Horizontality

Throughout his overarching *opus majus* proposing the survey of more than one century of architecture[1] following the Industrial Revolution, Jean-Louis Cohen roams all along in the field of "built objects": edifices and cities. However, as the title suggests it, this is a history book oriented towards the future. In a sequence of the last chapter the author voices his intuition of the landscape being progressively brought into the built environment, and of the growing part landscape architecture tends to play in the continuous emergence of the human milieu.

Yet landscape is a construct, not a construction. For Cohen to combine it with the horizon in a meta-metaphorical subtitle is revealing: in search of a feasible future his most knowledgeable account of recent architecture aims beyond the artificial world extending as far as eye can see. Nowadays both landscape and horizon are used – and at times abused – metaphors in everyday language. Choosing Cohen's subtitle-phrase as the topic for this year's issue of our journal was expected to bring about some clarity on the matter and rich harvest generated by the endlessly diverse possible understandings of each of the two words, as well as of their odd couple. The result is still surprising, as will be seen in the contributions exceeding all expectations, for the papers unveil a beneficial thematic richness. However, regardless of the diversity of the treated topics, a certain sameness is apparent. Hence the title of this introduction. Horizontality here is meant to indicate some sort of unwillingness or restrain to go "over the rainbow" in problematizing more stringent questions concerning the artificial environment. It is perhaps a typicality of our times, overconfident in their technology – or even a subconscious refusal to acknowledge the limits of our power to control nature. By shying away from projecting the inquisitive gaze beyond eye level, quite a few of the contributions to this issue certify in an inverted manner what seems to be an ontogenetic difficulty of humankind: to put ourselves in the shoes of the non-human part of the living world.

The following series of inventive, valiant – yet sometimes hesitant – attempts to look farther than the horizon of the human world will nevertheless provide a learning about how fertile "avoiding the narcissism of overpowering edifices"[2] can be. Landscape, having been invented to be the most comprehensive concept to perceiving nature as our world, is more often than not turned inside out: we own the landscape and we demand for it to reflect our fictions, illusions, beliefs and errancies. Consequently, we find over and over again that landscape merely mirrors our filtered realities. Notwithstanding, staring at the horizon and seeing the reflection of our own world allows every now and again some approaches to escape from the gilded cage of an over-anthropized environment and to glimpse at the uncanny scenery of the Earth inhabited differently.

The dossier begins with an interview. Or, rather, with a series of interviews this time. **Adriana Măgerușan** talked to members of several designers' teams authoring projects aimed at thoroughly reshaping the relationship between the Transylvanian city of Cluj and the Someş river flowing through it. The metaphor of the horizon, now embodied by the river, acquires here new dimensions, although nearly exclusively seen from within the city. What makes their different stories remarkable, are the common topics emerging from them. The most important aspect appears to be provided by the newer concerns for urban biodiversity: they indicate an attempt to overcome the exclusionist instinct of architectural and urban planning.

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1   Jean-Louis Cohen, *The Future of Architecture since 1889* (London: Phaidon, 2012).
2   Ibid., 473.

The paper of **Nicolò Chierichetti** is thus bound to come next as it is meeting head-on the matter of ecological transformations generated in peri-urban landscapes determined by large scale infrastructural networks. Exploring the horizon of a planet invaded by post-industrial human settlements shifts the perspective from Romantic revelry to the view of motorways and their emerging artificial and natural ecosystems. Based on the case study of Milan, the author looks at the phenomenon of urban and interurban transportation infrastructures, which make a poignant impact on the anthropized landscape; he tackles the vital question of non-human life established around these structures. With its thorough analysis of the regulations put in place by regional authorities to address the ecological fragmentation produced by highspeed road systems, the paper reports on encouraging initiatives in search of solutions. Thus, the article constitutes an exception to the overwhelmingly anthropocentric approach of most of the contributions, which remain mostly captive to architecture's constitutive navel-gazing.

A somewhat similar attempt to overcome architecture's self-referentiality is subjacent to **Valeria Federighi**'s analysis of the socio-technical imaginaries – and anxiety – produced by the unstoppably sprawling urban realm. Still, her gaze directed towards the landscape returns ineluctably to town. The case study at the core of her paper is taking on the urban and suburban landscape of Kiruna. The case proves to be very local and at the same time generously universal due to the confrontation between hardly compatible values at stake: mining (economic), heritage (cultural), and ecological (natural). By comparing three different narratives, the argument comes down to discussing the landscape understood in the theoretical framework provided by Alain Roger, and his concepts of *artialization in situ* and *in visu*, as "device" for interpretation. This particular matter of conflicting landscapes was eventually translated into a brief to be solved by means of an architectural competition. However, no finite project seems to have emerged from the process; it is the process itself that turns into some sort of open project: an outlook on what might become a more adaptive way of planning the artificial domain and a positive (if provisional) conclusion to the drama.

