

## **Landscape, Architecture and the City: Questions on an Ecological Approach to Plant Design in Architectural and Urban Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

*Recent years have seen an ever more pressing debate on both ecology and cultural preservation. Architecture finds its place at the centre of this debate, and the town is a predilect milieu. However, although the task of being more ecologically conscious and more careful for one's past has been taken up by many actors on the civic scene, there are questions to be addressed on the theoretical discourses that found the corresponding practices. The research aimed at here is situated on a common ground of ecology and preservation – architecture and landscape design in the city. It is considered important to see how some conditions assumed by ecology and preservation policies render their discourses vulnerable in front of their detractors. The questions of danger, duty and usefulness are to be examined and their nuances discussed to shed light on the ambiguities and difficulties of the ecological and pro-preservation discourses. Maintaining the premise that theory is inherent to practice, the research tries to hint at how such difficulties in theoretical approaches can be surpassed by following the path from debate to practical examples.*

### **Rezumat**

*În ultimii ani, dezbateră pe scena publică privind temele ecologice sau de conservare a devenit tot mai intensă. Arhitectura își găsește locul în centrul acestei dezbateri, iar orașul este un mediu predilect al acesteia. Totuși, deși datoria de a fi tot mai responsabili – atât din punct de vedere ecologic cât și al conservării culturale – e asumată de tot mai mulți actori de pe scena publică, există întrebări nelămurite privind discursul acestora, adică, privind fundamentele teoretice ale practicilor de protecție a mediului, natural sau cultural. Cercetarea de față își propune să se situeze pe un teren comun al ecologiei și prezervării, legat de întrepătrunderea arhitecturii și a peisagisticii în proiecte urbane. De pe acest teren comun, sunt abordate proiecte și discursurile teoretice ce le susțin, din perspectiva vulnerabilității unor aspecte ale politicilor de prezervare. Considerând câteva invariabile ale acestor politici – amenințarea dispariției lucrurilor, necesitatea ca acestea să nu dispară și apelul la conștiințe – lucrarea abordează situații în care răspunsului oficial la aceste chestiuni i se oferă alternative. Acestea pot fi ocazia unei nunațări și a unei mai bune înțelegeri a fundamentelor teoretice în ceea ce privește demersurile ecologice și de prezervare.*

**Keywords:** sustainable design; ecology; preservation; landscape design.

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## 1. Introduction

The general context of the research is described by two major directions of public contemporary discourse. On one hand, there is a growing interest in sustainability, a concern with environment and the quality of life, of which life in urban milieus is an important part. The future of this aspect of society development is at stake. On the other hand, there is a continuous effort to preserve the past, whether a menaced natural one or a built, cultural one. These two concerns are most represented by the ecological and monument conservation discourses. In particular, these discourses touch the way design is being approached.

The case of intermingling works of architecture with landscape design or mere plant insertions, is considered a relevant subject for a closer analysis. Recent projects indicate a possible renewal in approaching vegetation and architecture in the city, integrating but also interrogating the ecological and pro-preservation discourses. The research aims at analysing these tendencies both from the theoretical and the practical examples' perspective. Analysing the discourses at their "limits" – following three key concepts that are considered defining for them both – provides a better understanding of new tendencies of design in the city. These three concepts come from Jacques Boulet's abbreviated version of the official discourse:

“Monuments are in danger! Their salvation is of public interest! The law must protect them! Attitudes must change!” [1]

These concepts are then – danger, duty and necessity, all three seen within an urgent perspective. Facing these urgencies can be a theoretical task intrinsic to any practical one, reflecting and forming the contemporary issues at stake – the attitudes towards nature and culture.

## 2. Ecology, Danger and the Question of Disappearance

In the last decades, architecture has become increasingly concerned with matters of ecology. While technical progress has allowed for significant practical approaches, the present paper looks at some theoretical premises that found and motivate ecological practices. These premises are intrinsic to the ecological discourse. One such premise is the assumption that there is immanent danger – the first reason for ecological action. It is a danger caused by man, with its immediate consequence, disappearance: the disappearance of species, the disappearance of the glaciers, the disappearance of seasons.

