

Critique of Forest Intelligence: Scenarios for Architecture and the City in the Twenty-First Century (and Beyond)

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Abstract

This contribution starts from a question: in what terms can the design reason that is guiding the action of numerous contemporary architects, city planners and project makers be considered and defined? We argue that such reason can be defined as 'forest intelligence', opposed to the human-animal intelligence that has instead characterised the repertoire of architectural-urban solutions from modernity onwards. The latter is characterised by verticality, exemplified by classes of opposites such as centre and periphery, the space of 'nature' and the space of the 'city'. On the other hand, the new 'forest intelligence' is characterised by horizontality – urban polycentrism, interrelation between the parts of the city, absence of a clear division between 'natural' and urban space. Therefore, we have investigated three remarkable moments of the first quarter of our century. From the art world, the Documenta 13 exhibition (2012); representing architecture and landscape

design, Gilles Clément's *Manifeste du Tiers paysage* (2004); and from the field of politics, the 'New Landscape Declaration' (2016), an updated manifesto for landscape practice. We believe that these three specific and topical events can be understood as activators, initiators and at the same time as spaces for publicising the aforementioned 'forest intelligence'.

Keywords

Forest intelligence, human-animal intelligence, design reason, civic forest, architecture, project

We are living in an era marked by multiple transitions, with targets set for 2030 and 2050 on the horizon: this time gap becomes an opportunity to open a reflection, both methodological and theoretical, that allows us to understand how to influence the impacts that the climate crisis and the ecological transition are having on our places, space and landscape.¹ As early as 1987, the Brundtland Report affirmed the need for a new sustainability of development and suggested a reference to *téchne*, conceived as our ability (as humans) to process elements present on the planet such that they could become resources as yet unknown or not employable with the technologies of the time.²

Nearly forty years later, the concept of 'sustainable development' (first introduced precisely by the Brundtland Report) remains at the centre of a transdisciplinary debate that seeks to define new research and projects to rethink a compromised relationship (compromised by us) between humans and their environment.³ Architecture is one of the disciplines involved in trying to understand, explain, anticipate and influence issues such as the typological implication of 'nature', biodiverse environments and their care, social access and the right to 'green spaces'. We can no longer sit back and be spectators to the critical

environmental events around us: design, compared to other more specialised disciplines, can and must respond to these issues with a certain amount of naivety, but also with creativity and lightness.⁴

A new form of urban intelligence

With this contribution we aim to define a transnational and non-local critique of the theoretical foundations that have given rise to a significant proportion of recent projects prefiguring architecture and cities of the near future in the form of civic forests.⁵ We will attempt to demonstrate how this new architectural and urban paradigm is gaining ground insofar as – and by means of which – we are moving towards a forest-like conformation or design structure of urban morphology (henceforth: urban intelligence). This updated conformation of thought and critical posture is horizontal, interrelated and diffuse, and polycentric, made up of rhizomatic city-archipelagos with numerous wild grafts disseminated with architectures in which the living element becomes predominant as a ‘construction material’.⁶

This conception seems to be undermining and replacing the current urban conformation, which could be defined as the classical one, present at least since the agrarian-Neolithic revolution onwards, which is instead human-animal, that is, vertical, hierarchical, centralised, made up of a centre and a periphery. Nowadays, this traditional urban landscape of ours is strongly in need of updating and intensive change operations.⁷ ‘The new enlightenment, which is inseparable from the project of an ecological and democratic society, goes hand in hand with a decentralisation of democracy that requires giving space to citizen-led experimentation and rejects vertical governmentality’.⁸

On the one hand, a city conceived as the worst form of living, except for all the forms that have attempted to replace it, a place in which more than 70 per cent of the world’s population will live by 2050.⁹ On the other, the theatre of the urban conceived as a true ‘species autism’, built almost exclusively with non-living material, within a specist view of segregation towards the outside world for everything that is not human.¹⁰ We live in a strange form of a place that is very problematic, in its current conditions, but which we cannot and will not (in the short term) manage to live without: a different spatial horizon for the city of tomorrow will only be possible by working and operating on the urban intelligence that lies behind the scenes, and which gives shape to the city itself.

