

Editorial and Abstracts

Editorial. Inhabiting Nature

Maria Argenti

This issue of *Rassegna* can be read on two levels. One the one hand it focuses on the relationship between urban architecture and nature, between the anthropocentric space of the city and the polycentric space of the global ecosystem, and how to integrate measures of nature within the spaces of collective dwelling.

At the same time the idea that inspired it declaredly rejects the reductionist logic that limits ecology to being a green buffer around buildings, a rhetoric brushstroke of colour, or at best a marketing ploy.

A second level of reading thus raises another question, different yet connected. It regards architecture (and urbanism) as an essentially anthropological expression of our existence; by definition always incomplete, fragmented and related to the world (nature in all of its diverse forms) in which it unfolds.

In one of the essays featured in this issue, Xavier Monteys cites a text by Alberto Caeiro (one of the heteronyms used by Fernando Pessoa) to remind us “that there is no Nature, that Nature doesn’t exist. That there are hills, valleys, plains, That there are trees, flowers, weeds, That there are rivers and stones, But there is not a whole these belong to [...]. Nature is parts without a whole.”

This idea, repeated by the anthropologist Philippe Descola in his description of the way of life of an Amazon tribe, recalls another text, again by Pessoa: “Eternal tourists of ourselves, there is no landscape but what we are. We possess nothing, for we don’t even possess ourselves. We have nothing because we are nothing. What hand will I reach out, and to what universe? The universe isn’t mine: it’s me” (*The Book of Disquiet*).

These verses hold the key to interpreting and animating both our debates and our research.

We are the ones who intersect culture, beauty, contradictions and solutions in the universe in which we live. This act of weaving is an inherent part of us; of our grandeur and our fragilities, of our memory and our forgetting; of the evolution in which we partake. It is as if – as Juhani Pallasmaa states – this weaving has a strong aesthetic value: “the aesthetic choice appears to be incorporated within the system of evolution itself.” Or better yet: “The aim of evolution, whether we believe it or not, is beauty” (Joseph Brodsky).

To overcome the naiveté of the environmentalist approaches that have proliferated in recent years, as Sergio Martín Blas notes in his text, it is up to us to “reconstruct the complexity of relations between the place, nature, identity and forms of dwelling.” It is up to us to avoid connecting architecture with a “naïve vision” of the laws of nature or cultural traditions. With the awareness that “from the outset, in classical myth the representation of the world is fractured: the mirror of Dionysius has always

shown us splendid broken or partial images” (Monica Centanni).

Therefore, the intention with this issue of *Rassegna* is not to offer a sugar-coated representation of this fragmentation, but to capture both its criticalities and potentialities.

From the Torres Blancas in Madrid to the projects by Noero architects in South Africa; from Le Corbusier’s *immeuble-villas* to the Villaggio Matteotti by Giancarlo De Carlo; from the complex in Alexandra Road in London, completed in the late 1960s by Neave Brown, to Les Étoiles in Ivry-sur-Seine by Renée Gailhoustet and Jean Renaudie; from the *projeto da Consolidação habitacional Juan Bobo* in Medellín to that for the Parque Novo Santo Amaro in São Paulo; from the French projects for *La Grande Motte* and the master plan for the seaside town of Leucate-Barcarès; to the edificio Jardín Hospedero y Nectarífero in Cali (Colombia) and the recent La Ferme du Rail, in the 19th arrondissement of Paris, winner of the first edition of the *Reinventer Paris* programme; from the proposal by Izaskun Chinchilla for a housing competition in Vallecas to the projects of François Roche; this issue of *Rassegna* undertakes an anthropological investigation of the complex relationship between city and nature, free of any nostalgias for the past.

As Luca Montuori affirms in his retracing of Sou Fujimoto’s ideas about architecture, the same freedom of choice we find in the forest, while searching for places that represent us “can also be found in the metropolis where chaos is constructed at different scales [...]. Forest and city are not antithetical figures, but two sides of the same coin, integrated in blurrings and gradients of spaces.”

