

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



SOPHIA

scopio EDITIONS

volume 9, issue 1 | publication year: 2024

issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]

isbn: 978-989-53640-8-4

...

homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

The Territory as Threshold: Images of Thought for a Non-Modern Landscape

Luís Miguel Ginja

Abstract

French philosopher Bruno Latour (1947–2022) proposed an idea in his 1991 book “We Have Never Been Modern” that challenges the age-old notion of a clear distinction between Nature and culture or Man and object. According to Latour, the traditional attempts to separate the concept from its counterpart have failed. Instead, he argues that these concepts are interconnected and cannot be treated as separate entities. This principle can be applied to contemporary urban areas and the surrounding region, where the borders between the city and Nature are becoming increasingly blurred. Design plays a crucial role in conscious thinking and addressing the challenges of using natural resources, their impact on sustainability, and how we interconnect with sites and the Land.

Furthermore, the relationship between urban areas and Nature is a critical issue that demands attention. These challenges are crucial for considering cities and landscapes and addressing them through design in terms of the territory. This act of design should tend towards a more holistic and integrated vision, which aligns with contemporary trends in various areas through a shift towards city projects that are less and less disruptive to the world. The conventional view of cities and Nature as separate entities is shifting towards an integrated perspective. This text deals with the territory as an agent of syntropy, as a link between the landscape and the city. The goal is to uncover how the relationship between the body and the territory can generate synergy in the system and create symbiotic relationships between the various parts involved. To achieve this, we will examine the available literature, starting from the central idea that we have never been modern. With this objective in mind, we will highlight the common areas to revisit the concept of assemblage. As a point of comparison, it is vital to closely examine Frank Lloyd Wright's almost century-old text, *The Disappearing City* from 1932, and determine which aspects of his utopian vision remain relevant today. Regarding that text, Kenneth Frampton (b. 1930) highlights gradually erasing the distinction between the countryside and the city, like the ideology of the Communist Manifesto of 1872.

Keywords: Modern; territory; landscape; city; design.

Luís Miguel Ginja, Estremoz, 1976. Portuguese architect with a Ph.D. from the Lisbon School of Architecture. He is an integrated researcher at CIAUD and has coordinated the WATer project – Water, Architecture and Territory – since 2022, and participated in other research projects on territory and city subjects. He was an invited Assistant Professor for the Industrial Design course at the Universidade da Beira Interior. His research primarily explores design themes, with a focus on the relationship between the body and space, the hand and the design process, and the interaction between the city and the territory.

We do not owe the term *Images of Thought* to Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) but rather to the organisers of the Benjamin texts collected under that name. Between 1925 and 1934, Benjamin wrote texts that were published in magazines and newspapers. Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) would come to comment and explain the meaning of the title, which was very characteristic of Benjamin's way of thinking, in the empirical and dreamlike dimensions that he developed with memory, or if we prefer images of a sensible reality (Benjamin 2018, 288–289). Benjamin uses city names as chapter titles to symbolise different themes and concepts related to urban life and Modernity. This motto becomes very clear in a text entitled *Marseille*. Right in the opening note is an epigraph by André Breton (1896–1966) – *La rue... Seul champ d'expérience valable*¹, thus making it clear that the space of the city moulds and defines those who live there. Benjamin, for his part, attributes human or animal characteristics to the city of Marseille by anthropomorphising it. He quickly constructs an oppressive image of the town over its inhabitants – *Marseilles, fat yellow seal and carious [...] its fauces swallow the bodies of black and brown proletarians [...]* (Benjamin 2018, 179). Each chapter explores various aspects of cities through these and other metaphors, such as architecture and urban planning and the resulting social dynamics. In Benjamin's texts, cities serve as sensitive landscapes for cultural exchange, political struggle, and technological innovation. They also reflect the impact of urbanisation on individual experiences and collective consciousness, where urban life, encompassing its physical, cultural, political, technological, and existential dimensions, opens windows to the complex interaction between cities and human experience in the modern world. However, we would like to bring into dialogue a text, albeit outside this collection, which serves as a motto for the argument of this article.

There is nothing special about not finding your way around a city. Nevertheless, getting lost in a city, like getting lost in a forest, is something you need to learn. The names of the streets must speak to the person who wanders through them like the snapping of dry branches, and the little alleys in the inner city show you the time of day as clearly as a valley in a mountain (Benjamin 2018, 82).