Three manifestos of a turning point

From this point of view three initiating events of the first quarter of our century can be traced as premonitory signs

in the 1) artistic, 2) project and 3) political spheres of what in all likelihood awaits us. These projects can serve as scenarios, useful for improving the living conditions of a species (ours) which it now also seems possible to coherently define through a possible leap in species (which is perhaps in part already being implemented).¹¹ *Ecce Homo urbanus*.¹²

Starting from the artistic side of the question, the first event is the prominent, global exhibition Documenta 13, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, hosted in Kassel, Germany, in 2012. There, many works centred on and questioned the centuries-old Western relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, between the natural and the artefactual, between the living and the non-living worlds, constituted by a sharp caesura and incommunicability.¹³ An artist such as Giuseppe Penone, who has always been confronted with the theme of the garden, conceived broadly, reduces to a minimum the threshold that divides (and actually also holds together) the world of artistic production from that of the experience of nature, seeking and proclaiming the utmost commingling and profound interpenetration between these two worlds and their ‘species’ (especially with the series *Essere fiume*, begun in 1981). [Fig. 1]

Starting from similar assumptions, the work exhibited by Song Dong attempts to shed a different light on a work of environmental forces that can sometimes produce something useful for the purposes of our living spaces, assuming that the human being is also able to give it the right space through his *non-doing* of Bartlebian memory (*Doing Nothing Garden*, 2010–12).¹⁴ [Fig. 2] Song Dong’s work is nothing more and nothing less than a small red circular perimeter about forty centimetres high, which in its material rigidity also offers itself as a seat for visitors. This enclosure marks the boundary of a little mound of earth: an area of a few square metres completely closed off to humans for a few years (in preparation of the opening of the exhibition in 2012), where other-lives continue to happen. Amidst grass stalks, flowers, small shrubs, pollinating insects from underground, life teems there. The Chinese artist’s installation is an updated variation on the theme of Joseph Beuys’s *7000 Oaks* for Documenta 7 in 1982, conceived as part of his broader project entitled *Defence of Nature*. Beuys had envisaged the positioning of 7000 basalt slabs in front of the entrance to the Fridericianum, the sale of which would have made it possible to purchase an equal number of oaks to be planted throughout the city, each with its own stele next to it. [Fig. 3]

The idea that we want to affirm is that of an exhibition, Documenta 13, which has arranged a before and an after. It was an exhibition that in many of the works exhibited, in the wake of the ‘interspecific alliances’ of Donna Haraway’s thought that guided the curator’s intentions,



Fig. 1: Giuseppe Penone, *Essere fiume*, 1995–96. River stone, quarry stone. Two elements, approximately 40x80x50cm. Photo: Archivio Penone.



Fig. 2: Song Dong, *Doing Nothing Garden*, at Documenta 13, 2010–12. Photo: Song Dong.



Fig. 3: One of the oak trees planted in Kassel, next to its stele, after Joseph Beuys's performance *7000 Oaks* at Documenta 7, 1982. Photo: public domain.

sought to glimpse a future mixed and no longer split and verticist of 'natureculture'. These goals were achieved by going beyond the notion of species itself, disrupting the idea of inequality, hierarchy and disparity that is realised every time one tries to affirm species difference as something real, ontological and definitive.¹⁵ This is set against a certain vision of things that makes human-animal intelligence – made up of one or more centres and one or more peripheries subject to them – the only reference imaginary for thinking and designing our lives and the spaces dedicated to them. Instead, a move towards a sort of horizontal, non-vertical and interrelated 'biotic communism' is implied, which is what has been defined here as forest intelligence, by way of anti-centralism and pure-peripheralism.¹⁶

If Donna Haraway's two manifestos (*Cyborg Manifesto*, 1985; but more importantly, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 2003) contributed to laying the theoretical foundations of an exhibition such as Documenta 13, which then itself assumed the role of watershed within recent artistic production, it is always a book in the form of a manifesto that has laid the foundations for the 'landscape turn' of architecture in the last twenty years.¹⁷ The text in question is the fundamental *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage* by Gilles Clément, first published in 2004.¹⁸ By landscape turn, we mean a becoming 'of the landscape' of the architectural discipline taken as a whole: today's ecological-environmental condition forces all architecture to be 'of the landscape', if by this we mean a stronger focus on what is perceived outside or around the canonical construction.

