

Questions on Time at the Crossroads of Architecture and Landscape Design

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Abstract

As defined by the Bruntland Commission of the United Nations in 1987, sustainability is a bet with time. Sustainable development aims at fulfilling the needs of the present without impeding future generations to fulfil their own. Within the framework of an oriented present, a particular understanding of time is engaged. In particular, the present paper is concerned with the way efforts for a sustainable design (architecture or landscape related) reflect a contemporary perspective on time. This reflection is brought on by recent tendencies in design, especially visible in urban situations, which bring together abandoned buildings and wild ecosystems. Encouraging diversity on the urban scene is thus equally a matter of ecological and cultural interest. At the more and more diffuse boundary between nature and culture, a specific perception of time emerges. It is not a historical time, nor a linear one, as the modern paradigm had embraced; nor is it purely the time of natural processes. As such, the very model of a future oriented time-line, proposed by sustainable developments is re-examined. Following two of Paul Ricoeur's opposing couples, the paper aims at understanding the different time-values present in recent design projects. These are used as two key concepts of the modern and post-modern models: memory-history and death-being. The task undertaken by the paper becomes a matter of reflecting contemporary understandings of time in design, architecture and landscape theories at the particular scale of some representative recent projects.

Rezumat

Așa cum este definită de către Comisia Bruntland a Națiunilor Unite din 1987, sustenabilitatea este un pariu cu timpul. Dezvoltarea sustenabilă țintește spre împlinirea nevoilor prezente fără a împiedica generațiile viitoare să își îplinească propriile nevoi. Având în minte această imagine a unui prezent angajat, poate apărea o anumită înțelegere a timpului legată de viziunea unei dezvoltări sustenabile. Lucrarea de față este interesată de felul în care, eforturile pentru un design sustenabil în arhitectură sau peisagistică reflectă o perspectivă asupra timpului specific contemporană. Acest interes al lucrării este o consecință a unor manifestări recente în design, în mod special în context urban, care aduc împreună clădiri abandonate – semne ale culturii – și ecosisteme spontane – semne ale naturii. Astfel, întrebarea pusă de lucrare este dacă, la granița tot mai fină dintre natură și cultură, apare o experiență particulară a timpului. Nu e un timp istoric, ci mai degrabă al proceselor naturale?; nu e un timp linear, ci mai degrabă unul ciclic? În orice caz, nu e timpul îmbrățișat de paradigma modernă și implicit, de modelul sustenabilității prin faptul

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*că e un timp eliberat de un scop, e un prezent care nu e doar tranzitoriu între trecutul ca resursă și viitorul ca receptor al resursei. Poate un astfel de timp să fie el însuși o resursă, din perspectiva unui sens lărgit al sustenabilității, în sensul unei sustenabilități culturale de pildă? Urmărind două dintre cuplurile discutate de Paul Ricoeur în lucrarea sa *La memoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, lucrarea încearcă să pună în evidență anumite experiențe temporale propuse de câteva proiecte contemporane. Cuplurile de concepte ale lui Paul Ricoeur, moarte-ființă și memorie-istorie fac posibilă o discuție despre monument și ruină ca exponente ale timpului istoric și respectiv ale timpului pur, ce pot ilumina aspecte extinse ale conceptului de sustenabilitate.*

Keywords: sustainable design; memory; history; ruin; monument; historical time; pure time; linear time.

1. Introduction

The general context of the paper is the contemporary discourse which brings together nature and culture in certain design projects. Specifically, in architecture, especially in urban milieus, recent projects show a renewed way of intermingling vegetation and built elements. The project for the Highline in New York – an old railway passing through the city – takes up the task of potentiating the existing ecosystem using small interventions to create a suspended urban promenade. In Paris, the site surrounding the old Mills in the 13th arrondissement is transformed in a park, evocative of marshes and wild prairies. Gilles Clément's project for the submarine base of Saint Nazzaire exploits the frail vegetation that has found its roots on the concrete slab of the base to create theme gardens like the garden of labels or the forest of aspen trees. If Saint Nazzaire offers a vegetation found *in situ*, that can be evocative and poetical, the Henri Matisse park in Lille is the occasion for the same French artist to create ruins and vegetation of his own. An inaccessible concrete plateau, some 2,500 square metres in size, named Derborence Island, dominates the center of the park:

“This feature, clearly visible from the Lille TGV station, is something of an enigma and is often mistaken for a huge bunker or some other fortification left over from the Second World War. In fact, it is an experimental structure designed to emulate an inaccessible fragment of primary forest now recreated as the centrepiece of an urban park. The surface of the island, some seven metres high, has been made intentionally inaccessible so that processes of ecological succession can occur without any human interference” [1].

