

URBAN ECOLOGIES: DESIGNING FOR DYSTOPIA

Joni Taylor

This paper will address how the Australian landscape continually forces its way back into the built environment. It will attempt to examine how a new urban ecology can be nurtured by curating, one that does not define separate spaces for nature or architecture. In the blurry haze of utopia and dystopia, should the crisis not be averted, but adapted for a new futurology?



Dust Storm, Sydney, 2009. Photo credit: Joni Taylor.

1.

On a morning in 2009, Sydney awoke to a city enveloped in an eerie red light, the dust and sand of the desert had blown its way eastwards and was stopped only by its collision with the Pacific Ocean. The sensation of the familiar cityscape stained red in an impenetrable haze was unnerving. The Queensland floods early this year saw the Central Business District of Brisbane evacuated and the power cut, a Ballardian image of an abandoned metropolis slowly flooding filled our television screens.

The Australian landscape is continually forcing its way into our urban areas, and includes annual bush fires and flash river flooding.

But are these true crises or has nature merely manifested itself somewhere a bit too close to our hearths? Are these “natural disasters” only disasters because the cities we live in are at risk? Do buildings or perhaps particular architectures lend themselves to these crises?

My research begins by taking a wild and speculative look at possible future urban design, a design that incorporates the wild back into the built environment to form one dynamic Urban Ecology. This includes not just the climatic extremities at odds with our architecture, but the wild life already present in our cities. The nature that is not tamed and cultivated, but dirty and abject, that comes up through the cracks and spreads between the paving stones. It is disorderly, unfinished and dynamic. In this new Urban Ecology, the city and the unruly forces of nature would not be in conflict but work together.

Urban design has traditionally pushed nature away, the garden cities of suburbia and post war modernist ideals domesticating the extreme environment. More recently, it is an artificial nature manipulated by new technologies for our own benefits. These new ideal visions that promise clean, green, carbon neutral cities are simply another Utopian non-place, that have no connection to site or scale. This exclusion is reminiscent of former failed and unbuilt utopias ala La Corbusier’s *Plan Voisin* for Paris – where nature is ordered and programmed as are all his Towers in the Park.

And unlike the natural landscape, which is adaptable and regenerates after extreme weather and rising waters, much current urban design and infrastructure is unadaptable and inflexible and without the capacity to be disrupted, disturbed or transformed.

The urge to build new utopias should be resisted. Instead Urbanism needs to allow the wild and the untamed back into its plan.

It is here that it is useful to look to the dark twin of utopia - Dystopia. If Dystopia is the chaotic, the unplanned and the uncontrolled, it is therefore vital to incorporate these attributes into the urban plan, or as utopian architect Cedric Price would call the “non-plan.” [1] Instead of the top down planned utopia, cities must be designed with dystopia in mind - the chaos, the flood, the crisis. Instead of ideal and grand Master plans, future urban design needs to embrace time, contingency, dirt and above all the greater nature that not just surrounds it, but shares our spaces.

In order for a city to be truly sustainable, architecture needs to be open and adaptable to the chaos and surprises that the natural and unruly elements continue to throw at it.

In the blurry haze of utopia and dystopia, should the crisis not be averted, but adapted?

"When rust sets in on a razor blade, when moss grows in a corner of a room.....we should be glad because...life is moving into the house." Hundertwasser [2]

The writer Davis Gissen describes a whole new ecosystem of *subnature*, [3] where architecture instead of resisting the forces of weather and climate, actually embraces it into the design process. His definition also goes so far as to include pollution, exhaust fumes and smoke, as well as mud, insects and weeds.

By incorporating nature into the urban fabric itself, cities are open to transformation and adaptation.

My work looks at how this can be achieved.

As a curator, I aim to present speculation and dreams, and experiment with urban spaces as places for growth and change. These experiments in the urban landscape, whether by artistic interventions or temporary design, can highlight and suggest new ways of designing spaces. Unlike rigorous urban planning these activities are safe-to-fail, and examine the city as a space that can take shape and grow.

One such example in response to this was the curated, public project entitled *Urban Wildlife Safari*, where participants traversed the city, exploring local spaces within the Sydney Central Business district and the flora and fauna that inhabit it. "It offers a unique glimpse into how the urban landscape acts as a backdrop for human/nature interaction and how this is changing. The project aims to resituate the city as one element of a living organism giving refuge and sanctuary to many forms of wildlife." [4] Ultimately it involved examining the city and its wildlife as one eco-system. Experts from different fields were invited to examine these often overlooked spaces and opportunities that the city offered. The artist Diego Bonetto studied the non-native or invasive species (weeds) that thrive in the abandoned parking lots and the *terrain vague* of harbourfront warehouses. Here the residual areas or *dross-capes* act as fertile ground for new ecologies to develop uninterrupted. An ornithologist pointed out how birdlife uses architecture and the local terrain as a hunting ground. And the waste at the popular tourist spot of Circular Quay too provides ample food for ibis and seagulls in opposition to their native diet.

Another recent curatorial project *DIY Urbanism* [5] went deeper to specifically examine Sydney and its urban condition, and uncovered ideas for self initiated urban programming. The projects relied heavily on Sydney's unique environment and suggested bottom up approaches to the city's future design. Projects included fantastical recreations of a new harbour island to deal with polluted rainwater runoff (*waterways* by Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski) and the adaptive reuse of McMansions to create sustainable housing (*Reincarnated McMansion* by Mathieu Gallois). Sydney's large inner city flying fox population is another contentious addition to our local ecosystem, on the one hand helping to pollinate the city's flora and on the other feasting on suburban gardens and destroying heritage trees. The project *Botanic Gardens Xtension* by Remnant Emergency Artlab speculated on relocating the bats from their current habitat in the Royal Botanic Gardens to a new controversial development site at Barangaroo, creating a native wetland there for them to roost.

In conclusion, future city design need not just develop new technologies that alienate nature further. The push towards carbon neutral skyscrapers and eco-friendly new towns often fails to cultivate the urban ecologies that are already present. The new urban ecology must incorporate the wild ecosystem into its own workings, where architecture and nature work as one dynamic system that embraces the ebbs and flows and impermanent spaces that Dystopia brings. By curating - one can act as an iterant urban planner - using the city as a testing ground for new prototypes.

References and Notes:

1. Cedric Price, Reyner Banham and Paul Barker, "Non-plan: An Experiment in Freedom," *New Society*, March 20, 1969.
2. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, *Hundertwasser Architecture: For a More Human Architecture in Harmony with Nature* (Koln: Taschen, 1997), 48.
3. David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).
4. Accompanying brochure from "Urban Wildlife Safari" by Joni Taylor and Norbert Walczak for the exhibition titled as "In the Balance: Art for a Changing World" in Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2010.
5. Curated by Joni Taylor for the exhibition titled as "The Right to the City," in The Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney, 2011.