The *Manifeste du Tiers paysage* is the theoretical address book that has probably had the greatest echo and influence on design project practice since Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923).¹⁹ Eighty years after the Swiss architect's manifesto, which marked the start of the architectural short century, the bridge of the transatlantic liner immortalised on the cover of its first edition seems to waver. Clément seems to want to bring us back down to earth, to redeem us after a mechanistic and rationalist intoxication, already strongly undermined by the equally extreme formalist and pseudo-historicist drift of postmodernism, which, in a broad sense, has even called into question the very habitability, for us humans, of Gaia's space.²⁰

Within its *Tiers paysage*, Gilles Clément makes two moves in one. The first is clearly political: recalling the most famous pamphlet of Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, theorist of the French Revolution, Clément states at the outset how his own words are to some degree to be understood as revolutionary. 'What is the Third Estate? Everything – What has it done so far? Nothing – What does it aspire to become? Something'.²¹ The second move is of a planning or architectural nature: the adjective 'Third' (capitalised in Clément's writing to claim a direct connection with

the world of the revolution) designates places that until then had remained 'unnamed', urban outcasts deprived of planning status, and for this reason often relegated to the margins of attention by architects, town planners and public decision-makers.²² Seen through new lenses – that of Clément the gardener, as he likes to define himself – these areas take on a programmatic and in some way existential value, given that 'it is in the gaze that the landscape is built' (a question also reiterated by the European Landscape Convention of 2000).²³

The Third landscape is thus a first site of disruption and rupture of the Cartesian dynamics proper to the disciplines of Western modernity, including those related to the architecture of the city.²⁴ With this, Clément is the first to bring into the world of design and architecture the so-called 'ontological turn' that had occurred in the world of cultural anthropology about a decade earlier, undermining disciplinary assumptions that, just after the release of the *Manifeste*, appeared to be obsolete, tired and now almost meaningless.²⁵ [Figs. 4, 5]

The third event we want to discuss is the *New Landscape Declaration*, one of the most up-to-date manifestos for landscape practice.²⁶ This declaration has emerged within today's legislative panorama (using its words, 'grounding the Green New Deal') and it seeks to operate in a restorative manner with respect to current environmental conditions, on several fronts, crossing many national borders.²⁷ Examples of this landscape practice include the UN's 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015), the so-called European Green Deal (2019) and the more recent Nature Restoration Law passed by the European Parliament on 17 June 2024.²⁸ In further analysis, all these acts and guiding directives, including the *New Landscape Declaration* within the discipline of landscape design, fit coherently within the (renewed) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in its Article 5 reads as follows: 'Humanity, and all living species, have the right to live in a healthy and ecologically sustainable environment'.²⁹

The New Landscape Declaration: A Call to Action for the Twenty-First Century is a real declaration of intent, co-authored by James Corner, Kate Orff and Martha Schwartz.³⁰ It opens with these words: 'Across borders and beyond walls, from city centres to the last wilderness, humanity's common ground is the landscape itself. Food, water, oxygen – everything that sustains us comes from and returns to the landscape'.³¹ If the declaration's tones are somewhat heated, primarily ecological (and perhaps a little too catastrophic), the volume captures and recounts not only the words of the manifesto itself, but also some projects of landscape architects, park designers, gardeners and also artists.

What these three initiating events have in common is



Fig. 4: Wagon Landscaping, *Still Alive!*, Ducal Palace of Agliè, Turin, 2024. Photo: Yann Monel and Wagon Landscaping.

