ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTS

DWELLING ON

FEZ

INDUSTRIOUS HABITAT

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1. urban nature: towards an environmental aesthetics in architecture

LABA’s orientation Urban Nature has the mission to question the age-old opposition between architecture and nature — the object-sculpture and the landscape-background — in light of today’s ecological crisis. At present, the idea of Nature as something nurturing, autonomous and in continuous renewal is being questioned by both the natural and the social sciences. How can architecture contribute to this larger ontological debate? The Anthropocene has proven and doubled down on William Morris’ renown statement that “everything except the desert is architecture.” It demands that architecture should no longer stop at the threshold of the window sill or at the edge of the building plot. It asks us to question the fundamental opposition between architecture and nature and to disrupt the relation of privilege between the meaningful object-sculpture in the foreground and the unconscious landscape background. Amidst wider struggles for environmental justice and nature-rights, we need ways of integrating ecology into architecture as more than just a collection of techno-engineering fixes (green roofs, solar appliances, energy efficiency plans) but also through the promotion of an environmental architecture as a collection of aesthetic principles and values.


2. ecological contextualism: architecture as environmental object

The word environment comes from the French environer, meaning 'to surround, enclose, encircle'. The word object comes from the Latin objectum, meaning 'thing lying before, opposite' (the mind or sight), from obicere, 'to present, oppose'. The environment envelops the spectator; it is infinite but its perceptual limit is the horizon. It is real but immaterial, ethereal. It is the milieu, the 'mid-place', the medium in-between. The object, on the other hand, is finite. It confronts the environment by creating a limit, a form. It is objective, meaning it has intentions, it occupies a position. In its delineation, it encloses an inside and excludes an outside. In doing so, it creates a subject, a point of view and a sense of belonging in familiarity set against the strange otherness of the outside.

To think of architecture as an environmental object means to question this very opposition by analyzing some of the inherent dichotomies of separation here at play — figure and ground, inside and outside, autonomy and analogy. By refusing them, we hope to replace separation with confrontation, and segregation with coexistence. If ecology is the 'study of the house' (from the Greek oikos, 'house' and -logia, 'study of'), it must also be the practice of thinking the threshold of the house — who do we live with, who do we extend our hospitality to? How high should our walls be? In an ecological sense, the hortus conclusus of the paradise garden seen as an ideal enclosure of moral and natural purity, is obsolete.

AIT-BENHADDOU KSAR, HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAINS
2.1) conscious environments: foregrounding the background

The dilemma of facing unknown territories on which to interpose oneself has led architects and urbanists to produce abstract tools that might help tame reality and convey a sense of security or even inevitability to each new strategy for change. From cartography and zoning plans to the modulor, these tools permeate all scales and have been recurrently used to create and enforce normative boundaries and limits. As instruments of power, the danger they present is palpable: to confuse models of reality with reality itself.

In his 1920 publication *Creative Confessions*, Paul Klee refers to this when he states that “art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible”. Making visible, or Sichtbarmachen in Klee’s original term, is the act of attuning to the environment, revealing it and rendering it conscious, foregrounded, instead of reducing it to an abstract background. This act of awareness is what Hassan Fathy referred to in his 1994 publication *Architecture and Environment* regarding a traditional way of reading and interacting with the environment where the fusion between foreground and background presides over all activities and thus produces an architecture which is an intentional consequence of our living patterns.

Since antiquity, man has reacted to his environment, using his faculties to develop techniques and technologies, whether to bake bread or make brick (…) Learning to manipulate clay, stone, and wood, man penetrated their properties, and his techniques gave expression to his aspirations toward the divine. (…) With the advent of the industrial revolution, the inherited techniques and perfected knowledge of creating, using handmade tools, were lost and are now forgotten. Energy-intensive mechanized tools have diminished man’s personal, cellular contribution to the fabrication of objects, the building of structures and the growing of food.3

2.2) perforated limits: inside — outside

Traditional architecture in the Arab world is known for its layers of enclosure, closely related to the organic growth of its cities. Such conformation also stems from Islamic cultural values and codes, reflecting a community structure which lacks formal civic institutions that would require a spatial staging of their status. Underlining such features, Stefano Bianca, in his 2000 book *Urban Form in the Arab World*, refers to the boulevard-labyrinth opposition, stating how the Arab city behaves as “a multi-focal system excluding any dominant axial orientation, with the sole exception of the qiblah direction of religious buildings. Street elevations are of secondary importance or vanish altogether. To experience a building, one has to enter and to apprehend it from within, which corresponds to the Islamic concept of sacred privacy and relative autonomy of each social unit.”