The question of disappearance is not strange to the architectural discourse itself. Architecture has had to deal with the dangers of its own disappearance, more so, in the west, beginning with the French Revolution, and more strikingly, in the aftermaths of World War Two. Policies of reconstruction, restoration and conservation have been put in place by the modern state and continue to operate as law. However, in between the questions of disappearance raised by both ecology and the policies of preservation, architecture seems to have addressed only slightly the matter of the inevitability of disappearance, ultimately – a form of death. Between the pressure of the two discourses, disappearance, whether slow or apocalyptic, haunts the theoretical or practical grounds of architecture.

Other arts have been – by their very nature – more pressed to address the question of disappearance. In her book *L'idée de nature dans l'art contemporain*, Colette Garraud discusses disappearance as a

theme at the crossroads of art and nature. From the beginning, she stresses that there is an attitude, like that expressed by Régis Durand, that the menace must continue to be expressed and acknowledged. For him, the danger is that the discourses speaking of danger are themselves menaced, where nature is concerned. In fact, Durand points out, there are no longer any ways of talking about nature, neither to celebrate it (romanticism is insulted, landscape disregarded) – nor to take note of the disaster (the ecological discourse is discredited when suited) [2]. Colette Garraud's point of view is that it is also dangerous not to see how political politics, industrial profit or pure publicity sometimes appropriate the ecological discourse. In particular, her interest is with such appropriations when directed against artistic gestures [2].

Thus, works of (land)-art have been criticised for the aggressiveness of their intervention. Although the violence of such gestures is trivial in scale when compared to the wrong-doings of the industrial society, the symbolic function of art should imply, in the eyes of some, an increased responsibility [2]. The author shows then how this type of argument does not work, not even in consciously ecological artistic gestures. For instance, Christo's use of recycled debris or Heizer's attention towards not disturbing birds by his artistic projects are not fundamental by their ecological sensibility to the artistic gesture [2]. Rather, the author assesses, the encounter between ecological and artistic concerns may be considered as part of a greater effort to re-establish man and society's relation with nature [2].

Within this « natural » equation, disappearance cannot remain exclusively the invariant of the ecological discourse. At the (quantitatively) small scale of earth-art, from Nils Udo to Alan Sonfist, the frailty of some creations, the one-morning life of some works, the absence-presence-absence of some *in situ* installations translate a different kind of worry : disappearance stands for the fragility and preciousness of the things that surround us [2]. Disappearance produces an *aller-retour* between the time of nature and the time of the work of art : in land-art, even the span of life of the work is neglect-able (some artists refuse even lasting through photography) [2]. Nature thus asks for a reflection on the permanence frequently associated with art.

In architecture, such reflections seem to be also more and more present, in some cases, also in association with nature. « « Every real thing is ready to disappear, it only asks for that », and I believe that in architecture, and in design in general, we are in this aesthetics of sacrifice » [3], says Jean Nouvel. His interest in disappearance comes from the interest in nothingness, that nothingness that represents the condition for creating events. The sense that Jean Baudrillard conveys to disappearance in a dialogue with the architect is that of making *becoming* possible : disappearance, contained by the ephemeral, would take to the ultimate purpose - « nothingness » [3].

