

The artifice of natural: relationship between man and environment in Thessaloniki and Kalamaria

Abstract

The confrontation of climatic change and their reflection in cities requires a deeper understanding of the dialectic between the concepts of natural and artificial. This is a first approach to provide subsidies and conceptualization to the architectural and urban waterfront project for the city of Kalamaria. Thus, it is based on examples of the nature, philosophy, and legislation of countries such as Brazil, for a better understanding of the two concepts. It uses the idea of “NATURAL ARTIFICE” as a methodological possibility for urban intervention in Kodra Park, a place of great urban relevance for the city of Kalamaria and an important object of study related to the problems faced by coastal cities regarding global climate change.

Keywords: natural, artifice, architectural, Kodra, Kalamaria, climate, global

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Introduction

João de Barro is a bird from the forests in South America. This bird builds his house from natural materials. Its typically oven-shaped nest has made it popular. In its natural state, it prefers the low branches of trees and dry trunks to nest, choosing points that have good visibility of the surroundings, but if it doesn't find a suitable place, it can nest even on the ground or on some protruding rock. In urban areas, where it is perfectly adapted, it prefers electric poles, and can also build on human buildings.

The João de Barro example raises several philosophical questions that dialectically coexist in our world. The bird uses only natural materials, as found in nature, so does the bird make an artificial or a natural house? We don't know if the bird uses any intention in its construction, so the house can be considered architecture? What really differentiates something natural from something artificial in the contemporary world?

The image of João de Barro is used here as a metaphor of how nature has always dialectically updated artifices for its own survival. As Paulo Mendes da Rocha¹ says, we humans need to change nature so that we can live as a society on this planet, because we cannot live in nature as the way it is presented to us. The point is that man alters nature in such a perverse way that today we no longer distinguish our own acts. But here a step back is necessary. What can really be defined as natural? And what can be defined as artificial? Clarifying these concepts becomes crucial when we are talking about urbanizing and solving problems on a global scale but with local actions required.¹

What definition do we need?

The idea of natural, since the late 14c on Western thought, prevailed as something “existing in nature as a result of natural forces” (that is, not caused by accident, human agency, or divine intervention). From a similar period, the meaning of artificial, from Old French, was understood as something “not natural or spontaneous”. The word is also related to the notion of artifice and thus it is present in the idea of building something, like a craftsman. The idea presented in the text “Restituting nature: A Latourian Workshop”², is to organize the

¹Mendes da Rocha, Paulo e Villac, Maria Isabel. *América, cidade e natureza*. 2012. São Paulo. Estação Liberdade; 1ª edição.

²Latour, Bruno. *Reset MODERNITY!* 2015. ZKM, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA / London, England.

human modern reading on the natural in a way that can be presented as the graphic below (Figure 1):²

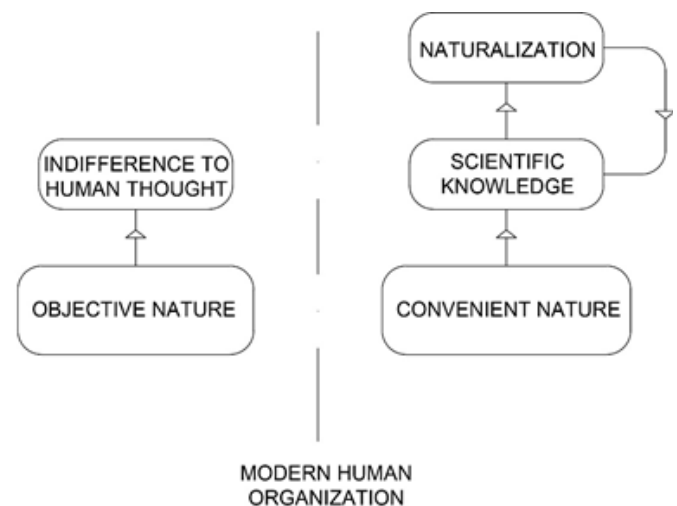


Figure 1 The separation between natural and artificial. Graphic: André Prevedello, 2022.

From philosophy, man reasons and organizes nature in two fields. A field of untouchable nature, separated from the human condition and which, according to the graphic, would be the natural environment by excellence. Its purity does not accept the human presence even though the human being comes from nature itself. The point is that humanity alters nature at its own will, not its own need. The botanical gardens of several European cities show the vision of an attempt at humanized naturalization, for example the botanical garden in Barcelona.