Other examples, stretching from Piet Oudolf's landscape design, land-art – earth-art manifestations or architectural approaches that integrate building and vegetation show a certain contemporary concern with bringing together entropical, sometimes un-designed vegetal elements and old or seemingly old structures. Whether they are reminiscent of romantic ruins or merely industrial debris reclaimed by nature, these projects are specific for the contemporary design scene.

In the more specific context of sustainability, these type of approaches raise a series of questions – which lead to the subject of the present paper. If the built environment is to be considered a resource or *vice versa*, if the planted environment is a resource, how does their intermingling – in a fragile balance, always ready to be inclined in the favor of one or the other – affect the very possibility of preserving these resources for the future? If it is not their separate preservation that is at stake, what does their coming together bring new in the realm of resource for the future? As such, what is their legacy to the future, or what kind of resource do they represent? This last question is addressed from two particular perspectives.

First, considering separately the old object and the natural one, their common meaning as signs of temporality emerges. They each signify time in a distinctive way, a historical time and a nature-

related time respectively. A possible understanding of their intermingling then emerges on the grounds of temporality significance in the proximity of Marc Augé's concept of pure time. Secondly, the idea of pure time assigned to ruins is discussed within opposing or contrasting couples like memory-history and death-being. From these two points of view emerges an understanding of time different to the linear, progress-oriented perception of time that sustainability has inherited from the modern paradigm. In a broader sense of sustainability, it is the very specific understanding of time encompassed by these projects that emerges as a resource.

2. Discourses on time: a few post-modern perceptions

The question of the old object and of the natural object is taken up in philosophical texts that go back to the 1960's. In Jean Baudrillard's *System of Objects*, the two types are discussed within the feeling of crisis that describes late modernity. As a critic of late modernity, Baudrillard positions himself at the search of symptoms for the crisis.

He comes to the description of the natural and the old by operating first the distinction between two objectual systems: the functional one – to which an objective discourse is assigned – and the non-functional system – to which a subjective discourse is assigned. Within the second system, one of the objects that seems to be “non-functional”, or un-useful is the old object. Baudrillard shows how this has, instead of a vocation in the realm of usefulness, a meaning as testimony, as object of nostalgia, of memory. It may seem like a reminiscence of the traditional symbolic order, but the philosopher considers it instead a distinctive sign of modernity [2]. Although old objects don't have a specific functional purpose, they play an important part in the make-up of the modern ambiance. This is to ensure its historicity: old objects are *useful* as cultural markers of time [2]. Thus the distinction between functional and non-functional is nuanced: the non-functional does have a function at the symbolic level, symbolizing time. This nuance is further explored by Baudrillard.

For the author of *The System of Objects*, this nuance of the un-useful yet useful old object is explained by understanding the old object as a sign of the crisis of modernity. From the beginning, Baudrillard is sceptical about the fascination for the old object. He considers it to enter the system of objects as a seemingly authentic non-functional one, nevertheless obeying perfectly the rules that govern the functional system [2]. As such, the authenticity of the old object has something false. It is no longer the chair of the father that is part of the interior ambiance, but an old chair symbolizing the father-figure; the old object sends to the myth of origins, eludes time and fascinates because it was *created*; it symbolizes the father-figure as source of value [2]. Moreover, Baudrillard further stipulates, the old object's usefulness would not be relevant without its very necessity. Although the modern ambiance allows for a level of comfort made possible by modernity's success, this is not sufficient. The old object is necessary to complete comfort, to fulfil the need for something that has life, that is above mere comfort [2]. Man is not at home in the functional environment; he needs relics to make up for the lack of a mother-cell, something that signifies in the realm of being, of transcendence [2]. Or, if the functional organizing of space is characterized by extension on the horizontal, the “non-functional” one is characterized by vertical extension or transcendence. Then, the functional object is for Baudrillard a sign of the absence of being: it alludes to actuality and is exhausted by the every-day reality, while the non-functional object is a sign of birth and thus an allusion to the ancestral.