Yet it is also true – as Violeta González and Guiomar Martín Domínguez point out – that “any current ecological imagination must necessarily take on a social component integrated within a project.” It must confront the many different ways of dwelling and intending the city and nature, built spaces and those we normally refer to as voids, but which are not empty.

The fragmented images of our contemporary era weave the complex pattern of the urbanised landscape, being created by man, time and every living being (vegetal or animal). This pattern has more than a single “architect,” and it must be continually re-designed and renegotiated.

This is the method, the approach, the alphabet – according to Gilles Clement – that everyone should employ to construct an idea that is flexible and adaptable to the shifting conditions of the environment, to elaborate the phrases of a discourse without emphasis and without certainties, but also without limits, so that we may explore the inventive power of life, accepting the idea of a permanent transformation of the beings and environments that welcome them. In this process of evolution man is the “clumsy gardener,” or better yet “a tightrope walker in the field of exchange,” engaged in a “mute dialogue without

the obligation to produce a result, drunk merely on the complicity of being.”

Likewise, ruins testify to the continuous unfolding and transformations of what is never immobile because everyone contributes to its mutation and imagination as something different thanks to an “adaptive aesthetic capable of restoring beauty and significance of abandoned territories.”

This is the “dark side of modernity” Milena Farina speaks of. Where the design of architecture is called upon to “represent, to depict the tension, conflict and anxiety that characterise the epochal landscape we are experiencing (from an unsustainable model of inhabiting the world to a new one to be invented).”

It is only within this vision that a discourse like that initiated by *Rassegna* makes sense, without the pretence of enclosing it within a formula.

In the mind map outlined in this issue, if anything, even the traditional idea of the enclosure and the wall is questioned in the essay by Mariacristina D’Oria in favour of an open vision of the relationship between what the wall encloses and what remains outside of it; because “the manipulations and experimentations that have succeeded one another in recent decades have progressively modified the permeability, initially visual, and later, more concretely physical” of the device that configures and narrates the relationship between man and nature; also mutating its meaning in the process.

The idea that drives us is that outside an integrated and integral conception of the relationship between anthropic space and natural space any discourse on collective dwelling risks reducing architecture – as correctly supported by Emilia Rosmini in her essay – to an empty para-ecological verbosity. It risks leaving no room for simple and fundamental questions: “were we to return to asking where children can actually play, the only answer would be in a nearby private football pitch at the edge of the complex, the symbol *par excellence* of the privatised and individualist contemporary city, for the few.”

Hence, we could say, without a future. Condemned to pursue the ghosts of its past. Instead, we should fully embrace the challenge of our contemporary era, to think about design for dwelling not as a tired repetition of stereotypes, but as a continuous evolution of the infrastructure that holds together a community and animates places. A modern conception of the relationship between nature, city and landscape, its uninterrupted experimentation, cannot but search for ever more advanced equilibriums, capable of cutting across diverse needs.

DEBATE

Jardin des plantes

Gilles Clément

This essay was written by Gilles Clément on December 17th 2014. The text expresses the role that the Jardin des Plantes has played in the French landscape architect’s formation since his childhood. At that time he was fascinated by this sensual and bewitching place, which allowed him to distance from the tiring landscape of the city and the harshness of the numbers and words proposed by his teacher at school. The time spent at the Jardin des Plantes represents a founding experience to build a flexible way of thinking, adapted to the changing conditions of the environment, to elaborate a discourse without emphasis and without certainties but also without limits, to explore the inventive power of life, to accept the idea of a permanent transformation of beings and their environments. It was probably in this place, «an open book on the enigma of life», that the foundations of his feeling of intimacy with nature were laid. The text was translated into Italian by Martina Pietropaoli.

Lessons of Animal Life and Architecture

Juhani Pallasmaa

This essay is a revised and expanded version of texts written for *Arquitectos Animales* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2020), and *Architettura degli animali* (Florence: Florence University Press, 2021). It explores the possibility that human dwelling and architecture draw inspiration from the natural world, specifically from animals. Animal life and constructions offer valuable design lessons, as they have evolved over millions of years to adapt to their environments. Examples such as the nest-building skills of birds and the intricate tunnels created by ants and termites demonstrate not only a deep understanding of space and function, but also a perception of beauty. Drawing on these examples, the text points how the categoric difference between humans and the rest of life forms is quickly disappearing. It is certainly time for us to begin to understand ourselves as fully responsible members of the living world and the continuing system of evolution, and our responsibility in safeguarding the magnificently complex systems of nature.

