

THE FOREST IN BRUNO TAUT'S *CITY CROWN*: A SPIRITUAL AND PERCEPTUAL UTOPIA FOR OUR CITIES

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Walking through the woods, your attention is caught by particular tree. There it is, rooted in the earth, trunk rising up, branches splayed out, swaying in the wind, with or without buds or leaves, depending on the season. How should we define it? What is tree and what is not-tree? Where does the tree end and the rest of the world begin? These questions are not easily answered.✱

Bruno Taut, among other architects of Modernity, could reveal a distinguished attitude in looking at the potentiality of vegetation and the sylvan to construct a new alliance between architecture and nature.

This relationship between nature and the project was then highlighted in his two essays *Natur und Kunst* (*Nature and Art*) and *Natur und Baukunst* (*Nature and Architecture*). The two articles present nature as the primary source for the art and the project, to look in depth with the lens of the spirit, finding in trees and sylvan the “architecture of the world”. Thus, the forest emerges as a spatial device between the scales and part of the territory and architecture itself.

From this, the contribution aims to present Taut's utopia of the *City Crown* as seminal work, where the city becomes a hybrid space between architecture and forest, which creates an indispensable bond of coexistence for people and built spaces.

Consequently, the definition of Taut's utopia is intimately connected with the image of the forest, outlining a nuance between minerality and naturality, defining a transformed vision of the idea of the garden city, and enriching the urban experience. Indeed, the forest becomes a new element of the city, a dense image that constitutes an experiential part of the urban fabric, defining borders and blending features. Here, the architect – as Bruno Taut explained in his essay – should “awaken the treasure that sleeps in the depths of the human mind”✶, filling the spatial configuration with a new spiritual bond between space, nature and society. Taut's *City Crown* aimed at presenting a visionary imaginary for the new city, considering this as a true mission; indeed, he specified that “If they [the architects] have no ultimate vision, if they do not hope and long for the greatest achievements, then their existence has no value”✷.

Finally, the essay proposes to frame Taut's work as a project legacy able to impact the approach to the current urban transformation, looking at the sylvan as a design and spiritual possibility for a new experience of architecture and urban space. Hence, themes like reforestation, green belts, or green wedges could find a new architectural and urban significance, further than their technical usefulness, presenting a new vision for the city.

THE VEGETATION: FROM HOWARD'S GARDEN CITY TO BRUNO TAUT

Since the last decades of the XIX century, and then exploding during the following century, the role of the city and its future started to be at the center of the architectural debate^Λ. The urban growth, the mass of people moving from the countryside to the city, and then the two world wars of the XX century pushed for a reimagination of the city, its spaces and significance^Λ.

In the changing condition of the space, many architects proposed new models for urban development. Modernism played a crucial role in this architectural speculation, building new experimental neighbourhoods and producing utopias that heavily influenced the development of the built environment and urban design. New values were spreading, and the need to reframe the city's social, ethical, and spatial theme pushed many authors to propose new development models.

Within this framework, at the turn of the XIX century, Ebenezer Howard published a book in England, stating a new alliance between the naturality of the country with the services and minerality of the city. Titled *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, the book heavily influenced architects and urbanists all over Europe, producing a proper garden city movement that aimed to transform the urban quality of life and, at the same time, reframe the relationship between the project and vegetation. From Taut to Migge, Gropius and Le Corbusier, the theme of vegetation entered the modern discussion of architecture and city, reflecting on the role of gardens and sylvan as controlled elements of a new vision for the project, capable of making a closer relationship between oxymorons of the past. As the physical construction of Howard's vision for a new urbanity, the first garden city of Letchworth was built. Like other German architects, Taut knew Unwin's work^{*}, visiting and reading his book *Fundamentals of City Planning*, which was translated into German with the title *Grundlagen des Städtebaus*. This textbook had a significant repercussion on a generation of architects, which considered the theme in the practice of urban design not only as a planning issue (such as the relationship between industries and dwellings or the circulation principles for the modern cities) but also in defining a crucial alliance between country and city.

