

Fire Family

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INTRODUCTION

Not all dragons are made equal. Not all breathe deadly fire. There are many dragons, many ‘fires’. Yet, modernity and western logics have evolved with a blanketing fear of fire, propagating a narrative founded on ruin and destruction. Under the falsity and singularity of this narrative, our relationship with this life-giving element has eroded over the past century and many of us today no longer have kinship with fire. It exists in our lives only in abstract and unseen ways: under the hood of our cars, in the wirings of our walls, under the glass plate of our kitchen stoves.

This absence of fire from our everyday lives stands in stark contrast to the fact that wildfires today are burning at least twice as much tree cover as they did two decades ago.¹ These unprecedented conditions have led to the term “Pyrocene”, coined by Stephen Pyne, to refer to a new geo-atmospheric era characterised by severe intensity megafires acting at the global scale.²

What does it mean to live, design, and build in a Pyrocene world? How might design thinking engage both architecture and land conservation practices to better prepare, and even welcome, our pyro futures? For the Works + Words Biennale 2026 organised by Aarhus School of Architecture and The Royal Danish Academy, our project, *Fire Family*, considers these questions and conditions through the weaving together of documentary film and ecological drawings of architecture and land. The gravitational centre for the film and accompanying drawings situates itself within the home of two fire-practitioner families living in Trinity County, Northern California, who are working with their community in cultivating participatory ecological stewardship through prescribed fire. While seemingly silent, the house which supports the livelihoods of these two families, is re-seen in the project as a kind of ‘conservation corps’: a body that incubates outwards beyond its domestic life, and into a greater ‘fire family’ of volunteers, land stewards, Indigenous partners, and earth lovers (Figure 1). In this outward stretch, the house effectively extends ‘home’ into land, suggesting an alternative ontology of home that is not delineated by walls and property lines but rather, is informed by a cosmology of fire.

While the film and drawings are directly interested in prescribed fire, we wish to open up a discussion within broader discourses of design history, specifically as fire relates to domesticity and attendant and changing relationships to ecological values. We begin our discussion with domesticity and its ties to landscape and gardens, exploring notions of evolved ‘guardedness’ as it relates both physically and spiritually to land. We then transition to fire, outlining colonial fire suppression, its silencing of Indigenous burning practices, and how embracing a fire cosmology – as already embodied by these Indigenous burning practices – may help to re-figure architecture’s notions of home and its responsibilities in planetary care. And finally, we discuss the film’s protagonists and their lived lives as an embodiment of a practicing fire cosmology where home and domesticity extend beyond the bounds of formalized architecture, gathering into its embrace relational forms of stewardship. It is within this arc, or web of historical relations, that we find ourselves both as filmmakers, and as designers and fire lovers, attempting to raise the voice of fire, and to offer alternatives to its prohibition across North American cities, towns, gardens and landscapes.

The Guarded Domestic

While our contemporary condition is decidedly guarded against the forces of nature, our ancestors at one time, lived within a more porous arrangement with the ecological forces of their respective homelands. Whereas now we firmly live within a human-nature dialectic – manifested by the physical and spiritual renunciation of ‘embeddedness’ in nature – our ancestors were far less delimited. While we have termed this as a historic movement of ‘progress’, this distance or guardedness presents us now with consequences in the oncoming ecological and climate emergencies.

While this guardedness has taken various forms throughout time – through specific landscapes, and specific cultures – design cultures of modernity have helped to disentangle ancient rituals and practices which gave humanity its fluency and kinship with other living and non-living entities, including the vast containment of water and fire.

In parts of the world this containment happened erratically, such as the movement away from the frequent use of intentional fire in the early modern period on the Iberian peninsula,³ or rapid transitions where fire was systematically illegalised in North America.⁴ Increasingly through industrialization, farmers and herders reduced their use of fire to tend the land. Gardens, forests and

agricultural lands became more controlled, more ornamental, and relied less on fire and flooding as a way to regulate growth. Land managers, farmers, and gardeners came to rely on surrogates: water was supplemented by civic systems to promote the growth of monocultural lawns; synthetic fertilizers replaced the pyrolic faculties of fire to promote growth; waste systems carried away brush otherwise cleared by flooding, fire, or ecological digestion.

