

Regenerative Landscapes

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Université libre de Bruxelles
Faculté d'Architecture

Designing the Transition

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Conference of the European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools

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Regenerative Landscapes – Designing the Transition A New Horizon for Architecture

Conference of the European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools (ECLAS)
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In a world torn apart by multiple ecological, social, economic, cultural etc. crises, thinking and acting in a balanced and holistic way is of utmost emergency. Alongside globalization, often resulting in uniformization, a seemingly inseparable fragmentation occurred. Fragmentation meant separation of components that once belonged together organically: urban planners propose open cities extremely detached from their (natural/cultural) surroundings, landscape architects imagine open spaces that affect flora and fauna habitats, architects design buildings that do not fit in or communicate with the landscape. In times of a high degree of professional specialization, of desired multi- and interdisciplinarity, professionals from strongly interconnected areas do not talk (enough) to each other, they got caught in fragmented, isolated and unbred thinking. A renewed dialogue is needed.

The annual conference of ECLAS (European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools) proposed to be a place for the renewed professional dialogue. This proposal requires a reset context, a rediscovering of the landscape not only as a necessary spatial-functional working unit for all involved professions, but also as a structural, systemic framework-like model for various, current social, economic or ecological phenomena. Landscape, regenerative landscape, could be a new horizon for architecture. As stated in the title of the conference, regenerative landscape should be a core component of designing the (professional) transition.

ECLAS 2024, hosted by the Faculty of Architecture at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, concentrated on exploring the reinvention of the landscape as a critical resource for design and planning. This approach was presented as a method for innovative system design and planning, aimed at addressing challenges arising from multiple crisis situations.

Thus, thinking, designing, planning, and acting within a rediscovered landscape perspective in architecture and urban planning could result in a much-needed renewal, a dialogue among professions. Translated into a common, concerted design potential could constitute a connecting, cross-boundary element between different areas and interest groups with seemingly competing values and goals. Landscape can act both as a conceptual framework and as a medium for activating this potential, as unlocking the transformative capacity is a necessity.

The question that triggered the conference — the necessity and opportunity of (re)connecting to the (regenerative) landscape — was raised in the opening statement and was then detailed in the keynote presentation, as a consequence of realizing that “we are operating beyond the capacity of our planet”¹ and, as a result, “we need to move back in the safe operating space.” Various teaching, research or practice experiences of past, present, and future (regenerative)

¹ The planetary boundaries framework draws upon Earth system science. It identifies nine processes that are critical for maintaining the stability and resilience of Earth system as a whole. Nowadays, all are affected negatively by human activities to an alarming extent, and as a result six out of nine planetary boundaries have been crossed. See Katherine Richardson e.a., “Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries,” *Science Advances* vol. 9, 37 (2023), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>, accessed September 30, 2024.

landscapes were unveiled in the presentations organized across seven panels; the panels were structured around concepts like “democratic landscape transformation,” “energy and/or mobility landscapes,” foodscapes, “hidden landscapes of the global value-added chain,” “beyond cheap nature” or “heritage and identities, as activating cultural capital.”

Cross-cutting questions concerning definitions, classifications, shaping operations, and impacts of regenerative landscapes were meant to connect all seven panels. Presentations were displayed by participants of various professional backgrounds: (landscape) architects, urban planners, environment engineers, ecologists, economists, etc. Some of the intriguing ideas, or possible conclusions, relevant to architecture could be summarized in the following paragraphs, structured according to the main conference panels.

1. Architecture is to be (re)connected to the historical landscape

Architecture and, more generally, landscapes can generate cultural heritage, complex identity, and vice versa. Understanding heritage from a landscape perspective opens many opportunities for creating synergies and added value at the interface of tourism, recreation, nature protection, agriculture, education, health and well-being. Historical landscapes and historical cities as their inherent part are the result of the interaction of natural and human factors and include a unique set of natural environment and physical structure, with all their specific attributes. Topography, geology, water and vegetation constitute the core, lasting and defining structural components of a landscape, that often shaped local architecture.

The idea of sustainability, the ecoregional approach are not only traditional attributes of the historical (urban) landscape, but also promoters of present-day development. There is an ongoing debate on urban and territorial resilience and regeneration, seeking for a city functioning in its original context, as part of a larger landscape unit by recognizing the intense historical relationship between the “architecture of the city” and the landscape.

