



SYLVA.
CITTÀ, NATURE,
AVAMPOSTI



A CURA DI
SARA MARINI
VINCENZO MOSCHETTI

SYLVA. CITTÀ, NATURE, AVAMPOSTI
a cura di Sara Marini e Vincenzo Moschetti

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DIRETTA DA

Sara Marini
Università luav di Venezia

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A PLACE IN THE
WILDERNESS,
WILDERNESS IN PLACE

STAMATINA KOUSIDI

In a 1925 letter to Ms. Meyer, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret underlined that the green roof of Villa Meyer did not aim to align with the character of a French garden but that it represented instead “a small wilderness where, thanks to the woods of Parc St-James, one can imagine oneself far away from Paris”[¶]. Modern architecture aspired to establish a new relationship between buildings, their inhabitants and nature, but it nonetheless did not bring any new materials, technologies or approaches to the design of open spaces: its connection to the landscape was to be found “in the old virtues of sun, sky, greenery, shelter, and space”[¶]. The sketches of Villa Meyer tell a different story. A thick layer of lush vegetation covers and frames the house, nearly taking over the built. The wilderness aims, in this context, to generate analogies, metaphors and figures of speech essential to the interpretation of (the new) architecture as a return to the (old) natural state of living, detached from industrialised societies: to reveal the allegorical potential of the landscape[¶]. However, it is also recognised as essential to spiritual well-being and may be understood through the prism of another stream of modernism which explored the relationship between architecture and the natural environment in utilitarian, if not health-giving terms, through a focus on light, air, physical exercise and rest, as numerous manifestos of this era reveal.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century concerns with health, hygiene and well-being reflected in the fervent search for a direct confrontation between building and the pristine nature of the woods. The immersive aspect of dwelling in nature was generated by design. Glass walls, flat roofs, terraces and balconies, pieces of furniture, design details and apparel comprised elements which were designed to break the impermeability of the building envelope and to obtain optimum penetration of sunlight and allow for the exposure of the body to nature, the sun and the fresh air. Schools and hospitals, summer camps and sanatoria which emerged in the 1920s and '30s, such as Hannes Meyer's ADGB Trade Union School in Bernau (1928-30), Richard Döcker's Sanatorium for tuberculosis in Waiblingen (1926-28) and Alvar and Aino Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium (1929-33), appeared as structures immersed in the wilderness. Benefitting from the close relationship between the built and the natural environments, they “[floated] outside [their] normal urban habitat” and “[angled themselves] to the sun”, as Beatriz Colomina describes in her discussion of the manifold ways in which modern architecture was presented and understood as “a piece of medical equipment”[¶].

Today, architects, urban designers and landscape architects increasingly embrace the “natural” dimension of architec-

ture under the influence of environmental, energy and health concerns. The terms “green”, “biophilic” and “eco-aesthetic” are gaining ground in contemporary design debates, articulating the aim to establish an architectural agenda for sustainability. The forest emerges as an essential aspect of the language of design and influences “the success of a certain infrastructural approach to architecture” which suggests a “process of *multinaturalization* of the human environment”¹. Emphasis is placed on the design of surfaces, spaces of flows, and atmospheres, as well as to the processes assigned to them – responsive, adaptive, regenerative. In their essay “Demedicalize Architecture”, Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini observe that “in a society like ours, so thoroughly enchanted by the myth of ‘nature’, it is not surprising to discover the wide-ranging dissemination of green. And by assimilating green the built environment aspires to craft a body that is ideal or at least in good health, apparently re-naturalized or better yet, embedded in nature”².

The modernist vision of placing the built structure in the woods, and integrating the human body to its natural surroundings, echoes in the present day. Domestic, office, healthcare and city spaces emerge as the new interfaces between the built and natural environments. Projects such as the IBN – Institute for Forestry and Nature Research by Behnisch Architekten in Wageningen (1994-98) and the Maggie’s Centre – Gartnavel by OMA in Glasgow (2007-11) are centred and develop around a system of internal voids conceived as gardens of wildlife qualities. Rather than by boundaries and limits, the distribution of rooms is characterised in both cases by joints, permeations and links allowing for a continuous relationship between interior and exterior, built and natural, private and collective spaces. The two projects aim at enhancing the relationship between architectural programme, building and context through landscape interventions that address the experiential qualities of office and healthcare spaces, respectively. In reevaluating qualities of comfort associated with different manifestations of everyday living, they promote a critical reflection on the relationship between user, artifice and nature.

