

EUROPAN

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SUSTAINABLE URBANO-ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATIONS IN EUROPAN PROJECTS

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EUROPAN AND SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION

The international political framework of sustainable development represents a paradigm shift which seeks to optimise both the relations between human establishments and the natural environment and the conditions under which human beings live together. In architecture, as in other spheres, the aim is to adjust to the context, to focus on local situations with their ecological and cultural specificities rather than to work from generic models or preset recipes. In a situation where living environments are badly degraded and fractured, the projectual systems of integration employed in sustainable invention face the major challenge of regenerating inhabited milieus. The 20th anniversary of the European competition provides an opportunity to measure how, through the projects of the premiated teams in the different sessions, this theme of sustainability has developed. For European represents not only a special Europe-wide locus of architectural and urban innovation but also a large scale observatory of the major developments in these spheres. So we have a dataset of emblematic winning projects as material for our research hypothesis, that the meaning of a sustainable project is defined by the regeneration of inhabited milieus.

Regenerating milieus by “reconnection”

The hypothesis advanced here is based on the idea that regenerating these living milieus, trying to make them habitable, entails the invention of “reconnections”, i.e. operators that can re-establish links, which combine and create synergies between diverse strata. Reconnection (French *reliance*), a concept reformulated by Edgar Morin¹, refers to a “process of linkage”, “the act of reconnecting and being reconnected, and its result”. In spatial planning, this is notably a question of optimising the relation of the part to the whole. The 20th century saw an accumulation of strategies which – explicitly or not – sought to divide territories and fracture social bonds. As the architect and urban planner Bernard Reichen points out, “post-war spatial choices and social trends came together to produce a fragmentation”. Founded on the philosophical principle of the opposition between nature and *techne*, on a sectorisation of priorities (economic, ecological, social and cultural) and on the functionalist presupposition of efficiency based on the separation of functions, the development of living milieus generated a physical, spatial and mental zoning which today we are trying to overcome.

So these re-connections are primarily established between :

¹ Edgard Morin, *Ethique*, Paris, Seuil, 2004, pp.113-114.

Natures and Cultures: systems of alliances and coexistence between human establishments and natural milieus. Here, “culture” is understood in the sense ascribed to it by Lévi-Strauss, i.e. the transition from a state of nature and the introduction of a new order. However, at the same time, the issue here is identifying the transitions and the interferences between natures and cultures as plural categories. In seeking to deconstruct the dualism between the two great universals of Nature and Culture, Philippe Descola², for example, invites us to think about alternative forms of continuities and discontinuities between human beings and their environments. In the sphere of spatial planning, the regeneration of human milieus requires the development of these new relations, which can only be established in the specificity of a given situation, always on a case-by-case basis. If Nature is universal, natures for their part are highly localised and natural milieus possess properties and qualities specific to them, in the same way as do cultural particularities. Reconnection as a generic principle, therefore, breaks down into numerous mediations that can take the form of architectural, urban or landscape solutions. O’zone, for example, the premiated team at Chessy in Europan’s 5th session, by working to interpolate the project into the micro-topography, seeks to establish a relationship between the urban conditions and the natural singularity of an area. In his work, Fabien Gantois, premiated at Henin Carvin for Europan 8, begins with the characteristics of the mining area, trying to develop a consistent milieu through a series of interrelations between the cultural and natural traces which, in this specific landscape context, are constantly blended and mirrored. What is a slag heap? A natural hill or a pile of waste produced by human activities? Clearly, these polarised categories cannot apply to a process of reconnection, in the sense that these processes are immediately confronted with mixed situations.