This is the beginning of the Tiergarten text from Benjamin's collection of texts, *Berlin Childhood: 1900*. As far as we can tell from the author's manuscripts, this was supposed to be the opening text of the collection, which is not the case today, possibly to orientate the theme. As we know, the text refers to the large park in the centre of Berlin. What we want to demarcate is already beginning to emerge. On the one hand, there is an apparent certainty that the spaces where we live influence not only who we are but also how we relate to others and how these experiences define us. On the other hand, there is a certainty that there should not be a qualitative or even classificatory divide between cities and landscapes. However, let us read the landscape as natural versus the city as cultural. It is, therefore, possible, through a review of the available

1 "The street... The only valid field of experience" TL

literature and on these premises of the natural versus the cultural, to revisit Bruno Latour's (1947–2022) premise that we have never been modern. In other words, there has never really been a clear cut between the built world and the natural world, and great misunderstandings in the construction of today's society derive from this cut. For the sake of brevity, and because the topic is much broader than the possibilities offered by this text, we have borrowed a question that seems timely and highly topical – Are we modern?

Professor Albená Yaneva (b. 1972) suggests this question at the beginning of the book *Latour for Architects*. What is at stake today, rather than the dichotomy between the natural and the cultural, are hybrid regions, where the culture imitates or tries to replicate the natural (Yaneva, 2022, 8). To better understand this third vector and its inherent implications, starting with a definition of Modern Man is essential.

The book *Five Faces of Modernity* (1977) by Matei Calinescu (1934–2009) defines the Man of the first phase through the medieval use of *modernus* instead of *antiquus*. *Modernus* is a man of the now, a newcomer, while *antiquus* is a man linked to the past, either by tradition or veneration. There is a clear distinction between *Modernus*, with no connections or limitations stemming from a past, almost like a blank canvas. *Antiquus*, on the other hand, are by choice or imposition. If we risk attributing social importance to both, Man *antiquus* is the dominant figure in the society of his time. The Man of the second phase is the Man of the Renaissance, which lasted until the Enlightenment. In this period, Calinescu denotes a segregation of the notion of Modernity from the church canon. If, at first, this notion only contaminated non-religious fields, because of the Renaissance, terms such as ancient and ancestral gained new connotations, and their semantic meaning changed (Călinescu 1977/1987, 59). What is clear to understand is that modern Man is always a projection of the new versus the old, of an apparent state of evolution, not in a Darwinian dimension, but in a Nietzschean one. It is a journey, a state of construction or ontological incompleteness. It should not be seen as a permanent state but rather as a lack that justifies this construction, *ad infinitum*. It is, therefore, easier to understand that the accelerated pace of cities and societies or their construction in the 20th century has posed profound challenges to the sustainable coexistence of human beings and the environment, but above all, in the construction of Man. Our development has often prioritised economic growth and social and technological development to the detriment of ecological integrity and social equity.

The need, especially two decades into the 21st century, for principles of ecological integrity, resilience and harmony with Nature seems increasingly clear. This text delves into the intricate relationship between humans and the environment and how the advent of modernity has impacted our perception of the world. Modernity has dramatically influenced our evolution, causing us to view ourselves as modern beings. Nonetheless, as Calinescu astutely observes, we remain individuals of the current age and cannot fully embody the concept of modernity.

By integrating these perspectives, we aim to develop a holistic framework that recognises the interdependence of humans and the environment, thus reforming Yaneva's question of – Are we modern? To our research question – What does it mean to be modern?

The ontological question is of the utmost importance; indeed, we could even say it is central. The blank sheet of paper with which Călinescu defines Modern Man illustrates this separation between Man and the environment. Connections are lost, and Nature becomes subservient to culture as a pool of natural resources that feed and make it thrive. The concept of “The Disappearing City”, a 1932 text by Frank Lloyd Wright, represents a vision of cities that seeks to integrate human habitation in harmony with the natural environment. Wright imagined cities that would harmonise with their surroundings, blurring the boundaries between built structures and the natural landscape. In doing so, he dispelled the prevailing notion of the city as a separate and autonomous entity, divorced from its ecological context. The *Disappearing City* presents a utopian vision with elements that have endured. Author Kenneth Frampton emphasised the gradual urban–rural fusion, like the *Communist Manifesto* of 1872, which advocated the gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country through a more equitable distribution of the population on Earth (Tavares and Oliveira 2008, 51). This vision of the city aligns with the criticisms put forward by Latour and Philippe Descola (b. 1949), who challenge the artificial separation between Nature and culture that underpins Modernity. Latour's rejection of the “Great Divide” between Nature and culture exposes the fallacy of seeing the city as a purely cultural artefact, divorced from its ecological context. Similarly, Descola's typology of ontological frameworks reminds us that different cultures conceive of the relationship between human beings and Nature in various ways, challenging the universality of Western categories such as city and wilderness.