In the domestic domain, the speculative project House dilation by Philippe Rahm architectes (2006), in turn, builds on the typology of the pavilion embedded in the woods and suggests its advancement from the standpoint of the climate. The project envisions that the rooms comprising the house become separated and dispersed in different areas in the Grizedale forest, in three natural settings characterised by specific properties of climate, light, temperature and humidity, namely the heat of the

OMA, Maggie's Centre – Gartnavel, Glasgow, 2007-11.
Photo by Gordon Farquhar.



forest at night, the warmth of the open field during a winter day, the freshness of the forest edge in spring¹¹. It seeks to comprehend how the perception of comfort¹² in the living spaces of the house is co-shaped with the surrounding environmental conditions and how such a symbiotic process could serve to challenge well-established standards of comfort in contemporary culture.

2.

In the mid-nineteenth century, concerns about the provision of healthy environments had influenced a different understanding of architecture's relation to nature. The 1851 proposal of horticulturist Joseph Paxton for an urban sanatorium is a good example: it formed part of an experimentation that saw glasshouses evolving from places of preservation and aesthetic experience to laboratories of spaces appropriate for human habitation in the context of the emerging industrial cities. A fragment in Paxton's broader portfolio, the proposal for a sanatorium structure reflected the hypothesis that "plants were not only intended to provide the urban population with access to the experience of the natural world, but they were also conceived as an integral part of the environmental system"¹³. By adjusting spaces intended for the cultivation of non-native plant species to spaces fit for human habitation, hence promoting the symbiosis between plants and humans, Paxton addressed openly the issue of environmental control.

Glasshouses rendered visible the environmental dimension of architecture. The transdisciplinary study of temperature, humidity, solar radiation and air movement and their effect on the health of plants defined new conceptualisations of space¹⁴. The construction process of glasshouses revealed the mutual limits of horticulture and architecture, in a framework that embraced the exploration of a healthy environment for man to reside in. To reverse analogies, not the modernist pattern of the all-glass structure contained in the wilderness, but elements of the wilderness domain contained in the all-glass structure. In his 1929 book *Befreites Wohnen*, art historian Sigfried Giedion draws a comparison between the glasshouse and the early production of modernist architecture. "Plants need light and heat. We need light and heat", he writes, exclaiming that "it took almost 100 years for architects to have the courage to demand light for humans as well and, instead of erecting dungeon-like walls, to build liberated walls dematerialized in glass!"¹⁵. The Glass House at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris (Rouhault Fils, 1833) is interpreted, here, as a precursor of modern architecture in a framework that recognised aspects of the environment as factors that had a significant bearing on architectural design.

The understanding of the environment as a hybrid of visible (nature, light, texture) with invisible (climate, energies, sound) elements gave rise to a counter-movement within industrial modernism. Architects and artists formulated a bio-technological approach to design: László Moholy-Nagy's visions of the biological dimension as a prominent consideration of architecture, Siegfried Ebeling's conception of space as membrane, and Frederick Kiesler's discussion of the notions of correalism and biotechnique as new architectural models articulated this approach. As the environmental performance of architecture would become a central topic to the ecological discourses of the 1960s and '70s, the conceptualisation of buildings in terms of the atmospheres they contain would proliferate. Attention was no longer placed on singular objects but on holistic systems, no longer on the relationship between inside and outside from an aesthetic perspective but on the impact of the construction, maintenance and operation of buildings on the environment. "The laws of nature and metabolism were displaced from the domain of wilderness to the domain of cities and buildings" ¶ ∩ and architectural design drew upon natural operations, copying biological and natural processes as precise analogues for the functioning of manmade systems ¶ ∆.

Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk focuses a critical attention on climatic conditions and dwelling. He uses the figure of the glasshouse to point out that "it was the exercise of granting plants hospitality that first created the conditions under which it became possible to formulate a concept of environment" ¶ ∟. Sloterdijk deploys such a typological figure to propose the understanding of the "environment as a shared climate", with reference to the complex relations between humans, plants and built artefacts, revisiting the ongoing dialectic between nature and culture. Approaching "environmental design as atmospheric" therefore "updates the concept of the environment into that of a sensorium, a sphere that is shared" ¶ ⊥ and brings to the foreground the entangled relationship between building, human body and the environment.

