Edited by Marie-Ange Brayer and Béatrice Simonot

ArchiLab's
Earth
Buildings

Radical Experiments
in Land Architecture

Thames & Hudson

# BUILDINGS

## IN LAND ARCHITECTURE

Edited by Marie-Ange Brayer and Béatrice Simonot

With over 600 colour illustrations

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# CONTENTS

# ARCHITECTS

ArchiLab's
# Earth Buildings

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# EARTH
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## Preface

ArchiLab is a unique platform in France, indeed in Europe, for meetings and exchanges between teams of architects from all corners of the world who represent the cutting edge of architecture. Thanks to a link forged with the FRAC Centre, the City of Orléans has since 1999 staged an exhibition of the most innovative architectural creations. Orléans has thus become, along with other international architecture forums, a place recognized for reflecting on the forces at work in architecture today and for enhancing public awareness of contemporary architectural culture.

The theme of this fourth edition of ArchiLab is 'Earth Economics', which implies the appreciation and understanding of local environments and considers architects' practical responses to a complex environmental system. The organizers of the exhibition, Marie-Ange Brayer and Béatrice Simonot, have assembled under this heading a selection of projects that demonstrate the exceptional diversity of architectural conception.

Several cultural establishments and institutional partners from our own city are associated with the staging of ArchiLab: the Fine Arts Museum, the Institute of Visual Arts, the Médiathèque, as well as the CAUE at Loiret, the architectural section of the Central Region and the departmental architectural service. ArchiLab is also the outcome of close and durable partnerships that have contributed to its success and international renown, notably with France's Ministry of Culture and Communications and the Regional Cultural Affairs Directorate, each member dedicated to promoting better knowledge and understanding of cultural architecture.

The quality of this cooperative work helps to bring architecture out from an ivory tower that is often perceived as sealed, exclusive and removed from everyday preoccupations. Exposed to public gaze and enquiry, architecture must propose varied responses to the challenge of designing and constructing our living spaces. Thus Orléans, with ArchiLab and its associated events, brings to the fore the avant-garde in contemporary creativity. I wish to thank all those who have helped to make ArchiLab 2002 a reality and to further its role as a forum for discovery and dialogue.

**Serge Grouard**

# ▷CONTENTS

# Architects

1.27

6.05

4.05                          L 2.25                                        8.32

9.12

E

6.05

7.56

4.23                                                      c.1132

3.03

# Essays

4.05

1.27

X

Ε

6.05

G

2.25

8.32

9.12

6.05

C

3.05

7.56

A

5.02

4.23

Béatrice Simonot

# Forces and Form

It is a commonplace that the environment is a central element of architectural practice. There has been a long tradition of environmentalist architecture, but currently it is very much to the fore in the thinking of many architects. How, then, do we define the environment today?

The destruction of nature has brought about a general feeling of anguish, which has made ecology a priority in the present-day world: environmental and social ecology, respect for and protection of our surroundings, development of things that will last, prevention rather than cure – these are problems that must be solved today by what is variously known as green or bio-climatic or ecological architecture. For the most part, these terms cover innovative technologies, recycled or adapted materials, cheap methods of construction to suit the needs of the time. But this sort of progress does not clarify for us which nature we are to defend and how we are to defend it.

What concept of nature do we actually have today? And what responsibilities can the architect imagine himself facing up to in a society that is evolving so fast? The drastic mutations that have punctuated this short period in our history, a permanently changing environment, an ever-increasing subservience to market forces – all of these underpin the general feeling that traditional attitudes and practices have become irrelevant, and now it is necessary to have a radical rethink if we are to meet the challenges of the modern world.

The environment is simultaneously local and global. Globalization is transforming what was once local, and it is taking place through a complex process of acculturation, by which the dominant, hegemonic culture intermingles with the local culture in a form of cultural recycling.

What is emerging from this process is neither a dogma nor a consensus that might conform to certain common values and lead towards a 'realistic' universalism or a 'resistant' contextualism; instead, we have a common critical basis: the need to come up with new methods of analysing every dimension of our hugely extended, ever-changing environment – natural and urban, economic, political, social and cultural. A comparison between different approaches will reveal the same preoccupation with context allied to analysis of the forces, local and global, that shape the area of intervention.