Disappearance is thus conveyed with ontological value. It comprises within its idea, another – the possibility of appearance. This form of regression and infinite proliferation is destabilizing in the sense that it does not fix meaning. Meaning has the chance to produce itself repeatedly. In this way, disappearance not only becomes a positive experience, but the very condition of a sense-full sensitive architecture. Jean Nouvel's recent use of vegetation in projects that span from Paris to Tokyo and Rio de Janeiro, from the two-decade old Fondation Cartier to the few years old Museum on the Branly dock, deals with the matter of disappearance on the frail common ground of architecture and vegetation. Using vegetation in his projects is a pretext for a game of different degrees of disappearance, which, every time, engages a re-appearance, in a renewed form. Sometimes disappearances are almost instantaneous : rays of sun passing through the leaves [4]; sometimes they come with the seasons : the hill that conceals the Guggenheim in Tokyo changes colours with each spring, summer, autumn and winter [5]. Sometimes they represent death itself : ultimately all vegetation dies. The genuine aspect of vegetation's death renders all action meant to prevent it, futile. Thus, allowing for disappearance to follow its natural course requires a more ample reflection on the way disappearance is dealt with in architecture.

Accepting danger would then suppose different positions towards its imminence. The end is part of every object's existence, living or non-living. In the case of vegetation, disappearance is to be accepted within limits. Finding the acceptable boundaries of disappearance is also a matter of balance in the case of cultural preservation. Towns and their architecture are subject to a policy of preservation which also depends upon danger. As Jacques Boulet puts it, the imminent disappearance of every object is the first condition of a whole politics of preservation that tends to go beyond itself [1]. Architecture in the city is at its turn haunted by its memorial burden. The use of vegetation as a form of acceptable disappearance is also a way of reflecting on some ambiguities in the discourses on ecology and preservation.

### 3. Ecology and Preservation in the City Scope: between Duty and Delight

As shown in a recent exhibition at the *Cité du Patrimoine* in Paris, called *La ville fertile*, there is a manifest preference in contemporary design for such ecosystems as brownfields, wild forests or wild water banks which are welcome back in the urban landscape. At a discursive level this preference is present in theoretical programs such as the manifest for a tertiary landscape written by French landscape architect Gilles Clément. His concept of a tertiary landscape comes from defining a certain type of ecosystems as refuges of diversity, constituted by the sum of places in decay, reserves or primary ensembles abandoned by man [6]. The essential character of these places comes then from their previous exploitation and their consequent subtraction from anthropic territory. The abandon may come from natural causes as well as from bureaucratic decisions. A consequence of the absence of human decision is the undecided character of these spaces. They are diverse in terms of species, whether animals, plants and simple beings – humans included as a particular species whose diversity is expressed ethnically and culturally [6]. The concept of tertiary landscape is part of the political project of humanistic ecology defended by Gilles Clément [7] – which postulates that mankind is a particular species equal to the elements of a diverse totality. In this understanding, the author of the manifest stresses the importance of planted territories usually considered unimportant and neglected by the particular species. Thus, the landscape artist invites to a re-consideration of the encounter between savage and domesticated [8]. The origin of the tertiary landscape lays in the concept of tertiary state, as explained in Seyes's pamphlet of 1789. Neither authority nor submission to authority, the tertiary state is defined in the pamphlet by the answer to three questions. What is the tertiary state? Seyes would ask – Everything would be the answer; What has it accomplished? - Nothing; and finally, What does it aspire to become? Something.

Unlike territories subject to human decisions of any kind, Gilles Clément's tertiary landscape lacks the active spirit (it has done nothing) but stands at the same time for everything. As such, it is difficult to address the question of protection. Officially not under any kind of surveillance, the tertiary landscape is under danger of disappearing by its very ignorance. Therefore, the lack of human decisions that has allowed it to appear in the first place turns against it. To resolve this paradox, Gilles Clément calls for the survival of tertiary landscapes in a reality of a mental order, an ethics of the citizen of the planet [6]. The next step comes as a natural consequence: the tertiary landscape is politically important, it must be protected, conserved, and, the author says, its existence depends on collective consciousness [6]. His manifest is in fact addressed to this collective consciousness. As Jacques Boulet puts it in his analysis of Riegl's *Modern Cult of Monuments*, this appeal to ethics and consciousness is the second condition of a policy of preservation [1]. Clément's manifest shows that even when political interference is avoided, the very survival of species comes back to a moral consciousness, to an ecological ethics that cannot escape the official discourse.

