A New Yorker cartoon a few years ago depicted the following: a large group of animals running out of a forest, and the deer telling the raccoon: “What fire? We are running away from eco-tourists!” The message was that eco-tourism - widely embraced as environmentally sensitive - has tremendous repercussions on nature, and that to the animal kingdom, at least, it can be worse than fire! This anecdote means to say that in acts of turning towards nature, or even in practices that purport to protect nature - or in any acts of “going natural”, as one of the activity themes of this conference cleverly summarizes such practices - one cannot happily assume that “if I’m doing something for nature, or with nature, my causes are noble”. Things are more complex, and as one decides to “go natural”, one urgently needs to ask “how”? And “why”? Or even “should I”? The question in the above title is a provocation, precisely to hint that this essay is not focused on raising a banner for “naturalness” in cities; rather that I offer some thoughts on how architects need to carefully and critically reconsider even some of our most noble conceptions and strategies about nature.

One important question that needs to be asked is: what has, or has not, happened in the recent past that urgently needs to be incorporated to inform and reshape a designer’s current view on nature? For tackling this question, let me dwell on two issues that seem important. The first is that to say “I am an architect who cares about protecting nature”, or something like that, is no longer particularly heroic - even if it may have been rather impressive and pioneering fifty or a hundred years ago. Because “caring for nature” is by now a “knowledge of domination”, as W. Sachs calls it. (See Sachs, 1995 and 1999) The more important design question right now is to ask: “how exactly does one care about nature?” How does one frame nature, and through what kind of lenses is a designer looking at it? And to push this question further: are there ways...
Going Natural: Or, Should You?

Panayiota Pyla, Ph.D.

A New Yorker cartoon a few years ago depicted the following: a large group of animals running out of a forest, and the door telling the raccoon: "What fire? We are running away from eco-tourists!" The message was that eco-tourism - widely embraced as environmentally sensitive - has tremendous repercussions on nature, and that to the animal kingdom, at least, it can be worse than fire! This anecdote means to say that in acts of turning towards nature, or even in practices that purport to protect nature - or in any acts of "going natural" - as one of the activity themes of this conference cleverly summarizes such practices - one cannot happily assume that "if I'm doing something for nature, or with nature, my causes are noble". These are more complex, and as one decides to "go natural", one urgently needs to ask "how?" And why? Or even "should it?" The question in the above title is a provocation, precisely to hint that this essay is not focused on raising a ban of "naturalness" in cities; rather that I offer some thoughts on how architects need to carefully and critically reconsider even some of our most noble conceptions and strategies about nature.

One important question that needs to be asked is: what has, or has not, happened in the recent past that urgently needs to be incorporated to inform and reshape a designer's current views on nature? For tackling this question, let me dwell on two issues that seem important. The first is that to say "I am of "caring" for nature that are questionably; should one perhaps just let nature be? The second issue is that we have not just lost or destroyed our connections to nature. We have also been making alternative ones! A great deal of talk seems to be devoted to lamenting the loss of past connection to nature; but we also need to realize that through losing such connections, we have also been making alternative ones, and any strategy of "going natural" needs to recognize this (I will come to this later).

Let me elaborate on the first point by offering glimpses into past strategies of "going natural" in the history of architecture-urbanism, asking questions of how and why.

Consider the work by Frederick Law Olmsted, a pioneer of landscape architecture, who often introduced urban wilderness, or a pastoral feel, into the city through massive engineering interventions. In his projects - his first being New York's Central Park - what appeared to be very natural scenes in urban centres were actually an outcome of carefully concealed advanced engineering. (Drainage, for instance, is unseen but vital in those lakes.) Looking at his strategies of bringing nature into the city, today one may perceive them as a way of "going natural". But looking at Olmsted from history's perspective, more than a century later, also reminds us how this particular process of "going natural" was intricately tied to social and other visions, e.g., Olmsted's egalitarian ideals, or a broader social agenda to nurture civic pride, etc. How would we translate into today's much more heterogeneous, globalised and unequal social landscapes? Is it not important to contemplate this question, and to articulate the differences with precision, before emulating Olmsted's pastoral aesthetics?

On another example, still from 19th and early 20th century, is garden cities and garden suburbs. If Olmsted's was an idea of an improved scale within the city, garden cities were going natural outside the city - in anti-urban environments or smaller urban concentrations. Such strategies also exist today, in the form of various low density strategies, which may converge one that lives "close to nature" in the midst of trees and lakes, but more often than not they also advance urban sprawl and/or social segregation. How can one reconcile the "go natural" aura of a low-density strategy with its social and environmental costs?

Another strategy of "going natural" comes from mid-20th century urbanism. Consider the plan for Islamabad, which was built practically from scratch in 1960 by Doshi Associates. (Fig. 1) In this case nature was a tool for social organisation. A linear park in the midst of the city was to serve as buffer between the administrative centre of the city and the residential and commercial part. In this case, therefore, nature was a very specific tool for separating social groups. On the scale of an urban sector, smaller green areas were again a buffer between different neighborhoods of different social classes. This was part of the State government's desire to keep different economic status by keeping them separate. The designer's aspiration to distance themselves from social groups. It is not possible to examine the nuances and differences between the differing views of nature in this project but, in either case, nature was conceptualised as a tool of social management (see also Pyla, 2008a). It was neither a happy and serene linear park nor a privileged area - there was a social history and complex politics.