This is perhaps the intersection between Bruno Latour, mentioned earlier, and Philippe Descola, an anthropologist and ethnologist whose work culminates in the monumental 2021 book *Les Formes du Visible*. His ethnographic study of the Amazon rainforest unfolds the anthropology of culture into an anthropology of nature. In other words, we no longer look at our surroundings as the study of Man in Nature but instead at Nature as conditioned by Man. As heir to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), his thesis was defended under the latter's guidance. However, it does not follow in the same footsteps; it is possibly, as Descola puts it, a parallel track. Lévi-Strauss defended a methodological opposition between Culture and Nature, while Descola is closer to an ontological vision. The crux of the matter is not to emphasise the similarities but the differences (Guerreiro 2024). It is possibly at this point that the ideas of Latour and Descola converge in the argument that Modernity reinforces the distinct division between the natural world, governed by objective laws and mechanisms, and that of human culture, characterised by subjective interpretations and social constructions. To emphasise the role of human and non-human actors in shaping our social reality, Latour introduces the concept of Actor–Network Theory (ANT).

This framework seeks to decentralise human subjectivity and highlight the active agency of non-human entities in shaping our world based on insights from scientific and technological studies. In other words, relationships between people and the environment are no longer primarily direct. All interactions with the world, both natural and cultural, are mediated through various degrees of interdependence. If we take oral communication between individuals as an example, only a tiny part is direct – the majority is mediated (Latour 1993, 107). Latour's critique of Modernity challenges the traditional boundaries between humans and Nature, rejecting the artificial dichotomy between the two. The concepts hold immense significance in guiding how we plan and comprehend our cities. They urge us to acknowledge and appreciate the complex, interdependent relationships between humans and the environment by promoting a holistic approach. The implications of this perspective extend beyond urban planning and are relevant in various other fields as well. Latour invites us to reimagine cities as complex human and non-human actor networks, where built environments and natural ecosystems are interconnected and mutually constitutive. Latour's approach intersects with Descola's at precisely this point in the unfolding of the anthropology of Nature, which translates into relationships of continuity, or lack thereof, between humans and non-humans. These relationships are not based on borders or the ontological classifications we commonly assign. As humans, we hold a unique position in nature. Our cognitive and moral capabilities enable us to accomplish incredible feats, such as creating art, science, and technology. However, human laws still bind us, and we must recognise our place within the natural world. Despite our exceptional abilities, we remain a part of the intricate web of life on Earth and must strive to coexist harmoniously with the rest of the planet. These are nothing more or less than preconceived ideas that establish clear boundaries between realities we want or insist on understanding. What we understand today as Nature is manipulated from within our Culture, which Yaneva calls hybrids, which we have already mentioned. Those hybrids appear for the time being as an artificial mediator between culture and nature, thus denoting a great danger between the two concepts, which is essentially the danger of further estrangement. At this point, the idea of landscape becomes striking, as the Invention of Nature. The term is borrowed from Andrea Wolf (b. 1967) about Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), but it refers to modern naturalism, to the vision of the world constructed through images (Guerreiro 2024). The authors do not propose exploring the concept of images and the bones of reality they reveal but rather use it to bring themselves closer together and frame their dialogue. However, let us consider the intersection of the work of Latour and Descola further. We can develop more culturally sensitive and ecologically sustainable approaches to growing cities and life in them. Another dichotomy, which is the same, lies between the old and the new, precisely the same adjectives we use through Calinescu's thinking about modern Man versus ancient Man. Irénée Scalbert portrays this very intuitively in the 2013 book *Never Modern*. Today's difficulty is the need to negotiate between the past and the future, between

the new and the old. The project takes shape in this fragile balance between detective work on the past and the need for a future for the work and its contemporaneity (Scalbert 2013, 44–45).