The type of duty evoked by the French landscape artist can be compared to a nineteenth century

discourse on the matter, that of John Ruskin. This comparison can be discussed on two levels. First, both discourses encourage the presence of vegetation which appears when man has retreated. Ruskin's praise of old ruins covered by plants is a major theme in his best known works, from *The Lamps of Architecture*, to *The Stones of Venice* or *Modern Painters*. His admiration for the work of man (buildings) and subsequently, the work of nature (plants) comes from a Christian understanding of the world as God's Creation. As such, the sense of duty he speaks of regarding abandoned buildings and the vegetation they accommodate is a religious duty. Ruins are an invitation to meditate on the place of man inside Creation; decay is in favour of nature itself. The ecological spirit and the religious one, for he contemporary and the nineteenth century thinkers both generate a duty to preserve, a duty of moral order.

However, is there something else inviting to a protection without intervention that seems to bring close the two discourses? In Ruskin's case, the stake of letting ruins be is also of aesthetic order. It is a consequence of his view of the Creation: as its part, ruins are an expression of beauty. They are the successful combination between the work of man and the work of nature. In this, Ruskin goes beyond the moral duty ascribed to the natural, growing apart from the discourse of Gilles Clément. For him, what resides in ruins is delight, a fascination with what Anne Eriksen calls the positive sublime [9].

“Delight”, which borrows its orthography from “light” and its etymology from the Latin “delectare” stays in the proximity of pleasure. For Ruskin, pleasure is implicit in the emotions that ruins arise. These delight is a form of reverence towards the divine creation, in opposition to the sin of melancholia [10]. In terms of aesthetics, his theories on the sublime can be compared to those postulated by contemporary architecture critics like Peter Eisenman. For him, the sublime is the characteristic of a contemporary aesthetics in architecture: destabilizing, unclear, vague [11].

However, the idea of pleasure has not found its righteous place within a contemporary discourse on architecture. In an essay on pleasure in architecture, Bernard Tschumi shows how the concept has been banished from modernist architecture which has replaced it with the cold abstract pleasures of geometry and space [12]. But it starts to come back to the contemporary society via its very first form: the garden. Since the post-baroque quests of Capability Brown, William Kent, Jean Jacques Lequeu, Abbé Laugier or Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the use of vegetation has cast a destabilizing shadow on the order imposed by architecture in the benefit of a pleasurable effect [12].

The question which can emerge from the confrontation between pleasure and duty is whether the latter allows for the existence of the first within the official preservation discourse. How can the ecological discourse integrate a discourse on pleasure? Specifically, in the case of ruins within the city, such as those evoked by Gilles Clément? Can the post-industrial society produce ruins of the kind Ruskin speaks about – ruins that not only call for a dutiful consciousness but also provoke pleasure? How can a pleasurable effect be obtained? Gilles Clément's demand for an ethical approach of the citizen of the planet could be repositioned in the light shed by certain discourses on pleasure. In a heterogeneous post-/alter-modern society, the multiplicity of approaches keeps opening possibilities that cannot stay within the frame of a rigid pleasure for modernist geometry. Further on, the question of pleasure generates a discussion on necessity and lack of necessity that concludes the debate opened in this article, at the limits of the official discourse on preservation.

#### **4. Necessity or the Public Interest**

Discussing the question of pleasure in architecture, Tschumi's article quoted above further comes to another issue considered intrinsic to any pro-conservation discourse, the issue of necessity. In his abbreviation of the official rhetoric that founds preservation policies, whether in the realm of

cultural or natural monuments, Jacques Boulet shows that the necessity of monuments lies in the public interest they arouse [1]. Public interest translates as utility and necessity: monuments are useful because they educate the masses, either from the point of view of history (cultural monuments) or from the point of view of ecology and biology (natural monuments). Tschumi shows that in the case of architecture, a powerful tradition since Vitruve places usefulness at the core of architectural theory. However, where gardens and ruins are concerned, these represent for the architect a part of architecture that combines the pleasure of space and the pleasure of geometry in the most *un-useful* (*useless*) way possible [12].