Thus, the vegetation became a tool of the project, but also an environment to build and confront. Considering the work of Bruno Taut, we could affirm that Nature played an important role in his career as an architect, visibly interacting with his design production.

Starting from the city, Bruno Taut was concerned about the possible alliance between human beings, Nature and the urban

context, approaching the theme from a poetic point of view. When writing the essay *Natur und Kunst*, Taut directly quotes John Ruskin in an excerpt from the book *Stones of Venice*: "We are forced, for the sake of accumulating our power and knowledge, to live in cities: but such advantage as we have in association with each other is in great part counterbalanced by our loss of fellowship with Nature. [...] Then the function of our architecture is, as far as may be, to replace these; to tell us about Nature; to possess us with memories of her quietness; to be solemn and full of tenderness, like her, and rich in portraiture of her"^Λ.

Quoting these lines, Taut let us understand the impact they could have had in shaping his approach to nature. Far from the utilitarian perspective, Taut gazed at the sylvan with an artistic and spiritual bond. Through it, he proposed a new vision for the garden city, trying to advance Howard and Unwin's model and enrich its design values. This concept was then exposed within a utopian project, published in 1919, titled *Die Stadtkrone – The City Crown*. In this publication, before introducing the project itself, he wrote: "To view architecture as nothing more than nicely designed functional forms or as ornamental wrappings around our essential needs is to assign it to the role of a craft and places too little value on its importance [in our lives]. In buildings that demand more than the fulfillment of basic necessities, [architecture] is an art, a play of fantasy, and only maintains a very loose connection to those purposes. However, no effort of the human imagination can lead to profound [physical] forms if it does not root itself in the inner spiritual life and existence of mankind"^Λ.

Bruno Taut, here, clarified his position on the role of design, opening to the project of the *City Crown*, where his attitude was revealed both in his treatments of architecture and sylvan. These were based on functional purposes and rooted in a spiritual and spatial bond. In this way, he demonstrated how the practice of architecture could work with nature as a declared formal inspiration^Λ ^Λ, and direct use of nature as a design element.

THE *CITY CROWN*: BUILDING AN IDEAL

This design goes beyond the barriers of the everyday, the 'natural' flows freely and, at the same time, in a tight spiritual bond.^Λ ^Λ

With these words, Taut described the project *City Crown* (Fig. 1), his utopian figuration for an urban reimagination. The utopian project constructs a continuous dialogue between buildings and Nature, where the forest plays a crucial role in the definition of the design figuration of the project.

The utopia echoes the medieval city in a concentric disposition with its core at the centre. Nevertheless, if in historic cities, the urban limits were defined by the walls, Taut assigned the role to the forest, which encircled the new city, with trees constructing a natural architecture. The inner structure is then proportioned between private buildings, gardens, parks, and public services. Then, starting by mirroring some typological features of Howard's Garden city, Taut proposed a complete permeation between minerality and naturality, starting with the houses which are "entirely conceived in the character of a garden city; in low single rows with deep gardens for every house, [...] so that the residential area itself is a horticultural zone making allotment gardens unnecessary. Beyond the periphery of the park belt is the agricultural zone" ¶ 9.

