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AMPS, Architecture_MPS, Parade, University of Kent
Canterbury: 24-26 June, 2020

CITIES, COUNTRYSIDE AND HERITAGE: BIOPOWER AND NEW VALUES IN DESIGNING PUBLIC SPACES

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INTRODUCTION:

In answering the call and the spirit of this conference that hinges on heritage, architecture, cities and media, the initial proposal was submitted on the 10th April, coinciding with the first peak of the Covid-19 crisis in this country. Uncertainty and the fear of the unknown were palpable. The PM was in the hospital, 866 people died in England after testing positive, while the Archbishop of Canterbury led the first national digital Easter Sunday service from his kitchen. People were warned to stay away from holiday destinations, and statistics emerged showing that BAME people have been disproportionately more effected by Covid-19 contributing to the discussion on race and racism that came to play a role in examining our society's heritage and monuments in public spaces. Under these conditions the question **I pose in this paper is what are the new dynamics between cities and the countryside, particularly in relation to public spaces and the position of the subject?** What do we as architects and designers of public spaces in the situation of a pandemic need to unravel and focus on in order to create safe, inclusive and delightful spaces that will help us to live better and to thrive?

COVID-19 AND THE RE-EXAMINATION OF OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE, SPACE, VALUES AND THE BIOPOWER IN THE SOCIETY

Humbled by the destructive power of the smallest of entities, we are re-addressing the inter-dependent nature of our lives with a sense of urgency. Two phenomena have been emerging in parallel. First, there is a recognition that we humans are not above nature but part of it and as such profoundly embedded and reliant on the environment, resulting in a newly nascent commitment to the planet as the willingness to curb pollution and climate change now comes from previously unexpected quarters. Second, there is a clear acknowledgement that digital, online communication has become our main means of relating to each other and of coming together as a society: we now almost completely depend on digital communication between us and for locational wayfinding information as applications increasingly lead us through the maze of cities, towards secluded corners in the countryside, beauty spots and places of heritage. Moreover, at present, there are hardly any untouched, uninspected or un-surveyed corners, while huge quantities of data constantly float around us¹.

These two tendencies, the concern for the environment and our dependency on the digital realm appear contradictory. Indeed, in the minds of some 5G critics they are 'mortal enemies'. It could be argued that they belong to the dynamics of the double-bind as theorised by Gregory Bateson. At the same time, this double bind is increasingly becoming pervaded with a third element, the obligation to act responsibly and more ethically towards all: all individuals, the environmental ecosystems and in particular towards those most vulnerable in society who often happen to be the fellow citizens we now see as essential workers.

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In Foucault's terms, the virus has brought to the fore and made tangible the shape of the structures in which society operates by making previously invisible biopower evident in practices of public health, regulation of heredity, race and ethnicity, social care and other social regulatory mechanisms of today². The pandemic has brought into plain site and mass circulation previously unseen glimpses of hospital intensive care rooms showing affected people in wards as unconscious bodies on respirators, or semiconscious ones rolling in wheelchairs. Sometimes we see a view of mass coffins taking over new cemetery grounds, but that would always be elsewhere. These aspects of everyday life that were previously imperceptible to most have now been viewed daily in full exposure, as newsrooms focus on positives, editing out disturbing news.

We observe how some of the predictions by Bateson³, Foucault⁴, Deleuze and Guattari⁵ in their search for a better understanding of humankind, have gained ground. Their ideas that we create the world that we perceive, not because there is no reality outside us, but because we select and edit the aspects of phenomena that fit our beliefs about the world, have gained new relevancy. Indeed, we have edited out from our perception of the world that viral pandemics of this kind were even possible. As a result it caught us ill-prepared, pushing us to change our basic world views. This is where we are now - adapting by catching up with previously ignored aspects of earthly phenomena. In doing so we are creating a new system of values.

SPATIAL IMPLICATIONS - CITY VS. COUNTRYSIDE



Figure 1 View of London from Greenwich park

Following the predicament that more viral attacks similar to Covid-19 are due, we have to acknowledge that our communication, relationships, our complete environment has been destined for change. This will affect both cities and the countryside, as transformation of habitats, population movement, workplaces and overall investment are likely. Our governments are pressed to do the things they were trying to avoid, i.e. to become more ecologically minded, as they concede that due to Covid-19 we inevitably have to organise urban life to be more pedestrian and cyclable, less congested or polluted.⁶ People living in big, unsustainable and expensive cities such as London are buying houses in the countryside as they crave for contact with the earth, sky, healthy nourishment and non-polluted air. The question becomes what is an architect's role in all of this? How are we to act to best facilitate, plan, and design for this transformation in a sustainable and balanced way for all:

- the environment (including natural, built and landscaped heritage)
- society (as big divisions need to be curbed)
- for every individual (giving the rise of depression and mental illnesses during the pandemic).