The approach to managing cities and their architecture, as part of historical landscapes is holistic by integrating the goals of ecological sustainability and those of cultural, social, and economic development. It moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment and focuses on the entire human environment, with all its tangible and intangible qualities. It seeks to increase the sustainability of planning and design interventions by considering the defining role of the historical landscape in shaping cities and their architecture, thus reconfirming the regenerative character of historical landscapes.² Historical landscapes are finely layered in time and this quality may endow them with the “healing” capacities of regenerative landscapes, a capacity that could be transferred to architecture itself.

2. There is an ongoing transformation of landscapes (and of architecture, too)

Landscapes mirror people. Communities and their subsequent social, economic, cultural power structures³ can determine landscape realities, and landscape can shape communities as well. The changing of landscapes and communities are interconnected. The capacity of transforming landscapes, of making unsustainable landscape systems sustainable and more accessible to people, is embedded in the latter's values, knowledge, resources, decisions, and concrete actions. Therefore, community-based approaches, partnerships, and co-creation are more needed than ever in all involved areas, all the more given the still limited capability to use participatory approaches.

Truly participatory transformative processes require a genuine, deep self-reflection and a profound relation to ourselves, as foundation of any collective acting or engaging with landscapes and their communities. Making the building process more inclusive and more participatory is

2 As defined, the topic was dealt with in Y. Sofer, “Continuity - Between a Historic Urban Landscape and the Regeneration of the Urban Fabric,” and E. Ványolós, “Reconnecting (the city) to the landscape. Cluj in Transylvania, Romania,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

3 “The right “to take place” in an urban environment is tied to power and social justice” in L. Fridell, M. Kylin, “Attitudes and ideas as a capacity for change towards sustainability – the concept of childhood and children's places as examples,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

an important dimension of landscape democratization, where architecture, the “built object,” simultaneously lives out of and contributes to the landscape. This idea was presented in this panel. A project-based research on a specific case in Athens, Greece, dealt with a collective and democratic approach needed for regenerating the identity of historical landscapes, an important process for “people’s well-being, for their socialization, as well as for continued acquisition of environmental benefits, and financial viability.”⁴ In this process, as another intriguing presentation suggested, AI could potentially have a role in the near future.⁵

3. Architecture is building a new energy landscape.

Nowadays building industry is one of the biggest polluters of our environment. It is wasteful, still uses a significant amount of energy and material resources. Making the building process more resourceful, parallel to continuous efforts of decarbonization, requires a reliable renewable energy production, a new energy landscape, since landscape could be “a medium for a shared energy transition, as shown in the conference.”⁶ Landscape was also presented as having the potential to become “a regenerative medium where energy provision can be combined with other societal challenges.”⁷ Understanding landscape as a new productive layer is essential, thus completing the other critical functions of the existing landscape system such as biodiversity, agriculture, housing, or transportation. The transition to a new energy landscape depends not only on planning or managing it according to criteria of sustainability, but also on design innovation, on finding new, less polluting materials, on adapting building techniques and technology to higher ecological standards.

4. Mobility landscapes are shaping environment.

The human need for mobility is continuously increasing not only due to the spatial separation of different urban functions within a certain territorial unit,⁸ but also to necessary interconnections of various cities or territories. Production and resource-provision have acquired global dimensions and people or goods are permanently moving between places. Beyond the evident cultural, social, economic benefits of mobility, it is also clear that the current mobility systems consume far too much energy and space while increasing social inequalities and creating new ones.

