

Forest Matrix. Towards Architecture for pluralism, diversity, minorities, alternatives

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Abstract

Architettura e costruzione sono gli strumenti principali che la civiltà, oggi come in passato, ha utilizzato per addomesticare e controllare la Natura. Le strutture dell'abitare, del produrre e dello spostarsi, si sono sovrapposti all'ecosistema planetario, nell'arco di un periodo piuttosto breve. In che direzione stiamo andando e a cosa ci porterà tutto questo? La foresta rappresenta il retroterra biologico e culturale dell'Uomo e può essere considerata la matrice della Natura. Molti concetti e molte parole, che descrivono la nostra società contemporanea, trovano le loro radici nello spazio e nei simboli propri della foresta. La vita che l'umanità ha trascorso nella foresta ha lasciato tracce profonde, una tradizione che è ancora parte integrante della memoria collettiva. La perdita di questo legame ci porterebbe ad una catastrofe culturale e biologica. La buona architettura nel prossimo futuro dovrebbe ricordare più il giardinaggio che la costruzione: piantare dei semi cominciando da una scala piccola, dalla nostra casa, quindi piantarli nel nostro quartiere a farli crescere fino alla dimensione della città.

Parole chiave

Foresta come matrice della Natura, spazio della foresta, auto-costruzione, workshop di architettura, ricerca dell'essenziale.

Abstract

Architecture and constructing are the main tools that both the present and the bygone civilizations have used to tame and articulate Nature. Structures of living, production and movement have in a short period of time overlaid primeval and complex ecosystems everywhere on the planet. What is coming next and where are we heading? The biological and cultural background of Man is the forest, the matrix of Nature. Many of the words and concepts describing our contemporary society still have their root in the space and symbols of the forest. Living in a forest has left a trace, a tradition which is part of our common memory. The loss of this connection would be both a biological and a cultural catastrophe. Good architecture in the future should therefore be related more to gardening than to constructing: planting seeds first in the small scale of a home, then of the neighbourhood, and finally growing into the scale of a city.

Keywords

Forest the matrix of Nature, forest space, self-construction, architectural workshops, search of essential.

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Architecture and constructing are the main tools that both the present and the bygone civilizations have used to tame and articulate Nature. Structures of living, production and movement have in a short period of time overlaid primeval and complex ecosystems everywhere on the planet. The living environment of human being has changed dramatically in the course of a few of generations, first from a shelter to a hut, then from a hut to a house, from house to town, town to city, and finally at this stage, from the city to a metropolis. What will be the next step in this development?

At the same time what we experience as reality around us is altering as well. Online communication and entertainment in virtual reality must have an impact on our focus and interest, our care of our immediate environment. Our capacity of making inter-subjective stories and entities that do not exist anywhere else than in our imagination may have already overrun the power of natural forces. And if so, are we able to imagine and design something good to come?

What is indeed coming next and where are we heading? The biological and cultural background of Man is forest, the matrix of Nature. Many of the words and concepts describing our contemporary society still have their root in the space and symbols of the forest. Living in a forest has left a trace, a tradition

which is part of our common memory. The loosing of it from our system would not only be a biological but also a cultural catastrophe.

There seems to be some kind of imagined threshold between man and Nature. It is clear that this is a man made concept, at first been an idea of safety, a fence that keeps the beasts outside the pasture. Inside the border prevails culture, architecture and tamed nature that flourishes and produces food. Outside the limit reigns the never-ending forest mystical and wild, the home of wild animals and those who do not belong to society.

When one enters this forest one sees only a part of it never the whole. Therefore the forest is a collage of secrets, surprises and possibilities. This is our deep-historic understanding that will remain such for a long time as part of our survival instinct. Maybe it has remained so longer than necessary, as the humanity has by now destructed this mythical dimension by creating instead of it an endless clarity, open safety space with no surprises. But importantly this space has no meaning, and has no other message than its own inner logic and efficiency. This new space and landscape is like a large open clean-cut forest creating unnerving monoculture, non-space that continues to one place to another, forever in between.

All this being considered, I believe that the meta-



physical polarities of Home and Nature in our contemporary society may have already changed places and this is the main reason to our schizophrenic relationship to Nature today. In other words it is rather the man-made world that is acutely felt as alien, right outside the fence: The endless road systems, urban sprawls, outback of production and consumption which reminds in its clinic reason more a designed desert than a diverse forest space. On this desert everything is willingly exposed, both physically and in cyberspace.

Meanwhile the forest, or what is left of it, has become the fenced space, into the depths of which already penetrate the sounds of traffic and city. Yet it still is home for plurality, diversity, the opposition, minorities, even unproductive thinking and activity, letting all flowers grow.

Making a good shelter, a home today could mean understanding the value of this space, imagining it to the full, and simply building it. From inside this deeply authentic space we would be able to observe

the world without being too exposed to it. Inside the forest is the architecture fulfilling the needs of a person, a family and a circle of friends; a shelter, a hideaway, a stream, a hamlet, a playground, a fireplace, a garden and a compost and graveyard. Outside are the needs of the big systems, the straightforward fields of production and transport.