How are we to grasp all the conditions that underlie the production of architecture? How are we to cope with the evolutionary process, to promote nature and natural resources, to create alternative territories, to make plans that will take into account the workings of time and the unforeseen? There are urban and architectural strategies now taking shape that are designed to cope with the complexities and constant changes of our environment, and which are having a profound effect on the conceptual reasoning that relates to 'new territories'. They are not bound up with some kind of back-to-nature movement, nourished by the nostalgia that pits nature against culture; nor are they engendered by an ethical, defensive approach dictated by protectionism; what is driving these strategies is the desire for active intervention coupled with a concern that all proposals must work in synergy with the environment, which is defined as a field of energy and situation. With the building anchored in its location, and the spirit of the location giving rise to the building, old ideas give way to new. Architecture no longer presents itself in terms of reaction, but becomes proactive, seeking to understand how the exploitation of natural resources, both social and material, may determine the structuring of a space. How do the forces that lie between the natural elements and the public spaces interact and express themselves?

For many architects today, the heart of the profession lies in the indissoluble trinity of research, experimentation and practice, and their quest is for systems of representation, for processes that can both adapt to and anticipate the rules of the game in order to cope with present and future complexities.

Architects who are genuinely engaged in a global society are above all concerned with comparing propositions in all their diversity, identifying discourses and rooting out their meanings: the economy of the land, of the soil, of resources – ecology being just one of many aspects. It is interesting for architects to grasp the following ideas by way of project experience rather than through a priori definitions:

▣ To reassemble a world split between humankind and nature, between humankind and its social and political environment. To 'domesticate nature' and to 'naturalize the domestic' is Tezuka's aim, which may extend as far as what Kengo Kuma calls a 'disappearance of architecture'.

▣ To reinvent a landscape based on the analysis of spatial and temporal processes and of the accumulations and energies that ceaselessly deconstruct and reconstruct territory (Tom Leader), or to orchestrate the forces that exist between natural elements and public spaces (Field Operations).

▣ To create a new topography, which may sometimes border on imitation, in order to establish a metaphysical relationship between the natural and the artificial by restoring the traces of an original geography (Francis Soler) or another kind of landscape archaeology, with a view to restoring history (Stefan Tischer).

▣ To harmonize architecture with its environment by devising intelligent technical systems that will be ecologically and economically viable (Françoise-Hélène Jourda) or constructing buildings like ecosystems (T. R. Hamzah & Yeang Sdn Bhd).

▣ To create new territories, an artificial topography that will weave together links between interior and exterior and blur relations between the observer and the observed (cloud 9), to define architecture as landscape and landscape as architecture (laN+). Natural and artificial are no longer antitheses. The artificial world is omnipresent. Space is a live system in which architecture plays like a relational link.

For b & k+, it is the definition of nature that has changed; the landscape is primarily political, virtual and technological, and architecture must position itself at the point of conflict between the landscape and physical space.

For Actar, architecture is geography. The site is not a fixed, ready-made container but a field of multiple forces; architecture is not an object for consolidating the characteristic features of a place, but it must add features and create links that unite the natural with the artificial, the building with the landscape, the town with the territory – not confronting one with the other, but bringing about new combinations and new interchanges of information.

Vicente Guallart wants a new contract with nature, to represent the real world starting from the virtual, and giving a virtual representation of a real world that is no longer either town or nature. Similarly, Dagmar Richter constructs a representation of the world that is unstable and devoid of any context – or rather she makes an artificial reconstruction of it.

▣ To divert the processes of standardization that are linked to the economic and cultural context and induced by globalization and that imply the use of standard products and standard modes of production.

Architecture is an industrial activity. Jones carries to its extreme the idea of an architectural machine, piling up industrial containers in order to

put together a group of houses, but he also counters the problem of uniformity by introducing rail systems along which the constituent modules can slide, allowing sufficient flexibility to give each unit its own individuality.

LWPAC follow a similar line, leaning towards a complex and perpetually evolving world; on different scales, from the urban project to the design object, they produce models, which they update according to the demands of the situation, so that they can make them more flexible and adaptable and can transform standard objects into individual works.

Servo are even more radical: their agency is scattered all round the world, which enables everyone to experience a different local, economic, political and cultural situation. Collectively they set up global lines of reference (Servoline), which each individual then modifies according to the particular context and recycles on different scales; this enables them continually to produce unique pieces constructed on a common base.

▶ To resist standard demands and reinvent programmes, transforming the rules and conventions within the natural, urban and social parameters that define the environment, nARCHITECTS tend to develop clear strategies whose apparently contradictory dynamics mix the possibilities opened up by new or existing resources and technologies with local models that persist in coexisting, no matter what the situation. This is the paradox on which their architecture is built.

