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Orienting the future of European cities from an ecocentric culture of design

Introduction

Today, the word “adaptable” is first referred to flexibility, to the submission of rules of liberalism and free market, to the idea that consumption would be the main energy of society and the dominant culture of populations.

The adaptability is referring to an anthropocentric model, an environmental perception that governs our representations of the urban world.

This anthropologic view is largely dominant among those in charge to decide the future of society and the urban fabric. They acknowledge themselves as being the only most significant entities in the universe while disregarding animals and plants, land, air, water unless they provide necessities such as nutrition, clothing, shelter and medical benefits. Consequently, human exploitation and abuse of the natural environment has been observed on a global scale.

How the evolution of our cultures of urban design can help to stop this unrestrained anthropocentrism and the disastrous effect it has on ecological functioning?

Developing an ecocentric culture of architectural and urban design in order to serve the ecological rebalance of the whole.

The ecocentric argument¹ as developed by Stan Rowe “*is grounded in the belief that, compared to the undoubted importance of the human part, the whole ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful, more mysterious, and older than time. The "environment" that anthropocentrism misperceives as materials designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense humanity's source and support: its ingenious, inventive life-giving matrix. Ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism with its fixation on organisms, for in the ecocentric view people are inseparable from the inorganic/organic nature that encapsulates them. They are particles and waves, body and spirit, in the context of Earth's ambient energy*”

¹ Rowe, Stan J. (1994). "Ecocentrism: the Chord that Harmonizes Humans and Earth." *The Trumpeter* 11(2): 106-107.

It leads to the idea of rebalancing the relationship between the parts and the whole so the parts should in a way serve the whole: the Earth being seen as a source more than resources.

The idea of biodiversity as a model of diversity²

We 'll push here the idea in which the threat opened by the fast disappearing of biodiversity is the mark that biodiversity and society are nowadays interdependent. Economic growth produces biodiversity's decrease.

But biodiversity is the living tissue of the planet and the ecological issues cannot be reduced in a narrow biologic or physical-chemical view of the world but is connected to socio and economical mechanisms.

As houses and cities have been build in the early times to protect theirs inhabitants against threats of the natural and wild environment, we have from now on to realized the inversion of roles between the strength of human civilization and the fragility of a nature that we couldn't replace anyway.

Building has always been imagined has a clearing gesture³, but we have to change our representation of human and urban settlement and take into granted the Aldo Leopold's land ethic that considers that an action is good when it aims at "*the preservation of the integrity, the stabilization and the beauty of the biotic community*". Beyond the weight of the world population and outside the still dominant American way of life's model, as long as globalised future will be understood as an anthropological creation split from the invisible fragility of biodiversity and ecosphere, strength and quantitative power will stay our enemy.

The evolutionary system of biosphere is totally under our responsibility and the link to the biological substrata cannot be forgotten even if the anthropological and technical cosmos of cities make us less and less sensitive to this reality.

That's why it is necessary for our urban and architectural design not only to be influenced by the touch of bio design, but more deeply to be regenerated by the values of egocentrism in order to engage new plans of action, news mechanism of settlement, new milieus.

Thus, architectural and urban design could bring about some changes in the standpoint of society toward nature. Architecture and urban environment could propose experiments that make the users more sensitive to the many ways,

² Patrick Blandin, *Biodiversité, l'avenir du vivant*, Albin Michel, 2010

³ Robert Harrisson, Forest, *The shadow of civilisation*, The University of Chicago Press, 1992,

(scientific, aesthetic and spiritual), by which our attachment with nature is solid and alive.

Architecture and urban design: the inventiveness of milieus

From architecture, (its cultural background and its pragmatic inventiveness), urban, architectural and territorial new design processes, could together promote an inventiveness of milieus as “socio-ecosystems”.

The care of biodiversity could be an entrance to such a challenge: the biodiversity of urban milieus being here considered as a target in order to install new links between human settlements and nature.

The social consequences of such a reorientation:

The transformation of these representations opens up changes in our design processes.

Instead of a professional training dominated by abstract conception, design processes could become more socially embedded, giving more value to the populations' knowledge. The recognition of the know-how as well as the capacities of intervention around domestic life that people can mobilize in an era of crisis, should be part of programs of intervention in communities. The reinforcement of population's autonomy is an urban challenge compared to spectacle and consumption.