COLONIAL FIRE SUPPRESSION

In the context of Canada and the United States, decades of colonial fire suppression have led to conditions whereby lands that co-evolved with fire have been denied that relationship and medicine. These ecosystems have developed in concert with human-ignited, low-intensity fires through Indigenous practices, creating many of the ‘picturesque’ scenes that enamoured European settlers. As underscored by Kat Anderson in her book *Tending to the Wild*, “much of the landscape in California that so impressed early writers, photographers, and landscape painters was in fact a cultural landscape, not the wilderness they imagined... The chalk drawings and paintings of Thomas Ayres, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Hill, among others, reveal centuries of fire management.”⁵

This freedom and right to burn was kidnapped from Indigenous peoples with colonization. By the early 1900s, many “Forest Service officials began to oppose deliberate burning and to argue for the suppression of all fires. They viewed lightning-caused and Indian-set fires as inherently destructive, with no ecological role in forest or grassland development and maintenance. It was thought that all fires threatened valuable tree resources, protective watershed cover, and wildlife.”⁶ This mindset quickly manifested itself through a series of legislative acts that helped to create a robust culture of fire suppression through national and state funds supporting the deployment of rapid mobilisation of firefighters, equipment and technology.

Today, our relationship with fire continues to be largely informed by this culture of colonial fire suppression, which dictates that all fires are ‘bad’ as they endanger livelihoods and ‘pristine’ wilderness. This has created conditions where the absence of all fire has led to suffocated ecosystems and dense, accumulated fuels. “These wildfires reveal the many ways we are lacking relationships with the land... Seeing ourselves as separate and above our environments, we abuse and neglect our environments.”⁷

Given these conditions we find ourselves in, how can we revisit the cosmological ground that forms our relationship with fire? More specifically, how might architecture reimagine itself within a fire cosmology given the amounting urgency to protect homes and communities? Familiar responses often rely on architecture's technical and instrumental capacities such as fire-retardant materials, responsive alarm and suppression systems, and defensible and compartmentalized spaces. However, these approaches are still informed by fire suppression culture and they skirt the more fundamental issue, which is that our relationship with fire is broken. Architecture's hearth needs to be re-found and re-imagined.

FIRE FAMILY

The notion of home, both in its technical making and in its more ontological and ecological imaginations, has often been articulated as the very seed for Architecture by way of the 'primitive hut'. As first appeared in Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's treatise on architecture, *De Architectura Libri decem (Ten Books on Architecture)*, the primitive hut as described by Vitruvius, was born out of a need to shelter from 'nature'.⁸ Continuing this lineage, Jesuit priest Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'Architecture (An Essay on Architecture)*, similarly painted a narrative of a 'savage' requiring protection from the elements.⁹ In both foundational texts, the primitive hut leans towards binary proclivities where human and nature are in tension: 'building as shelter'. The implications of such a divide over time can be witnessed in today's governing ideologies of how home is defined. Entrapped within capitalist logics, our contemporary understanding of home is commonly defined by property lines or the walls of a rental unit. Home is paid for and statically delineated. Home is contained. Domesticity is contained. Care is contained.

But what begins when we re-establish ourselves as in-situ stewards of the interwoven domestic and the ephemeral? An expanded idea of home might serve as a gateway to a more broad metaphysical renewal in design culture. In 1982, Bob and Jan Mountjoy, two architects from Northern California, began building next to an ancestral meadow that once supported the Nor Rel Muck Wintu people near the small town of present-day Hayfork, CA. Flanked by oak savannah and woodland, the Mountjoy's had spent the years previous, studying, sitting and living on the land (Figure 2). First by tent, and later by a 3-walled rough shelter, Bob and Jan carefully began to read the weathers, the waters, and winds and the fires of the Hayfork Valley and their 'Round Meadow'. Through this act of architectural embodiment, a simple trilogy of simple buildings rose. These were designed

without the need for air conditioning, and were situated under the living canopy of the white oak fringe to dampen California's extremes of drought and heat (Figure 3).

In 2018, nearing the end of their lives, the Mountjoys entrusted the property to a local non-profit, the Watershed Research and Training Center. Two families now live there, and make up the core staffing of the WRTC's prescribed fire programme. A house that was designed for two retirees, now houses four adults, two children, and a rotating cast of fire professionals, effectively creating a 'fire family'. The house and garage serve as the organization's fire cache, and more broadly, as the spiritual and material heart of the region's prescribed fire movement.

