

URBAN NATURE 22-23

NEW RURALITIES

“(…) How can a culture as educated as ours be so unconscious, so reckless, in its relations with the living earth?” Formulated in 2012 by Isabelle Stengers, this question particularly challenges us in this moment of crisis: climatic, pandemic, economic,

but above all, onto-epistemological crisis shaking us. Aren't we reinforcing an incorrect, untenable configuration between humans and all the other inhabitants of the planet? And if so, how to reverse this trend by both conceptualizing and designing our environments differently?

Cities are now the home and habitat of most of the world's people. They are justly considered a manmade environment, removed from nature. However, few cities escape from nature's extremes, whether they are dust storms in Dubai, snow in New York or floods in Paris. Nature accommodates in cities, adapts to the opportunities provided in them and looks for new chances to reproduce, as we recently witnessed with the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, cities modify natural systems and change their biogeochemistry, at unseen scale and pace. Whereas cities originally relied on their immediate surroundings for food and material resources, they are increasingly dependent on an ever-widening base, nationally and internationally, to satisfy their metabolic needs.

The merit of the notion of the Anthropocene is to make visible today to which extent we are inextricably linked to those distant places, to all the other inhabitants of the planet, human and non-human. However, the distance between humans and the living earth, a legacy of modernity, places us in a relationship of instrumental exteriority towards our environment, rendering us incompetent to take the many voices it contains and that could improve its habitability into account. The survival of humans is today, more than ever, intrinsically linked to the actions of non-humans.

Betting on a reconfiguration between humans and non-humans to try to respond to the environmental crisis is a gamble far from being won in advance. What we aim at the design unit Urban Nature it is not the application of known tools to respond directly to well-defined symptoms, but rather an “imperfect holistic exploration of a holistic problem that is beyond us.”

The tools (maps, models, participant observations, workshops, dialogue between actors and contrasting knowledge, etc.), will have to be tested and adapted each time, in the manner of Gilles Deleuze when he invites us to “think through the milieu”, both without reference to an ideal goal and without separating the object of enquiry from the environment it needs to exist.

Urban Nature proposes that sustainability will be forever hindered unless we do not revise the onto-epistemological basis that dissociated us, our cities, our environments, from nature in the first place. If we wish to design them differently, we need to reconceptualize them beyond the human, beyond the culture/nature dilemma.

Nadia Casabella

Axel Fischer

François Vliebergh

Benoit Burquel

NEW RURALITIES

The environmental crisis we are witnessing can be in part explained by the unresolved city-countryside dichotomy. Across the late modern period, this relationship has been based on the exploitation of both natural and human resources, and on the establishment of asymmetric responsibilities and capacities. And above all, on an unbroken effort to conceptualise the countryside as an underdeveloped space and resource periphery.

Since the late 1990s, the 'Urban Renaissance' has been a dominant paradigm, from Soja to Glaeser, passing by the New Economic Geography School or Brenner, recentring the urban studies fields inside cities. As urbanists and architects, we are forced to recognize that something went missing on the way. To start with, everything that existed outside the cities stopped being theorised on its own. Rural territories became spaces subordinated to the metropolis, hinterlands providing resources or stocking waste. Most insidious to us now, the logic governing those rural territories contained valuable aspects that were discarded because seen as discordant to the productivist and industrialised norms (Scott J., 1998). Think for instance of some institutions informing how resources were used in agriculture (e.g. commons, forest maintenance practices, closed cycles between animal husbandry and land cultivation, etc.), or practices and beliefs embedded in the agroecosystem organisation. Still, these landscapes are the result of 7000 years of human–nature coevolution (Montserrat, 2009). They harbour high biodiversity (Van der Sluis et al., 2019), and regulate multiple ecosystem functions (Plieninger et al., 2016). Since recently, they appear too as innovative environments showing signs of transition in different fields (e.g. energy, food) and potentially resulting in renewed city-countryside relations that globalisation had previously erased (Delfosse and Poulot, 2019).

The New Rurality project focuses on those rural territories, today mostly disregarded in the domains of architecture and urban design, to generate a type of interdisciplinary knowledge that would be useful in the spatial implementation of the Rural Pact (EU, 2021) and the European Green Deal. It seeks to provide a fertile ground to innovative learning and teaching practices for the students and university staff, while reconnecting with cosmovisions and traditions that speak of the interaction between society and nature, an interaction many actors inhabiting or intervening in them compellingly uphold. It proposes to apprehend those territories no longer as isolated, but as spaces entangled inside a global economic and value system, and to unearth the logics of the socio-technical infrastructures and networks that were erected to organise and control those territories (Stanziani, 2021), and whose endurance may deter sustainable transition.