A different example comes from Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, and specifically his pavilion for the exposition of 1967 in Montreal. The geodesic dome was to contain a giant geoscope, which was basically an instrument that could allow one to play what was called a world game. It was a multi-player computer game that could basically allowed players to develop scenarios for resource redistribution around the world, with the goal of
helping humanity survive on earth. So you could go and play this game and figure out how to redistribute resources to save the earth. In this case, therefore, the design strategy in the name of nature framed nature as a resource to be managed. (Nature as an entity that humans need to manage to save it, and to save themselves). A blind spot of this happy game and its managerial perspective on nature, obviously, is that it misses the politics (and particularly the geopolitical agendas) that govern the management of global resources. Once one recognises this, the key issue that emerges is not "let us manage resources", but rather "who manages resources", "who has a say and who does not?", etc.

Another more recent view of nature is in the landscapes of cultivations, large expanses of vineyards, cultivated cornfields, etc. Nature here is an entity that is tamed, again a resource for human use and exploitation.

All these design strategies about or with nature, whether they embrace it, manage or exploit it have been framing nature in particular ways. These strategies, therefore, cannot simply be "naturalised" as sensitive to or supportive of nature. The question of how exactly they frame nature is key to ask, every time (see Pyla, 2008b and 2012).

Let me come to the second point: that we have not just lost or destroyed our connections to nature – we have also been making alternative ones. Consider a nature theme park. I’m sure all of us have been to some of these, and many have reacted by thinking: "it’s not really real nature". There may be living trees that need watering, or animals that might theoretically bite, but because the experience is so carefully orchestrated (the clearly delineated paths, the ubiquitous
Fig. 2. "Next Nature", poster by students, Architecture and Ecology class taught by F. Pyla, 2011. Source: University of Cyprus. © C Anthakopoulou M., Nikolaides A., Polychroniadou E.

helping humanity survive on earth. So you could go and play this game and figure out how to redistribute resources to save the earth. In this case, therefore, the design strategy is the name of nature framed as a resource to be managed. (Nature as an entity that humans need to manage to save it, and to save themselves). A blind spot of this happy game and its managerial perspective on nature, obviously, is that it misses the politics (and particularly the geopolitical agendas) that govern the management of global resources. Once one recognizes this, the key issue that emerges is not "let us manage resources", but rather "who manages resources", "who has a say and who does not", etc.

Another more recent view of nature is in the landscapes of cultivations, large expanses of vineyards, cultivated cornfields, etc. Nature here is an entity that is taxed, again a resource for human use and exploitation. All these design strategies about or with nature, whether they embrace it, manage or exploit, it have been framing nature in particular ways. These strategies, therefore, cannot simply be "naturalized" as sensitive to or supportive of nature. The question of how exactly they frame nature is key to ask, every time (see Pyla, 2010b and 2012).

Let me come to the second point: that we have not just lost or destroyed our connections to nature - we have also been making alternative ones. Consider a nature theme park. I'm sure all of us have been to some of these, and many have reacted by thinking: "it's not really real nature". There may be living trees that need watering, or animals that might theoretically bite, but because the experience is so carefully orchestrated (the clearly delineated paths, the ubiquitous commercialism, etc.) the unexpected or the threat and thrill of nature is largely bracketed, to make some think that this is quite distinct from another nature "out there". And yet the increasing exposure to thematic natures (from "whale watching" to eating at "rainforest cafés", and from online gardening to shopping at the Body Shop) eventually begins to condition society's understanding of nature and our role in it. I am saying this not necessarily to lament a loss of some "real nature" but to say that it is important to understand these new natures in order to negotiate with them. Because there is no longer a simple option of going back to a nature we lost - if that existed, as Worster points out (see Worster, 1995, and Pyla, 2012). The issue is to understand how we have been changing our understanding of nature (see Gissen, 2009 and Griffin, 2008). This point is also made by a student project responding to an assignment asking them to design a poster depicting a future conception of nature, in which they showed little Red Riding Hood walking in the midst of wind turbines. Far from being a futuristic manifesto happily celebrating a loss of nature, the poster wanted to provoke some serious reconsideration of the semantic "weight" the concept of nature has today. (Fig 2) I guess another cartoon is making a similar point: there is father penguin sitting on a small iceberg (the rest has melted away) and saying to child penguin: "Call this an iceberg? When I was a kid we would not have called this an iceberg". Child penguin perceives icebergs totally differently, and father penguin simply laments that. However, could we assume that there is a nature to go back to, and simply lament its loss, since our perceptions of it have already changed? Or do we need to carefully weigh how we understand nature and how we want it to be, given that understanding? If we want to take some solid steps in "going natural", we need to contemplate rather carefully the direction in which we are heading.

References


