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Against Recycling Nature

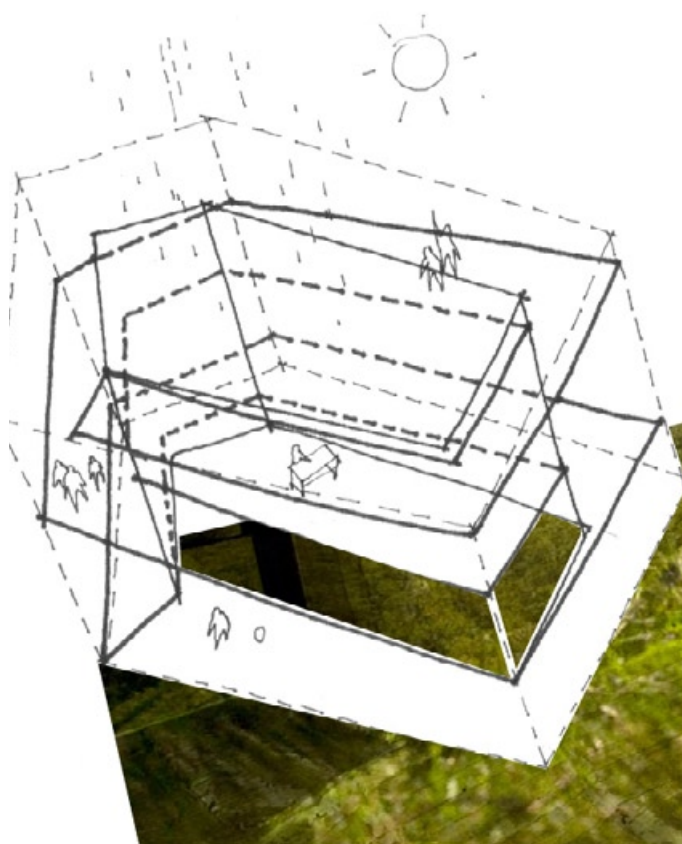
Carl Douglas Considers Buildings Beyond Site

'Ecology' sounds like something to do with science and solar panels, animal liberationists and atmospheric chemists. But Timothy Morton, author of *Ecology without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010) claims otherwise. Rather than being a topic or an area of study, he suggests ecology is simply exploring the consequences of a single thought: that everything is connected. It's not a very complicated thought, and as far as philosophical insights go, it seems kind of obvious. We're fairly well house-trained now when it comes to recycling and checking where our food comes from and switching off the lights – or at least we know we're supposed to feel guilty we when transgress in these areas, because we're supposed to have a bigger picture and understand the far-flung effects of our local actions. What Morton suggests, however, is that being ecologically-minded is not just considering a subset of our actions that have larger-scale effects, but recognising that *all* of our actions have such effects.

Some odd implications follow from the axiom that everything is interconnected. To begin with, there is no longer any outside. We throw our waste away, but it comes back to us because 'away' was never really a place. As philosopher Bruno Latour puts it,

"There is no reserve outside in which the unwanted consequences of our collective actions could be allowed to linger and disappear from view. Literally there is no outside, no *décharge* where we could discharge the refuse of our activity... It is not only Magellan's ship that is back but also our refuse, our toxic wastes and toxic loans, after several turns." (*Harvard Design Magazine* n.30)

Because there is no outside, ecology, in Morton's eye, has little use for the concept of Nature. He puts it as bluntly as



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No boundaries: A kindergarten which traces connections beyond its property envelope

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saying that Nature does not exist, that it is a ghost “dressed up like a relic from a past age,” that “haunted the modernity in which it was born”. His reasoning has nothing to do with dubious postmodern idealisms that claim nothing really exists; on the contrary, he is completely committed to the real existence of the Great Barrier Reef, global warming, plutonium, and coffee plantations. What he rejects is the idea that some of these things are Nature, and that Nature is an *outside*.

Nature, he contends, is an entirely synthetic construction, an artificial segregation of things into two classes: the Natural and the non-Natural. We're highly finicky about how we like our Nature: trees, mountains, and birds are great, but slime moulds, earthquakes, and rats aren't. Everybody wants to save the baby pandas, but pity the poor activist trying to get people to care about slugs. When we talk about Nature, we tend to imagine a small set of things that we like. Nature has long been a conceptual touchstone for architecture and urban design, where it often appears as an emblem of harmony, authority, and purity. Nature is an idealised image of the world we find ourselves thrown into. It is also a reductive image, because it requires us to draw a circle in the sand labelled 'Nature' and decide on what goes inside it and what doesn't. Instead of a new *concept* to replace the old one ('the environment', for example), Morton suggests we need a new *practice* – the practice of tracing connections.