The other field is left to convenient nature, that is, the natural that can be altered to make possible the human construction, rationalized, scientific and progressive. In this sense, nature is naturalized as something that can be controlled to promote human evolution, and here it can be affirmed an artificial evolution (machines, computers, internet). This bifurcation created as a human action explains much of the indifference of some societies towards the natural environment. For many societies, nature does not even exist as an entity to be related or even respected. Here is where humanity is now (Figure 2).



Figure 2 The transformation of the natural into the artificial. Waterfront of Kalamaria. Photo: Maria Ioanna Stathaki and Eleni Vasiloudi, 2022.

There are now several lines of thought in a somewhat controversial discussion about the relationship between humans and natural areas. Within the thought of conservation biology, that studies philosophy, economics, and genetics, with the aim of promoting guidelines for the conservation of biodiversity. Within this field, there are two lines of thought with opposing ideas on how to preserve the planet's biodiversity.

The first line argues that protected natural areas without human presence should be established, the so-called “integral unity conservation areas” in Brazil. This line of thought takes the position that human presence compromises the natural environment. Still, this happens not just with modern man, but even with primitive peoples, whether indigenous, barbarians, or others. In this sense, the “good savage”, would use nature with respect, without exploitation, with only subsistence hunting, taking from nature only what was necessary; it is just a myth that is not proven since man is always an explorer of the natural environment. Thus, this line of thought argues that integral conservation units are necessary as the only means of conserving what remains of natural areas on the planet, even if these areas somehow already suffer the presence of human actions through global warming, pollution, and other contemporary issues.

The second line of thought has a contrary view and argues that it is impossible to isolate an area of the planet for conservation for two reasons. First, because there are no more areas isolated from man. Even, for example, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, at some point in the past, these areas have already suffered the human presence. This is the myth of “untouched nature”. The second reason would be that isolating an area as natural, ends up causing damage to the entire population that somehow depends on the use of that isolated area, whether for any subsistence culture, tourism, leisure, etc. Thus, this line defends the existence of human presence in the natural area, but with controlled presence, which in Brazil is classified as a “unit of sustainable use”. In this use are national forests, extractive reserves, and natural heritage, among others.

Within the controversy between these two views on the natural environment, in world, both lines of thought are adopted today. It is common ground in the world that protected areas with human-controlled use must exist, within the second line of thought. The great contemporary discussion is whether these areas should not be isolated from humans for the maximum conservation of biodiversity possible. Using the example of Brazilian legislation, which, incredible as it may seem in the face of current political issues, is seen in the world as advanced, there are integral conservation units classified as “Integral Park”. These enable some uses such as controlled tourism and scientific research. In sustainable use units, there are “extractive reserves” that make it possible to exploit nature's wealth, but in a controlled manner (as an example, we have the Amazonian rubber trees that still supply latex for some industries). In this category are classified several Brazilian national forests.

From the moment we are discussing the maritime fronts in Thessaloniki and Kalamaria cities, an urban fabric with more than 2,000 years, the wealth of historical, commercial, affective, symbolic, and occupational relationships, clearly indicates the need for an occupation in the model of a unit of sustainable use. It would not be logical to isolate an area like Kodra Park, in Kalamaria, from the entire surrounding urban network. Even more illogical would be to free up the area for urban occupation like the rest of the city. Let's opt for the middle ground, as Ressano Garcia³ says: “The balance between the built environment and nature is at the heart of the architectural design” (Figure 3).³

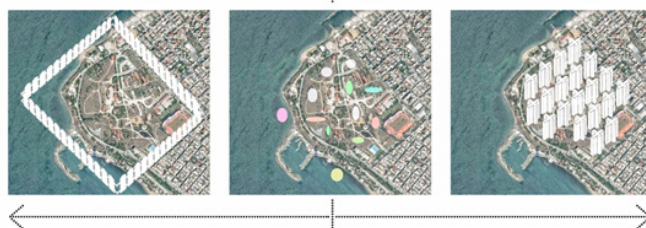


Figure 3 Kodra Park and the extremes of isolation or total occupation of the area. Graphic: André Prevedello, 2022.



Figure 4 Natural textures on Kalamaria's waterfront under a concrete floor. The non-delimitation on what is artificial and natural. Photo: Tullia V. Di Giacomo, 2022.