Cultures and Cultures: social solidarity and the political sharing of territory. Contemporary understandings of territory undermine notions of identity, distinct culture, instead emphasising ethical, social and cultural hybridisation. At the same time, there is a worldwide trend of communities turning in on themselves. Today’s conditions strongly reflect these paradoxes, and the aim – through the projects – is to construct relations without once again sacrificing differences on the altar of an abstract universalism, while at the same time not contributing to the explosion of communities that nothing can connect. Because architects and urban planners are responsible for establishing habitable milieus for a hybrid society, they inevitably work on these forms of cultural reconnection, tackling the problem of the commons. What common space for our society? In Bordeaux for session 9, the winning project “Field” responds with a big empty space, a field of potentials in anticipation of future forms of life, bounded by a great linear building. For Xavier Bonnaud, expert with Europan France, the relevance of this building does not lie in its monumental character, “it is more a front, a beach, the edge of a potential field which would be a new type of public, collective or shared space for the city”. Who will inhabit this place? People from the neighbouring Aubiers district, people from future, perhaps

² Philippe Descola, *Par delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005

richer, areas that will grow up around, workers in nearby companies? How can we give form to assembly space today? By weaving lines between city and harbour, the winning team at Le Havre for European 9, with “Plug and ply”, creates an opening to a possible relation, manufactures an intermediate landscape, a connective milieu between worlds which previously had nothing to say to each other.

Natures and Natures: enactment of landscape and ecosystemic continuities. By segregating inhabited areas, zoning also led to a fragmentation of natural milieus. Turning great natural areas into sanctuaries, as Bernard Reichen points out, coincided with a hard urbanism characteristic of the modernist functionalist era, with no hesitation in knocking down to rebuild. To the extent that the living world finds its resources in exchanges and interactions with other forms of life, these fragmentations had a disastrous impact on its preservation. The aim now is to introduce ways of re-establishing the links between these fragments in order to give ecosystems back their continuity. So another form of reconnection, which reflects an emerging awareness of our responsibility towards nonhumans³.

These three types of reconnection generally coexist in projects, although depending on the situations encountered, one or other may take priority. They are reflected in multiple operations, including the establishment of rhythmic articulations, the synergy between the different spatial and temporal scales of the milieu, but also the quest for dynamic balances, common measures, interfaces.

The question of rhythm, in particular, is crucial. Deleuze and Guattari have developed the idea that rhythm is the operator that enabled different human and non-human milieus to share common futures. As Tiberghien points out, “milieus co-penetrate: not only do living things move from one milieu to another, but milieus move in and out of each other. What prevents them collapsing into chaos, merging and fusing, say Deleuze and Guattari, is rhythm, which is the milieu of all milieus, the one that allows one milieu to be transcoded to another, the coordination of heterogeneous spacetimes (...). Rhythm refers to incommensurable milieus that move into each other by a phenomenon of transcoding that Deleuze and Guattari also call transduction.”⁴ European projects enact those rhythmic connections between entities which, although copresent in the same physical space, mutually ignore or reject each other. Thus, the “Deconvolution” project in Saint Chamond, European 9, tries to restore a connection between the very hard industrial world of the former steelworks, the endogenous natural features that it allows to return, and the new residential neighbourhoods distributed around the site.

These new connections go further than a mere juxtaposition of worlds in pacified relations, because the quest is for genuinely active, complementary, symbiotic relations, through which, as a result of which, to use another of Deleuze’s terms, milieus become something else. It is therefore striking to see, as architect and urban planner Alain Pelissier stresses, that the nature that comes to overrun the site, although endogenous, may not be indigenous. Indeed, the question is not whether the project, in the regeneration it offers, is faithful to the area’s past, natural or cultural. It is less about achieving potential than inventing possibilities through these

³ By “nonhuman”, we mean the elements or individuals that make up the organic and inorganic world, outside the anthropic sphere. They are the “inhabitants” of the biophysical stratum, in the state of nature.

⁴ Gilles A. Tiberghien, *Finis terrae, Imaginaires et imaginations cartographiques*, Paris, Bayard, 2007, pp.97-98

multiple interactions. By connecting, the milieus express virtualities that they had never previously been able to realise. Regeneration is not the restoration of a previous state, but the invention of a new, sustainable state, within which the “materials” of a site enter into new, meaningful relations and form habitable spaces.

So European constitutes a laboratory of experimentation and innovation which, in the original possibilities that it offers the young teams, encourages hybridisations and new connections. It is also a great observatory of the emergence of these questions, in particular since the architectural and urban projects arising from it have been confronted with the task of sustainability. Indeed, this is a question that has emerged over the last few sessions. As Reichen comments, sustainability demands a holistic approach to data : it is about escaping from the sectoral approaches that generate spatial and social segmentation. As a result, the environment, the economy, the social and cultural sphere operate in synergy. In previous research⁵, we have been able to demonstrate the growing role in the proposals of the issue of sustainable development, mainly seeking to renew the relationship between human habitat and the natural environment. Session 9, with its explicit focus on sustainability, revealed a kind of maturity in the teams’ proposals, an advance on the sometimes somewhat simplistic responses in previous sessions. The analysis of a number of emblematic projects reflects this change⁶.