As a complement to these notions, which are sometimes quite elusive to encapsulate, these authors' work can help strengthen the dialogue. One of them, Le Corbusier (1887–1965), and his search for new architectonic relationships that could make the built environment harmonic with human needs and natural principles led him to develop – *Le Modulor*. It was created to guarantee ergonomic functionality and establish a harmonious relationship between the human body, architecture, and the natural world. Le Corbusier believed that a more balanced connection could be achieved by aligning architectural dimensions with the proportions of the human body. However, some view *Le Modulor* as a symbol of modernists' aim to impose order and rationality on the complexity of urban environments. Le Corbusier's vision of the city, emphasising rational planning, standardised forms, and functional spaces, sharply contrasted with the organic and spontaneous nature of the countryside.

Another perspective of the exploration of the contemporary countryside by Rem Koolhaas (b.1944) offers a critical reassessment of this dichotomy between the countryside and the city, or if we wish, between the cultural and the natural. In his 2022 book – *Countryside, A Report* – derived from the 2020 exhibition – *Countryside: The Future*, Koolhaas challenges the conventional view of the countryside as a static, backward and unchanging landscape, positioning it as a place of rapid transformation and complexity. He argues that globalisation, technological innovation, and socio-economic change increasingly blur traditional boundaries between town and country. Once considered the antithesis of the urban, the countryside is now subject to the same processes of modernisation and urbanisation that define contemporary cities. Koolhaas' work suggests that the field is no longer a passive recipient of urban influence but an active participant in global production, communication, and cultural exchange networks. This perspective undermines the clear separation between urban and rural, proposing that these spaces are interconnected and mutually constitutive. The transformations in the field, documented by Koolhaas, reveal the fluidity of the boundaries between these two domains and challenge the binary thinking that has historically dominated architectural discourse.

The present text proposes that we transform Bruno Latour's *Actor-Network Theory* into an *Author-Network Theory*, reimagining the relationships and dynamics typically described by ANT in the context of authorship, intellectual production and creation. The Author-Network Theory would reinterpret the principles of ANT to focus on creating, disseminating, and interpreting texts or ideas. Instead of actors, we have authors. From this point of view, the authors (as creators of ideas, texts, or artefacts) are the central nodes within the networks. They interact with other authors, ideas, technologies and cultural contexts, contributing to the creating act. Although dedicated thinking is required, which is now outside the spectrum of this



[Fig.1]

Culture + Nature, 2024, 38.835471, -7.579813, Author



[Fig. 2]

Nature – Culture, 2008, 38.836855, -7.578370, Author

text, these networks may include non-human elements that increasingly influence creation and will undoubtedly have a dominant weight in the future. One of the fundamental points for future generations will be distributed authorship. A work or an idea is not the product of an isolated author. Still, it emerges from a network of influences, including other works, texts, cultural norms, technological tools, and social interactions.

A point that can serve as a pivot in understanding this inversion, or if we want the transformation from actor to author, is the text by Latour and Yaneva – Give me a gun, and I will make buildings move. Latour, as we have already mentioned, explains that objects are not merely passive or static entities but can influence and be influenced by the networks of relations of which they are a part. Yaneva, working with Latour, extends this idea to architecture, emphasising that buildings are not fixed and inert structures but dynamic participants in the social and material world. According to this interpretation, the “gun” represents a tool that can introduce changes or highlight the agency of an object. The weapon symbolises an external force or influence that reveals the latent potential of objects (in this case, buildings) to act and interact within a network of relationships. By suggesting that buildings can “move,” Latour and Yaneva emphasise that buildings can act within a network—they can influence human behaviour, change over time, and interact meaningfully with other actors (human and non-human). The gun, or if we want the pen, is essentially in the author’s hand. This is what can push buildings to move. The phrase is a metaphor for the idea that architecture is not simply about creating fixed structures but about engaging with a dynamic network of relationships. In this view, buildings are not merely physical entities. Still, they are intertwined with the social, cultural, and material contexts in which they exist, capable of – moving – and evolving within these networks. Here, the networked author, with their agency, has played a decisive role in shaping the future of architecture. For further research, the works of British Professor and Architect Cedric Price (1934–2003) and Architecture Critic Reyner Banham (1922–1988) should be consulted. We believe that the critical thinking developed by Reyner Banham and his observation of the cities and technology, still in the 70s of the 20th century, mixed with Price’s view of the city, can lead us to construct a framework for evaluating the present and discerning the near future.

