



Nature as Construction Material

Jesús Vassallo, Guest Editor

The forest is by definition the antithesis of the city, a place of mystery and darkness where the laws of reason do not apply. Or at least, such has been the narrative of western civilization since Greek and Roman times. Best enunciated by Martin Heidegger's famous metaphor, the necessity to clear the forest as a foundational act in order for any form of human society to emerge is deeply engrained in our collective psyche.

Today, the role of the forest as a nemesis of architecture and the civilization for which it stands is however severely weakened. Successive waves of industrialization have rendered the power of nature as insufficient to curb our ambition and appetite to occupy and consume the world. We are now at a pivotal time in the history of human civilization, in which the largest ever movement of population to cities is being paralleled by the realization that we have reached the limit of our footprint on the planet. This entails that as we make preparations to house billions in old and new cities across the globe over the next decades we must necessarily rethink the relationship of architecture and cities to nature.

It all boils down to a simple yet radical idea, the necessity to reconsider human activity in general—economy is the best example—, and its products in particular—the built environment—as internal rather than external to nature. While this may seem counterintuitive, there are however plenty of precedents which we can leverage if we are to reconstruct our cultural definitions of both nature and architecture and produce a new paradigm that can carry us forward through the next century.

Ever since the power of industrialization first revealed itself, there have been periodic bursts or attempts to rethink the relationship of the discipline of architecture to nature. This was explicit in the Arts and Crafts movement, and its search for the new forms of architecture within nature, or even more literally in the City Garden movement, which reconceptualized nature as the main city-building material. Also within the modern movement, once the first fevers of progress started to wear out, instances of this trend emerged, with Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City as perhaps the most salient example at the scale of urbanism. Nordic architects of the second generation of modernism also incorporated nature deep at the core of their approach for architecture, as is evident in the experiments that Alvar Aalto or Arne Jacobsen carried out in their own homes and with their own hands. Closer to our day, the attempts of Herzog & de Meuron to literally build with algae or moss complicate distinctions between nature and artifice and prefigure our contemporary interest in natural construction materials.

As mass timber construction quickly gravitates towards the mainstream of the construction industry, and experiments with rammed earth, unfired clay, or bamboo become more common, it seems clear that a path emerges in which architecture may one day, at least conceptually, grow out of the soil instead of being imposed on it. This promise also poses the potential to reconsider the divide with which we think about and design rural and urban areas, even the possibility to rethink our cycles of production and consumption as part of a larger gradient of agricultural and natural cycles. This call for papers seeks out both historic and contemporary topics and case studies at a wide range of scales which may contribute to reconceptualize nature as a construction material for architecture, or alternatively, architecture as a vehicle for nature. The time may have come to let the forest back into our cities.

Note:

The Guest Editor and the Scientific Committee welcome submissions (see author guidelines) in English or Spanish by young and established scholars and architects until February 28, 2018. Here follow a few possible topics by way of example. Diverse and speculative proposals are welcome:

Nature as a Material for Building the City (Frank Lloyd Wright: Broadacre City; Ludwig Hilberseimer: The New Regional Pattern, Lafayette Park; Kisho Kurokawa: Agricultural City; Oswald Mathias Ungers: Berlin, A Green Archipelago).

Nature as a Source of Architectural Form (Moritz Maurer and Karl Blossfeldt: Nature as origin of architectural language and ornament; Frank Furness and Louis Sullivan: The emergence of American Organicism; Nicholas Grimshaw: The EdenProject; Toyo Ito: Parque de la Gavia).

The Architect as Gardener, or the Architect in the Forest (Arne Jacobsen: House and Garden in Soholm, Alvar Aalto: Muuratsalo Experimental House; Ralph Erskine: The Box; Alison and Peter Smithson: The Solar Pavilion; Tom Emerson: The ETH Garden; Selgascano: Between Air).

Nature as a Building Block (Herzog & de Meuron: Ricola-Europe, Dominus Winery; Roger Boltshauser: Ozeanium Basel; Anna Herringer: Bamboo Hostels; Peter Zumthor: Hannover Pavilion, Serpentine Pavilion; Junya Ishigami: Art Bio Farm, Venice Pavilion).

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