Innovative emergences in European

In its twenty years of existence, European has actively accompanied a profound transformation and probably a paradigm shift in the way urban issues are approached. An analysis of the iconic projects in the five most recent sessions shows that European has contributed to the emergence of these themes through an original approach that focuses on four primary domains.

Firstly, transversalities: of scale, with the emphasis on the “urbano-architectural” scale; of disciplines, in combining skills within teams; and finally, of culture, through a cross-fertilisation of different viewpoints from the European teams on a single site. As a competition of ideas followed by implementation, European also entails a constant to and fro between idea and application, taking on the challenge of the two-way transition between theory and practice.

Then, the question of **contemporary urbanity**. The ubiquitous theme of the reappropriation of the urban milieu is an invitation to develop new connections between usages, existing urban structures and the natural environment. This exploration has enabled the projects to devise new forms of urbanity, often on peripheral sites, avoiding both neo-rural models and land-hungry housing estate

⁵ C. Younès : European 6 – 18-06-2001 ; C. Younès : *Entre Urbain, architecture, nature* – IFA, 05-03-2002 ; C. Younès : *Habiter la nature* – European, 03-05-2004 ; C. Younès / F. Bonnet : *La nature et le projet : enjeux et figures, Apport conceptuel des projets par rapport à la question de la nature, Analyse des résultats du concours European France, 7 sessions, 07-2006* ; C. Younès / F. Bonnet : *Nouveaux paysages et milieux habités en projet – Etat limite, (Analyse de la 7ème session du concours European en France) 06-07-2007*.

⁶ Our dataset consists of: a series of winning or runner-up projects from session 5 to session 9 analysed from the perspective of reconnection, an interview with O’zone, E5 winner in Chessy, an interview with Fabien Gantois, E8 winner in Henin Carvin, a round table (experts: Alain Pelissier, Xavier Bonnaud), an interview with Alain Bertrand, client for E7 on the Nanterre site and a jury member for European France session 7, an interview with Bernard Reichen, member of European Europe’s Scientific Committee. All these documents have been analysed in a report: “European projects and the sustainable city”.

developments, in a move towards solutions that offer both greater density and more room for a social and programmatic mix.

Also, the exploration of **alternative mobilities**. This important theme has grown in significance as the scale of the competition sites has changed, moving from the problem of the object in its context to the more complex problem of urban scale projects (urban extensions, requalification of industrial or dockland zones, etc.). Reichen stresses connectivity as one of the three driving forces in the invention of the European city.

Finally, the constitution of a **figurative imagery**. The images produced by European are important. They give form to societal trends and contribute to the development of a pool of imagery, renewing the representation of urban transformations through the project.

In addition, there has been a strong and consistent shift in the last 5 sessions on at least two points. **The connection of architecture with the urban and with the wider territory and a serious recognition of the ecological imperative**. Indeed, the overlapping of scales has become one of the major priorities of contemporary spatial planning, as shown, for example, in the proposals put forward for the Greater Pari(s) consultation. It should be noted that three of the teams premiated in that consultation are former European winners (MvrdV, Finn Geipel and AUC). In the dialectic of the global and local, it has been apparent through the European projects, how the local – formerly devalued – has gradually been rehabilitated as a genuine driving force for invention. For Alain Bertrand, of the Seine Arche EPA [public development agency], who took part in European 7 with the Nanterre site, the transition in recent sessions to the urbano-architectural scale has led the teams to tackle more powerful, more subtle and more complex questions and taken us out of the era of the architecture of the object. Projects such as the O'zone project in Chessy or AUC's in Villetaneuse, both premiated in the fifth session, contributed to the emergence of this focus on the local qualities specific to each site and to their connection with global issues⁷. According to O'zone, this fifth session “marked a change in the European tradition”, because the urban question became major.