Manuelle Gautrand also establishes different functional strategies in the face of a complex and evolving culture; for a cultural building she proposes nomadic cells that can be recycled in different spatial configurations.

TeamMinus operates within the context of a China that is currently in upheaval. It tries to solve problems by way of localized and limited proposals that claim to have an educational function in relation to the effects of an unprecedented and anarchic economic development, while leaving room for local situations that are completely underdeveloped.

▶ To proceed along minimal lines, towards an economy of resources, by recycling forms, materials and methods, replacing luxury with maximum output from the standpoint of the way of life that a building can allow (Eduard Bru).

Economy of form and abstraction are the watchwords for Propeller Z, who take the shortest and most functional direct route to coping with constraints, avoiding all formalism, all identifiable style and for the most part using means that rarely conform to convention.

Atelier Bow-wow apply their analyses of the metropolis of Tokyo to the most difficult, most extreme conditions and recycle them in the operational modes of their projects – for instance that of 'smaller houses' – which verge on the absolute minimum.

▶ To devise strategies of urban action that correspond to the complexities and continual transformations of the environment.

Resolutely experimental, Block sets out to 'contaminate' the town with mini-actions along the lines of 'copy and paste and transform'. These actions transplant one identifiable urban world into another, mixing together objects and signs from unconnected territories and inserting ephemeral, constantly changing elements that bear witness to the heterogeneity of the town and propagate the concept of its endless transformation.

▶ To conceive new methods of analysis and new instruments of urban planning that will introduce a dynamic, open dimension into a traditionally static procedure that is tied to decision-making at a single given moment. This is the subject of the research carried out by RAD, who recently dissociated themselves from the Asian branch of OMA when they proposed scenarios that would take into account anarchic urban phenomena and models borrowed from biotechnology or artificial intelligence.

HOST share the same ambitions when they construct theoretical matrices in order to examine relationships between the variables at work in a given territory and to understand how they function, so that they can be applied to different local situations.

▶ To cope with the density and the degradation of natural and suburban environments – an acute problem in the Netherlands – by developing a three-dimensional concept of an ideal town: this is the collective project of the postgraduate laboratory of the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, under the direction of Winy Maas (MVRDV) and Wiel Arets; their 3D-City is a cube-shaped town that reconstructs in three dimensions the various elements and phenomena constituting a world that is nothing more than a vast urban field subject to the laws of globalization.

▶ To negotiate before acting is the guiding principle for Chora. Their starting-point is the idea that local environments are permeated by multiple and global movements, which bring profound changes to the town and its increasingly heterogeneous population. It is this emerging population, consisting of intermingled identities, that must be identified through its conduct, its beliefs and its representations if it is to become actively involved in its own evolution. The task is to transcribe a spontaneous way of life into scenarios that will prolong it, and to make the diversity into a dynamic force that can no longer be the object of collective planning but will instead be the subject of actions negotiated between participants who are informed and aware of all the upheavals.

▶ To create a fusion between the body, the environment and technology (NOX). The town and architecture can no longer be considered as areas defined by material limits, but are the results of multiple, living experiences in which human conduct depends on perpetual interaction between the place itself, the new media, magazines, television, movements and meetings. In their planning project for La Défense in Paris, NOX adopt a similar approach to that of the Situationists, who through experience of drift prioritize the dimension of time over that of space; NOX transcribe multiple forms of behaviour into a dynamic and fluid schema in order to construct a model that will leave the field free for every individual experience.

Offshore go even further in promoting the concept of disappearing borders. Territory will be no more than the representation of a network of relations between inhabitants, whose links are to be conceived not in terms of space but in terms of communication.

Along the lines of the 'Flying Doctor' – an Australian system for delivering medical care to far-flung communities – they propose a planning concept based on sharing time, not space.

'To rebuild the unity of the world', 'to reinvent a landscape', 'to make', 'to create new territories', 'to conceive', 'to construct', 'to deal with' – these terms make up a list of practices that correspond to a mission of production, of engagement in the world that is generally entrusted to the architect. What is different here is the underlying and unanimous conviction that this engagement cannot take place without detailed analysis of the places concerned and the increasingly rapid and diverse upheavals to which they are subjected. Research into and analysis of the forces at work have become a sine qua non for the architect's activity.

Whatever the scale of the project envisaged, ranging from single object to complete town, form can no longer be considered as a unit in itself; it both arises out of and goes hand in hand with a system of dynamic, ephemeral and unstable forces.