The 'fire family' – Erin, Miller, José, Andrea, Alder and Acorn – have grown into stewards of the place, both by way of their efforts to reintroduce fire into and around the ancient oaks, but also through careful coexistence with the land's other inhabitants (Figure 4). Deferential to ancient norms, yet practiced in methodical and professional use of fire, the family is journeying towards an instance of what we might call the 'unguarding' of domesticity, whereby though the practice of prescribed fire adjacent to their wooden house, they attend to cycles of ecological time which serve a complex mix of risk-reduction; training; invasive species removal, and ecological restoration. In this, the fire family embodies a very specific and emblematic re-wedding of domesticity to the ecological ephemera of Northern California, hosted by a little house and a garage (Figure 5).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps guarding oneself from ecology and atmospheres may yet be a momentary lapse in humanity. Perhaps modernity is a larval stage of our development, one part of an ouroboric cycle whereby we might return forward to other ways of sustaining life on earth. As witnessed through the Mountjoy House and its growing fire family, process, participation and relationality take precedence over lot lines and market economics in a cosmology of fire. The Mountjoy House is not just the fire family's hut. It is the nucleus of their land. Land that they do not own, but instead steward. To protect their home means to enact care within and beyond the house, garage and fire-cache: a way of being with land that has been integral to Indigenous practices for time immemorial. "Although native ways of using and tending the earth were diverse, the people were nonetheless united by a fundamental land use ethic: one must interact respectfully with nature and coexist with all life-forms. This ethic transcended cultural and political boundaries and enabled sustained

relationships between human societies and California's environments over millennia. The spiritual dimension of this ethic is a cosmology that casts humans as part of the natural system, closely related to all life-forms. In this view, all nonhuman creatures are "kin" or "relatives," nature is the embodiment of the human community, and all of nature's denizens and elements – the plants, the animals, the rocks, and the water – are people.”¹⁰

In North America, the metaphysics of ecological conscience never fully left. It has been stewarded resiliently by Indigenous nations, especially in the West, and amongst all the suppression of fire and cultural genocide, threads of ancestral fire knowledge have survived and have been passed down generation by generation, often by matrilineal fire-keepers. For instance, the stewards of the Redwood forest, the Yurok Nation in present day Northern California, who are also unjamming the rivers at monumental scale, are increasingly re-introducing fire, or ‘cultural fire’ back onto their lands. Into this fold also enters a series of non-Indigenous fire practitioners – such as the fire family of the Mountjoy House – who collectively understand their ancestral role in landscape and cultural harm. Together, these fire communities are reintroducing open and intentional fire to the edges of towns and wildlands. It is a project, a movement, of being on, in and of the land; a project of exegesis as *Homo faber* to make the land home again, not through its domination, but through a careful dance between enactment and deference. This is to see intelligence not in technos, but intelligence borne through the kinship with land as we re-wed: to do so, we must believe that we ourselves are at once fire, water, soil, and sun.



Figure 1. Film still from 'Fire Family': Members of a volunteer fire department gently hold the fire line on a prescribed burn in Trinity County, California (authors' contribution)



Figure 2. Film still from 'Fire Family': The Mountjoy House (left), situated beside Round Meadow (right) in Hayfork, California (authors' contribution)



Figure 3. Film still from 'Fire Family': the Montjoy House in Hayfork, California (authors' contribution)



Figure 4. Film still from 'Fire Family': Alder Bailey ignites a prescribed burn in white oak savannas surrounding the Montjoy house in Hayfork, California (authors' contribution)



Figure 5. Film still from ‘Fire Family’: Alder, Erin and Miller Bailey enact a winter solstice ritual, seen from inside the Montjoy house in Hayfork, California (authors’ contribution)

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Bios

Chad Manley is the founder of Cmplba. His practice weaves between architecture, film, and ecological recovery, rendered through built and immaterial work which float amongst the continuums of culture and nature. Based within the Cascadian cultural-bioregion - which traverses the unceded lands between Northern California and Coastal British Columbia - the practice seeks to build relationships between ancient life-ways, future ecologies, and the elemental powers of fire and water.

Thena Jean-hee Tak is a first generation South Korean American born on the ancestral homelands of the Plains Tribes. She is a designer, researcher, and founder of LILO: Little Office, a design practice that privileges alternative ways of seeing and making. Her work involves planetary care and theories of ecological-enactment through stories of kinship and reciprocity that support the healing of land and culture. Thena is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of British Columbia where she teaches in the Master of Architecture program.

Notes

¹ “The Latest Data Confirms: Forest Fires are Getting Worse.” World Resources Institute. Accessed December 10, 2025, <https://www.wri.org/insights/global-trends-forest-fires>.

² Pyne, Stephen J., *The Pyrocene: How we Created an Age of Fire, and what Happens Next*. (University of California Press, 2021), 3-6.

³ Pyne, Stephen J. *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 199.), 116.

⁴ Pyne, *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth*, 186.

⁵ Anderson, Kat. *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*. (University of California Press, 2005), 57.

⁶ Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*, 119.

⁷ Erica Tom, Melinda Adams, and Ron Goode, *Solastalgia to Soliphilia: Cultural Fire, Climate Change, and Indigenous Healing*, 1.

⁸ Pollio, Vitruvius, and M. H. Morgan, *The Ten Books on Architecture*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 38-39.

⁹ Laugier, Marc-Antoine. *An Essay on Architecture*. (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls), 1977, 11-12.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*, 57.