The other big emergence is the inclusion of the environment through the impact of the ecological imperative: initially associated with the notion of landscape, it has gradually shifted towards the idea of nature, in particular nature in the city, before finally merging with the living world. This shift obviously accompanied the emergence of sustainable development, in which the two dimensions of the environment – both scientific (ecosystem) and phenomenological (landscape) – came together again after a long period of separation, as Augustin Berque has shown⁸. More and more of today's projects work on biotopes – ecosystems – and try to combine them with shared cultural and social spaces. The “Day-to-day nature” project in Henin-Carvin, European 8 or “Deconvolution” in Saint-Chamond, European 9, reveal strategies of alliance between these two facets of the inhabited environment, both human and natural, working simultaneously on the phenomenological and physical aspects of the environment. Although, as Alain Bertrand (subsequently a member of the European 9

⁷ In an article analysing the 10 Grand Pari(s) project, Richard Scoffier establishes a distinction between projects of “strength” and projects of “power”. For him, the AUC project (Djamel Klouche) is representative of the first kind, in so far as it seeks to activate potential, to intensify strengths that are already in place. Richard Scoffier, « La ville entre pouvoir et puissance » in *D'Architecture*, n°181, April 2009.

⁸ See Augustin Berque, particularly *Médiance, de milieux en paysages*, Belin, 2000

jury) points out, the French European proposals still show a certain formalism, nature is gradually ceasing to be a mere item of decor and becoming a resource in respect of energy and materials and in respect of quality of life.

Thus European's projectual dynamic from 1999 to 2009 has creatively produce different types of reconfiguration linking local and global, singular and generic, whole and part. The unification and interpenetration of these entities, both hyperlocal and translocal, constitutes one of the fruitful aspects of this European competition. Taking on the challenge of regenerative transformations of inhabited milieus on the basis of their social, cultural, climatic, geographical singularities, has each time required the abandonment of models and the reinvention, in a situated reality, of other forms and figures that achieve naturo-cultural alliances and new hybrids.

Three operators of sustainable reconnection

The reconnection at work in the projects requires new operators that we summarise here, using the three categories Reichen develops in the interview.

He considers that there are three factors pertaining to sustainability that motivate the people in charge of spatial planning. First, connectivity. "The whole question of connectivity resides in the social/spatial link and in the way that the virtual world reinforces the real world." So connectivity should not be understood simply in terms of the physical connection between territories, but also from the more immaterial perspective of a service society. In the general economy of today's spatial planning, virtual links play as strong a structuring role for cities as the traditional links associated with infrastructures. This means that in this information and telecommunications society, connecting communities requires the articulation of both real and virtual, two dimensions that are not in conflict but reciprocally reinforcing. The fulfilment of this objective opens the way to multiple strategies, which the European projects have helped to develop. For example, the "On the road" project in Reims (E9), for the downgrading of a motorway into an urban boulevard, seeks to use the potential of the infrastructure to establish transversal links with the bordering neighbourhoods. Greater urbanity should lead to new services and the establishment of mixed and interconnected neighbourhoods.

The second significant factor of reconnection is the **city as nature**, in other words the invention of a different relationship than that established by postwar urban development, which has greatly contributed to creating our current spatial fabric. While this relationship was based on the separation between large protected natural areas and highly built-up areas, which is the model of the modern city, reconnection seeks to create multiple links between the urban fabric and the natural environment, through a whole series of strategies ranging from the planting of green roofs and walls, to a re-evaluation of the role of the elements (water, air, earth, fire) in inhabited milieus. The idea is no longer to juxtapose natural and artificial "rooms", but to recognise the powerful interdependence between these two strata, and to understand that they can coexist on the same ground. On this subject, we have observed the rehabilitation of ground, no longer as a simple base or "background", to use the expression coined by European France's expert Xavier Bonnaud, but as a true substrate, capable both of revealing the traces of a human past and of acting as the natural memory of a site, as it does in the Deconvolution project in Saint Chamond. In this sphere, the influence of theorists like Corboz, with his notion of the

palimpsest⁹, of urban planners like Bernardo Secchi¹⁰ or landscape architects like Gilles Clement or Bernard Lassus, with the notion of the substrate, is crucial.