“Stepping into a Garden”

Xavier Monteyts

“Stepping into a garden” (translation of the Spanish double-sense expression “meterse en un jardín”) is an invitation to broaden our usual concepts about the relationship between the dwelling, the house, and nature, the garden. It is also an invitation to reconsider the notion of nature, to challenge its systemic structure by considering it as “parts without a whole,” borrowing Fernando Pessoa’s expression. Inhabiting nature implies moving through those parts, avoiding to follow the steps that lead to dwelling in the city as the space in which everything has its own place. The house has a meaning that we can reconsider from this point of view. On the other hand, the question of nature in opposition to architecture is raised, considering its future and the relationship between buildings and plants. Such is the context in which we must

think the role we want to play. Perhaps we can begin by designing spaces in which plants are not simple accessories, but rather dwellers in their own right. The house should learn from the garden.

The Mirror of Dionysus: Design Itineraries from Single Houses to Collective Living

Sergio Martín Blas

The article focuses on the radical displacement of the nature surrounding the single house, attached to the ground, towards the vertical forms of urban collective housing. The idea of taking pieces of land up in the air to insert fragments of nature in human constructions is as old as the hanging garden, but only in the twentieth century it produced specific design outcomes such as Le Corbusier's *immeuble-villas*. In addition to the desire of a closer contact with natural elements (air, sun, greenery), these and other projects work with the memories of specific natural environments, places and landscapes, often distant and different from those in which they are inserted. Only a careful observation of the design process can reveal the itineraries that connect collective residential systems with fragments of architectures, environments, and natural landscapes transferred into them. Recreating the complexity of the relationships between place, nature, identity, and forms of living is key to overcome the naivety of environmentalist approaches based on the concepts of continuity and harmony, close to the regressive premises of geographical determinism and regionalism. The text presents two design itineraries, both ambiguously ascribed to the organic architecture of the 1960s and located in two capital cities of Ibero-America: Rogelio Salmons and Hernán Vieco's "Fundación Cristiana de la Vivienda" in Bogotá, and the mysterious case of Torres Blancas by Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza in Madrid.

Unfinished, Dismissed, Inhabitable. Abandoned Landscapes as a Model for the Future Habitat

Milena Farina

Since ruins are the final destiny of every construction, in our time, more and more settlements and anthropized landscapes are abandoned by people, accelerating a suggestive yet disturbing return to nature. These "abandoned landscapes" include construction sites with interrupted works, leaving skeletons of structures whose demolition is unsustainable, highly specialized buildings and urban spaces that have been dismissed and can be hardly reconverted, and unauthorized settlements that have become unlivable.

The disappearance of human presence in wide territorial areas has produced an unprecedented landscape where primal and vital nature invades highly artificial spaces. In some cases, richly biodiverse ecosystems have developed, where mankind is no longer the only actor, interacts with several animal and vegetal species, and enjoys a revivified nature. Hence, those remnants of modern civilization show total availability for a new living culture and become a sort of future habitat. The image of the ruin being inhabited by nature can also be a fruitful reference for design strategies to renounce the opposition between artificial and natural, on which modernity is founded.

Imitation of Life *Giovanni Corbellini*

This essay wonders about the evolution of the contradictory relationship between architecture and nature, in which a long-desired integration overlaps a widely practiced opposition. Recent philosophical approaches, bolstered by the many crises the contemporary world is dealing with, inform projects that aim to overcome this dichotomy, trading conflict for collaboration. They accordingly tend to propose a, mostly rhetorical, turn toward a kind of green neo-functionalism, where the intrinsically "good" environmental aims push any other aspect, the architectural ones included, into a blurred background.