A change of perspective for architecture

The experimental scientific methodology since the sixteenth century in Europe, which argues that anywhere, earth, region of the planet can be controlled to extract from the natural environment what is desired, resulted in the global problems that we live in today. The point is that this method inhibits and even eliminates any local knowledge that can be used. The question that arises is whether society, not as a whole, but diverse local societies are evolving along with nature or reducing knowledge that seems increasingly necessary to deal with nature. In this sense, it would fit the analysis of the urban planning of areas such as the Kalamaria waterfront, specifically the urban fabric related to Kodra Park, a primitive thought of returning to the natural as much as possible. A return and an idea of containment of the modernizing advance, as Eduardo Viveiro de Castro⁴, argues when he talks about the primitive indigenous peoples before rationalization equalizes the entire landscape.⁴

³Ressano Garcia, Pedro. Obras seleccionadas. Documenta, 1^o Edição, Novembro de 2016, Lisboa.

⁴Viveiro de Castro, Eduardo. On The Modes of Existence of The Extramoderns. 2015. In Latour, Bruno. *Reset MODERNITY!* 2015. ZKM, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA / London, England.

In this sense, it is necessary to analyze the possibilities of manipulation of the Kalamaria landscape as architectural and urban action. Facing the reuse of Kodra Park and Kalamaria waterfront from an all-natural conception would not be feasible, as already defined, as it would imply complete isolation of the area, treating it as a comprehensive conservation unit, isolated from the city.

Urbanizing the park by connecting it again to the sea, and reducing problematic human action (large constructions, excavations, industries) implies conceiving the area as a mixture of natural spaces and artificial spaces. We speak here in a near-natural that in architecture is possible when we use materials, for example, in the way they are available in nature. A block of stone that is positioned as a ladder reproduces the most natural we can do. This action is here called “artifice of the natural”

The artificial in architecture presupposes using landscape abstraction as a design tool⁵. It happens when we manipulate the natural environment to produce something, a metallic structure, a concrete structure, or even the treatment of a stone that is polished and altered formally and materially to meet human needs.⁵

An abstract conception of Kalamaria’s landscape could not be projected according to its scale. The vastness of the Thermaic Gulf, the presence of Mount Olympus southwest of the park, the large green area in the city’s master plan (2013) that is classified as a green public space area, and education, demonstrate the impossibility already present in local society of not fully artificializing the area.

The artifice of natural

Architecture needs to work between the natural and artificial environment. The polarization between concepts is no longer suitable for a planet fraught with problems such as global warming, rising sea levels, noise, and environmental pollution. In this sense, architecture should act contrary to the reinforcement of standardized polarities and static dichotomies, proposing an ontological and epistemological dynamic and hybridization of the landscape, which becomes an artificial part and a natural part.

For more than 150 years the idea of something not completely natural or artificial was already in literature and in the twentieth century was very popularized in cinema. In literature, it appears that the first ideas of fusion between man and landscape appeared in Edgar Allan Poe’s 1843 short story, “The Man That Was Used Up”. The book tells the story of John A.B.C. Smith, a brigadier general, who spends his days idle as a pile of pieces on the ground. After being captured and tortured by Native Americans, Smith was reduced to a

piece of man who fills his pieces from a room full of prosthetic pieces. When the general needs to introduce himself to someone, he needs to be reassembled, piece by piece. Smith is as mechanical as the 1850s would allow, that is, not much. The artifice here is its assembly as a necessity to relate to other people. This architecture from the artifice of the natural has its usefulness in urban areas such as Kalamaria. Still, we say that some areas should be isolated from man. This is the case of the estuary near the city of Thessaloniki which, due to its fragility and importance as a place of biodiversity, should be isolated, removed from the highways and reserved in all elements connected to it (underground rivers, winds, geomorphology, etc.).

In areas where there is a historical need for human insertion, we argue that this connection should be continuous, fluid, and porous as much as possible. We are talking about an architecture in which parts are as natural and parts are artificial.

Conclusion

We need to understand in a practical way that the reading of the man/nature thought does not apply anymore. We are no longer in the Anthropocene; we are in a post-man/nature era in which we no longer distinguish what is man and what is nature. We become a hybrid which actions that generate hybrid results. This is the current landscape. This is easily visible all over the big scale: when you have a big ship and Mount Olympus in the background. But it is on the small scale that this intervention is registered as perversely (Figure 4).

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Conflicts of interests

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⁵Prevedello. André Augusto. Project Diary as a Strategy of Urban Apprehension. Writing Place, No. 7 (2023): Taking Place: Reflections from the Fieldworker. Department of Architecture of TU Delft and Faculty of Architecture of RWTH Aachen University.