

## **Artificial landscapes: Nature as urban object**

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### **Iconicity meets Sustainability**

In 2006, Charles Jencks wrote his celebrated essay 'The Iconic Building is here to stay'. His text framed critically a tendency observed in the architecture of the late 90s and early noughties to treat buildings as iconic objects that assume a semiotic function as distinct icons within their (mostly urban) contexts. This concept refers to architectures that underline their presence primarily on a visual level, not only by distinguishing themselves from their surrounding environments but also through their operation as semiotic icons; resembling, connoting, or alluding to familiar objects for their effect. This presentation will draw from Jencks' discourse to frame and define a new 'iconic' turn for architecture; one that focuses on the more specific thematic of nature as an icon of urban sustainability. The pressure that has been exerted on architectural practice over the last few decades, by the recognition and understanding of the ongoing climate emergency, and the emphasis placed on sustainability as the holy grail of architecture's future relevance, has undoubtedly raised awareness for the need for more environmentally and socially sustainable designs, particularly in the context of dense urban environments that are more likely to present complex conditions of environmental and programmatic congestion (Koolhaas). Yet, this awareness of sustainability coincides with a cultural condition that has been persistently over the last few decades already been dominated by iconicity; that is, by the imprint on a culture of saturated visuality, which suggests a dis-placement of individuals; that is, a move away from embodied experience of spaces and places and towards the visual consumption of places and buildings as objects. Already predicated as early as the 1960s in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, and more explicitly established through concepts such as Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality and Jonathan Beller's *Cinematic Mode of Production*, this shift was borne out of a visual culture nurtured through cinema and television as embodiments of modernity's visual habits and thrives today in the digital iterations of visual disembodiment, democratised and pervading through the mediated objectification and commodification of cities and places by the stylised mobile photography of social media.

### **Architecture and Nature**

The iconographic idealisation of the natural has pervaded the history of architecture and design. From the strictly curated geometries of Baroque French gardens to the staged bucolic set ups of the romanticist picturesque, as well as the tamed Japanese gardens, the relationship between human and nature has been one based on artificiality as a means of visual taming. Much of what we recognise today as natural landscape, particularly in the United Kingdom with its extensive deforestations, is in fact manmade, with the majestic Scottish Highlands defining one of the most artificially curated landscapes on Earth. In this context, ideas of the natural within architectural and urban design struggle to live up to nature's own agency. The geometric rationalisation of modernity gave way to more radical juxtapositions, or perhaps oppositions between architecture and nature. Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* for Paris ([link](#)), was based on the vision of the *Ville Radieuse* ([link](#)), juxtaposing a grid of skyscrapers, interspersed within a field of 'urban jungle' (Koolhaas, 1994), in

probably one of the earliest moves of 'greenwashing', where the brutal, a-contextual megastructure is compensated by the undesigned wilderness in between.

Of course, it does not take much to see that both the over-taming of the natural and the complete lack of management of its interface with designed environments is problematic. In their ironic critique of the 'end' of modernity *The Continuous Monument*, Superstudio posited that 'The only alternative (to nature) is Architecture' (1969). Their utopian global project proposed a global structure of steel and glass as a means of compacting human activity within the manmade to liberate fields and landscapes for rewilding and agricultural production, as seen in the compacting of Florence along the axis of the Ponte Vecchio, to give way to a field of crops. Non-coincidentally, the iconology of sustainability today, relies heavily on similarly technofetishist approaches, where glass and steel dominate the architectural language of highly artificially conditioned and mechanised environments – yet conditioned in a sustainably artificial way. From the Eden Project, to the intangible display of a northern French forest at the heart of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (), the entanglement of the natural within architecture often seems to miss the balance between symbiosis and objectification, whereby the natural emerges as an architectural form that the human gloriously conquers.

### **'I am Nature'**

Today, professional regulations and systems of validation such as LEED and BREEAM quantify 'sustainability' as an unmissable 'absolution' of sin for any architectural project that will tick their boxes. The objectification of nature within architectural and urban projects, acts as a token of sustainability, which resembles more and more the discussion of nature as a fabricated iconic hyperreality rather than an undeniable reality that designers need to nurture and contribute to. Recent projects such as the Marble Arch Mound in London, by MVRDV (2021), and the Little Island at Pier 55 in Manhattan (2021), by Heatherwick Architects, exemplify an iconographic approach to the natural, which reminds us of the semiotic discourse developed by Stephen Izenour, Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi to describe Las Vegas. The architecture presented there forcefully declares the sign 'I am Nature', atop architectural fabrications that do not anymore even display or objectify nature itself. In a step further on the spectrum between nature and architecture, the architectural completely overtakes the natural, treating as an iconographic form to be (over)engineered and constructed as architecture. Notoriously, the admittedly distorted scheme of the Marble Arch Mound would have cost less, in money and CO2 imprint to fabricate as landscape rather than architecture (), while Little Island's floating concrete platform offers nature on a very expensive, environmentally and financially plate, off the coast of a city boasting one of the largest and naturally iconic urban parks in the world. Inevitably, the balance between the imprint of the structural expenditure undoubtedly outweighs the actual contribution to the city's natural environment. Here, the natural poses as merely the sustainable decoration of otherwise artificial architectures of platforms while the natural acquires a purely iconographic function as the indexical sign of sustainability. Rather than engaging with the natural element through active occupation and principles of environmental sustainability, the two cases resort the disguise of architecture as nature. The appearance of nature as urban object does not propose a counterpart for architecture as much as a frosting for a construction extravaganza.