The theme of the competition is also at the center of an account given by **Camelia Sisak** to the impressive series of projects aimed at transforming the urban landscape of Cluj. A change is under way in the "cultural landscape" of this Transylvanian city, as a result of the by now entrenched practice of approaching any major public investment through an open access competition. Yet the report, unlike in the previous paper, remains within the limits of the human settlement and of a foreseeable outcome. Still, the documented collective effort to achieve the best possible solutions for complex urban planning problems remains exemplary, not least because competitions involve a multiple transfer of decision making. By assuming landscape to be a primarily aesthetic matter transformed continuously through successive interventions, the paper is putting forward an actuality by no means as self-evident as it might seem.

Quite differently, in the sense of tackling the processual nature of any urban settlement, are the "peri-urban landscapes" discussed in the paper of **Ineta Šuopyté**. Her "unfinished horizon" keeps its promises of providing some "critical reflections" on several post-suburbanization scenarios by dwelling on the specific fate of rural houses of culture in post-Communist Lithuania. As a rule, these structures, which become landmarks of the Soviet-era rural landscape are now neglected or given unsuitable functions, thus becoming symbols of the profound societal changes occurring during the past three decades. Yet again architecture – and the anthropic landscape it defines – is the sign of its times. The article unveils another dimension of the idea of "cultural landscape" when it traces the general features of the "built landscape" imposed on societies by totalitarian regimes.

Other kinds of cultural landscapes, this time from the western Romanian region of Banat, are the starting point for the inquisitions undertaken by **Gabriela Domokos-Paşcu**, **Ana-Neli Ianăş**, **Maja Bâldea**, and **Teodor-Octavian Gheorghiu** in order to identify new "ways of experimenting and understanding the territory." As a matter of fact, their paper reports on a research conducted for several years. While dealing with a reasonably wide yet still limited territory, this contribution succeeds in proposing a methodology that can be applied indefinitely. It does so by establishing – on the basis of internationally accepted definitions and recommendations in the field – rules

generally applicable for defining the exceptions to the rule. These, in the end, outline the correct interpretation of any given cultural landscape by being grounded precisely in what makes it unique.

In her attempt to apply to the historical districts of Bucharest the methodology for urban analysis and intervention of the "Roman school" developed from the ideas of Gustavo Giovannoni, **Alina Stoica** puts emphasis on a different aspect of contextualism in architecture and urban planning. Though exclusively human and city-oriented, her approach is luminous and constructive by seeking those theoretical and practical elements in planning that encompass local specificities while at the same time enhancing them. Both horizon and identity hear are "glocal" as long as the matter is the culture of inhabiting in its most inclusive sense.

By revisiting the "Blut und Boden" story, **Gianluca Drigo** takes on landscape as depositary of local identity from the very opposite end, the dark one. Besides giving a detailed, documented and knowledgeably critical account of the historical phenomenon as it developed during the last century, the paper indicates both explicitly and implicitly the persistent traits that make the resurgence of such ideas possible in any culture and in any inhabited territory. In the event, the author shows how the constructed character of the landscape, an essentially aesthetic idea, appears having the potential to be perverted politically, turned into a toxic realm: an excuse to kill animals, plants and other humans.

It is this very dead end that lies at the center of **Ifat Finkelman**'s paper: in an immediate relation to the present, the paper tells the story of a hill, a disputed sacred place in West Jerusalem. The conflicting narratives remain indifferent to the landscape, they are merely about territorial boundaries, about meanings attached to the place, which transform any inhabited place in a means to exert power: "Through the study of these built-up layers, we can identify the interlacement of factors and changing narratives that determined the site's evolution and understand *landscape* as a medium of exchange between space and the events that shape it," as W.J.T. Mitchell, quoted by Finkelman, puts it. Architecture here, more perhaps than anywhere else, becomes an ideological tool that completely invades the landscape. A landscape that is perceived as owned and expected to respond to divergent historical fictions. The horizon evoked here is closed and hopeless. The tradition handed down and at work today in the region appears to have the same major features as those told in the Old Testament, whose first five books are largely identical with the Torah, and whose author is a prophet venerated by Muslims. This horizon is turned towards the past, entangling it with the present and the future – somewhat like the obstinate disputes surrounding the sacred hill evoked, which take notice neither of the plants and animals living there, nor of the beauty of the light in different seasons.