There is no escaping the influence of globalization on localities. Most of the proposals listed concern small, localized steps towards inventing or defining a new relationship with the world; they seek to realize ideas that might appear contradictory. It is a matter of continually devising pluralistic solutions that will lead to positive development, to a dynamic flowering as opposed to the prevailing homogenization and standardization.

In this way architecture does not merely accompany the turbulence of our modern world, but instead becomes an active force of revelation and challenge, generating a pluralist community that can defy the synthetic system developed by globalization. ☒

Marie-Ange Brayer

# On the Surface of the Earth, in Search of the Chorographic Body

*'The only Utopia possible today is purely quantitative.'*
*Archizoom*

Through the window of a train that stretches out as an endless corridor, a man looks out at the landscape. It's a strange landscape, insofar as its naturalness seems to have been fashioned entirely by man. It's a manufactured landscape. The undulations, the fine furrows, the gentle geological folds express an unusual orderliness — that of a smooth, domesticated geography, terra firma, yet, at the same time, infirm. This landscape surprises us: it combines the detachment of the observer, for whom it is an object of contemplation or even reverie, with a chorographic view in which the overdeveloped details seem excessively formal. Between the view and the representation lies the geographical earth, an indissoluble whole. This image encapsulates the paradox that characterizes many architectural experiences of the 'earth', ranging from earth-matter to the earth surface that covers the entire world, from material ground down into the finest particles to a surface for inscription or incision. While one can only view a landscape and not live in it, one can only work with the earth, occupy it, penetrate it, live on it. The earth, as the original matrix, as 'chora', offers the body a refuge, a shelter. The chorographic is a liminal region between earth and landscape, between body and representation, which developed alongside landscape painting in the 16th century. Painting and cartography tended to intermingle, as can be seen from Brueghel's landscapes or Georg Hoefnagel's cartographical views. Between the surface and its depths, between landscape painting and earth 'mapping', Max Peintner's drawing (Ill. 1) throws confusion, because it fuses together the local and the global. For Denis Cosgrove, the fact of 'thinking global' and 'acting local' is reflected in chorographic views, which are 'interconnections of localities'.[1] The chorographic view, which absorbs the whole into the part, is a charting of the earth, a domesticated morphology of the landscape. Instead of a unified system of control, we have 'multiperspectivism', an 'infinity of local perspectives'[2] that spring from the equivalence of bodies in the chorographic model. Simultaneously surface and relief, the chorographic landscape with its flattened curves opens out on to flexible geometrical forms, moving spatial structures, which integrate bodies that are both singular and fractal.

The chorographic landscape is levelled out by the grid. The latter compartmentalizes as a sort of tabular extroversion of the earth, a taxonomy of the world. Between surface and field, suspended between embodiment and disembodiment, it has given rise to the 'histograms of architecture' (1969) of Superstudio, who cover everything from movable objects to environments, from architecture to towns (Ill. 2). The continuous, isotropic surface of the grid stretches out like a second skin over the world, absorbing all dimensions and contexts. The grid has transformed the earth into a 'continuous monument'. There is no architecture here: the earth has become an infrastructural landscape, an all-embracing crust that lies beneath the grid, radically destabilizing our foundations. This 'continuous monument', which has absorbed the consistency of the earth, presents itself as an immutable image, without beginning and without end. It forms just one single world, one single 'nature'. It is a global environment that transcends all localities. While the modern landscape came up against frontiers, flowed into a horizon and disappeared into the depths, the earth as patterned by the grid plunges us into a unified landscape with no borders, no safety barriers. 'The first territorial interventions, ironic and conceptual, were ideological models which were to guide the architectural project by placing it in conflict with existing realizations and with geography'.[3] In Archizoom's 'No-Stop City' (1970), 'the urban artefact is the result of a purely quantitative process, independent of the quality of the architecture.'[4] Archizoom developed 'a practically infinite urban construction, in which architecture is no more than a form of soil exploitation'. Here the town seems to be a continuous structure, stripped of 'architectural images'. 'Nature, external to the urban model, once more became totally autonomous. It was no longer contaminated by architectural elements that were meant to endow it with cultural significance. It remained a neutral field, beyond all value systems, accessible to direct, physical cognizance'.[5] 'Domestic and urban furnishings coincided completely'.[6] Not architecture or geography alone, but all the interwoven structures of these radical utopias pull us into a world where the earth is purely self-referential. Here the latter no longer accumulates the remains of the chorographic landscape, which called for the 'incorporation' of the exterior, but instead it extends into a multiplicity of connecting soils, which cannot be pinned down to any original state. There is no longer any interior or any exterior; the earth is a vast domestic field that stretches out into infinity.[7]