The good architecture in future may therefore remind more of gardening than constructing, planting seeds first in smaller scale of a home, then neighbourhood, and finally growing into the scale of a city. This new type of growth should be based more on a sort of labyrinthine clarity, space that is experienced and memorized rather than exposed, and thus full of meaning. Like a forest.

My positive estimation and hope is that in near future the birth rate of humanity will even up, and instead of economic growth we start focusing on bettering the real and holistic quality of life. All forms of life included.

The philosophic revolution and expansion of dem-



Fig. 1-2 Sauna in Seljord (Norvegia) designed and constructed during the workshop "Into the Landscape", 2009 (Paolo Mestriner, Rintala-Eggertsson Architects, Massimiliano Spadoni). Photos by Dag Jenssen.

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Fig. 3 Fishing Point in Seljord (Norvegia) designed and constructed during the workshop "Into the Landscape", 2009 (Paolo Mestriner, Rintala-Eggertsson Architects, Massimiliano Spadoni). Photos by Dag Jenssen.

ocratic education will bring about a majority that learns how to denounce values that support ever-growing materialism and consumption, as it will in its short-sightedness destroy our beautiful planet including ourselves and our only chance for happiness. Economy will be described in different terms, including long term effects on biosphere. Capitalistic activity that harms the public commons like air, water and forest will be considered racist, fascistic. With aid of raising and education our children and grand-children are re-connected to reality and nature. With building this means that all our houses and infrastructure is there to also create many-faceted biodiversity and living grounds. Architects together with biologists, farmers, foresters and geologists are able to design houses that at the same time are gardens and create positive micro-climates protecting and supporting natural magnifolds. This symbiotic gardening-construction is made of local materials for local climate, no waste is generated. On the level of an individual the quality of life becomes far better. We eat healthier and use our own body to tend, repair, control and articulate our own surroundings. We earn less as less money is needed. In other words, we work less, and have more free time for self-fulfilment. Our houses are smaller, using this way less resources and energy, we need less things around us and the ones we do, are made better

and thus last longer. Cheap mass production ends. At the same time communication and movement have become even easier, keeping the planet a quite peaceful place. Understanding the interconnectedness of all things on the same planet and the limits of our common resources will add as a balancing effect. Movement mixes peoples and ease of access to information reduces political polarization and dropping off. Few want to sink the common ship. In the end, as a natural product of trial and error, the environment of human being closes to nearer to its starting point making a full circle. The metropolis and the mono-cultural fields of movement production and living are turned back to a forest space. Yet this forest is different, unforeseen biotope, a new planetary civilization.

It will be a combination of gardenized nature and human life-world growing from the local climate and culture.

Technology is light, it has evaporated into the sphere of nature, co-operating. Work, social life and free time

Create their own architectures of forest types, they either grow fast to meet the situation, or are made to become monumental old ecosystems, symbols of stability and balance. In this matrix a growing individual will learn to read the signs of nature by moving freely from place to place, hunting and





Fig. 4 Fleinvaer Artist residency, di Rintala-Eggertsson architects e Tyin Tegnestue Architects. created during an workshop. Photos by Pasi Aalto.

-What do you think about the western civilization? - I think that would be a good idea. (Mahatma Gandhi)

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gathering information and meaning. Public space is common and unrestricted as the space of democracy. Perhaps even the long gone gods and fairies will return back to the forest to be served.

In Western Culture we tend to keep Nature at arm's length, and it still is unconsciously felt as the opposite of the city and man, although maybe today in the role of the 'good cop', a living museum that has to be preserved. A philosophical turn would mean we finally realize we are inside nature, part of it, and vice versa, the forest is inside our temple, the core of our culture.

In practice this new system has to be constructed in steps, it has to be lived through in stages of development.

The challenge of architecture is that people cannot with all senses encapture the totality of a new space and existence until it is built. But it is a good challenge to have, and while our children will be growing in a world that is already closer to this goal, they will never accept anything less. It is a question of education and upbringing.

The situation today is dirrenet and new, even unknown and alien, because the change should be so radical that not many want or dare to think of it, let alone start testing it in reality. The attempts are either some technical accessories if they come from the economic thinking, or too metaphysical con-

cepts if they are born in the academies. We need deep layered guessing, testing, erring and learning in field conditions. In other words playing together. We are in a situation where life needs not any more to be scientifically explained but should be lived in the right manner. Forest is in my mind the right place for this next chapter of human history. It is at the same time a space, a symbol and a possibility to return home.

(Sami Rintala)

Build your own architecture

Most of today's construction is based on concepts, technologies, materials, and social models, which are more than hundred years old. We hardly use the knowledge we could have today. But in view of climate change, shrinking resources of raw materials, radical demographical shifts, and increasing social inequalities resulting from the rise of neo-liberal economy, construction needs to be re-invented today more than ever. (Ruby I., Ruby A. eds. 2010, *Re-inventing construction*)

Construction in traditional cultures is guided by the body in the same way that a bird shapes its nest by movements of its body.