The identitarian mood is somewhat less grim in the report given by **Angela Gigliotti** about an extraordinary attempt to build architecture that vanishes in the landscape under circumstances peripheral in every sense. The author is looking once again back in time at the posterity of a twice utopian architectural enterprise. The idea of setting "Danish revival" architecture in Italy appears from her impressively thorough and meticulous historical research as impossible an endeavor as building villas for the wealthy that would then vanish into the landscape. In the end, the Italian-Danish edifices turned out as a bizarre stylistic hybrid. And the lakeshore hillsides have since ended up as over-urbanized allotments, thus losing their most precious character.

Nuria Casais-Pérez, **Ferran Grau Valdosera**, and **Francesc Xavier Roig-Munar** discuss the present architectural state of waterside promenades as well; like Gigliotti, the authors deplore the overdevelopment of the shores, this time in Spain. Basically, it is a historical overview of the multiple factors that led to the current, untenable situation. Eventually, the paper dives into the analysis of the earlier, natural dune ecosystem replaced during the last half century by rigid built structures because of intense urbanization. It is a cartography *in nuce* of the whole phenomenon of the transformations in settlements, infrastructures, and landscape resulting from the post-war development of global mass tourism, as illustrated by this Catalan case study. The topic of "artificial re-naturalization" appears as a sequel to the analyzed processes and implicitly raises the question of the level of complexity required by any project to match an eventual "natural re-naturalization" with foreseeably unwanted consequences.

Future experience will show to what extent the project paradigms analyzed by **Maud Cassaignau** and **Markus Jung** will resist and expand. The authors discuss long awaited projects that aim to reintegrate some compatible parts of nature within the human habitat. The two Australian case studies chosen are exemplary in more ways than one; perhaps their most interesting aspect lies with the fact that the hybris of certainty is left out of both discourses, drawn and written. Thus far, "ecological cities" remain mostly in the realm of desiderata, but even such fragmentary attempts towards "more-than-human" architecture and urban planning are more than timely. Remains to be seen if any project – selective and exclusive *per se* – can truly cope with the challenges posed by the newer climatic phenomena.

The interest in the traditional Nordic feeling for local atmosphere and specific manner to conceive contextual architecture introduces the discussion proposed by **Erika Brandl**. Her choice of researching Sverre Fehn, Arne Næss, and their "joined methods in environmental representations" achieves a remarkable feat by putting together the works of two contemporary Norwegians, an architect and a philosopher who had not collaborated personally. By identifying similar or corresponding features of their respective works, the author intends to outline a different relationship between natural environment and architectural or conceptual representation, expecting to indicate a desirable direction in reshaping architectural production. Her (and Fehn's) sharp insight on the clear separation made by the lines drawn by humans between natural and artificial areas is close to what anthropologist Tim Ingold discusses elsewhere.[3] And by projecting the potential dissolution of these boundaries Brandl is creating an opening towards an eco-anthropology of architecture looking out towards different horizons, more serene.

The case of the "Venice Laboratory," linked inexorably to the personality of Gianugo Polesello, constitutes the central subject matter of **Alioscia Mozzato** in the last contribution to this issue. In spite of its centeredness, the paper is by no means the monographic kind of work. Taking on this most unique city of human civilization opens wide the door to innumerable questions concerning our late-modern societies struggling with unprecedented crises. What place other than Venice could illustrate more tellingly the rise and fall through the centuries of great human-made places, the potentials and limits of human endeavor, the miracle and fragility of our artificial world embedded in nature?

It appears therefore inevitable that the 2025 manifesto of the Venice Biennial should begin with pointing out our "era defined by environmental urgency" and consequently require from the participants "to draw on our wealth of intelligence, from our ever-growing artificial computing power to our collective wisdom, to rethink your approach towards a *circular* and nature-positive design practice."[4] Yet the metaphor of circularity, used all through the text like a leitmotiv, seems less encouraging; it brings to mind countless failed attempts to get away from the structural impossibility to make something artificial and natural at the same time. The circularity metaphor is also an implicit expression of a shortening historical perspective accompanying the rapidity of the everyday. In spite of the best endeavors to look at the landscape alluded to by Jean-Louis Cohen, the provisional conclusion emerging from this issue of sITA is that, so far, its horizon is but scarcely visible.

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3   Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, Routledge, 2013), Chapter 9, "Drawing the line."

4   https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/circular-economy-manifesto, accessed December 15, 2024, my italics.