The impact of mobility systems is significant on urban and territorial development and management, on the general quality of the natural environment, on the urban and architectural landscape. The transition to a more sustainable mobility system relies on improving the interaction with the green-blue infrastructures, and the public space network in general. As discussed in conference, this improvement can be facilitated by interdisciplinary approaches, by connecting various planning and design scales and components, like stormwater management, biodiversity, health and mobility planning, not only on large territories but also on the streetscape level, or even at the scale of the architectural object.⁹

5. Foodscapes return to the cities.

Despite having shaped the relationship between humans and their landscapes since the beginnings of history, during the transition to modern urban societies, food production has

4 A. Paraskevopoulou, A. Gkoltsiou, E. Mougiak, A. Christaki, “How to regain our landscape: A democratic / collective approach for regenerating the identity of a historically important landscape,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

5 K. Bacha, B. Dreksler, “Empowering Regenerative Landscapes through Generative AI in Participatory Design,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

6 R. Pistoni, G. Déserts, A. Doreau, “Landscape as a medium for a shared energy transition: findings from a serious game,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

7 D. Oudes, “From promise to practice: advancing the concept of multifunctional energy landscapes,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

8 Starting from the modernist paradigm of the Charter of Athens, 1933.

9 F. Otto, “Scaling up urban climate adaptation measures by taking to the streets,” and M.C. Christ, “Walking design / designing walks: revealing water stories as paths to regenerative urban landscapes,” ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

lost its once strong connections to people and landscapes. Similar to other economic systems, foodscapes operate today in both local and global networks. This involves a loss of awareness of the limited natural resources on which our food depends, especially soil and water. A transformation both local and global of the food system is urgent as it responds to multiple crises related to biodiversity, climate, water, health, and food security. Establishing local and regional food systems is very important for reducing carbon footprint, enhancing biodiversity goals, increasing climate resilience, and facilitating social cohesion. Understanding landscapes and their cultural heritage, foodscapes hold great opportunities for reconnecting people to nature and promoting responsible consumption. Though not directly connected to architectural design, foodscape is important due to its relevance to urban and territorial (landscape) planning disciplines. Foodscapes and urban agriculture could generate the revival of food production facilities around cities' residential areas, thus indirectly influencing their architectural design.¹⁰

6. *(Landscape) architecture is beyond cheap nature.*

Traditionally, architecture was perceived as opposed to nature: originally building a house represented not only a spatial-functional cutout, not a fragment of nature, but a clear separation from it. Building meant the protection of humans from nature. In contrast, today's landscape architecture has at its core the protection and enhancement of ecosystems, putting design with and for nature at the interface of society and natural environment. The idea of "cheap nature" best represents the overexploitation of natural resources, the evidence of the unsustainable use of soil, water, air, flora, and fauna by economic activities, particularly by the building industry. Architecture should contribute to the task of regenerating nature by innovative design, e.g. research on using new, living materials or ecofriendly building techniques and technologies. A convincing and innovative case study from Finland, presented in this panel, gave an interesting insight on such a contribution.¹¹

The conference presentations proved to be extremely relevant to the current debate about architecture's own crisis and the need for change, for a reset. Like many other disciplines, architecture is less relevant and efficient in guiding our society to find the best answers for the challenges resulting from the multiple crises we must face. As the presentations in all seven panels suggested, to regain this relevance, architecture should reconnect with its natural context, contribute to regenerating the environment and thus help improving long-term sustainability, increasing biodiversity, and enhancing resilience. Architecture should learn the regenerative capacity of landscapes by participating to the "healing process," by trying to stop destructive environmental actions (excessive urbanization, climate change, deforestation, etc.), and by possibly adapting to the dynamic character of nature and its cultural context. In the process of rediscovering its origins, of reinventing itself, architecture as "art of transformation"¹² has a new horizon, the regenerative landscape.

10 The case study of Oosterwold in the Netherlands could be relevant: a peri-urban polder land, transformed into a hybrid rural-urban area with nature-based solutions, being earmarked to urban agriculture with 50% of its surface, as the remaining parts will be used for dwelling, grey infrastructure and the creation of greenspaces and water features. See D. Münsterlein and J.E. Jansma, "Almere Oosterwold - A self-organized peri-urban Foodscape," ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

11 In addition to direct roles of the building process in enhancing nature regeneration, biodiversity, its role of architectural/urban design in changing users behavior in looking beyond "business as usual human well-being" is also underlined, as presented in E. Lähde, O. Mahlio, "Urban Evolution: Regenerative Approaches to Enhance Biodiversity in Finnish Housing Projects," ECLAS 2024, Brussels.

12 As stated in the main keynote presentation of the Doctoral Colloquium by Alexandre Chemetoff (born 1960), a French architect, urban planner and landscape artist (ECLAS 2024, Brussels).