The refamiliarization of our urban way of life⁴ around common local life respond to a large demand of the population, which is aware of the fact that values can be put into practice in local scale more than in global scale,

The ideas of mutualism, cooperation, association (house, gardens, cars sharing as shares of all kind of facilities that could take place around domestic life,) seem to be not only ecological and social necessities but also as an antidote against the drift of individualism.

Against the excess of artificiality of ecosystems, restoration, resilience, temperance, even frugality in the borrowing towards biosphere is an interesting challenge for urban development.

The way organisms act in an ecosystem could also be a source of inspiration for news design processes. As architecture, ecology is in charge of the

⁴ Elisabeth Crawford, *Everyday urbanism*, University of Michigan, 2005

mechanisms working at a superior level of organisation, from individual to biosphere. It's like architecture **knowledge about the complexity of organisations**.

Cities, and specifically European cities have a leading role to play in such challenges, for at least two reasons: because of the advantage and density they carry in their genetic urban code and because they are bearing a democratic model of society, which is an important guide line to face such issues.

Architecture design as a culture of intertwining

We are today encapsulated in an anthropocentric model and have forgotten the subordination of the parts to the whole, thinking that we could build an indoor world called globalization, free of the dependency to the ecosystem dimension of our planet. But to leave such spiral of degradations calls for integrate in our design processes the non-human components of our ecological community of life and stop considering and measuring everything with the only focus of isolated human interests.

*“Air, water, earth, and organisms are essential parts of the one homeostatic whole, the Ecosphere, literally the Home-sphere.”*⁵ We have to put into regard these four elements to the one the ancient Greece had proposed (Water, air, earth and fire) and replace “fire” by “living organisms”, even if Prometheus doesn't like it.

This change will affect our geometric and somehow devitalized culture of design, which is not anymore in phase with the challenge of loss of biodiversity and environmental disturbances. Design processes must refer more to the leaving scales of territories and communities than to the formal obsession of lifeless buildings.

The consciousness of this specific issues, the challenge to refrain the extinction of species, lead us to realize the huge diversity of forms of life that the earth's biotope has provided. We could examine this variety as a reality, a complexity, a realm of interactions, which is still far beyond our ability of actual design.

Looking at non-human, to the vegetal and animal world could refresh our design process and our urban culture and lead us through an intimacy with all the complexity of nature.

It could also, as Juhani Pallasmaa wrote⁶, free our imaginary of iconic and rather nihilistic domination.

⁵ J. Stan Rowe, “What on Earth is Environment? », *The Trumpeter* 6 (4):123-126. 1989

⁶ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin, Architecture and the senses*, John Wiley and sons Ltd, 2005

Conclusion

European urban prospective must keep going further on and not to satisfy of some green easy answers. We have to face, without catastrophism, the destructive potential of our culture of installation. **A new age of architecture is to invent intertwining the fields of analogy, scientific experiments, cultural creations and ecological metabolisms around the poetic strength of the wilderness as figure of the surrounding of nature in which at final step we are still depending on.**

The 13th session of European could work on these topics.

European countries are not anymore in a development⁷ based on the growth of their economy. The expansion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been fading away regularly for at least two decades, and it might be not such a bad news since this model of development didn't reduce poverty and has created an unprecedented environmental crisis. Growth of the economy is fading of biodiversity leading to the fast atrophy the living milieu of our planet.

Architects, urban planners, politicians, engineers, and around them the entire population of Europe are pushed to reorganise their dwellings, without the economical model and the dependency to the engine of finance that dominated the urban fabric in the past decades. May be it's time not to let anymore the development of neighbourhood only the hands of the financial economy, and to relink, from places to places, the urban milieus with the complexity and richness of nature and ecosystems.

That's the imaginative prospection we propose for the EUROPAN 13 session. What cities, what model of innovation could we put into discussion in a more ecocentric point of view?

The cultural and professional crucible of EUROPAN is one of the best places to tackle such issues in an operative and innovative way.

⁷ Dominique Meda, *La mystique de la croissance, comment s'en libérer*, Flammarion, 2013