Perhaps as a false postscript, it would be important to point out that this view of the world goes beyond science or philosophy. It also lies at the heart of what we loosely call poetry, or the ability to see beyond the visible. Benjamin’s text, which must date back to 1932, speaks of this free movement between the city and the countryside. However, *Álvaro de Campos*, *Fernando Pessoa’s* heteronym (1888–1935), wrote the following about the poet *Cesário Verde* (1855–1886) in poem III of *Guardador de Rebanhos* (1925) – [...] He was a peasant / Who wandered freely in the city. [...] But he walked in the city like someone who walks in the countryside. [...] (Pessoa 1925/2006, 26). More than being aligned with their time, various currents of thought at the beginning of the 20th century were already concerned with the non-separation between

culture and Nature, old and new, city and countryside or landscape. This emphasis on diversity challenges us to recognise the plurality of ways of understanding the world and to design cities that reflect this diversity based on an ontologically plural territory of lives and forms. This is the boundary we suggest breaking, the frontier that no longer makes sense in the face of the pressing needs of the future. The meaning of Being Modern is, first and foremost, a process of growth, the result of discovering the scarcity of our understanding of the world, not the totalisation of the knowledge we believe we know through our narrow methodological window. Faced with the growing demands of the 21st century, we now have a greater need to interact with the environment with Nature.

The urbanisation of the territory, as we understand it today, is, in a way, the production of this second Nature, artificial and hybrid, transformed through work, resulting in infrastructures and a built environment, which in turn allows Man to occupy that same territory (Gunz et al. 2016, 28). We need a new understanding of this concept, which essentially goes along two specific lines. Firstly, and perhaps most urgently, we need to stop climate change, which is destroying the human species, not Nature. As a more complex entity than the fragile human being, Nature will regenerate and transform itself into something else due to its evolutionary capacity. Human beings will be unable to do this due to their physical limitations and lack of understanding of their environment. The second is possibly due to these transformations' social changes and upheavals. Society today is already beginning to show signs of absenteeism towards its fellow human beings. We are currently witnessing two camouflaged wars, which have led to the destruction of cities and territories. Some of these memories are lost forever, and their reconstruction may never happen. Man will soon have to return to seeing the territory as home, and home not as something that protects him from the territory but as something that completes it.

If we want to close with an image, perhaps *The Spiral Jetty* (1970) by Robert Smithson (1938–1973) is the best metaphor for our description. The symbiotic way a building transforms its surroundings while allowing itself to be transformed by it. Perhaps this is the path we can take and that, in the near future, may offer an answer to what it means to be modern.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, Walter. 2018. *Imagens de Pensamento*. Edited and translated by João Barrento. 2nd ed. Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim.
- Călinescu, Matei. 1987. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Originally published 1977.
- Guerreiro, António. 2024. "Nós, modernos, somos os únicos a pensar a diferença entre natureza e cultura." *Review of Nous, modernes, sommes les seuls à penser la différence entre nature et culture*, edited by Philippe Descola. *Electra* 23
- Gunz, Markus, Vlado Jovanović, Roger Diener, Lârus Gunnarsarsson, Marcel Meili, Christian Mueller Inderbitzin, Christian Schmid, and Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, eds. 2016. *Territory: On the Development of Landscape and City*. Zürich: Park Books.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno, and Albena Yaneva. 2017. "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture." *Ardeth* 1 (8): 102–111. <https://doi.org/10.17454/ARDETH01.08>.
- Le Corbusier. 2010. *Modulor*. Edited by Manuel Sequeira ed. Lisbon: Orfeu Negro.
- Koolhaas, Rem, Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Arc en Rêve Centre d'Architecture. 2020. *Countryside: A Report*. Cologne: Taschen.
- Pessoa, Fernando. 2006. *Poesia de Alberto Caeiro*. Lisbon: Editora Planeta DeAgostini. Originally published 1925.
- Scalbert, Irénée. 2013. *Never Modern*. Zürich: Park Books.
- Tavares, António, and Inês Oliveira, eds. 2008. *Arquitectura em Lugares Comuns: Ideias e Projectos para o Vale do Ave*. 1st ed. Porto: Dafne Editora.
- Yaneva, Albena. 2022. *Latour for Architects*. London: Routledge.