There is abundant proof of the positive feedback loops that a stakeholder-inclusive and participatory planning and comanagement approach delivers for the revitalisation of rural economies. Such an approach demands a transdisciplinary perspective willing to dive into the context-specific landscape trajectories of those rural areas (the driving forces steering them as well as the tipping points bending them). Architecture and urbanism, despite being disciplines at the core of human/nature interactions through the design and articulation of the built environment, have been traditionally less inclined to interact with localities, or to delve on the processes underlying their trajectories. This probably explains why architects and urban designers have largely overlooked the recent dynamics in the European rural areas since the economic crisis of 2008 and most acutely since the pandemic (Poulot, 2021).

These places have become the destination of new migratory movements, very heterogeneous in their composition, ranging from retired people to young families aiming to reconnect with the "earth", to urbanites flocking the COVID-19 lockdown, attracted by their affordability and life quality. Architects and planning officials have been the ones most directly concerned by these dynamics, retrofitting the built heritage and expanding the infrastructures required to support those new populations. Recent policy at EU level seems

to hold on to this trend. The Commission's "long term vision for rural areas" and its subsequent EU's Rural Pact and Rural Action have lifted the stake of rural areas high on the European agenda.

While this new wave of migration has undoubtedly contributed to the renewal of much of the built heritage, it raises many questions about its impact on regional (spatial) development: will this population generate a demand for services and products capable of revitalising the local economy? Or will this demand be absorbed instead by large corporations that will continue to import cheap products and fortify the old city dominance over the countryside? Conversely, how this "new rurality" can impact mobility, land prices, education, the climate emergency, etc.? Or to which extent the local actors will be involved in this transition? The NERU project will deepen our understanding of the spatial and metabolic organisation of rural areas, as well as of their role and importance in realising the European Green Deal (aka EGD) due to the continuous dependency of cities on their rural back lands for their supply, the vitality of their ecosystems and the access to amenities.

The impact on energy and food supply and global security of the military events in Ukraine will resonate long, likely influencing the land use and spatial policies throughout the continent. It becomes urgent to engage the teaching staff, the students, and the diverse practitioners to identify pathways that will guide Europe in its quest to a responsible future. The primary objective is to reconceptualize rural territories beyond the current opposition city-countryside, adjusting the contents of the architects and urban designers' curriculum. If we are to grasp the asymmetry between the places we inhabit (i.e. cities concentrate 60% of the worldwide population) and the places upon which we depend (i.e. cities depend on rural hinterlands for 80-90% of their material and energy needs), at the root of the current climate crisis (cf. Priority 1), we need to consider those rural areas systematically, guided by their internal logics (e.g. economic, socio-ecological, climatic...) and attentive to the assemblages that the humans and non-humans form.

To reconceptualise implies to "map" those territories differently, starting from the study cases that the partners spotted (see table in Appendix). Mapping means recognizing and identifying different morphologies, accessibilities, ecosystems, institutions, supply chains, social innovations, controversies... both retrospectively and prospectively, incorporating techniques that are frequently used in other human sciences disciplines (i.e. Anthropology and Geography), informed by systems thinking and urban metabolism.

NERU is a cooperation partnership gathering a team of architecture professors and teachers from 5 European universities (ULB, Politecnico di Torino in Italy, Universidade da Coruña in Spain, Universidade do Minho in Portugal and Universitet Po Arhitektura Stroitelstvo I Geodezija of Sofia in Bulgaria) in collaboration with ETH Zürich in Switzerland.

This project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme between 2022 and 2025, proposes a series of local and joint teaching activities for students trained in architecture and spatial planning disciplines in these universities.

These activities aim to respond to a double challenge: the emergence of new environmental and societal issues in the rural environment; the opportunity to reverse the progressive erasure of knowledge and know-how concerning the rural environment within architectural training.

Joint activities between students and teachers participating in NERU will include two intensive workshops in Bulgaria and the Iberian Peninsula in the summer of 2023 and 2024, as well as an international student ideas competition with an exhibition, prize-giving and colloquium in Brussels 2025.

Students from the 6 partner universities will work on rural sites in their own countries or in the countries of other partner universities throughout the year. The joint activities will allow them to better understand the diversity of situations and issues in rural areas across Europe.

SOIL

Drawing on the experience of the last years, we will continue our exploration of the soil right under our feet. As a matter of fact, soil sealing is a key aspect of the modern alienation from nature, of the split between daily life and the environmental relationships one depends on to live, of the alienation of nature from cities. In the countryside, soil has a completely different presence in the daily life, in all its complexities.