Álvaro Siza, praising such Arab condition, recalls:

> During my childhood, I was ill for a long period of time and I had to undergo a long period of rest . . . I lived in an old house that had a big balcony open onto the city, which was wonderful then, withdrawn and full of harmony . . . By the end of the first month of my stay, being unable to move beyond that balcony, I started to hate the landscape that hence became obsessive. I have thus felt increasingly the need for a connection between inside and outside that is not immediate and total, as it were in the origins, ambitions and practice of the architecture of the modern movement. . . .

We have an extremely rich tradition of Arab origin that, especially in South Portugal, renders these transition spaces visible, in which light changes until it is lost in the intimacy of the interior. But this depth, this thickness, is being quickly lost, be it due to the need to build for a large number of people (thereby reducing areas), or because of an enthusiasm for new materials [glass or thermal insulation panels]. . . . These transparencies can be found in extraordinary form in the projects of the venetian Andrea Palladio, whereby in the construction of a universe, all rooms communicate through openings placed along a single axis that is further extended onto the arrangement of the garden and the fields, losing itself in the distance. Hence the need for these pauses, which somewhat dematerialize the house and create a sense of continuity and soft transition between the inner dimension and the outer complexity.

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5. ÁLVARO SIZA VIEIRA, IMAGINAR A EVIDÊNCIA (LISBOA: EDIÇÕES 70) PP.45–47, TRANSLATED BY LABA
2.3) ambivalent objects: autonomy and analogy

Alison Smithson, in her 1974 article “How to Recognise and Read Mat-Building”, calls for a new understanding that reacts to the form-follows-function motto, where “the individual gains new freedoms of action through a new shuffled order, based on interconnection, close knit patterns of association and possibilities for growth, diminution and change.” She traces back the Arab medina typology as the defining reference and hence coins the term ‘casbahism’ (Kasbah, in arabic, meaning medina or fortressed compound).

The understanding must come through the perception of the parts, as the whole system can never be seen. We must dispense with the use of symbols and monuments, for the century has cast aside these crutches of authority. Indeed if authority can be said to exist it can only be through consent and has no need of formalism or allegories to impose itself. 6

This ambiguity, which mediates between the dogmas of modernism’s universality and the regressive nostalgia for a pre-modern past, relates to what Kenneth Frampton defines as an “architecture of resistance” that is able to challenge both the commodification of the modernist artefact and the populist drive of post-modernist historicism. How to be modern and return to sources at the same time?

Between autonomy and analogy, the archipelago and the enclave, the balance of these landscapes of co-existence might be grasped when we understand that the majority of Frampton’s examples for his discourse on the architecture of critical regionalism are geographically remote when considering their relative distance from the great economic and cultural centres of global modernization: Tadao Ando, Luis Barragan, Jorn Utzon, Mario Botta, Álvaro Siza. This distance, a defining characteristic of Fez itself, provides a niche in which regional traditions can still develop and a critical ambivalence between continuity and rupture may occur.

This studio is the second in a new series of laba ateliers dedicated to researching the hypothesis of architecture as environmental object, a theory for environmental aesthetics in architecture that focuses on modes of landscape contextualism. It is common-place to state that architecture defines itself in opposition to nature. But in the age of the Anthropocene, the celebrated trope of the Primitive Hut, inhabited in perfect harmony by the Noble Savage, sounds nostalgic and idealistic. Natural harmony and nature domination have been replaced with hesitation and uncanniness; nature has become Unheimlich, estranged and ‘unhomely’.

Creating architecture means to settle in a finite place, to reside (from Latin re-sedere, meaning to ‘sit down, rest, linger’) in a location (from the Latin locus, meaning ‘place’). In his book *Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi defines *locus* as the “relationship between a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it. It is at once singular and universal.” He explains that in the classical world, “[the ‘situation’ — the site — was governed by the genius loci, the local divinity, an intermediary who presided over all that was to unfold in it.” The Romans had a cult of these spirits, and they called them Lares, also known as household gods. In Islam such divinity is referred to as baraka and is said to be present in both space and people.

The places we dwell in translate our attempt to divide the familiar from the unfamiliar, the domesticated space from the otherness of the environment, and where everyday affairs are ritualized into a spatial organization, a form of life. This unity between space and all living activities constitute the heideggerian trinity of building, dwelling, thinking, as a way of bringing forth the essence of things.

_Bauen, buan, bhu, beo are our word bin in the versions: ich bin, I am, du bist, you are, the imperative form bis, be. What then does ich bin mean? The old word bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist mean I dwell, you dwell. […] The old word bauen, which says that man is insolar as he dwells, this word bauen, however, also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the_
soil, to cultivate the vine. [...] What is the state of dwelling in our precarious age? However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the proper plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The proper plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of the industrial workers. The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.  

