoriality"

73
Shares



FEB 7 11 42

An Environmental Communications slide of a blimp

top

8

SEP 7 11 AM

67

TOP



ORIGINAL

73
Shares



An Environmental Communications slide

73
Shares



NOV 7 1977

29

An Environmental Communications slide of a car wash from a set on “Commercial Architecture”

ROGER WEBSTER



MADE IN U.S.A. AUG 73 H5

16

73
Shares



An Environmental Communications slide of a parking lot from a set on "Commercial Architecture"

SEAL EDGE WITH WARM IRON.
DO NOT TOUCH FILM.
MADE IN U.S.A.



TOP
↑

ORIGINAL

6

CONTEMPORARY ARCH. of
NEW HAVEN

73
Shares



Environmental Communications slide showing the “contemporary architecture of new Haven”

37

© 1973



SURVEY ON DOMES

73
Shares



Environmental Communications slide from a set on domes

73
Shares



JAN 72 H4

21

MADE IN U.S.A. U.S. PAT. NO. 3,012,354

Environmental Communications slide

EXPO '70



FUJI GROUP PAVILION

YUTAKA MURATA

RW

MADE IN U.S.A. U.S. PAT. NO. 3,013,071

73
Shares



Environmental Communications' slide of the Fuji Group Pavilion for Expo'70 by Yutaka Murata



Cover of an Environmental Communications catalog on Tokyo

Environmental Communications: Contact High *continues at LAXART (7000 Santa Monica Blvd. Hollywood, CA) through April 1.*

 **comments (0)**

73
Shares