However, since going back to nature asks buildings to perform highly sophisticated technical solutions, the contradiction is still there. By recognizing and accelerating this paradox, some design experiences of the last decades has shown possible ways to consciously inhabiting the gap between nature and artifice, working out its conflicts as a less naive motor of architectural imagination and its enduring meaning.

RESEARCHES

Another Break in the Wall *Mariacristina D'Oria*

Lars Larup, in *Villa Prima Facie*, recognizes in the formal aspect of the wall its archetypal value of the home while connecting its material characterization to the phenomenological world. The material's variation that substantiates it evokes profoundly different atmospheres and situations. In the contemporary era, the constant emergence of terms such as post-human, trans-species, and non-human has ignited a vigorous debate on the distinction between domesticity and nature, consequently altering this architectural diaphragm, the physical and imaginary discrimination between these two spheres.

The wall has become, therefore, the liminal interface on which to deploy experimentation to define an interactive architecture capable of integrating a multi-species dialogue and configuring new spatialities open to the unfolding of new cohabitations. The article aims to reason precisely on the manipulation and experimentation operations that have occurred, in recent decades, on this archetypal element, gradually changing its permeability (first visual and then more concretely physical) and weaving a complex system of material and relational combinations.

Inside Outside. Sou Fujimoto: Inhabiting Nature from Japan to France

Luca Montuori

The text investigates the key themes through which Sou Fujimoto declines the relationship between man, nature and artifice, hybridising traditional Japanese culture in the global dimension of contemporary research. In particular is explored the encounter between these themes and that of the Western architecture. We can deduce from the Japanese experience an attitude towards nature that considers it not as an autonomous domain, external and

independent of human action, but as a part of life that weaves a continuous dynamic with it through time.

In the text, the realization of the Serpentine Gallery pavilion (2013) is taken as a key moment for the evolution of a research from the single-family house to the dimension of the collective house experimented in the European context. The occasion of some architecture competitions in France and the consolidation of an experience with young French professionals (Nicolas Laisné, Dimitri Roussel, OXO Architectes) led to the projects for the Arbre Blanc, for the Village Vertical and for Mille Arbres, which are here reread in the light of the Japanese architect's previous experience.

Nature and New Seaside Towns in France in the 1960s: La Grande Motte and Lecaute-Barcarès

Virginie Picon-Lefebvre

After World War Two in France and the period of Reconstruction, architects were asked to build a "social" tourism infrastructure as opposed to the classic tourism which was the domain of the hotel industry. In order to accommodate numerous holidaymakers, very large operations of several thousand collective and individual housing units were built from the beginning of the 1960s, such as La Grande Motte by Jean-Balladur or Leucate-Barcarès by Georges Candilis on the initiative of the State. These vacation towns present much more varied architectural expressions than those of the new towns intended for permanent residence. The architects imagined "cities of happiness," between nostalgia for rural origins and the search for a golden age, the desire to return to nature to recreate the lost village community. Nowadays, more than sixty years after their construction, the renovation of those "new towns" are necessary for several reasons, among them the changes in the way of life and the lack of public investment to maintain those sites built for popular vacations.

Where Do the Children Play? Meanings and Forms of Nature in Three Public Housing Projects of the 1970s

Emilia Rosmini

In response to the ultimate international challenges, such as overexploitation, contamination, climate emergency, inequality, and iniquity it is more than necessary to create supportable and dynamic spatial dwelling to regenerate biological and human communities.

Although with different premises, even in the 50s the contexts demand a radical change towards a more immersive approach to the conception and design of social housing, an approach founded in care for social and living milieus. A generation, of the post-war period, in which the theme of reconstruction inevitably forced a cultural rethinking, a change of paradigms.

The article analyses a significant triad of these experiments to understand these values: Alexandra Road in London, Les Étoiles in Ivry-sur-Seine, and the Matteotti Village in Terni. In all cases, it is evident that, although firmly adhering to the modern vocabulary, a strong sensitivity towards the natural dimension, a reinterpretation of the symbols of vernacular architecture, and an aesthetic of everyday life are the founding foundations of the project.

