

Escapism : social, architectural and psychological relevance of re-connection with nature on human beings.

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1. Description Themes

Cities - Edges - Nature - Inhabitants - Coexistence

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.*

William Wordsworth
The World Is Too Much With Us

Urban inhabitants throughout history always felt the need to escape from the cities where they were living to try to reconnect with nature, looking for a way to relax and experience the natural environment in all its purity and tranquillity.

This phenomenon can be identified with the term Escapism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is “the tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured”.

The magnetic and enigmatic connection to nature has always characterized me and my family's history creating a strange and primitive bond with it. Living a few kilometers away from the huge dormant Vulcano Laziale, in the southern part of Rome, always created in me an innate attraction to nature, either seen as a dangerous and unpredictable being, but also, at the same time, generous and welcoming, with its fertile soil, thanks to what my grandma used to work as a farmer collecting grapes and fruits.

Our actual house has a small terraced balcony on the ground floor, filled with plenty of small bonsai, huge vases packed with different Mediterranean shrubs, or climbing plants surrounding the external perimeter of our house. This is the place where, since I was a child, I have lived my weekends and I have seen my father on Sundays' mornings taking care of it.

His passion and dedication to nature, from curating and taking care of the small leaves to dividing the dirty and intricate roots, always got my attention and esteem, passing down this curiosity and fascination for natural exploration.

That safe spot he carefully built, surrounded by plants and flowers was a place where to escape from the hectic rhythm of the urban week life in Rome, and where to enjoy his free time with all of us.

Introduction

Fascinations



1. Description Themes

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Only a few years ago, the entire world population was facing the COVID-19 crisis, undermining all certainty, and testing a new way of living. In this period, in our cities, the inhabitants understood the real importance of open-air spaces, for example, our terraced garden or the rooftop of the main residential buildings, and how the fixed boundaries as fences and walls are affecting the human perception of the space and the buildings surrounding us.

In that critical moment, the population living in a dense urban context felt the need and the urge to escape from the houses where they spent months enclosed, afraid of any human interaction, to feel one with nature, to explore green areas, and to feel finally free.

But during those months, the spaces where people were used to walk, interact, and living every day were left abandoned and the “non-human actors” started making use of those spaces again, as we saw in Venice’s canals where dolphins came back swimming after years, or in the main cities where wild animals and birds, such as wild boar, bears, foxes and many others, started conquering again the asphalt streets and squares. Therefore, looking back to what happened immediately after COVID-19, we understand that the relationship and the co-existence between human and non-human species need examined deeply and considered in the design process of our cities. We are not living alone and, as Bruno Latour stated, “non-human actors should have the same rights as humans”. (Actor Network Theory)

The question that arises spontaneously after this analysis is what is nature, and in particular the desire to escape to it, bringing to the urban inhabitants?

What kind of social and personal relevance has the escaping act on the human being, and how this is affecting the lives of the non-humans? Do we have the right to “invade” nature and escape from our urban concrete-based environments?

How can architecture and urban planning coexist with the natural environment and aid in the reconnection between human and non-human actors in nature?

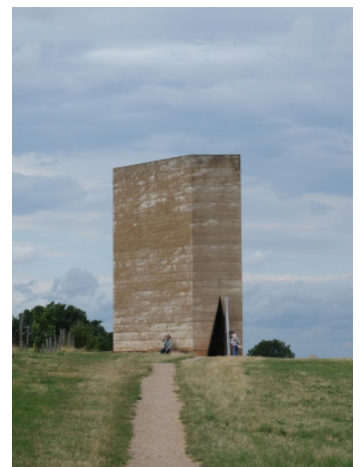
Throughout history, humans have always looked for a way to find their inner peace in nature, wandering and admiring all the species of plants, trees, animals, and insects living there.

This tendency to seek nature affected human behaviors when the urban population needed to face extraordinary changes. As we experienced, the desire to have a clear connection with natural elements immediately after the COVID crisis ended, in the 19th century, with the Industrial Revolution that affected the development of our major cities and the way of behaving of most of their inhabitants, many poets and intellectuals decided to find their inner peace escaping from their grey manmade

Escapism and COVID



(Sub)Questions



1. Description Theme(s)

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cities to go in the natural world.

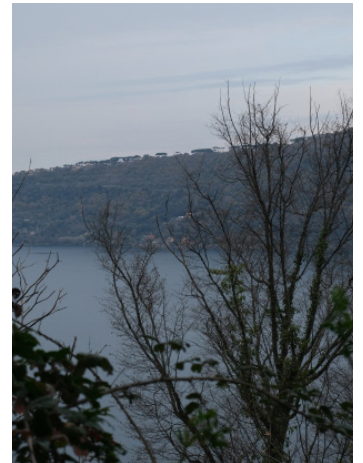
The effect that nature had on them was a powerful experience of natural beauty, able to change human conduct, becoming more kind and loving in their daily lives. William Wordsworth affirmed in different sonnets that he wrote, such as "The World Is Too Much with Us"(1802) and "I Wonder Lonely as a Cloud"(1807) how this experience and connection with nature was such a powerful experience of immense and sublime natural beauty, provided his mind with a memory that he could have "visited" as a respite from the harsh and intense rhythms of their grey Industrial world.