Fig. 5: Wagon Landscaping, *Jardin Joyeux*, Aubervilliers, Paris, 2015. Photo: Yann Monel and Wagon Landscaping.

that they are the bearers of a sensibility that was latent (and belonged to a minority) until the end of the twentieth century, but which has taken the stage at the dawn of this twenty-first century (still belonging, however, to quite a minority). This new forest intelligence is also a way, declining the concept of the 'dignity of mourning' introduced by Judith Butler, of widening the spectrum of the 'dignity of art' as much as possible. All of this is an attempt to include those who were considered as mere things: living beings that were conceived as 'world lacking' if not even 'without world' until the end of the last century.³²

Utopias, projects, anguishes: on the forest trend in contemporary architecture

'To banish anguish by understanding its causes; this seems to be one of the main imperatives of bourgeois art'.³³ Today, fifty years after Manfredo Tafuri's text, the issues agitating the architectural debate seem to be very different from those he explored, but that statement still seems significantly relevant. It is obvious that we are dealing with new anguishes, or old anguishes taking on new forms, but 'bourgeois art' – whatever that means today, or did then – still seems to be focused on understanding the causes of the anguish that runs through the new planetary middle class.³⁴

Again, in that fulminating first chapter of *Progetto e utopia*, Tafuri takes up the image of the city as a forest. Today, this metaphor seems the only great utopia available. There is no major new project on an urban scale that is not treated as an image of an Eden: the forest, the woods, the clearing, the garden, the orchard, all come together to form a new open space that represents, connects and distributes. [Fig. 6] This is a spatiality that is, in some ways, pre-historical before it is wild. The image is that of an urban that allows itself to be undermined and placed on the fringes by welcoming pieces of 'nature'; an urban that tends to disappear, to fade into the background, with a dense bush now in the foreground. Together with a pre-historical valence, this space, in some ways, could also take on a pre-political instance. In fact, the inclusive image of nature also seems to be a device to annihilate conflicts, to construct a condition of 'urban relativism' that can entail as many pitfalls as it proposes solutions.³⁵ There is no relationship between the forests evoked by Laugier and Milizia (as Tafuri recalls them) and those manifested in the urban imaginaries prevalent today.³⁶ But it is a relevant coincidence. The metaphorical image of the forest that during the so-called Age of Reason seemed to contain within it the sense of its irrationality, changes in our own time. The new forest is *literal*. In it we see the houses and streets, in the foreground emerge the Edenic signs of the daily care of open space. The aim is to revive and extend the metropolitan dimension but

transfigure it into the luminosity of the contemporary forest, always full of light, reflections and clearings where the life of the future will find space and places of exchange.

If the forestry solution is a pre-political space, the anguish that must be banished today is post-ideological.³⁷ The spectre of new anguishes today seems to reside above all in the perception, which is now clear, that an energy-intensive development model is serving its irrationality. In the meantime, the economic model that instructed it doesn't seem to demonstrate the necessary awareness of the problem.³⁸

If an *urban scheme* can be qualified as the political way of thinking about and managing the city, on the other hand, *urban intelligence* can be defined as the design way of dealing with the spatial question proper to the city.³⁹ And the question of urban intelligence – in particular that of its current mutation, because this is the thesis pursued here – becomes fundamental in an era in which the very space of the city finds itself stretched and stressed between two poles delineating a future that is paradoxically uncertain and obligatory at the same time.⁴⁰ The city and the forest are the two poles of a new urban scene that seems to deal with contemporary anguish with the measured replacement of entire parts of the twentieth-century city (itself a collage of different epochs and dynamics) with a forested urban landscape, a sort of new cosmopolitan habitat.⁴¹

In its variants, with annexed implications – whether artistic, design and political, investigated in the course of this text – today's exercise of 'banishing anguish' thus becomes an attempt to stage a habitat that, by completely detaching itself from the habitats inherited from the city of the past, seems to prelude a new, innocent beginning.

