

FOREST IN THE CITY, A NEW PARADIGM?

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In the ever-present context of global warming and the acute loss of biodiversity, forests are at the centre of the reflections of theoreticians and practitioners around the globe. The contributions in this issue of JoLA take the stance that forests should also be at the centre of cities, the very places that, throughout the history of humankind, have fundamentally developed against forests, as Robert Harrison has masterfully shown in his epochal *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. As a primeval matrix that preceded humankind on earth, it is only the evolutionary stadium of sedentarization that led to the progressive and often massive clearing of forests, with their edge gradually becoming ‘the edge of civilization’.¹ Forests—at least in the Western world—have long served as antinomic poles to the city, where the wild, the magic, the forbidden . . . unfolded in mysterious ways. This bipolarity became increasingly blurred with industrialization and the sprawling cities it produced, and then later suburbanization, and now the pressing climate crisis we are experiencing and the ever-faster growing deforestation rates that are redefining boundaries and, needless to say, are beyond alarming.² Even if some parts of human societies still inhabit forested environments, today forests exist more as protected, endangered relics or as small remaining patches in overexploited urbanizing landscapes. As dynamic living environments, urban forested landscapes host biodiversity, birds, mammals and insects. They are places where vegetation layers interact with animals in complex ecosystems, which can be articulated through new equally complex measures such as soil horizons and underground hydrography. Scientists have long been exploring forested areas in cities, showing that relatively unbuilt and preserved areas such as natural mature forests or counterpart young pioneer spontaneous bosquets play an important role as biodiversity reservoirs that strengthen ecological networks. Research on such themes often focuses on landscape-ecological dynamics, adapted maintenance regimes, habitats and biodiversity in relation to urban patterns, spatial species distribution, ecosystems interactions, et cetera. Forests are also examined as a ‘resource to be optimized, scientifically managed, and administered by experts’ to answer contemporary issues such as urban densification, climatic prospects and biodiversity loss.³ From this perspective, forests and trees present a living architecture that can be managed, accommodated, structured and cared for, hence also designed. Forests can form territorial infrastructures that shape the contemporary metropolis, they can recolonize post-industrial landscapes, and they now even figure in the discourse of urban developers, marketing ‘inhabited forests’ in new generations of ‘green’ residential schemes. Forested environments can also sometimes be progressively re-established in urban contexts, through spontaneous recolonization or consciously designed silvicultural projects. Should we then envisage this new vision of the ‘forested’ city as a paradigmatic change?⁴ New polarities are being created by inserting what used to be the englobing ‘wild’ outer world into the very centres of the city—the forest as the re-conqueror of its original antithesis. Of course, the ecosystemic and functional motives underlying this new orientation are overwhelming, but perhaps we can also decipher it as a symbolic inversion of polarities, a reconnection with the matrix of the origins. Maybe the notion of polarity itself can be questioned and overturned by a concept of porosity, a porosity that dynamically intertwines cities and forests. To nurture our thinking about porosity, it would be beneficial to shift our gaze to the non-Western context, where communities have been living in forested environments since ancestral times, in a relationship that is not based on domination, but on cooperation or even companionship with nature. Whichever the reading, humankind needs to reengage with the natural living world. This engagement cannot limit itself to ecosystemic, spatial, social or sheer functional aspects. It should also explore the history of this connection, the related cultural memories, myths and metaphors, as well as the moments of rupture