Once its position established in relation to the functional object, the useless one is then seen in its deviant nature. Unlike the functional, the non-functional object gives birth to passions: it needs to be possessed. In the chapter dedicated to collection, the author of *The System of Objects* investigates “the nevrotic balance” between the old object and its owner. The collection becomes important because it is invested with everything that the owner could not invest in his relationship

with other human beings [2], with the living. Thus, in a play with series, the final element of the collection is the person of the collector himself who only becomes whole in relation to his collection. In this way, the absence of the old is a sign of personal un-fulfillment; the collector's need is a convulsive one, a sign of his lack of balance.

Like the old object, the natural object as part of the system has a similar fate. It is a desired object, also wanted for its authenticity because, even when it only alludes to nature, it does so in a compensatory manner. Thus, for instance, the natural object and natural colours are replaced by glass – which thus simulates a relationship with the outside world. There is no longer an “in the garden”, but rather a spectacle of the garden, the glass of the window being at the same time spectacular and frustrating [3]. Like the idea of holiday, using glass is part of a system of replacing nature with its surrogates. It becomes – if not a collected object – a luxurious one, as in the case of the countryside cottage or holiday home [3].

The lack of necessity of both the old object and the natural one becomes itself a necessity that goes beyond the needs fulfilled by modern comfort. The system of objects which no longer knows how to integrate lack of necessity is thus under the sign of modernity's crisis. Baudrillard shows that both the natural and the old objects are marks of this crisis, conveying them the attributes of simulacra. Their role inside the system is to simulate the old and the natural, and in this way, to make up for the deficiencies of excessive functionality. At the limit, these objects give way to the appearance of a compulsive need to compensate, falsely, and to possess. Possession and collection are then motivated by dubious reasons: it is not quality or authenticity that ultimately motivate the owner, but rather the mere absence of the object [2].

But what stands valid both within the system of objects created by modernity and in a framework that is independent of its crisis, is man's need for lack of usefulness. The system produces endlessly, its products overwhelm. But, Baudrillard says, the system of objects is and has been tragically tempted by fragility and death [2]. Therefore, the power of the functional object is disliked, its infallibility feared. If the new object always subtracts itself from an open interaction between the forces of nature and technology, the old and the natural objects do exactly this: they stand as testimony for this conflict, for this fragility, testimony that contemporary man seems to need, just like, Baudrillard adds, primitives are fascinated with the technical objects [2].

The need to capture this collision between nature and culture seems to be the sense in which un-useful objects – the old and the natural – are in fact, useful or relevant. Baudrillard describes them separately, as part of a pathology that characterizes the crisis of modernity in the context of the 1960's. However, he admits that both the old and the natural are necessary to man independently of the moment he describes. Modernity remains the context of the discourse of Marc Augé on the old and the natural, but unlike Baudrillard, he addresses the two together, under the name of ruins.

Like Baudrillard, Augé criticizes the incapacity of modern society to create objects that can fulfil the need for old and natural. In his anthology *Time in Ruins*, the French ethnologist warns on the fact that „the future will not create ruins”, as it does not have the time to do so [4]. The non-lieux generated by late-modern societies like airports, industrial areas or urban peripheries do not stand a chance to become, Augé claims, ruins. In his 1992 *Non-places*, a decade before *Time in Ruins*, the ethnologist already pointed out the spatial and temporal dimensions of such non-places [5]. In his more recent work his interest is primarily with the question of time in relation with non-places. Time is reflected in these alienated places and at their turn, their state reflects the state of time perception in the contemporary context. Thus, when abandoned and in decay, non-places and the objects that are part of them, only exist as witnesses of a destructive social and economic system. The main difference between the debris of the contemporary era and the true ruins of other centuries is for the French ethnologist, the type of understanding they convey to temporality. While

the first category of objects stands for a time of destruction – the streets of Kabul and Beirut are such examples – real ruins are instead a measure for „pure time” [4]. Pure time is different from historical time in that it does not have relevance from the point of view of history. Ruins are ruins as long as they have been lost by history or when history has lost them.

That happens when vegetation reclaims the work of men, when the boundary between culture and nature becomes less clear. It is a point where the old and the natural intermingle and thus lose their usefulness. From the point of view of history, that is – from the point of view of modernity's belief in knowledge as means to achieve progress – ruins are no longer relevant. They escape a time-frame that considers, since Viollet le-Duc [6] and Quatremère de Quincy [7], that the past is important to the present in order to build the future.