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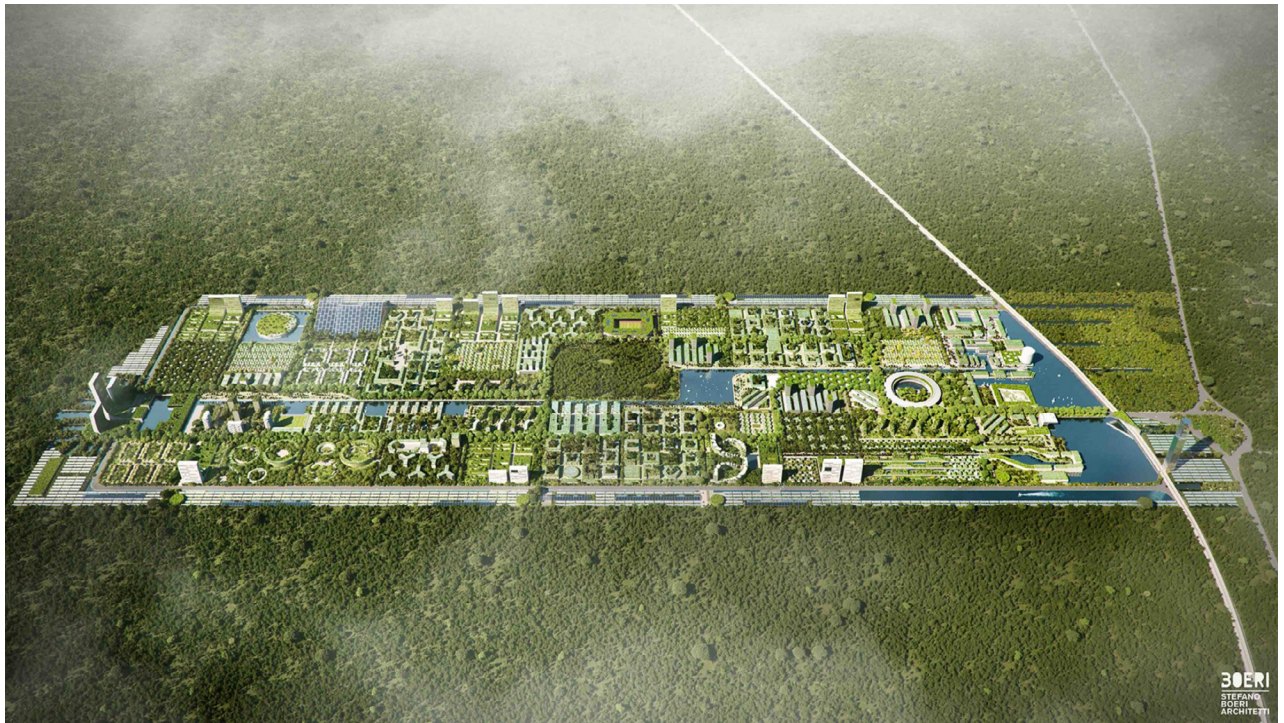


Fig. 6: Stefano Boeri Architetti, *Cancun Smart Forest City*, Cancun, 2018–19. Image: The Big Picture, courtesy Stefano Boeri Architetti.

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Biography

Giovanni La Varra (PhD) is an architect and associate professor in architectural and urban composition at the Department of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Udine. With his studio Barreca & La Varra he has several urban regeneration projects underway in Italy and abroad (<http://barrecaelavarra.it>). He is also the author of numerous essays and articles in magazines such as *Abitare*, *Casabella*, *Domus* and *The Plan*.

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Tommaso Antiga is an architect and PhD candidate in architecture at the University of Trieste, in an inter-university course with the University of Udine. He graduated at the University of Udine with a thesis in the form of a discourse around the theme of death and its places. Currently, his research focuses on the issues of urban regeneration by reforestation and renaturalisation, as well as those of ecology and nonviolence. He pays particular attention to the urban place of the cemetery as a space of implicit criticism for the society and architecture of the city to come.