The message that poets such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge wanted to deliver was that the more we spend time and rest in nature to reconnect and renew our spirits, the more we counteract the depressing effects that urban stress and our cities have on us.

This phenomenon was mainly an aristocratic attitude or something that only wealthy people could afford and, therefore, analyse how the workers and the less wealthy part of the society experienced in the past but also right now live this connection with nature.

Considering our nowadays cities, where multiculturalism and diversity are some of the main characteristics that enrich the experience of the city, in the research I would like to focus also on how different cultures and societies experience differently this connection with nature, trying to consider other perceptions of the natural environment, to then create the basis for a design "polite manifesto" on the relationship between Nature, Humans and Architecture.

History



Politics and society



2. Method(s) and Approach

The research phase will start with an extensive study of the literature, academic articles, and archival sources to have a better understanding of how in the past people experienced escapism to reconnect with nature and counteract the stress that the developing cities were causing to them. Then the focus will move to the spatial relationships and connections between cities and green areas, focusing on the access points and the edges.

At the same time, to better answer the research questions, the best way to explore the human perception of nature is to practically experience those kinds of emotions and feelings, participating personally in those experiments in the field. Those moments are going to expose the observer to many different inputs and, to bring back and argue those perceptions in the research, the data are going to be collected in the form of different media.

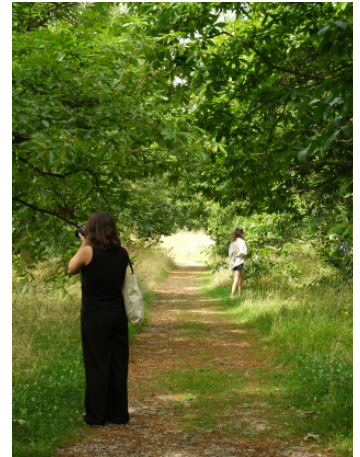
The field experiences are going to be walks and moments when the studied subjects wander through nature trying to analyze their perception and how their behaviors are changing, taking notes about what they say, and what they wear, and interviewing them to understand their connection with those spaces is and how they used to reconnect to natural spaces in the past.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing stated that "Walking is the speed for noticing and for thinking" and it's important to understand how the velocity helps enter in tune with the rhythms of nature. Walking involves particular attention to the surroundings, the velocity is given by the interest of the observer in what she/he is looking at, and by reducing the speed of the walk she/he can get more information from the environment. That's why is fundamental during the field research to fully experience this visual and physical connection with nature, by guiding some exercises the "wanderer" in observing and remembering emotions and choices in their paths in the past.

But how does this perception change moving from the city to nature?

Hiking from a city to a natural environment highlights how emotions and perceptions change between those two places and how nature affects positively the behaviors of the people, bringing them back to primitive and youth memories. In this case, an important role is played by the boundaries, the edges that delimitate the green areas used to escape, and the entrances to access nature. In this case, analyzing and drawing some case studies where nature meets the city, focusing on the human scale and the detail scale, is going to provide a better view of how these passages are affecting the experience of the walkers. Observational walks along edges and collection of pictures and drawings, considering, in particular, the edge of our project location in

Literature



Walking



2. Method(s) and Approach

Schaerbeek, are creating a list of data that can help us find a project rule on how to work on this topic.

Is the presence of other people affecting this experience? The research is going to be conducted in different ways, first of all, experiencing nature alone, together with family members, friends, and other people, and lastly with a dog to better see what a person is noticing, smelling, hearing, or thinking in these three scenarios and how the presence of other people, or animals, is changing what reconnects us with the nature.

The tool that helps the observer to collect the data is a notebook and a camera. Each person, with her/his own background, can collect different objects, take pictures, and take notes on a particular scent, color, movement, or anything else that creates in her/him this sense of escapism. In this way, we can depict a whole variety of feelings and perceptions during a site visit by unfolding the place.

To take into account the needs of the people living around our site and to avoid to monopolize the research with our Western-centric point of view, we want to consider all the people that live in the multicultural neighbourhood of Schaerbeek and understand how the other cultures see nature and the theme of Escapism.

In this case, we could interview and ask inhabitants from different backgrounds how they, and their families, experience this reconnection with nature, by providing a picture or a drawing of which element is bringing them back to this idea of natural tranquility as opposed to the daily urban stress.

Edges



Multiculturality



3. Sources and Inspirations

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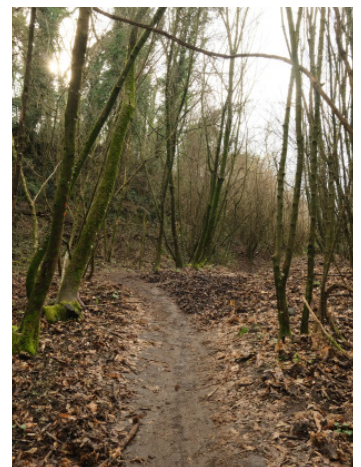
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All the pictures used for this research plan were taken during hikings, excursions or moments of escapism from the urban stressful rhythms.