"By linking health to issues such as the quality of air, water and urban space, medicine has helped to make the environment an important concern" ¶ ✱, casting a major influence on architectural and urban design practices. In contemporary discourse, the notion of the body as organism prevails over the idea of the body as measure ¶ ∥ and points to a transition from the physical (tangible) to the physiological (intangible) dimensions of architecture, from image to effect and delight, from relations of analogy to abstraction. "The return of the body to the scene, this time considered in all of its material and immaterial aspects", as Sara

Behnisch Architekten, IBN – Institute for Forestry and Nature Research, Wageningen, 1994-98. Photo by Christian Kandzia.



Junya Ishigami, Park in a Building, in J. Ishigami, *How small? How vast? How Architecture Grows*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2014.

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Marini points out in her essay *The Anthropocene Style. The Space of Participation and the Language of Architecture*, “coincides not only with the demand for space customizations, but it opens up new questions about the meaning and performance of space and proposes new ways of sharing”¹.

Contemporary design practices continue to address these questions. They are not focused on a mediated relationship between architecture and nature but on a comprehensive approach to architecture and urban design instead, so as to integrate natural and built components in an all-inclusive system. Alongside issues of structure, space and form, these practices draw attention to the intangible aspects of living spaces, to the design of atmospheres and microclimates, to factors such as temperature, humidity and solar radiation, to controlled environments and regulated air. Projects such as the speculative Park in a building (Junya Ishigami, 2010), the Amazon’s Spheres in Seattle (NBBJ, 2013-18) and the Living tower (SOA Architects, 2005) put directly into act the concept of “living-with-nature”, hence prioritising the physiological dimensions of architecture, notions of comfort and human well-being.

3.

In contemporary cities, the convergence of wildlife and urban qualities is an aspect that cannot be ignored². On the one hand, elements of sylvan qualities enter the urban territory – its fabrics, its buildings and its infrastructures – and craft new definitions of the role of nature in the city³. On the other, in recent decades, buildings and landscapes evolve as experimental grounds of ecological principles, rendering ambiguous the boundaries between artifice and nature. These phenomena are not new. In the course of architectural history, different approaches to the intermedial relation of architecture to nature have cultivated different understandings of the notion of wilderness. They have henceforth structured their own forms, models and technologies of design. This paper aims to draw attention to two approaches which emerge as prevalent and centre around the “being-one-with-nature” and the “living-with-nature” notions. It argues that we need to revisit the historical precedents to architecture’s growing fascination with the wilderness, both as a metaphorical concept and as an actuality, and examine how these may serve as catalysts for the crafting of alternative tools for the design and the interpretation of the built environment.

A question that arises concerns revisiting the problem of form. Within a context that embraces the assumption that archi-

ecture cannot separate itself from the natural world, phenomena such as the transformation of mineral walls into living façades, of flat-horizontal roofs into natural surfaces, of interior spaces into green systems come to the fore, influencing new architectural languages. A shift of attention away from “concerns about appropriate form and the wider cultural context of design” and “towards a humanist and social concern for the sustaining of individual health” ☿ ☿ can be therefore observed. The problem of architectural form however sustains and calls for further exploration. It remains an aspect of cultural expression which “continues to be vital, not ancillary – and [...] cannot be deemed simply subservient to, or the passive recipient of, the claims of an ethical horizon as it is delimited by current environmental modalities” ☿ ↓: an aspect that needs to be taken into consideration in design along, and not at the expense of, the pressing social and environmental demands.

A second question refers to elucidating the notion of the “between” ☿ ♯, the interface between architecture and nature. Design is called to interpret and address the issues related with the natural world and influence the establishment of new logics of ecological design. It is called to bridge the gap between progress and environmental protection, change and preservation. As Paulo Tavares observes in his essay *In the Forest Ruins*, the most significant interpretation of design has less to do “about *planning* and more about *planting* the planet”, considering that “planting is also a practice of planning and design, but one that needs to be fine-tuned to the agency of winds, climates, and the myriad beings upon which the seeding and pollination of life depends” ☿ ↓. It is important, in this regard, to question whether “our relation to nature is one of inclusion or exclusion, and furthermore, what sorts of natures this relationship implies” ☿ † and what kinds of relationships between city and wilderness remain to be forged.

