Going Natural: Or, Should You?

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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 repercussion 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 act of "going natural", as one of the activity themes of this conference clearly summarises such practices — one cannot simply 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?" The question in the above title is a provocation, precisely to hint that this essay is not intended 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 in: what, has, or has not happened in the recent past that urgentely needs to be incorporated to inform and reshape a designer's current views on nature? For that question, let me dwell on two issues that are very 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 back in the pioneering 1950s 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 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 of "caring" for nature that are questionably sound? 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 realise that through losing such connections, we have also been making alternative ones, and any strategy of "going natural" needs to recognise 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 oases in urban centres were actually an outcome of carefully concealed advanced engineering designs (for instance, a tunnel is unseen but rather vital in those parks). 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 form of "going natural" was intricately tied to social and other visions — e.g., Olmsted’s egalitarian ideals, or a broader social agenda to nurture culture and pride, etc. How would these 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?

Another example, still from 19th and early 20th century, is the famous Givenchy gardens and garden suburbs. If Olmsted’s was an idea of going natural 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 convince one that one lives "closer 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 Doxiadis 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. To this day, 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 neighbourhoods of different social classes. This was part of the State government’s desire to keep the peace among groups of different economic status by keeping them separated (and what seemed to distance themselves from the State’s agenda by conceptualising these green areas as opportunities for gradual integration of social groups. It is not possible to examine the nuances and differences between the differing views of nature in this project but, in the same way Olmsted conceptualised as a tool of social management (see also Pyla, 2008a). It was neither a happy and serene linear park nor natural green areas these had 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 geosphere, which was basically an instrument that could observe, change all the sub and super parts what was called a world game. It was a multi-player computerised strategy game that basically allowed players to develop scenarios for resource redistribution around the world, with the goal of ...
commercialism, etc.) the unexpected or the threat and thrill of nature is largely bratteted. To make some think that this is quite distinct from another nature "out there". And yet the increasing exposure to thematic naturals from "whole watching" to eating at "rainforest cafes", 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 naturals in order to negotiate with them. Because there is no longer a simple option of going back to nature we lost - if that existed, as Worster points out (see Worster, 1985, and Pyla, 2012). The issue is to understand how we have been changing our understanding of nature (see Dissanayake, 2009 and Griffen, 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

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