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*The Return of Nature*<sup>i</sup>

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“Our oaks no longer proffer oracles, and we no longer ask of them the sacred mistletoe; we must replace this cult by care...”

—Charles-Georges Le Roy, “Forest,” *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772)<sup>ii</sup>

“American biopolitics sees in nature its same condition of existence: not only the genetic origin and the first material, but also the sole controlling reference. Politics is anything but able to dominate nature or ‘conform’ [*formare*] to its ends so itself emerges ‘informed’ in such a way that it leaves no space for other constructive possibilities.”

—Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008)<sup>iii</sup>

That Nature has returned with a vengeance in architectural theory and practice goes far beyond the transmutation of the Vitruvian qualities of *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* into sustainability’s motto of equity, biodiversity, and wise development. The relation of architecture and nature found in the abundant literature on sustainability rests on a moral imperative provided by the current environmental crisis, which sets, as in a Greek tragedy, the finitude of natural resources over and against the dismal and infinite cycle of human production and consumption. From this agon emerges the quest for a responsible architecture. The apocalyptic drama is rehearsed in such movements as natural architecture, which reifies the presumed mysteriousness and fragility of natural materials by disposing and exposing leaves, branches and rocks in ephemeral interventions. By the same token, hope is made to reside, resolutely and problematically, in the promise of technology (this despite the specter of historical modalities such as pollution and obsolescence); thus there is biomimicry, to give but one example, in which the emulation of natural forms and processes undergirds the creation of such materials as adhesives replicating the bonding materials found in mussels, ceramic tiles with the strength of abalone shells, or glass with the air purifying capacities of certain plants.

Yet to what degree such bio-ethical platforms potentially negate the project of architecture remains a fundamental question. At present, the trend to “naturalize” architectural form in the digital regime has made manifest two tendencies which, each in their own way, reject the cultural, social and symbolic life of forms: the first involves a

direct calculus attempting to translate the perceived conduct of natural systems, thereby imbuing form with a sort of naturalized behavioralism; the second, tied to a classical tradition aligning mathematics and nature, replaces the compositional authority of the designer with the computational generation of pattern. The result is all too often the production of a devitalized ornament, of rhetorical forms that, in the end, re-present nature and so return to mimicry as principle (the copy newly moralized). If modernist formalism veered too far towards the utopian purity of the autonomy of art, then sustainability has radically tilted the scales the other way—that is, towards the ontological primacy of bio-environment all the while finding refuge in an ethical agenda and so eschewing critique and denying that it, too, belongs to a formal and formalized system. Such tilting of the scales has not come without costs: namely it risks endorsing a critical terrain marked by neo-empiricism and ahistoricism. As Andrew Payne has recently remarked, the ostensive “priority of the natural system over its social and political correlatives can have the effect of precipitously foreclosing the question of how these various regimes interact with one another within the dynamics linking natural and cultural history, and further, of what degree and sort of autonomy those interactions make possible.”<sup>iv</sup>

Precisely because sustainability introduces new and complex constraints, it becomes necessary to shift gears—this to prevent subsuming the social, political and cultural dimensions of the built environment under nature’s primary status. We would need, first, to say something about the role of those constraints in modern interpretations of nature as they are related to matters of function and codes. Then, we would need to provide real comparison between the environmental limiting condition and other moments of “functional interference” with architectural form (such as the introduction of the elevator, which transformed the relationship of buildings to the city and thus the city itself; such as fire safety, which radically altered the social arrangements of interiors; and such as the adoption of ADA rules, the disability access ramps which fundamentally altered the conception of thresholds and sequences). For in all of those instances in which constraints did, in fact, operate on the corpus of architecture, spatial and institutional mutations of profound consequence occurred; there is, after all, a long tradition of architects pushing back against that which intervenes in order to grant themselves experimental license.

More importantly, there is no one-way street here; architecture is just as likely to provoke change (transformative architecture) as it is to respond to it (responsive architecture). We could argue that despite the maelstrom of claims to newness and the moralistic rhetoric now swirling around the sustainable what-have-yous or what-have-you-nots, the problem may be capable of contributing to a legacy of how externalities have imposed themselves on architecture—and vice versa—in both recent and distant pasts, in both concrete and symbolic ways. Put another way: to demystify the ecological and the sustainable is to reveal the possibility of architecture.

Indeed, sustainability’s call to arms belongs to a complex historical arc with crucial junctures ranging from Giambattista Vico’s primordial forest, antipode to human civilization, to twentieth-century analogies between ecological systems and political economies, to more recent demonstration of the ways in which fundamental forces and

resonances accumulate into shapes and figures—all of which reveals that the problem of form in design is vital, not ancillary, and above all, need not be deemed simply subservient to (or the passive recipient of) the claims of an ethical horizon as it is delimited by current environmental modalities. How do we weigh the legacy of a posthuman(ist) framework in architecture against the value ascribed to nature in bio-ethical ideologies? How might form demarcate the shifting crossroads between ecology, society and aesthetic philosophy? How might we clear the (ideological) air?

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<sup>i</sup> *The Return of Nature* is the first of four *Harvard Symposia on Architecture*, an annual series of events which brings together architects, historians and theorists to consider the question of architecture's autonomy in relation to contemporary debates.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles-Georges Le Roy, “Forêt,” in Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres* (1751-1772), vol. 7 129: “Nos chênes ne rendent plus d’oracles, et nous ne leur demandons plus le gui sacré; il faut remplacer ce culte par l’attention...” A profound discussion of Le Roy’s entry appears in Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 113-124.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>iv</sup> Andrew Payne, “Sustainability and Pleasure: An Untimely Meditation,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (Spring/Summer 2009), 78.