Following, relating the main concern of his time, Taut reflected on the relationship between industries and dwellings, infrastructures, and public space. However, the central architecture is the fundamental place in this utopia, which also gives its name to it. Echoing the Glasshouse, a series of constructions thicken in the heart of the city, expressing at the same time the solidity of the new city and the poetic light that shines in the interiors across the glass facades. The central building is taller than the others, towering over the rest of the urban fabric. Entirely thought as a public space, Taut imagined the people to overlook the territory around, having a close contact with nature and the city, experiencing the space as a collective good. Moreover, the agglomerate that composes the core of the *City Crown* and hosted public functions grounded on a sequence of squares where the minerality blended the sylvan: "While the exits from the theater and small community center lead to large outside staircases (special ramps are not drawn; the approach to the loading dock in the middle would take place via a tunnel-like driveway) and tree-covered squares, on the right and left of these two large buildings is a framework of courtyards, arcades and buildings, which vary depending on position and purpose" ¶ 11. In general, overcoming functional zoning, it is possible to interpret the utopia by looking at the sequences of its spaces, where woods and buildings define a reciprocal dialogue between masses and voids. The sylvan is used to construct a precise figure of the urban space and is valued with a spiritual meaning. More than a border, the forest enters the city and reaches the main buildings: like thick connections, axial churches are placed as forest front elements; similarly, the central architecture is the culmination of a forest wedge which constitutes a forest park. Within this, universities and hospitals are hosted, making the forest also a public and livable space.

Taut's fascination for the forest is already visible in his early paintings. In the first years of the XX century, Taut produced a series of paintings and drawings with the forest as a landscape or main subject, representing its physical presence in the territory. The production reveals a strong interest in sylvan's atmospheres, its relationship with the light, as well as the forest as physical construction of nature ¶ 1. These are collected in the book *Bruno Taut: Natur Und Fantasie 1880-1938* curated by M. Speidel and published in the 1994. Some paintings like *Flußlandschaft* ¶ 1 emphasize the forest as an object, a solid figure which defines a natural architecture in the territory, underlined by the contour lines and standing between landscape and buildings.

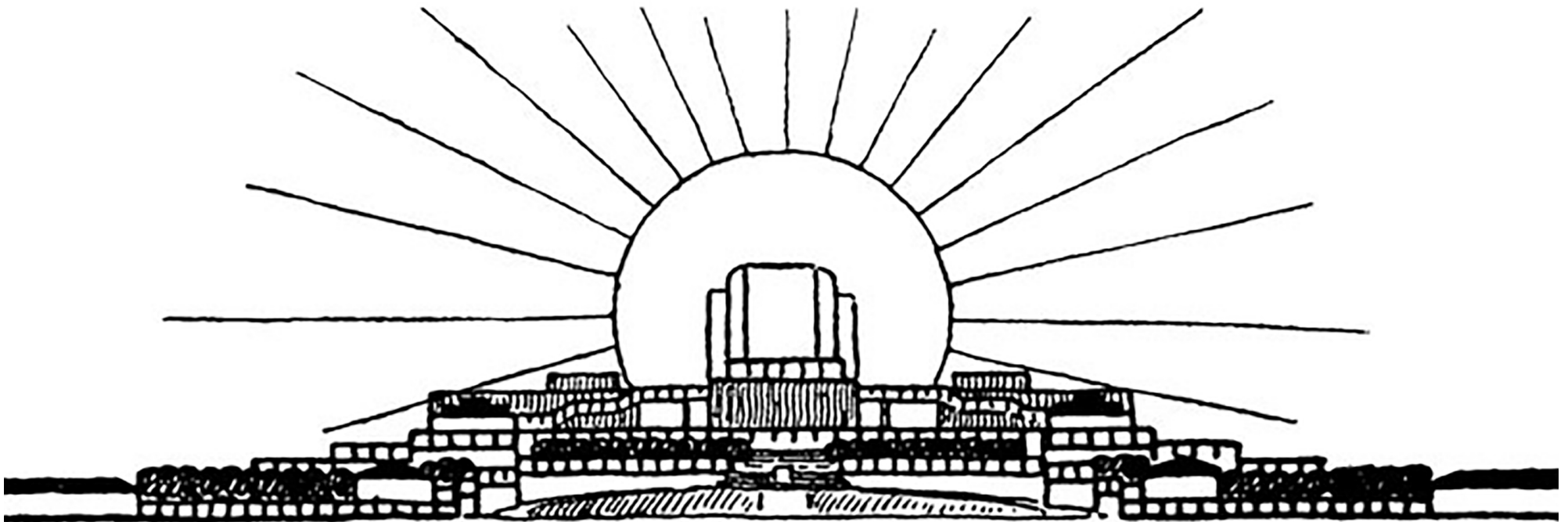
The project for the *City Crown* transposed the same attitude to look at the sylvan as an urban figure. Indeed, in this work, the forest takes a prominent role, being a design tool and an element of perceptions. Both a barrier to define the city's shape, a dense element within the city itself, defining the "basement" of the central architecture, and a space to perceive nature, the forest could be described as a symbolic foundation for the *City Crown*.