Crucially in addressing this conference agenda, how does the digital sphere enable and empower us in the search for a new balance between the city and the countryside, given that much digital data is

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constantly beaming across our neighbourhoods while being collected and updated at the same time. How are we to prepare both the countryside and cities for the transformation that will conceptualise the spatial design that will be more inclusive, less restrictive, healthier and more enjoyable?

The process has already begun, it is happening now, as newspapers report a surge in interest and purchases of homes in rural environments and relocation of urban homes towards healthier and ecologically more satisfying peri-urban areas.⁷ In this context all peri-urban spaces will potentially be areas of gentrification. This should be seen as an opportunity for architects to work on the design of the often only contemplated city edge.

In approaching this design the question becomes:

What will happen to public spaces? How will they change? How are we, humans, changing? What aspects will come to the fore?

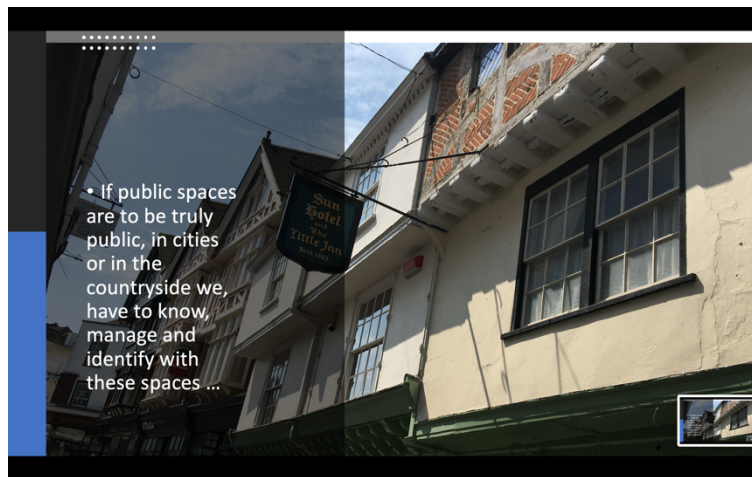


Figure 2 Canterbury – strolling through the streets that shield and protect

We know slightly more now than in April when this question was posed. This was before the tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent rise of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement that has galvanised a long-overdue call for the revision of spatial heritage including figures celebrated in our public spaces. As we now sense, many are due for revision and destined to museums as the link between colonialism, the slave trade and the accumulation of wealth comes to light. It is becoming evident that this amassing of wealth was materialised in numerous grand houses of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries now characterised as heritage under the auspices of extreme forms of exploitative capitalism based on slavery.

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Figure 3 Kara Walker, *Anti-Slavery Fountain*, Tate Modern 2019 - water as a key theme, refers to the transatlantic slave trade and the ambitions, fates and tragedies of people from different continents

Long-overdue questions of inequality, racism and lack of inclusivity as well as historically inadequately grasped issues concerning the slave trade emerged on top of the agenda. It is striking but also logical how this virus-induced crisis opened up a series of inter-connected issues that we have to address as a society nationally and globally, if we want to see improvements in our overall way of life.

Urban, peri-urban and rural design questions more tangibly than ever interlace with issues concerning national physical and mental health, and sociological aspects including the disputed question of heritage, race and inclusivity.

This is why some of the recent architectural explorations of habitats, even when they come from worthy protagonists appear anachronous.

WARNING TO THE DWELLERS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

As I was initially writing this paper, the news came out about the latest show by OMA – AMO Office of Metropolitan Architecture incongruously called *Countryside, the Future* marking a new area of engagement for Rem Koolhaas, who had launched his career with a city-centric attitude reflected in the name of his practice as well as of his early book *Delirious New York* (1978)⁸.

Without insinuations and remaining respectful of this architect's important contribution to architectural discourse and practice, due to the urgency of our overall situation there is a need to express criticism more directly, something I might not have done in the past.

It could be my confinement-based perception of the show that remains closed, but in the current global pandemic, post-'me too' and post 'Black Lives Matter' movement, the digital presentation of this exhibition feels strangely out of place and belonging to a different era.