A walk through a forest is invigorating and healing due to the constant interaction of all sense modalities; Bachelard speaks of the polyphony of the senses (Pallasmaa J. 2005, *The Eyes of the skin. Architecture and the senses*)



If the structures of living are increasingly becoming bigger and more complex, the architect's role is progressively shrinking. A job which seems to have lost importance, perceived as a luxury that often is unnecessary.

As architects, we entered in a deep and dark forest, a space without fixed point, where we must learn how to survive and how to find our bearings.

The current economic crisis is redesigning our attitude toward the development and therefore toward architecture and design. A crisis that has got spatial consequences, reshaping our cities and our way of living, thus our way to approach design. The architect's role has been changing so fast in the past years that potential futures for architecture has to be invented.

We need to find a clearing in the woods, a place where we could sit and enjoy the surroundings, the landscape, life.

In an architect's work the passage from the design to the construction is generally tricky, demanding time and efforts. Mainly it is a kind of discontinuous journey, starting once more after a long period of inactivity and suddenly going off again. A syncopated rhythm, made of expectations, sudden accelerations and long stops. Nevertheless, there's a kind of experience where architecture is shown in all its phases, where it's possible to design and build architectures in few days, through an experience of team work, a harmonic sequence that could produce a masterpiece.

In the last years the idea of self-construction and the growth of architectural workshops where could be possible to design and build a small architecture started to change the idea and the role of architect. In few days could be experienced.

Few days of treatment and few pills of architecture to cure the sickness of architecture. The distance



between model and reality may actually cause stress and illness. The points of reference which architects have to deal with since the beginning of their career are Michelangelo, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Giò Ponti, Terragni, E. N. Rogers, Alvaro Siza, and finally Rem Koolhaas, Herzog & De Meuron and Souto de Moura. In their professional activity, instead, architects have to deal with the surveyor of the municipality administration, a client asking for an artificial mountain cottage, or a building contractor who wants a simulated country house. Design and construction tend to be separated: on one hand the project is no longer referred to the reality of its construction (economic data, time and relation with the context) and becomes an autonomous act. On the other side the construction turns into a technical matter, architecture into building, as a dumb answer to regulations, codes and performance of the building. During the workshops, quantity data (sqm at disposal, features of the site, skills of the workers,

time available.) and qualitative data (relationship with the landscape, type of architecture, sensoriality of the space.) are present at the same time, melted in a whole where they could not be separated. The process of architecture became a journey, a search and discovery of his identity. It shows a deep relationship with the landscape, not conceived as a background set to emphasize the characters' mood, but as a character itself, an opportunity of meeting different people. In a workshop of architecture the accent is placed upon the concept of Landscape, meant to give more importance to the relation with the landscape, a physical, sensorial and intellectual immersion in it. It also meant to enhance the term 'landscape' that in the latest years has often been abused losing its real meaning.

Small scale architecture, a minimum act, is the key strategy to tackle the production of architecture. A line of research shared with Sami Rintala, Dagur Eggertsson and Paolo Mestriner. The least pos-

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Fig. 5 – Workshop Into the Landscape, 2009, Seljord, Norvegia. Photos by Arianna Forcella.

sible use of shapes and resources, a methodological design approach focused on the search of the essential in our work and generally in Nordic architecture are a response to the needs and requests of the environment. In those sites nature is still a primal factor: the values of responsibility and necessity towards the landscape are essential in architecture, whereas elsewhere they are scarcely taken into consideration. In the 90's, in the faculties of architecture, 'site relationship' was a frequently used expression, nonetheless it was quite a meaningless and mysterious notion for most students. During the days of a workshop a sensorial and physical contact with the place are restored. Dealing with screwdrivers and hammers, handsaws and nails, wood and soil gave a different meaning to the site relationship. Our engagement developed at different levels: with the resources available, with local visitors who told us what those places meant for them, with the local climate conditions that we have to face during the work, and with a way of living and work pretty new and unexpected.

It's hard to recall the workshops experience when you are in a dark room, with a pale light illuminating your desk, on a winter rainy day. It is difficult to split it into episodes and analyse them. Difficult to put this experience under a glass and give it a name and a code. How to define it? An architectural work?

According to regulations, a building work wants a client, a project to show, meetings, changes in the project, hand-shaking, suits and ties, agreements, fees... During the workshops the day of 'the architect' could start travelling inside a marvellous landscape, going to 'the office': a fireplace, firewood ready to be used, a tool box with its instruments and maybe a lake in front of you, quiet and placid.

What else, then: a teaching activity? But school observance requires a teacher's desk and some students' desks, a teacher giving a lesson and some students listening to him (normally without asking anything) and taking notes. perhaps someone taking a nap. What happens if you cannot tell the difference between teachers and students? If the teacher is simply someone more experienced and the work is a mutual cooperation, where everyone finds his/her place and his /her task. What if even some student asks to work beyond the regular working time? Can we define then a workshop? A carpenters' work? But you need to be experienced in that, years of work, ability to handle the tools, strong hands and a rough face. Still we built architectures which, with their presence, arise a doubt. Was it a work? Or a game? Maybe it was just a great experience of life.

(Massimiliano Spadoni)