✦ [Translation by the author] “Villa Meyer, Paris 1925 (1er projet): Madame, [...] Nous pensons que l’unité est plus forte que les parties. Et ne croyez pas que ce lisse soit l’effet de la paresse; il est au contraire le résultat de plans longuement mûris. [...] Ce jardin n’est point à la française mais est un bocage sauvage où l’on peut grâce aux futaies du Parc St-James se croire loin de Paris... Les services reçoivent le plein soleil, tant mieux. Par les fenêtres, haut placées, sous le plafond, on voit du ciel et des arbres... Tant mieux. (Lettre de Le Corbusier à Mme. Meyer, avec croquis)”. Le Corbusier, P. Jeanneret, *Œuvre Complète*, vol. 1: 1910-1929, Editions Girsberger, Zürich 1935, p. 89.

∞ R. Geddes, *The Nature of the Built Environment*, in “Progressive Architecture”, June 1974, p. 74.

↓ “While Le Corbusier displayed little interest in the niceties of garden design, he was nonetheless deeply susceptible to the evocative power of landscape. He was possessed by a panoramic vision that seemed to incorporate in its trajectory the literal sweep of history”. K. Frampton, *In Search of the Modern Landscape*, in S. Wrede, W.H. Adams (edited by), *Denatured Visions. Landscape and Culture in Twentieth Century*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1991, p. 44.

∧ “The sanatorium buildings were typically disconnected from cities, floating like ships on mountainsides, in forests, by lakes, or at the coast [...] This sense of floating outside its normal urban habitat and angling itself to the sun to heal fragile bodies challenged the definition of architecture. It is as if architecture itself took the cure”. B. Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2019, p. 74.

∩ Cf. J. VanderGoot, *Architecture and the Forest Aesthetic. A New Look at Design and Resilient Urbanism*, Routledge, London-New York 2018.

⊥ A. Zaera-Polo, *The Politics of the Envelope. A Political Critique of Materialism*, in “Log”, XVII, 13/14, 2008, pp. 77-105.

* G. Borasi, M. Zardini, *Demedicalize Architecture*, in Id. (edited by), *Imperfect Health. The Medicalization of Architecture*, Canadian Centre of Architecture-Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2012, p. 19.

∥ [Translation by the author] “Notre travail pour le projet d’un centre de résidences d’artistes à Grizedale en pleine campagne au nord de l’Angleterre s’étend sur l’ensemble du site. Il dilate les fonctions dans différents lieux, différents climats [...]. En réalité, l’architecture se dépouille ici de sa dernière peau, de l’ultime strate de son enveloppe extérieure, et c’est l’environnement alors qui acquiert ce rôle [...]. D’une forme au départ compacte, la construction se dilate jusqu’à atteindre trois situations géographiques (dans le pré, en lisière, dans la forêt) qui chacune se détermine par rapport à des qualités climatiques spécifiques [...]”. P. Rahm, *Architecture Météorologique*, Archibooks, Paris 2009, pp. 24-25.

∩ “The German word *Behaglichkeit* – the

rough equivalent of comfortableness, which also expresses a sense of physical contentedness – is derived from the word *Hag* (fenced enclosure), which referred originally to a section of the wilderness closed off for human use. The word comfortableness has similar implications of cosiness and physical security enjoyed in familiar surroundings”. A. Janson, F. Tigges, *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture: The Vocabulary of Spatial Situations*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2014, p. 62.

✦ ∩ “[He] conceived the interior as a type of self-contained biosphere, in which plants and animals, including human beings, mutually participate in the sustenance of an internal carbon dioxide and oxygen cycle”. H. Schoenefeldt, *The Crystal Palace, Environmentally Considered*, in “arq: Architectural Research Quarterly”, XII, 3/4, 2008, p. 285.

✦ ✦ “Despite some architects’ resistance to technical and material innovations, horticulture and medicine played a crucial role by mediating between architecture and environmental practices as engineers looked to these scientific fields to elaborate a theory of warming and ventilating – imbricating architecture with efforts to reconstruct foreign climates across England”. D. Valen, *On the Horticultural Origins of Victorian Glasshouse Culture*, in “Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians”, LXXXV, 4, 2016, p. 420.

✦ ∞ S. Giedion, *Befreites Wohnen | Liberated Dwelling*, edited by R. Geiser, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2019, p. 62, or. ed. *Befreites Wohnen*, Orell Füssli Verlag, Zürich-Leipzig 1929.

