Architecture colonizes space for human appropriation, defining a boundary of domination set against a background of wilderness and chaos – in other words, nature. The classical city, one could argue, did the same thing on a communal scale: it contained the aggregation of civilized inner public spaces segregated from the outer (extramural) countryside. The city wall drew the limit between the two worlds, with the cultural object in the foreground, contained and framed against the backdrop of wide-open land. Urbanization blurred and irreparably damaged this once-stable opposition. The territory lost friction and changed in more or less awkward ways to the point at which “the urban” itself became a kind of all-pervading cultural background – one might say, a kind of nature. LABA’s orientation Urban Nature is a paradox that supersedes dichotomy, and in doing so, it highlights the forced coexistence of its two antagonistic conditions – just as nature becomes increasingly urbanized, so the urban becomes gradually more natural. Urban nature is the condition of living on artificial Earth and artificiality is now a precondition of life on industrial Earth, a world of domesticated nature and wild urbanization. If the Neolithic Revolution gave birth to “the city”, then the Industrial Revolution gave birth to “the urban”, and if the first altered the natural environment, then the second abolished the concept of nature altogether.

As we continue to develop available geographical locations, we lose touch with any sense of the natural world. Even natural spaces are now understood as “protected,” which is to say that they are defined in contradistinction to an urban “reality,” often with signs to point out just how “real” they are. Increasingly, we expect the sign (behold nature!) to precede access to nature.

Dino F. Felluga
We live in an urban-industrialized civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, in that “Nature” with capital N. The trouble with this belief is that nature quietly expresses and reproduces the very values that it pretends to reject: it acts like a landmark in the desert, which by its state of exceptionality ends up perpetuating and endorsing the banality and sameness of that very desert. In other words the aesthetics of Nature—rolling hills and unspoiled greenery—is what hides that Earth in the age of the Anthropocene has become globally dominated by industrial exploitation.

In light of this paradox, laba aims to imagine a formal language for architecture that goes beyond the aesthetics of nature, and an industrial aesthetics that goes beyond its classical opposition to nature. We want to imagine “ecology without nature,”¹ where clean energy and environmental management embrace human and non-human needs in ways that go beyond an economy of preservation in terms of “visual impact.” We want to imagine post-anthropocentric landscapes, where windmills and dams can become beautiful landmarks, and human impact might be seen as a responsible act of cultivation rather than an embarrassing damage to so-called pristine wilderness. We want to imagine industrial buildings that interact with climate and its changes, collaborating, as Robert Smithson put it, with “geology’s entropy” and the massive scale of the landscape. Within this hypothesis, one would hope to re-establish an integral nonaggressive relationship to living cycles of production and consumption, where land ‘development could tend toward a sensuous culture … [and] labour would be diverted to the construction of an aesthetic rather than a repressive environment.”²

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¹. TIMOTHY MORTON, ECOLOGY WITHOUT NATURE (CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIV. PRESS, 2007).
². HERBERT MARCUSE, AN ESSAY ON LIBERATION (BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 1969), 90.
In his essay *The Oedipal Logic of Environmental Awareness*, Timothy Morton traces the philosophical origins of Anthropocene back to the agricultural age, a period inside which we are still living and that is responsible for our human disposition to turn “reality into domination-ready chunks of parceled out space waiting to be filled and ploughed”. He describes this as uncanny ploughing. Perfected over the millennia, arcadian or pastoral aesthetics are the illusion that hides the fact that today, the planet is no longer natural. “Based on the technological enframing of Earth as manipulative stuff”, we have been reifying “Earth into slabs of abstract space” ready for occupation and colonization, attempting to impose consistency and smoothness upon a fundamentally unhomely and inconsistent reality. Ironically, it was this great plan [or fantasy] for domesticity and human insularity that resulted in humans unconsciously becoming a geological force on the planet, capable of changing the planet’s geology, atmosphere and biodiversity. Agricultural appropriation of land, with both its physical and cultural implications, plays a central role in Israel’s ancient and recent history, and we believe that it offers an ideal setting to investigate and reveal the uncanniness of our human efforts to domesticate, to ward off the strange other, both human and non-human.

Timothy Morton, *The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness*

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3. TIMOTHY MORTON, "THE OEDIPAL LOGIC OF ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS" IN *ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES*, VOL. 1, 2012: 7–21
uncanny arcadia

God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

Genesis 1:28

For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places, and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.

Isaiah 51:3

The Middle East was the birthplace of the Neolithic Revolution, the founding agricultural act that came to humanize and domesticate the planet. Bridging between Africa and Eurasia and pervaded by large rivers and marshlands, it contained a comparatively moist and fertile land. While climate changes during the Ice Age led to repeated extinction events, this region retained a greater amount of biodiversity than either Europe or North Africa, making it a crucial link in the distribution of Old World flora and fauna, including the spread of humanity. It is considered the Cradle of Civilization because it saw some of the very first developments in human social and technological inventions such as cities, class-based societies, monumental architecture, writing, the wheel, and irrigation. It was home to the eight Neolithic founder crops and four species of domesticated animals (cows, goats, sheep, and pigs). Also known as the Fertile Crescent, this region saw the onset of the human domination of nature and the birth of a long history of pastoral aesthetics.

laba Studio 2016/17 will focus on Israel and the role played by agriculture in: 1) territorial appropriation and domestication; 2) structuring the development of urbanization; 3) creating a national homeland narrative; and 4) changing the climate. We will look into the three major types of Israeli agricultural development: the vernacular Palestinian/Bedouin, the socialist utopian Kibbutz/Moshav, and the high-tech desert farming. The studio will be carried out in collaboration with Landbasics, a landscape architecture Master studio at the Technion headed by Prof. Matanya Sack.
laba’s year-long studio is split into three moments that convey a full journey from territorial research, to on-site field work, to architectural design. Its didactic goal is to bring the creation of the architectural object to a critical position in relation to the environment. The first part, Territory, is taught in the first semester and assisted by the Teaching Unit U – Cartography. The second part, Field, is located between semesters and consists of a trip to the site. The third part, Architecture, consists of the development of a site-specific and contextual architectural design that acts as a proof of concept for the territorial constitution developed in the first semester.

