Thinking with Vegetation

Trees are great and beautiful machines, powered by sunlight, taking in water from the ground and carbon dioxide from the air, converting these materials into food for their use and ours. The plant uses the carbohydrates it makes as an energy source to go about its planty business. And we animals, who are ultimately parasites on the plants, steal the carbohydrates so we can go about our business. In eating the plants we combine the carbohydrates with oxygen dissolved in our blood because of our penchant for breathing air, and so extract the energy that makes us go. In the process we exhale carbon dioxide, which the plants then recycle to make more carbohydrates. What a marvelous cooperative arrangement – plants and animals each inhaling the other’s exhalations, a kind of planet-wide mutual mouth-to-stoma resuscitation, the entire elegant cycle powered by a star 150 million kilometers away. Carl Sagan (1980).

That mutual reanimation between plants and animals – an endless dance that has allowed life on Earth – is, as Sagan puts it, a “marvelous cooperative arrangement.” However, any cooperation requires an agreement between parties. Unfortunately, and even though we want to convince ourselves otherwise, on several occasions, we – the human beings – have unilaterally withdrawn from that agreement.

For example, the forest industry considers trees a ‘renewable resource,’ generating large plantation areas where species are cloned and replicated, as if they were products, maintaining the flow of a cycle of planting and exploitation that ends up draining the soils of nutrients. In parallel, from our field, the notion of ‘green architecture’ implies understanding vegetation as a mere tincture with which we dye our projects and undertakings – with labels such as ‘green,’ ‘ecological,’ or ‘sustainable’ – to signal an environmental concern that remains purely anthropocentric and keeps the system intact. And, as if that were not enough, the forced confinements during the pandemic have brought with them a boom in home gardening, which boosted the growth of the indoor plant industry. An extreme case is the market for succulents, involving organized crime networks and severe damages to the ecosystems from which these plants are extracted to be commercialized abroad (Trenchard, 2021). Thus, under the alleged
praise for the different forms of vegetation, we actually objectify, instrumentalize, or exploit them.

“Plants,” for Emanuele Coccia (2018:10), “in their history and evolution, demonstrate that living beings produce the space in which they live rather than being forced to adapt to it.” Following the words of this Italian philosopher, plants would not only be the first architects, but they would also be a much more qualified and complete one. In fact, besides making their own space, they also produce and enable the other life that occupies it. From that point of view, the instrumentalization of vegetation would be nothing else than another example of the structural limitations of purely human thought.

Luckily, there are already ideas, proposals, and discourses in architecture that go beyond the anthropocentric view on vegetation. These are written, thought, designed, or built architectures that ‘learn from’ and ‘think with’ vegetation. Approaches and contacts between architecture and vegetation that this issue seeks to highlight.

Thinking with vegetation allows us to understand that the maintenance of life on this planet cannot be defined unilaterally. Instead, we must allow space for other non-human entities to participate and benefit as well. Rather than sending humans into space or creating the conditions for human survival on another planet, the challenge is to understand that we owe life not only to our parents but also to the entire society and nature as a whole. In other words, thinking with vegetation allows us to abandon individualistic and anthropocentric projects to establish empathic and collaborative relationships with our surroundings. As a magazine devoted to promoting knowledge about architecture, publishing an issue of ARQ focused on those who think with vegetation is an opportunity to look at a topic of current relevance and our responsibility as an academic journal in an educational environment. At the end of the day, we have a lot to learn from and almost nothing to teach vegetation. ARQ

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