A sign of pleasure would then be for Tschumi the very lack of architecture's usefulness. Although the author of the article on pleasure in architecture does not say that the relation is reciprocal (lack of usefulness does not necessarily generate pleasure), like pleasure, lack of utility is prudently associated today with architectural matters. The rich debate scene following the French Revolution has created an apparatus of salvaging monuments on the very ground of their necessity. Furthermore, monuments of architecture differ from those of other arts because they are necessarily useful, as Quatremère de Quincy stipulates in his definitions [12]. However, rediscovering the loss of necessity today may mark one of the crises that define the end of modernity. The problems of modern architecture – of salubrity and order – have been transferred to economy and the market. In the society of profit, Tschumi further argues, the necessity of architecture becomes its very lack of necessity [12]. Ironically, this aspect of uselessness of architecture defies the political. Uselessness and pleasure associated to it embarrass the system: they are both matters that elude it. Gilles Clément interpretes his tertiary landscapes in a simmilar way when situating it at the edge of political interference: depending both on its absence and a sense of duty it stimulates [6]. More radical, the lack of utility embraced by Tschumi stresses that an architecture of pleasure does not aim at becoming so [12]. A sense of self-consiousness is stil required, but in the sense that architecture must keep questioning itself, must be obsessed with itself, must be ready to be destabilized [12].

In this perspective, the city has traditionally kept architecture and vegetation apart. Hence, an equally powerful tradition in the realm of monuments: either cultural or natural. This comes from an understanding of nature and culture as concurential, one submining the other. Thus, vegetation on a building means its ruination, its end of utility from the point of view of history, for nature has begun to work against it. Equally, ecological approaches try to protect the environment from aggressive, rapid developments. However, recent tendencies show the way nature and culture intermingle. From the renewed interest in romantic ruins as that shown by Tschumi or Gilles Clément (in his design for the Henri Matisse Park in Lille), to the introduction of „cultural landscapes” in the official discourse, encounters between nature and vegetation whithin the loose boundaries of architecture seem to have shifted. More so, in the discourses quoted above, there seems to be an alternative to the official discourse.

Thus, the official rhetoric claims there is a duty to preserve monuments (laws must protect them, attitudes must change). But this sense of duty can be nuanced following Gilles Clément. Even if for him too, attitudes must change in order to protect tertiary landscapes, this change takes the form of lack of action: law itself is not required. In this sense, the question of utility (usefulness) of abandoned sites is still raised, but in a more subtle way: it is not public interest that causes it, but rather a broader understanding of ecology. With Tschumi, the question of pleasure makes both duty and utility unrelevant. Or, sticking to his discourse, when duty and usefulness disappear, pleasure may emerge.

Within the multitude of contemporary discourses that look at possible encounters between nature and culture, the ones discussed above question the grounds of the modern politics of preservation. What is of significance is that the present context allows for alternatives to the official discourse

that supports legislation. These alternatives bring up questions like pleasure in architecture where duty and usefulness become vulnerable values – at their limits.

## 5. Conclusions

Contemporary discourse is itself, like vegetation and memory, a frail matter. Its vulnerability tends to turn against the very objects it tries to protect. The very self proclaimed necessity of ecological or pro-preservation policies can reach its limits. In order to better clarify the difficulties of these discourses, the research aimed at an analysis from the point of view of founding concepts in ecology and preservation speeches alike. At the same time, other points of view are indicated, inviting to further exploration, stressing the openings and alternatives possible in contemporary context. Within a model that considers nature and culture less and less apart, designing in the urban scene can be a fertile ground for experimentation. The openings offered in the analysis sketched above stress the importance of theory and its intrinsic relation with practice in the field of design. At the scale of the town, in front of its enduring concerns with ecology and cultural preservation, the update and the debate on the public scene is considered itself a necessity.

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