More than just a garden city, Taut envisioned the space for the wilderness to "connect the heart of the city with the open land like a lifeline. This will be a true people's park with [...] a vast grove and a forest leading to a natural area" ¶ 10. Through this relation, the Architect envisioned a true symbiosis between the city and the sylvan, an alliance embedded in the city's morphology, metabolisms, and climate functioning.

The forest in the *City Crown* becomes a living element of the settlement, controlled in its form as an architectural material. The shape of the forest traces the form of the city, where the sylvan becomes its natural construction, in a strong relationship with the built environment. The same circle around the city that recalls the city's wall of the middle age is a reinterpretation of the historical city but imagined through nature. Remarkably, the forest's aesthetic echoes the urban elements, configuring a series of visual metaphors and, lastly, becoming a city itself. The forest is a built organism that gives structure to architecture; we could see in the sylvan a typological element, a built space, and a spiritual place of Taut's imagination.

Moreover, the forest in the Architect's vision is more than an image of wilderness, becoming a climate device too. Indeed, even without technical analysis, Bruno Taut proposes the forest to be more prominent on the *City Crown*'s western side to allow the city's fresh ventilation thanks to the main winds. As described by Taut: "In the west, along the main wind direction, a big sec-

The images show the towering element of the city crown.
Drawings by Bruno Taut.



tor shaped park brings good air from the woods and fields into the city”†. The relationship between the city and the forest also becomes a method to cool the city, avoiding the hot urban climate and considering the connection between the city and nature for better wellbeing.

Bruno Taut, starting with the knowledge of the work of Unwin and Howard, tried to evolve the garden city model. In his vision, nature is no longer a utilitarian space; instead, the forest, so Nature, becomes an integral construction of the city and architecture as a spiritual counterpart to them.

Interestingly, the main elements of the urban fabrics arise from a differently dense forest. The three churches, placed at the margin of the urban fabric, are built as complementary to the forest that seems to penetrate the city itself. The forest wedges become a thick and dense construction of trees, which makes closer the relationship between the mineral space for the citizens and the naturality of the sylvan. Similarly, hospitals and the university are placed within the forest park, valuing the last one of a social and public role, making the relationship between man and nature closer.

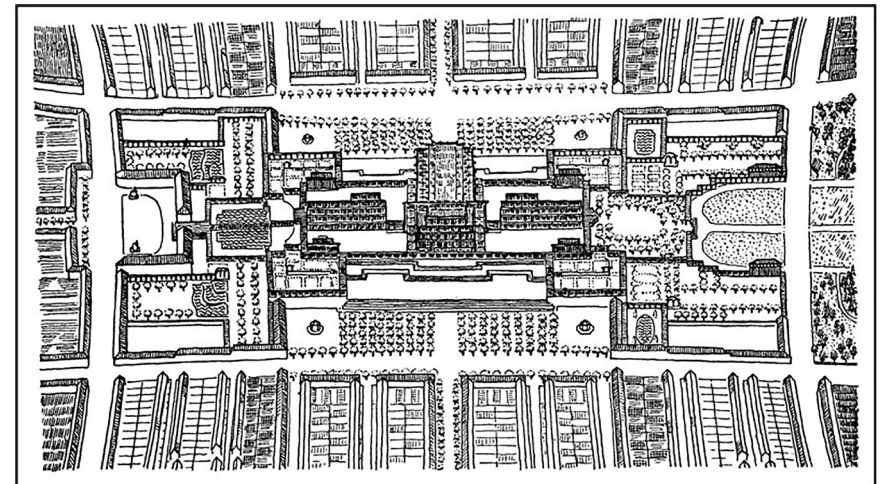
As written before, the culmination of the project is the crowning building. Here the forest reaches the architecture and represents a natural basement for the main public building, shaping small dense forested squares. The woodland is so blended with the architectural forms, stressing its presence. The project, as a whole, displays the concept “to tell about Nature” through urban and architectural design that Ruskin suggested and that fascinated the imagination of Taut.