Both urbanism and architecture usually present the soil as an inert and technical surface, seen zenithally. While the soil is thick, grained, kept alive thanks to the activity of the many living beings that literally pass through it. Soil is more than the material with which our cities are built, or on which they are built. Soil is a critical dimension of the social production of space, inscribed in the history of places, and embodying a series of close links between social and biophysical systems through the food we eat, the water we drink, or the various substances it must absorb (from nutrients to gases whose abusive presence deregulates the Environment).

Soil represents a unique opportunity to update our relationship to the (non)living in and around us, moving beyond the city-nature opposition and beginning to inhabit a regime where we could be “many”, a collective of associations internalizing the environment, “making world” with us. How would our cities and countryside look like were we ready to engage with the soil as a living matter, to avoid trivializing our relationship with the ground by allowing it to become the regurgitating foundation of the places we inhabit?

VALLE D’AOSTA

Valle d’Aosta is a mountainous region of northern Italy located at the very feet of the Mont Blanc. If the region has experienced an industrial boom between the two world wars with the coal and mining industries, it is nowadays living with the seasonal rhythm of mass tourism. As an autonomous region of Italy, it has a certain fiscal and administrative independency and French as a second official language. Valle d’Aosta and especially Courmayeur, the main village located at the feet of the Mont Blanc, holds a peculiar place in the collective imaginary of Italy and abroad, as a very specific and mundane touristic resort.

In the 1930s, Adriano Olivetti placed the region in the architectural imaginary of Italy by launching, privately, a study for the “Piano Regolatore” (strategic and urban plan) for the entire valley, gathering the rising stars of Italian architecture at that time. The plan proposed an innovative approach to the valley on an economic and social level, focusing on 5 poles from Ivrea (Olivetti’s headquarter at the feet of the Alps) and Courmayeur. Even if it remained an architectural experiment on paper, the plan marked the transformation of the valley towards a tourism-driven region.

Nowadays, the region is characterized by what Nicola Russi (Politecnico di Torino) calls “internal peripheries”, may they be caused by physical features (shadow, slope, etc), mobility issues, social inequities, or seasonal exploitation. Despite its relative autonomy, the region has not developed a diversity of activities outside the tourism industry and its seasonal hyper-activity. Consequently, a large number of existing buildings, may they have been designed for housing, agricultural or industrial uses, are left unused. The recent interest in the valley as a place for living in the aftermath of the pandemic and with the generalization of teleworking let unexpected opportunities emerge. Climate change appears as particularly visible in the region. The reduction of the snow cover drastically affects the provision of fresh water. Scarcity of water of the last years due to climate change is particularly amplified by its extensive

use by the ski industry in the mountain and the intensive agricultural industry in the Po valley. In this context, a series of dynamics explore the possibility to foster a local type of production specific to this high-altitude region.

We propose to approach the valley through a very situated point entry: the railway track between Aosta and Pré-Saint-Didier as a loose opportunity to explore the complexity of this territory, and its multiple dimensions. Built in the 1930s to collect coal from the mines in the mountains and to transport

it towards Aosta, the railway track was taken over by the national railway company after the Second World War and served from then mainly for transport of persons between the regional capital and Courmayeur and the Mont Blanc massif. In 2015, the line was closed by the railway company arguing that the renovation and maintenance costs were too high. Since then a series of feasibility studies have been launched by local authorities and collectives to explore the possibility to reopen the line and to extend it to the very centre of Courmayeur, but also to understand its potentialities for another type of mobility and support for another type of economical network. The infrastructure, in its specific relationship with the valley will be a first thread to explore the site but also the support for alternative narratives.

How to apprehend a territory from a distance? We propose to use this distance as an asset. Starting from soil, it will allow us to dive in an uninhibited way in a distant reality. It will allow questions to be formalised through the exploration of the territory, based on fascinations.

During the year, each student will draw up a fascination notebook, which will be completed and condensed over the course of the project, in order to feed the reflection. It could be of different types: dyptiches, constellations, galleries.

The first stage of the work will consist of immersing oneself in the site, its problems, its specificities from Belgium and from generic cartographic documents. It is not a question of starting the work with exhaustive analyses but through hypotheses, fascinations on the one hand, and fictions, narrations on the other.

At this stage, we favour collaborative and transversal work. The formalisation of the working groups will be based on speculative connivances. Hypotheses and fascinations allow for specific and situated research to be undertaken in order to deepen a subject. Fictions allow the field of possibilities to be opened up.