✦ ∩ L. Kallipoliti, *No More Schisms*, in “Architectural Design – EcoRedux”, 208, 2010, p. 19.

✦ ∆ *Ibid.*

✦ ∩ “If post-Uexküll the talk was of ‘environment’, then this meant thinking not just of the natural habitat of exotic animals and plants but also of the procedures for the technical reproduction of that habitat in alien surroundings. It was initially this reconstructive imperative that we have to thank for the fact that a general concept of the environment was formulated”. P. Sloterdijk, *Atmospheric Politics*, in B. Latour, P. Weibel (edited by), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2005, p. 945.

✦ ⊥ D. Hauptmann, W. Neidich (edited by), *Cognitive Architecture: From Bio-politics to Noo-politics; Architecture and Mind in the Age of Communication and Information*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2010, p. 312.

✦ * I. Lanthier, L. Olivier, *The Construction of Environmental Awareness*, in E. Darier (edited by), *Discourses of the Environment*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 1998, p. 76.

✦ ∥ “Two founding metaphors underlie the body in architecture: the body-organism and the body-measure. These two tropes have crossed the centuries and are still valid today. [...] The two figures (the body-organism and the body-measure), in their progressive interpretations and applications,

shift from the centrality of the organic to the absolutism of the abstract: here the body placed on the altar of the project seems to evaporate". S. Marini, *Lo stile Antropocene. Lo spazio della partecipazione e il linguaggio dell'architettura | The Anthropocene Style. The Space of Participation and the Language of Architecture*, in "TECHNE. Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment", 14, 2017, pp. 46-47.



Ivi., p. 47.



"Why are we now reaching a turning point? In recent decades, cities have grown in a dramatic way. The urban condition has become the new norm. In the extremely large contemporary urban territories, natural elements can no longer be considered as artifacts. From parks to empty lots gradually reclaimed by vegetation, from water management to urban agriculture, nature represents, to the contrary, a fundamental dimension of urbanization. In addition, urban infrastructures that once were perceived as adverse to natural life now appear sometimes as wildlife preserves. In Europe uncultivated land alongside freeways has become, for instance, the dwelling place of various endangered species. Leaving aside this type of extreme situation, one cannot be struck by the new partnership that is emerging between the infrastructural approach and the affirmation of the new role of nature in cities". A. Picon, *Nature, Infrastructures, and the Urban Condition*, in M. Mostafavi, G. Doherty (edited by), *Ecological Urbanism*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2016, pp. 534-535.



Cf. H. Macdonald, *Animals Are Rewilding Our Cities. On YouTube, at Least*, in "The New York Times Magazine", 15 April 2020, <https://nyti.ms/2RDqkwk>, accessed 26.12.2020.



S. Guy, G. Farmer, *Reinterpreting Sustainable Architecture: The Place of Technology*, in "Journal of Architectural Education", LIV, 3, 2001, p. 145.



P. Scott Cohen, E. Naginski (edited by), *The Return of Nature: Sustaining Architecture in the Face of Sustainability*, Routledge, London-New York 2014, p. 3.



"What does 'mastery of the relation between nature and humanity' mean? That neither must man master nature nor nature man. Nor must both be surpassed in a third term that would represent their dialectical synthesis. Rather, according to the Benjaminian model of a 'dialectic at a standstill', what is decisive here is only the 'between', the interval or, we might say, the play between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence". G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, p. 220, or. ed. *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002.



P. Tavares, *In the Forest Ruins*, in AAVV., *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2018, p. 302.



"One of the most interesting concerns of the flat-horizontal envelope is whether its

relationship with nature is one of exclusion or inclusion, and furthermore, what sorts of natures this relationship implies. [...] The proliferation of biospheres and biotopes as part of this envelope typology resonates with Latour's proposal of a political ecology based on the multiplicity of natures, as an opportunity to challenge *mononaturalism*". A. Zaera-Polo, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

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GIORGIA AQUILAR
BEATRICE BALDUCCI
MARCO BROCCA
GIOVANNI CARLI
FULVIO CORTESE
STAMATINA KOUSIDI
LORENZO LAZZARI
JACOPO LEVERATTO
SARA MARINI
ELISA MONACI
VINCENZO MOSCHETTI
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