To conclude, with a modern attitude, Bruno Taut controlled nature and, at the same time, achieved a sense of freedom for the city. The City Crown evolved the concept of the Garden city proposed by Howard and tried to do what, decades later, Monestiroli wrote about the Modern urban culture, which “seems to allow, at least theoretically, the ancient dream to equip the nature to be inhabited”. Taut traced this poetic interdependence between the Forest and Architecture, shaping a city where architecture and nature are reciprocal complements. The forest, which Taut believed essential for the modern city, is a symbolic and perceptive tool. Spiritual and experiential, this utopia presents the forest as an architectural element, a form of the territory, and a design tool that could work on new urban figurations.

The figure represents the city's core, with the city crown's complex.

Trees create a sequence of forested squares and define a tight bond between architecture and naturality.

Drawing by Bruno Taut.



Taut's work remained tight to the forest beyond the utopia, making it a manifesto of his belief and a possible will for a different relation between minerality and naturality. This is visible in Hufeisensiedlung, built in 1925, or even the following project, like the Waldsiedlung, constructed between 1926 and 1931. Both projects revealed a sensibility for the sylvan, which became an integral part of the urban and architectural space.

In this perspective, rereading the *City Crown* means catching the architectural and spiritual vision of the forest in connection with the mineral city. This allows us to frame and signify the forest starting from the design values shaped by Taut, trying to address them as a new possibility for the urban wilderness. The *City Crown* project displays that it is not enough to find space for nature in the city; instead, through this utopia, the Architect showed how it is possible to manipulate and give value to the forest, which becomes the counterpoint of architecture and an architectural construction itself. This, somehow, forces us to go beyond the idea of a quantitative nature, an approach based on the number of plants implemented in the city, rather, he suggested facing sylvan in its qualitative essence, looking at its shapes and atmospheres.

The usefulness of this interpretation becomes central when referring to current practices. Indeed, what seems to be missing in the present-day panorama is a cultural understanding of the ongoing processes, where design could have a role in shaping the possible relationship between nature and the city, sylvan and mineral. If the current issue of the project is to adapt cities through nature, we should deepen its poetic power, where nature is not only a straightforward solution to climate hazards but a vehicle to transform the urban experience²¹. Here, the role of the forest could be valued with new morphological and ethical significance in a vision that is not focused on filling the neglected areas with forests but instead on shaping a new alliance and interdependence between the city and the sylvan. This relation, as Bruno Taut suggested, could relate at the same time qualitative and quantitative features. In fact, the thermal discussion briefly introduced in the *City Crown* could be deeply implemented in the contemporary project. Similarly, new ecological connections and forestation projects could see in the *City Crown* a utopian paradigm, able to rethink the urban structure and experience.

An example could be seen in some experimentations developed by Ecosistema Urbano. The Spanish studio reflected in different contexts how to implement technical-based solutions to improve the environmental quality of urban spaces, where the

sylvan become a shaped element of architecture, like in projects such as the *Ecoboulevard*. Likewise, moving to the territorial scale, the international office Sasaki developed a series of projects where green wedges become new social and experiential opportunities, where the ecological project allows to work on the qualities of nature as part of the city. Exemplary is *Zhangjiabang park*, in Shanghai, where green and blue infrastructures are shaped in their complexities, offering an environmental restoration, an infrastructure for the city's climate control, and a new living habitat.