Finally, for Reichen, the third factor is what he calls the **economy of means**, covering today's interest in practices such as reuse, rehabilitation or recycling. How do you do a lot with little? How do you maximise the potential of a place to enable it to regenerate "from the inside"? This effort, which emerges in the context of a worldwide economic crisis, is an invitation to "build differently" and to look carefully at elements of the sites that might, until reassessed, be seen as insignificant¹¹. However, once again it is in the reconnection between these sparse resources, that "sparks", as Xavier Bonnaud observes, are invented. This economy of means is as relevant the ecology of energy and material (construction materials), as to issues of heritage (in particular industrial heritage). However, it is also a reflection on the economy of the relationship between built and unbuilt areas. New tools, such as offset equations¹², can now be used to understand how the systems of environmental protection and urban development balance out. For Reichen, there are thus "many European projects that work on the economy of means through density, dense objects in natural areas".

As we can see, these three factors intersect with the three levels of reconnection mentioned above – natures and cultures, cultures and cultures, natures and natures. First through the new forms of mobility, with their reduced impact and greater diversity, which make cities more accessible and combat the different forms of spatial and social segregation; then through the search for hybridisation and coexistence between city development and the natural environment; and finally through a better, more economical management of resources, different ways of using and combining the potential already in situ.

In a previous article¹³, we also noted the emergence in today's urban ideas of what Magnaghi calls a "local project"¹⁴. What arises in such a project is not a model but a scenario, or scenarios, that try to use the forces present, and in particular to mobilise the different stakeholders (politicians, developers, local people, etc.) in a common project the outcome of which is not necessarily known. This incompleteness in the projects reflects an acknowledgement of the uncertainty that necessarily surrounds the representation of the future in urban planning. This lucidity is one of the important aspects of sustainable development, which – between control of the future and awareness of the unforeseeable contingencies to which it may be necessary to adapt – seeks to maintain the effectiveness of a political action in an unstable context. For Magnaghi, therefore, the contemporary utopia of sustainability retains its critical value, but is rooted in a reality that already exists, made up of "a constellation of molecular initiatives that are emerging today on the land and on the city and which, far from separating ideal and action, propelling the project into a revolutionary future or confining it in the current social conditions of production, distance themselves from the State and from the market by building here and now a civil society, a local

⁹ Andre Corboz, *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais*, Editions de l'Imprimeur, 2001

¹⁰ Secchi talks of a "ground project" to refer to the attempts of contemporary urban planning to rediscover coherence between sparse fragments. Bernardo Secchi, *Première leçon d'urbanisme*, Editions Parenthèses, 2006

¹¹ Patrick Bouchain, *Construire autrement*, Actes Sud, 2006

¹² Offset equations, in the sphere of urban planning and environment, are used to measure the ecological footprint of an operation.

¹³ « Le projet local: du modèle au scénario », *Urbanisme*

¹⁴ Alberto Magnaghi, *Le projet local*, Mardaga, 2003

society, the aggregates of a new community.”¹⁵ Thus, the nowhere of the traditional utopia is contrasted with a nowhere which is not to be rejected, but allowed to express itself. Many European projects identify themselves with this open approach, leaving room for the unforeseeable, and also for local civil initiatives. Although the European nature of the competition, based on a diversity of views and the possibility to submit projects on foreign sites, sometimes makes familiarity with the local context difficult to achieve, we nevertheless see this context taken seriously, even at the risk of occasional simplification.

This local project could therefore outline the contours of a new utopia of which European, through the projects produced within it, would offer versions. In this new form of utopia, a global and concerted approach is recommended, in order to link the global and the local, development and its topos, through a democratic form of invention. The aim each time is to develop projects that connect the spatiotemporal dimensions of the planetary, the local and the singular.

In this perspective, the sustainable project leads to the invention of new forms of reconnection and displacement that leads to a production of a resilient architecture of the milieu, in which living beings, usages and spatiotemporal figures are intimately associated.

The scale of the SCOT is wider, more strategic, although less focused and more limited in its legal scope. It cannot, for example, be used to grant planning permission for a specified plot. It is commissioned by cross-municipality structures or structures created for a specific project.

¹⁵ Magnaghi, *op.cit.*, p.80