The Fez studio will focus on the theme of dwelling as a testing ground to investigate the confrontation between the object and the environment. The conception of dwelling implied here is flexible and stretched to include programmes that go beyond housing typologies. Key points of focus will be, as enunciated before, the relation between background and foreground through architectural frames that reveal the site; the questioning of limits and the contamination between inside intimacy and outer strangeness; and the ambiguity between contextual analogy and autonomy.

The choice of Fez as a case study derives from its rich architectural history and from its peripheral position, from which a distanced critique of Western modernism and industrial capitalism is easier to ascertain. We find traces of these ideas in the productive and industrious character of the medina that spurs a network of interdependence which is central to the communal spirit its urban layout brings forth. In accordance with Islamic values, it portrays a tradition of asceticism that already foregrounds a sense of ‘environmentality’ over iconic form and spectacle.

Now it is time that gods emerge
From things by which we dwell...  

8. MARTIN HEIDEGGER, "BUILDING, DWELLING, THINKING" IN BASIC WRITINGS (NEW YORK: HARPER COLLINS, 1977) PP. 348-363
9. POEM BY RAINER MARIA RILKE QUOTED BY DAVID FARRELL KRELL IN BASIC WRITINGS (NEW YORK: HARPER COLLINS, 1977), PP. 344
4. method: territory, field, architecture

laba’s two-semester studio is split into three moments that go from the territorial scale, 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, takes place before the beginning of the second semester and consists of a trip to Morocco and a symposium/workshop to be held at the Euromed Architecture School, in Fez. The third part, Architecture, consists of the development of a site-specific and contextual architectural object that accurately responds to the territorial reading developed in the first semester.

By expanding the field of architecture into territorial studies, laba aims to claim the urban system as part of the architectural object and the integration of 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’, the larger scale of both abstract thinking and territorial construction.
The term cartography is based on the Latin charta, meaning ‘paper’ or ‘map’, and graphia, meaning ‘description’, which derives from graphein, meaning ‘to write’ or ‘to draw’. Swiss urbanism historian André Corboz defines description as something between the act of reading (analysis) and writing (designing). He claims that there can be no description of a territory without a fiction of the territory, a positioning that contains a speculative and ethical critique. This is reminiscent of a sketch by Le Corbusier that defines a certain type of ‘architectural gaze’ as the smooth transition from the act of ‘looking’ to that of ‘creating’, stating: “la clef c’est regarder… regarder, observer, voir, imaginer, inventer, creer”. The map-as-description is situated at the heart of this process that turns observation into action. Maps have the power to actually make the territories they represent because description, graphia, is already a project.

Following this premise, laba’s first semester is structured along four cartographic exercises that progressively narrow the student’s scope of vision, developing a territorial reading going from layers to systems and finally site. In each of these exercises the students will work in groups of 5. The first exercise is a compilation of basic cartographic layers that constitute the territory such as hydrography, topography, geology, etc. The second exercise is a combination of those layers to form 4 territorial systems: infrastructure, industry, settlement and landscape. The third exercise is a critical composition of those systems to give shape to a territorial site identified by the students. The last exercise will focus on the final map to be produced by each group.
4.2) field:
touring the context

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.

Laba’s field trip lasts around ten days and takes place before the beginning of the second semester. It is always combined with a workshop and a symposium, in collaboration with a local teaching institution, in this case the Euromed Architecture School, in Fez. This is the crucial moment where each student must pick a site on which to further develop an environmentally-aware architecture object.

The goal of the second semester is that students start from a critical topography (description of place) of their chosen site, and then respond to its situation with an architectural proposal. This has to respond adequately to the program as well as to the environment, revealing the singularity of the object’s site, its ‘placeness’, as well as the autonomy of the object’s form and purpose. To this end, models will be the primary tool of work. The sequence of assignments follows a trajectory meant to highlight the process: place, space, structure, object. The final project should reflect the overall yearly academic method and structure, thus translating a solid understanding of Moroccan territory and architecture. Students may work individually or in pairs.

The worst enemy of modern architecture is the idea of space considered solely in terms of its economic and technical exigencies indifferent to the site.

. . . Through the concept of the site and the principle of settlement, the environment becomes the essence of architectural production. From this vantage point, new principles and methods can be seen for design — principles and methods that give precedence to the sitting in a specific area. This is an act of knowledge of the context that comes out of its architectural modification. The origin of architecture is not in the primitive hut, or the cave or the mythical ‘Adam’s House in Paradise’.12