Responsibility, sensitivity, and creativity marked the design of the collective space, resolving the elements between the private and the collective; as well as reinforcing the relationship between the city, nature, and housing. These projects can help our current ways of planning, encouraging us to wonder how to reconcile things and beings at a time when the habitability of the planet is in question.

Building Nature in Unequal Contexts: São Paulo and Medellín

Luiz Recaman, Mariana Wilderom

The article proposes an analysis of the projects Housing Consolidation Juan Bobo (in Medellín, Colombia) and Residential Parque Novo Santo Amaro V (in São Paulo, Brazil), seeking to understand how both recognize and react to the urbanization process that, in addition to being explosive and segregating, has degraded environmental resources. The proposed analytical path starts from a review of the productive models that have pressured territorial occupation since colonization. The accelerated industrialization during the 20th century exacerbated these original characteristics of confrontation with the natural strata in the expansion of the urban area. Next, we analyze the forms of occupation of the respective territories by the mass of workers who faced the scarcity of housing provision, occupied the edges of the cities and the natural remains in a rudimentary manner. Finally, we highlight the potential of the two housing projects in the sense of the hypotheses, essentially different, of the projection of a socially and environmentally possible urbanity.

Urban Agriculture, Productive Infrastructure and Housing in South Africa

Jo Noero

We face a difficult future as architects. Our cities are unmanageable and divided. The underlying ideas that have shaped the architectural work that is described in the article can be located in the writings of architects John Turner, Colin Ward, Giancarlo De Carlo and others whose political persuasions can be described broadly as anarcho-socialist. The key element in their writings has to do with finding ways of opening up peoples' imagination, ingenuity, and labor by giving them the freedom to take charge and manage the important decisions governing their everyday lives. Out of this has grown a fascination of how to give the opportunity to urban dwellers to produce their own food and how to use this food resource as a way of exchange within the city. Various scales of agricultural production are explored as well as the development of sustainable and independent public infrastructure systems to support urban living. The key question is how to get political support to share control of the development of cities with citizens – certainly in South Africa at present this is not achievable, yet the time is rapidly approaching when we might not have time to debate this issue. The projects in the article are small and do not pretend to be anything but discrete tentative moves forward in this debate – what we need are many more initiatives – experimental in nature – like these projects to open a discussion about the future shape and composition our cities.

Agro-Cities at the Test of the New Century: Living Between Production and Sharing

Mariella Annese

Starting with a critical introduction on the theoretical models of agrotowns of the last century, the text critically re-reads some concrete experiences of the 12th century: Gualart's Sociopolis in Valencia and his post-covid housing project in China, and then speaks more in depth about the Cité Gagarine Truillot project in which an existing social housing settlement is recovered. If the weakness of the first examples is the proposal of new settlements with new land consumption, the innovative french project proposes to regenerate the existing public city with an agro-city strategy.

The project tackles the current theme of rethinking the public housing city of the modern in a contemporary sense, actively involving society, but many questions remain unresolved, denouncing the current difficulty of de-constructing established models in favour of effective r-urban housing models.

Life, Work and Nature. Two Forms of Productive Housing in Cali and Paris

Guiomar Martín Domínguez, Violeta González Escorihuela

This paper identifies a potential field of research in those architectural practices that explore the integration of “work” and “nature” into collective urban living; two key parameters that, significantly enough, were chosen as leading mottos in the last four European competitions. Examining two built projects from quite different contexts – “Edificio Jardín Hospedero y Nectarífero” in Cali, by Husos architects, and “Farme du Rail” in Paris, by Grand Huit cooperative – the research initially looks into the relationships between each project's natural ecosystem and the social values, agents and processes implied in the conception, management, and maintenance of their domestic-productive landscapes. Moreover, the analysis of specific architectural strategies brings to the fore innovative solutions that challenge conventional dualities such as natural/artificial or productive/reproductive, either in programmatic, constructive, or spatial terms. Despite their limitations, these projects serve as an excellent starting point to expand the discussion on the meaning of collectivity for the design of future urban housing from a broad ecological perspective.