From the perspective of the French ethnologist, „the purpose” of ruins today is their capacity to elude history, to be indifferent to it. In so doing, ruins give sense to time, in a response to modernity's disappointments. Witnessing the acceleration of history, the over-abundance of events, today's society manifests, following Augé, a renewed need for sense, for meaning. But the problem does not reside with matters of meaning, but rather with matters of time: what lacks sense is the present in the light of a past that does not settle down [4]. What would then the pure time, the time of ruins, be? It is a time that moves slowly, a time of natural processes that aren't in a hurry; it is a time that welcomes reflection and meditation on essential and eternal questions that do not lose their relevance; it is a time that escaped history and has run into nature [4].

The old object and the natural one as described by Baudrillard were incapable of representing pure time. They were marginal to the system of objects, to the functional system, and implicitly, part of it. They gave the measure of its deficiencies at the same time trying to complete it. Like the functional object, the old and the natural entered a logic of ambiance – their part being to allude, falsely, to time. But, as a mark of modernity's crisis, like the debris of Kabul and Beirut for Augé, these objects are not issued from natural processes. They stand for the disappointments of progress and knowledge. Only when freed from purpose, like in the case of ruins, who have become so slowly, naturally, can these objects have sense and meaning. However, the need for the pure time they stand for endures, even in their deviant form – the behaviour of the collector standing as an example. His desire is to possess not just the object, but time and nature themselves. From this impossibility comes the conflicted nature of these objects: they cannot be truly possessed, their lack becomes obsessive. Speaking of ruins, in an essay on architectural pleasure, Bernard Tschumi shows that they provoke a sensual pleasure, unlike the obsessive behaviour of the collector [8].

Thus, the interest in projects like those described at the beginning of this paper could represent the search for the „pure pleasure” that resides in pure time as made possible by the encounter of vegetation and built structures, of nature and culture. It is a conscious search and not an entirely innocent one: although it escapes history, it does stay relevant from the point of view of forms of knowledge as is the case with the Garden of labels at Saint Nazaire. The labels assigned to plants by Gilles Clément could be a sign of trying to understand time, even to possess it. However, they also invite to reflection on how time passes, on natural processes and a slow escape from history [9]. The park in Lille on the other hand has more to do with the idea of pure time: the isolated structures that are to become ruins are isolated in a way that forbids human intervention and invites to contemplation, even from the nearby railway, a possible symbol for a different kind of speed and time perception. At their turn, the New York Highline or the parks in the thirteenth arrondissement in Paris invite time – as represented by vegetation flourishing on and around built elements – to unfold uncontrolled or at least partially so. However present the intentions of design, these projects do have a sense of uncertainty, allowing for developments with unknown endings within the relationship between the built and the vegetal, between culture and nature, as Fredric Jameson puts it [10]. According to his book *The Seeds of Time* and previously, to *Postmodernism or the Cultural*

Logic of Late Capitalism, at first glance, if the modern privileged a temporal experience – existential time and the depth of memory – the post-modern is more interested with the discontinued experience of space [11]. But for Jameson, the distinction is not between a preference for space rather than for time, but a preference for a special relation between space and time. Thus, it would be impossible to imagine a pure experience of the present of space without a past and a future: the experience of space is still an experience of time [11]. The post-modern is at a loss when space thus subordinates time – regretting the impossibility of addressing essential questions on origins and thelos, on time and the Freudian unconscious, in Jameson's words [11].

3. Possible time-dimensions associated to the concept of pure time

As it is an experience of time that alludes to the idea of ruin, the projects sampled here send to the possibility of experiencing time outside the modern and post-modern paradigms, as described above. Thus, in Fredric Jameson's words, essential questions can now be addressed. Following two of Paul Ricoeur's opposing couples, it is further aimed at understanding the different time-values present in recent design projects that allude to the notion of “pure time”. These are used as two key concepts within the modern and post-modern models: memory-history and death-being.

