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From Things to Relationships: Architecture of the Ecological Mind

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The following Short Note on environmental aesthetics was guest-edited by Tom Baugh.

Architecture, as a matter of aesthetic appreciation, has a very long history. For as long as we know, through writing and symbols humans have expressed aesthetic concepts. Since prehistoric times, 'secret' geometries have been embedded in the writing and symbols... geometries that established proportions to enhance visual harmony. Over the millennia, humans built structures with aesthetic intention guided by these geometries. Coming to relatively recent times, empathy theory introduced the concept of form-feeling, emphasizing the direct connection between what is seen and what we feel....between the objective and the embedded geometries.

However, what is beyond the seen: "imaginative vision" or "new vision/visibility" has not always been discussed as part of the larger perceptual field since it required admitting or recognizing the existence a scale that is beyond immediately accessible to the humans. More than a decade ago, architectural theorist Anthony Vidler (2004) asked for an expanded field of ecological aesthetics that would show new process-oriented spatial formations and new inter-disciplinarity. Vidler maintained that some of the most important notions of ecological aesthetics are not in the sphere of "vision," or the seen, thus calling for a careful "reorganization" of the world as we perceive it.

Ecological consciousness and "new vision" as the artist, writer, and educator Gyorgy Kepes described it, are therefore the starting points for the aesthetics of relationships rather than aesthetics of objects. Ecological consciousness requires seeing things below and above the mezzo-scale of nature. It teaches us that as our understanding of the relationships between "things" grows, so will the spaces that we will build have an additional ethical dimension.

There are two ways in architecture and related fields today in which this aesthetics of connectedness instead of aesthetics of separation shows itself: on one hand are projects that insist on visualizing the invisible – such are those visualizing climate change. It also includes metaphorical use of patterns, what Kepes thought to be a primary visual source of interconnectedness, in the urban and landscape design as well as on façade design. Being able to understand things on micro and macro scale are part of necessary knowledge. On the other hand, and probably more substantial, is a level of complexity involved in human life that is being introduced into architecture.

We will have to learn to think in terms of relationships rather than objects on all levels of architectural effort; and that is where ecology is invaluable to architecture. Ecology teaches us to appreciate the visible in a new way, but it also teaches us to assume, until the moment we understand the invisible relationships, that there is more than what we can see. This concept needs to be included in ecological aesthetics, at least when one discusses architecture. As a field, architecture has an unlimited potential of creating environments that propagate beauty as we know it but, at the same time, it has ethical dimension of creating environments that include a myriad of life functions that are part of the architectural program. It just seems that beautification of an architectural object will not be enough anymore; every architectural effort carries the potential to include life processes and organizational thinking particular to relational world that ecology offers.

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