

Living and Sustainability: An Environmental Critique of Design and Building Practices, Locally and Globally

1. Paper / Proposal Title:

At the crossroads of sustainability: A critique of the naturalistic recompositioning of contemporary architecture

2. Format:

Written paper

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5. Abstract (300 words):

It is undeniable that the mantra of sustainability has triggered a fundamental reversal to the core of design practice: If the original purpose of architecture was to protect humans from the destructive actions of nature, today it must protect nature from the damaging actions of humans. However, sustainable design is far from being a coherent body of fully totalized ideas, it has a broad spectrum of disputing interpretations that oscillate between the mainstream deterministic models of energy control and technological efficiencies, and the more peripheral romantic approach that calls for

the use of low-tech or readily available materials and a de-escalation of urban densities and patterns of consumption. Given that the latter argues for the implementation of an ethical asceticism that sacrifices our existing quality of life while the former celebrates the intensification of the current mechanisms of techno-economic production, it is difficult to envision what is the next step for the green revolution.

However, mainstream green design has been evolving – mainly by progressively absorbing the narrative of deep ecology. Nature has been integrated in architecture, literally, by placing vegetation in buildings, digitally, by computerizing the environmental data itself (climate records, wind streams, sun rotation and air flows are modelled and effectually shape architectures), and transcendently, by claiming to be nurturing ‘the existing and evolving connections between spiritual and material consciousness’. The acknowledgement of the inexorable affiliation between architecture and the environment is, of course, not exactly new – it suffices to recall Le Corbusier’s concepts of *mur neutralisant* and *respirations exacte*, or the employment of *brise soleils* and green roofs. What is distinctive today is the reification of a mythical and static idea of nature in architecture as an ideological stance, totally intertwined with state-of-art data processing and Natural Capitalism’s market-driven tools.

This presentation will confront Norman Foster’s celebratory urban vision for Masdar and BIG’s concept of hedonistic sustainability in Copenhagen’s power plant with Tim Morton’s critique of ecomimesis and Slavoj Žižek’s examination of self-indulgent ecological consumerism. The underlying argument will be that despite forging new creative freedoms by exploring hybridizations between the domains of design, science and economics, sustainability’s self-righteous ‘naturalistic’ narrative is enabling a vision of architecture as ‘expert management’ that focuses on producing projects of ecologic ‘beautification’ while presuming to be looking at the big picture, therefore conducting an architectural retreat into its academic shell, depoliticizing the architectural practice. To conclude, we will claim that architects should acknowledge that architecture will not save the world, so they should avoid taking options that narrow the field of ideas and nullify discussions: we are still in the outset of the engagement of architecture with sustainability.

6. Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Miguel Eufrásia is an architect and a PhD student at DARQ-FCTUC. He obtained his Architectural Degree from the Architecture School of Porto (FAUP) in 2005, after obtaining a Socrates-Erasmus scholarship to attend Lille Architecture School (ENSAP) and representing the University in several workshops such as Archilab 2002 (FRAC, Orleans); “Les Grands Ensembles” (Nancy); and “Dispositivo, Instalação, Reciclável, Móbil, Virtual” (Porto). From 2002 to 2010 he worked at MVCC Camilo Cortesão e associados, in Porto and in 2010 he was awarded a PhD individual research grant

funded by FCT-Portugal. Since then, he taught Theory of Architecture at DARQ-FCTUC and written articles on Architectural magazines. He practices architecture and has joint-collaborations with architecture studios such as Adoc, ColectivoMel and Parqur. He was a contributing editor for the 2014 Portuguese Representation in the Venice Biennale 'Homeland', with 'Summoning the Collective' an on-going speculative project that aims to generate the completion of unfinished buildings in Portuguese cities by destabilizing and exploiting the role of the contemporary architect. His PhD thesis "Critical Sustainability", supervised by Jorge Figueira, provides a peripheral reading of inconspicuous examples of contemporary Portuguese architecture as a provisional framework for reconstructing lines of continuity between the past architectural legacy and the necessary re-politicizing of the debate regarding sustainable architecture.