A shift like this might make us reconsider one of the most common givens of architecture: the property boundary. Property boundaries allow territory to be parcelled into neatly sealed units which plug into a limited number of inputs and outputs (water, power, and waste connections, for example). The boundary is a perimeter that can be policed as private space, discrete from the public space outside. But when we isolate something like this, we are imagining its connections to be severed in a way that cannot happen. Surface water, for example, has a notorious disregard for property boundaries, as do sound, vibration, animals, and light. Ecological practice, I submit, would begin for an architect not with Greenstar accreditation (as worthy as such an accreditation might be), but with the tracing of connections, particularly where they cross such boundaries. The drawing above is a concept sketch for an inner-city kindergarten on Emily Place that aspired to be this kind of architecture: instead of a fenced plot, it was imagined to be a place of constant passage for children, teachers, passers-by, sun, air, water, birds, plants, food, and voices.

Nature is an imaginary place. The fantasy of an *outside* world is dangerous when all we have available are more *interiors*. To imagine that our projects are sited in Nature is to fantasise about disconnection: to imagine that there is a world out there separate and unaffected by the world within the borders of the project. Nature is a bankrupt idea: too small, too idealised, and too disconnected. Latour writes, “I am all for recycling, but if there is one thing not to recycle, it is the notion of 'nature'!” CD



NZIA Membership Category Changes

Given the rapidly changing nature of the profession the NZIA Council is currently considering changes to membership categories and is seeking feedback on this from the Branch committees and membership ahead of our Council Planning day to be held on August 6th. Please email your thoughts and opinions to Tim Melville at tim@rtastudio.co.nz.

The RIBA recently commissioned a study, Building Futures, which sets out to explore the future role of architects, asking: who will design our buildings in 2025; what roles will those trained in architecture be doing then and how will architectural practice have changed as a result? Through a series of one-to-one interviews and round table sessions the study aims to examine the breadth of those who shape the built environment: including traditional architects and those working in expanded fields of practice, as well as clients, consultants and contractors. The resulting speculations provide an opportunity for discussion and interrogation - an exploration of the imminent changes likely to affect the industry over the next 15 years. The key findings are summarized below. They have pertinence for our examination of our current membership categories and how well they will meet our future needs as an Institute of Architects.

The thoughts of Indy Johar are particularly relevant to this discussion. He is a qualified architect and policy researcher. He is a director of the global Hub network, co-founder of Hub Makelab – a supportive eco-system for social startups. He co-founded 00:/ [zer'o zer'o] in 2005, a design strategy practice focused on catalysing change in our cities, towns and neighbourhoods through a fusion of physical and institutional interventions. Projects range from the scale of low-carbon homes, developing a new class of learning institutions, to community led neighbourhood retrofits and 'mass collaborative' community master plans. Indy has taught and lectured at various institutions from Columbia University New York to Said Business School Oxford.

Indy Johar, writing “an open letter to the professional Institute” (the RIBA), has said: “One thing is certain – we are in a period of change and liquidity that we have not witnessed for just over a generation. This change will almost certainly reconfigure our cities, towns, suburbs and villages – and by consequence us, as a profession. Make no mistake, there will be no ‘back to normal’; we are at the tipping point of a systemically different conversation.”

“Which means, inevitably, we need to think about the institution and its role in agitating, facilitating, encouraging, catalysing, driving, narrating, interrogating and sharing our reflections – but fundamentally driving the systemic renewal of the profession – from our ethics, to our knowledge base, to our forms of practice and overcoming the existing pathways of dependencies, momentum and capability gaps buried deep within the ecology of our ‘profession’.”

“This requires a progressive institution built to reflect the challenges and opportunities presented not by the 20th century but the 21st century. I would therefore argue that it may be time to explore new modalities and behaviours for such institutions. And I would suggest that as a starting point we need to understand the following:

1. We are not a membership organisation. We are a learned society - driven by the logic of knowledge and public value and learning as opposed to the interests of its members.
2. We are a profession - not an association of consultants. Our first duty is to do no harm to the places where we work, regardless of who pays us and how much we are paid. We are privileged to co-shape places which will significantly outlast the hands and financial instruments that made them – so we are curators of that near and long term future.
3. Our knowledge and IP ecology as a profession is fundamentally fragmented and isolated across thousands of small organisations. Imagine an institution which understood the solution was not to promote larger organisations but to create a platform for sharing our individual knowledge. This would be