that signal fundamental changes in our relationship with the environment. There is literature emerging in design and planning theory that addresses these complex perspectives and discusses the role of forests in reimagining relationships between social and biotic systems,⁵ exploring planning and development and spaces for humans and non-humans,⁶ promoting hands-on creative and alternative forest management,⁷ or focusing on site-specificity, experience, aesthetics and spatiality in urban forests.⁸ This special issue positions itself within this emergent contemporary landscape critical discourse and research corpus. While forests might be considered as ecological relational buffers, their socially integrative role needs to be equally recognized. A recent paradigmatic shift in the realm of forest science acknowledges the interconnectivity of trees, humans and nonhuman entities above and below the soil. This shift presents a challenge to the conventional forest concept that has been imposed by the tree industry and its plantation practices. As recently explained by botanist Francis Hallé, our primary relationship with trees is more aesthetic than scientific.⁹ Forested areas in urban environments foreground the role of trees as a symbolic element around which to gather as a community and care for together, but they also offer ways to perceive and reconnect with the environment in a more embodied and material sense. This sensitive relationship is mostly missing today in the way we think about the city. Trees in urban contexts are suffering from pollution, permeabilized soils, and untimely cutting and pruning. It is urgent to rethink the place of trees and forested areas as a link in our relationship with nature and with ourselves. Although a collective entity, each forested habitat presents associations of individual species that can hopefully contribute to a healthy habitat as a whole. In this sense, each tree is a marker and a reading element of the ecosystem at stake, an element of knowledge, imagination and place making.¹⁰ But also, sometimes, a signal of deterioration and a call for action and care towards each element of the forest as well as the forest in its entirety. Trees are not all the same. It is not a matter of planting trillions of individual anonymous trees, it is much more a matter of supporting the development of complex habitats of species geobotanically coherent to the sites and that can support the existence of a web of biodiversity.¹¹ In a densifying urban fabric, and more recently in the post-Covid-19 city, forested areas have become public spaces and urban destinations. In other words, they have become more publicly practiced areas which complement traditional public open spaces.¹² Research in landscape architecture has only recently started to consider forested areas in cities as sociospatial environments that can host social uses, urban practices and community-led initiatives.¹³ Forested areas are explored as urban figures and territorial infrastructures, spatial frameworks or political planning tools, making a more balanced or healthier combination of territorial, ecological and mobility concerns possible.¹⁴ Forested urban spaces have also recently been considered in research as living architectures that could act, at smaller residential scales, as integrative patches, co-inhabited by humans and more-than-humans.¹⁵ This obviously gives rise to new sets of questions. What kinds of shared usages and forms of integration should this new urban fabric cater to? What types of public emerge in forested spaces and what are the political consequences? What new demands will be put on urban design teams and which maintenance regimes will be required? What concepts could be developed for critical thinking on urban forests? Is it at all possible to design forests or inhabit them in a 'designerly' way?

As exemplified in this issue of JoLA, these and related questions have already made their way into contemporary city-making practices and even more so into landscape architecture, calling for the invitation of new types of stakeholders and competences to the planning and design table, new forms of negotiations and new kinds of integrative design practices. Reflecting this change, this special issue wants to contribute to this emerging field in landscape research, by informing critical thinking and pushing further not only the integration of silvicultural and forestation techniques with contemporary landscape design, but also radically reimagining public spaces and aesthetic design

paradigms in the reforested city. Today, these are all extremely important objectives, and the JoLA editorial team is therefore particularly pleased to be hosting this guest-edited issue on forest urbanism. While opening up a new theoretical field to be explored in landscape research, the issue also takes us back to the basics of the profession and the common denominator of our disciplinary field: green and accessible spaces for conviviality. It offers an opportunity, we hope, to initiate a more political and critical debate on deforestation, climatic design approaches, urban imaginaries and aesthetics, and hence, to reformulate the question of the right to the city from a new and increasingly pertinent angle. The guest editors of this special issue are the three co-chairs of the Urban Forests, Forest Urbanisms & Global Warming international conference that was held at the KU Leuven in June 2022.¹⁶ In addition, the editorial team of JoLA invested deeply in reviewing and developing all submissions.

NOTES

1 Will Steffen et al., 'The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives', *Philosophical Transactions. Series A, Mathematical, Physical, and Engineering Sciences* 369 (2011), 842–867.

2 Ibid.

3 Anita Berrizbeitia, 'Criticism in the Age of Global Disruption', *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 13/3 (2018), 24–27.

4 Ibid.

5 Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6/1 (2015), 159–165.6 Françoise Vergès, 'Racial Capitalocene', in: Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London: Verso, 2017), 72–82.7 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

8 Ibid., 108.

9 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

10 Ibid.

11 Jennifer L Rice, Joshua Long and Anthony Levenda, 'Against Climate Apartheid: Confronting the Persistent Legacies of Expendability for Climate Justice', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5/2 (2021), 625–645.

12 Isabelle Anguelovski et al., 'Green Gentrification in European and North American Cities', *Nature Communications* 13/1 (2022), 3816.

13 Jane Hutton, *Reciprocal Landscapes: Stories of Material Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

14 Bruno De Meulder, Kelly Shannon and Minh Quang Nguyen, 'Forest Urbanisms: The Belgian Sonian Forest and Environs', *Landscape Architecture Frontiers* 7/1 (2019) ; Yves Petit-Berghem and Sylvie Servain, 'Editorial', *Projets de paysage* 22, *Forêt et Paysage* (2020), journals.openedition.org/paysage/9378.

15 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

16 Organized by the Department of Architecture, KU Leuven, LAB, UCLouvain and the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, UMONS in relation to the Francqui Chair 2022 of Cecil Konijnendijk (Francqui Chair 2022).