The first semester – Territory – will be structured around five research topics: Landscape, Settlement, Infrastructure, Agriculture, Knowledge. Its goal is the production of a territorial constitution that can be understood as a long-term road map for future development. This constitution will provide the basis for the second semester architectural projects. Both semesters – Territory and Architecture – will be articulated by the field trip to Israel and a symposium/workshop to be held at the Technion University of Haifa, at which point students will be asked to pick a site and program to develop in the second semester.

The architectural projects of the second semester stand as a “proof of concept” of the first semester territorial constitution. Projects are conceived within the parameters of the Territorial Forms, and thus test the intentions articulated in the first semester spatially. By expanding the field of architectural design into territorial studies, laba aims to claim the urban system as part of the architectural object, the territory (and the landscape) into the site (the object’s plot), both in a physical and an ideological way. In this way, laba hopes to foster an architectural engagement with “the big picture”, that is, the “large scale” of both abstract thinking and spatial construction.
In his seminal 1983 essay Le Territoire Comme Palimpseste, André Corboz compares the territory to a layered parchment with inscriptions and erasures attributed to both intentional and accidental, natural and human, factors. Tracing a narrative out of the ways in which we have represented it, he identifies a historical opposition between the map – the God’s eye view, ubiquitous, abstract and descriptive – and the landscape – the human perspective that projects an etat d’âme onto a scenery. The map renders the territory as an object, while the landscape acknowledges it as a subject. The former has the pretense of exactitude, while the latter is relative to each viewer’s conscience. Corbóz proposes a challenge to this opposition by stating that with the advent of satellite imagery and high speed transport, multilocation appears to have become a human condition. The network configuration of the contemporary territory has introduced an overlaying of different speeds and spatio-temporal perceptions. These layers of movement have overlapped with layers of archaeology and geology, which are the traces of past territorial inscriptions of both deliberate and fortuitous, human and natural, causes. The palimpsest is thus a metaphor for reading the territory in its depth: as a miscegenation of environments that are overlapped in strata. It challenges the notion of the territory as surface and its affiliated emphasis on perimeter and propensity for tabula-rasa appropriations. Instead, the territory as palimpsest requires a close reading of its traces and fragments, aimed at interventions that work in a spirit of recycling.

Landscape Cartography is a combination of the map and the landscape – somewhere between technical drawing and subjective painting – that is already pointed towards a project. Its goal is to provide the students with territorial literacy by giving them a language with which to read and write about the territory in line with the layering of territorial systems evoked by Corbóz.
In his 1980 text *Learning About Landscapes*, J. B. Jackson states that he owes the invention of the discipline that he named Landscape Studies to his life as an avid traveller: "[T]here is a strong element of snobbery, it seems to me, in our criticism of tourist groups, the condescension of those who belong – who are at home – to those who are strangers without recognizable status. Yet we are all of us strangers, tourists, at one time or another . . . [and] I would say that the inspiration of tourism is a desire to know more about the world in order to know more about ourselves." The tour has an educational purpose that goes beyond mere frivolous entertainment. It allows us to evaluate our preconceptions of the territory as a patchwork of delimited geographical surfaces. Just like the map, the tour is a reading of the territory: one that exposes the nature of landscapes as culturally ambivalent, socially constructed, and historically specific interpretations among which particular images have collectively prevailed. This viewer-landscape relationship allows the students to render the project site as a meaningful context. It allows them to participate emotionally in the landscape and critically assess what has been previously interpreted on a more abstract level through cartography.

labà’s field trip typically lasts around ten days and is always carried out in combination with a workshop and symposium accomplished in coordination with a local teaching institution. This is the crucial moment where each student must pick a site on which to further develop an environmentally-aware architecture object.
Today, human history has collided with geological time and given rise to strange and sweeping human-induced phenomena that are mostly out of our control and largely imperceptible to our senses (global warming, mass extinction, pollution). The global level of human impact on the planet has ended the separation between nature and culture and made artificiality a pervasive planetary condition. In so doing, it has rendered the very concept of a natural environment – the neutral and benign context for human activity – obsolete. In the age of the Anthropocene (literally, the human era), the environment has taken centre stage, claiming that it itself is also the result of human authorship, agency and care (or the lack thereof). This foregrounding of the environment has left a gap in the relationship between humans and their surroundings in which our old ideas of place and context – fundamental values in the adaptation of project to site – have been called into question. Acknowledging the present global condition of artificiality demands a new level of design responsibility. From architects, it demands the ability to advance the discipline beyond a relationship between architecture-as-object and landscape-as-surrounding. To speak of architecture as the creation of environmental objects means to invert this relationship. Objects and systems, buildings and landscapes, monuments and infrastructure can thus be integrated into the larger ecology of territorial weaving. This results in a distinct type of contextualism that is not about familiarity, but rather about revealing the unconscious qualities of the site and rendering them visible; an architecture that interweaves scales and is attuned to climate, geological strata, landscapes and ecosystems.