Considering ruins as a notion that can describe the projects above, this can be further contrasted to the modern concept of monument. If the first (ruins) relate to pure time, the latter (monuments) maintain the values of history and knowledge held valid within the modern paradigm. For Paul Ricoeur, as for Pierre Nora's places of memory [12], monuments are historical: they fix the past and cut off the relationship between past and present which is specific to memory. Thus the contrast ruin – monument becomes one between memory and history. Monuments, like the false old objects of Baudrillard, allude also to a fixed moment in the past – birth, origin, sometimes they allude to the mere passing of time – the process of becoming old, but never to death. Living memory on the other hand, like pure time, has not isolated itself in the past; events it refers to can always re-emerge in the present. Rhythms of nature are the ones that invest this sense of naturalness into the relationship between past and present. Birth and death are therefore the signs of such a pure time. At the same time, this pure time has relevance in the present in a different way than the historical time does. Then, the sense of the memory ascribed to ruins (and to the pure time they allude to) could be about this nuancing of the temporal experience: a temporal experience which, within the rhythms of nature also speaks about death.

Outside history, ruins – or more broadly put (in order to also describe the projects that constitute the pretext and context of the paper) design projects at the crossroads between built and wild, culture and nature – allow for a questioning of death in ontological terms. The meditation on fate that ruins invite to, reflects itself both in the contemplation of beauty that causes delight and satisfies desire, as well as by complexly placing the being (Heidegger's *Dasein*), in front of its imminent death [13]. Ricoeur thus understands Heidegger's fulfillment of the being, the completeness of his destiny, when death has arrived. Therefore, an understanding of death as intrinsic to the being, an ontological understanding, is of essence to the *Dasein* – an essence that cannot be achieved from the historical perspective alone [13].

In the context of comparing the understanding of time around the encounter between vegetation and architecture to the understanding of memory-history and death-being, an enriched view of the idea of pure time may emerge. Pure time thus further distinguishes itself from historical time by its ontological dimensions. At its slower, more natural pace, the time of culture and nature intermingling invites to meditation on essential questions. Returning to Fredric Jameson, unlike the understandings of time within the modern and post-modern paradigms, the return of culture to the natural allows for one's possibility to ask the essential questions again.

4. Conclusions

Within the debate for culture as one of the pillars of sustainability – such manifestations as the projects described at the beginning of the paper – which apparently work against preservation of resources, may in fact claim to be a resource of a different kind. First, in the framework described by Baudrillard and Augé, accepted as a premise of the paper, there is a need for old and natural constant to man, whether inside the modern or post-modern paradigms. This need is demonstrated by the fact that the absence of the genuine old and natural from the modern ambiance can lead to deviant obsessions, as in the case of the collector. Secondly, what makes the old and the natural objects false is their disconnection with natural processes: the old object must stay old but never disappear, simulated nature at its turn does not fade away. This disconnection is in fact a disconnection with what Marc Augé calls pure time. The two hypotheses of the paper could then be restated: architectural and landscape manifestations, as the ones described, may be an attempt to fulfill a still existing need for a certain experience of time, the experience of time offered by ruins.

This hypothesis is further verified in the paper considering an important characteristic of this experience of time : it is a time that invites to reflection, to meditation and thus reveals ontological meanings. The intermingling of nature and culture, as in the case of the Highline, the Park of the Grands Moulins or the Derborence Island in Lille, allows for a dynamic of events that does not exclude utter disappearance: the death of plants, the decay of the work of man. At the same time, both old and natural are equally valued and respected – left outside human intervention and decision. Following Paul Ricoeur, death's relevance to the fate of the being cannot be replaced: it is this dynamic that characterizes allowing nature and culture to collide.

The ontological meaning conveyed to the experience of time provided by some design objects today is centered on the couple death-being. Another couple of notions invoked by Paul Ricoeur has proved to have a more immediate consequence on the understanding of time. Death-being can be compared with memory-history in terms of relevance to the present. While death is intrinsic to being, memory should be intrinsic to history. Their disconnection is the very disconnection between ruins – an expression of pure time – and monuments – an expression of an alienated, irrelevant to the present, past.

In terms of resource, projects like those that constitute the pretext of the present paper appear now as necessary cultural manifestations – fulfilling man's need for an experience of pure time. While monuments – historical or natural – have been the preferred form of a modern discourse related to the past and the natural, ruins may be a concept also to be considered in terms of resource. Time experience itself is a resource to be cared for in an age when, as Marc Augé puts it, ruins are no longer produced.

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