Finally, it is useful to revisit what Taut wrote about the work of an architect: "The architect must carry within himself an awareness and knowledge of all the deep feelings and sentiments for which he wants to build. Of course, his work aspires not only to the ephemeral, in that it calls to the *Zeitgeist*, but also to those dormant spiritual forces of generations, cloaked in beliefs and aspirations"²².

This spirit led Taut to conceive the *City Crown*, which he addressed as a necessity to rethink a transformation of the city. As Bruno Taut wrote, this possibility was not a defined and close work but rather a suggestion: "At best, this work should be a flag, an idea, or a theoretical suggestion, whose ultimate solution is comprised of many thousands of varied possibilities"²³. Nowadays, we can read and use the *City Crown* as a "fossil index," a utopian vision that could guide us in shaping the contemporary need for new sylvan relations within the city. Hence, with this visionary project, Bruno Taut highlighted the need to consider the city's future to address utilitarian and technical issues while reflecting on the poetic potential of a new urban imaginary. Nowadays, this attitude could be helpful in approaching the technical-based knowledge leading the projects that tackle the climate crisis, shaping a new design culture of urban nature.

- ✱ T. Ingold, *Correspondences*, Polity, Cambridge 2021, p. 34.
- ∞ B. Taut, M. Mindrup, U. Altenmüller-Lewis (eds.), *The City Crown*, Ashgate, Surrey 2015, p. 126, or. ed. B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, Jena 1919.
- ↓ *Ibid.*
- Λ E.P. Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism Since 1850*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2018.
- ┐ B. Gravagnuolo, *La progettazione urbana in Europa – 1750-1960 – Storia e teorie*, Laterza, Bari 1991.
- └ J.R. Gold, *Modernity and Utopia*, in T. Hall, P. Hubbard, J.R. Short (ed.), *The SAGE Companion to the City*, SAGE, London 2008, pp. 67-86.
- ✱ In the same year, for example, Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut visited the garden city by Unwin, in England, as reported by Kristina Hartmann in W. Nerdinger, K. Hartmann, M. Schirren, M. Speidel (eds.), *Bruno Taut 1880-1938*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Munich 2001, p. 139.
- ┐ J. Ruskin, *Stones of Venice vol. 9*, in Id., E. Tyas Cook, A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, George Allen, New York 1903, p. 411.
- ┐ B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- ✱ D. Nielsen, Kumarasuriyar A., *Nature's Muses in Bruno Taut's Glaschaus*, in "Wit Transactions on Ecology and the Environment," 2012, pp. 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.2495/DNI20051>.
- ✱ B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
- ✱ ∞ Ivi, p. 128.
- ✱ ↓ T. Miller, *Expressionist Utopia: Bruno Taut Glass Architecture and the Dissolution of Cities*, in "Filozofski Vestnik," 1, 2017, pp. 107-129.
- ✱ Λ B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- ✱ ┐ For a further analysis of Bruno Taut as painter and his spiritual bond between nature and architecture: B. Taut, M. Speidel (ed.), *Bruno Taut: Natur Und Fantasie 1880-1938*, Ernst et Sohn, Berlin 1994.
- ✱ └ Ivi, p. 64.
- ✱ ✱ B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- ✱ ┐ Ivi, p. 128.
- ✱ ┐ A. Monestiroli, *Le forme e il tempo*, in L. Hilberseimer (ed.), *Mies van der Rohe*, Città Studi, Milano 1984, pp. 7-18.
- ∞ Regarding the possibility of a new urban experience look at: M. Zardini, *Toward a Sensorial Urbanism*, in "Lotus," 157, 2015, pp. 63-73; M.

- Gandy, Urban Nature and the Ecological Imaginary, in N. Heynen, M. Kaika, E. Swyngedouw (eds.), *In the Nature of Cities. Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 62-71.
- ✱ ✱ B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- ∞ ∞ Ivi, p. 133.

FOREST, CONCEPTUAL, SYMBOLIC

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