

Foreword

With the launch of this new issue, *RA Revista de Arquitectura* turns twenty. There are many reasons for considering this a big success, being its published materiality the most obvious. Anyone familiarized with the procedures and circumstances in which academic magazines are immersed will join us in our delight. For these twenty years, its contents, ambition and scope, have been evolving and adapting at the slow pace inertia of academia. And so has changed the panorama of research within the context of Schools of Architecture.

The original goals of *RA*, though, still remain intact. Beyond normalizing criteria and usually unpredictable evaluation processes, *RA* was originally conceived to contribute to the academic discussion with a rigorous and critical point of view, excelling the practical, to sustain a progress of knowledge by recognizing the transcendental cultural dimension of Architecture. And this meant to be done within the frame of the University: with generosity above any yield, and idealistic, far from any utilitarian benefit, so dangerously spread even in the academia. Making ours the lucid Nuccio Ordine's essay, we would like to think that we have been somehow contributing to defend 'the usefulness of the useless'. And also considering that university is precisely the suitable place where this battle against immediate benefit must be fought. It may be there where we should nurture knowledge, criticism and thought, and develop a stronger passion for knowledge.

In short, this is another sustained step which we trust to keep placing the magazine in its prominent situation among the ever-growing list of academic journals in our field. From this point on, the main topic and scope for every monographic issue are defined with the collaboration of an external guest editor. Therefore, essays will not elude the recent or upcoming debate, nor will they forget the lessons from the past. In addition to the open nature of the magazine, several contributions by invited authors will set some of the extents of the conversation.

Finally, essays are now published complete, both in Spanish and English, and the layout follow a full redesign, making the reading of the magazine a more pleasant experience, trying to avoid the arid nature unfairly but commonly associated to academic journals.

The Editorial team

Editorial

Nature as Construction Material

Jesús Vassallo



It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the current man-made environmental crisis is a historic event of a magnitude such that calls for a comprehensive and deep reexamination of all human activity on the planet. In that regard, and for architects, it is a development comparable to the invention of agriculture or the industrial revolution, to the extent that it will radically transform the ways in which we build.

On the other hand, the problems and challenges that we face today are not completely new. In fact, each environmental crisis has been historically followed by an increase in both awareness and specialized knowledge. Such generation of knowledge has been indeed intense in the last decades within the environmental sciences and humanities, a body of work in which architects have only tangentially or sporadically participated.

The marginal position of architecture in these discussions is surprising, not only because of the responsibility implied in the percentage of emissions and energy consumption embodied in the built environment, but most of all because architecture, having traditionally defined itself as the opposite of nature, has amassed a rich and deep body of knowledge about the latter. While much contemporary environmental literature discards the ideas of nature generated within architecture history and theory as romantic or obsolete, I believe, as editor of this issue, that this is a perfect time to take stock of such tradition and evaluate its possible contributions to our current change of paradigm. At the end of the day, the challenge that we face today is the necessary dissolution of the dichotomy between the concepts of culture and nature. In that context, architecture, which has traditionally imagined itself as crystallized culture, has both a privileged standpoint and a great responsibility.

It all boils down to a simple yet radical idea: we need to reconsider human activity in general -economy is the best example-, and its products in particular -the built environment- as internal rather than external to nature. While this may seem counterintuitive, there are however plenty of precedents which we can leverage if we are to reconstruct our definitions of both nature and architecture and produce a new paradigm that can carry us forward through the next century.

Ever since the power of industrialization first revealed itself, there have been periodic bursts or attempts to rethink the relationship of the discipline of architecture to nature. This was the main drive of the Arts and Crafts movement, and its search for the new forms of architecture within nature, or even more literally in the City Garden movement, which reconceptualized nature as the primary city-building material. Also within the modern movement, once the first fevers of progress started to wear out, instances of this trend emerged, with Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City as perhaps the most salient example at the scale of urbanism. Nordic architects of the second generation of modernism also incorporated nature deep at the core of their approach for architecture, as is evident in the experiments that Alvar Aalto or Arne Jacobsen carried out in their own homes and with their own hands. Closer to our day, the attempts of Herzog & de Meuron to literally build with algae or moss complicate distinctions between nature and artifice and prefigure our contemporary interest in natural construction materials. As mass timber construction quickly gravitates towards the mainstream of the construction industry, and experiments with rammed earth, unfired clay, or bamboo become more common, it seems clear that a path emerges in which architecture may one day, at least conceptually, grow out of the soil instead of being imposed on it. This promise also poses the potential to reconsider the divide with which we think about and design rural and urban areas, even the possibility to rethink our cycles of production and consumption as part of a larger gradient of agricultural and natural cycles. With that end in mind, this issue collects a series of essays and case studies, both historic and contemporary and within a wide range of scales, which may contribute to reconceptualize nature as a construction material, or alternatively, architecture as a vehicle for nature. The time may have come to let the forest back into our cities.

Image: Panoramic view in the longleaf yellow pine timber possessions of the Thompson & Tucker Lumber Company as seen from the Eastern portion of the George Smith Survey, fourteen miles south of Willard, Texas, 1908.