It is not a question of inventing other places from scratch, but of carefully making the available traces resonate, of revealing what is already there, in order to sketch out possible narratives, modes of living, alliances, cohabitations.

The second stage will consist of translating these observations and hypotheses into concrete proposals, acting as counterpoints to the questions raised, by multiplying the worlds and superimposing the possibilities.

The proposals will reveal specific situations that will question the relationship with the place and encourage debates with regard to the problems observed, based on specific research and speculative narratives.

A first synthesis will be made. It will determine the criteria and protocols of research/action that will be applied during the In Situ workshop. What will we look for? How will we do it? How do we bring the field back? How to make it a source of knowledge? How to allow a confrontation, a singular relation to the site? This intensive session will confirm or infer certain proposals. A second synthesis will be carried out, refining the working hypotheses for an in-depth development.

An active archive will soon be created in the form of a blog. This permanent archive will make it possible to retrace the project process, the research, the intuitions, the doubts and the turning points in the development. It will also allow a handover to the two workshops at the Politecnico di Torino which will also be working on the site in the second quarter. This archive will then be able to develop by extending, branching out or branching out.

SUGNY - VRIJGEWEID

In the second part of the year, we will explore the theme in the Belgian context. Two sites are proposed in Belgium: the territory of Sugny, in the province of Namur (Vresse-sur-Semois); and the territory of 'Vrijgeweid', in the province of West Flanders (Torhout).

These two sites were both the subject of major agrarian and rural modernisation work in the 1950s by a parastatal organisation of Catholic and conservative inspiration, the Société Nationale de la Petite Propriété Terrienne (SNPPT).

The SNPPT carried out several 'modern farms' and so-called 'rural reorganisation', i.e. the redistribution of fields and land following improvement work aimed at increasing agricultural productivity: drainage systems and irrigation in Flanders, clearing and deforestation in Wallonia, and road construction. In order to do this, the SNPPT also demolished sunken paths, hedges, marshes, heaths and moors, which were considered 'unproductive' at a time when the environmental qualities of these habitats were not recognised.

The workshop will explore the current challenges of these two Belgian countryside sites, and potential solutions, while keeping in mind this historical perspective.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Frédérique Ait-Touati, Alexandra Arènes, Axelle Grégoire. 2019. Terra Forma. Manuel de cartographies potentielles. Editions B42.

Robert A. Beauregard. 2015. Planning matter. Acting with Things. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Neeraj Bhatia, Mary Casper (eds.) 2013. The Petropolis of Tomorrow. Actar publishers.

Joke Brouwer, Sjoerd van Tuinen (eds.) 2020. To Mind is to Care. <https://v2.nl/files/2020/pdf/pdf-to-mind-is-to-care/view>

Rachel Carson. 1998 [1965]. The Sense of Wonder. HarperCollins, published posthumously.

William Cronon (ed.) 1995. Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature. W. W. Norton & Company.

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari. 2004 [1987]. A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. London: Continuum.

Vinciane Despret. 2016. What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions? Translated by Brett Buchanan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rania Ghosn, El Hadi Jazairy. 2015. Geographies of Trash. Actar publishers.

Emilie Hache. 2011. Ce à quoi nous tenons. Propositions pour une écologie pragmatique. Les empêcheurs de penser en rond - Le Découverte.

Donna Haraway. 1991. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, 183–201*. New York: Routledge.

Daniel Ibanez, Nikos Katsikis (eds.) 2014. *Grounding Metabolism. New Geographies 06*. Harvard University Press.

Bruno Latour. 2003. "The Promise of Constructivism." In *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, edited by Evan Selinger, 27–46. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bruno Latour, and Catherine Porter. 2004. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

James Lovelock. 1995. *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth*. W. W. Norton & Company

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2011. "Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom." *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 50 : 5–22.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Richard Misrach, Kate Orff. 2014. *Petrochemical America*. NYC: aperture.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. 2017. *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Isabelle Stengers. 2015. In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Open Humanities Press.

Van Dooren et al. (eds.) 2016. *Multispecies Studies*. *Environmental Humanities* 8:1. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/issue/8/1>

Albena Yaneva. 2009. *The Making of a Building: A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture*. Berlin: Peter Lang AG

Site specific

Adriano Olivetti et al. 1943. *Studie proposte preliminari per il Piano Regolatore della Valle d'Aosta*. Ivrea: Nuove Edizioni.

Roberto Dini. 2020. *Architetture del Secondo Novecento in Valle d'Aosta*. Aosta: Tipografia Testolin.

Roberto Dini et al. 2022. *Rigenerazione del Patrimonio Edilizio Sottoutilizzato Alpino*. Politecnico di Torino.