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The work of this architect, well-known for his sharp and critical mind and for his down-to-earth attitude, now appears as a patronising déjà vu and another white male's voice advising on 'how to unleash the future' if you know 'how to look at the present in a creative way'. This 'creative way' seems to be via OMA's instructions about how to find the solutions to all our major problems such as migration, climate change and preservation of the countryside. In a manner similar to his books such as SMLXL etc, the Countryside exhibition seems to showcase everything. Coupled with the promise of a creative approach to countryside globally, this venture appears daunting. Led by their master, the men in white overalls march into an open field assuming territorialisation. Paradoxically, this enabler's manual on the countryside's future is in the most metropolitan setting i.e. the iconic, spiral museum building by Frank Lloyd Wright's on the edge of the Central Park and across the road of one of the most ridiculous, colonialist museums - Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The presentation of wide-ranging themes and conditions that numerous associates and employees have spent time organising into the exhibition of common places is puzzling. It offers unsubstantiated claims that the countryside is the 'site of the most radical, modern components of our civilisation'⁹. The aim of the exhibition is not clear as the collected items appear as fragments of current global research on architectural, urban and rural discourse and practices, already considered by most architects, urbanists, agriculturalists, researchers and students worldwide – i.e. something that neither one person nor one practice can claim as their own creative approach to knowledge.

Koolhaas must have realised the absurdity of this overambitious approach as he admitted it in the accompanied film clip, leaving to his co-author Bantal to state the buzz words: 'migration', 'climate change', 'preservation' culminating in a slogan that the solution to everything is in the countryside. Dressed in white plastic, the OMA -AMO men triumphantly march by the camera as if undertaking an expedition to the Antarctic, unconsciously enacting the narrative of white colonialization.

Aesthetically and conceptually the film exhibits too much arrogance and a lack of judgement to tune into meaningful discussion. The impression is (perhaps wrongly) that a globally ambitious architect set a stall in this iconic place of architectural heritage simply because he could. Is it a vanity project? Possibly. Who is it aimed at? While this is unclear, below the shiny surface it appears to be aimed at clients / developers, galvanising the market forces to consider investing in the countryside.

This is when alarms should start to ring as we should be concerned of the likely damage the influx of the big capital can cause to the rural environment by disproportionate privileging of the commercial spaces, potential distortion of the housing market that leaves the majority of people out, and no real care for public spaces, inclusivity or heritage unless there is a clear line of profit¹⁰.

DESIGNING PUBLIC SPACES

Even if future public spaces would in time adapt and become assembled in an evolutionary manner, the question remains: how much are we going to meet in person? How would these encounters happen, how would they look like if at all? The answers to these questions posed in April started to emerge in June and July as we notice the new configuration of our streets now extending the pedestrian pavements to provide for social distancing, cafes spreading tables to the roads and squares. In the middle of London the feeling was becoming overwhelmingly Mediterranean.

What about other aspects: are we going to meet our fellow human beings by chance, such as going to the theatre or a gallery place, or, will it be due to the twists and turns of the algorithm determined by an unidentified artificial intelligence model based on how much density certain areas can hold?

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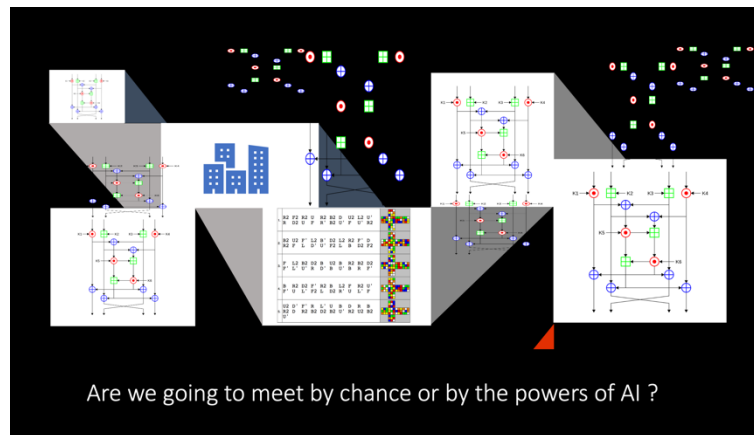


Figure 4 Abstract representation of human encounters – Algorithm

If so, who is going to be in charge of the database for those Artificial Intelligence depositories that include information about us beginning with health, but extending to all other aspects of our lives including locational and beyond?

The owners and the major shareholders of big companies that process this data are in a strong position, as the governments increasingly depend on big businesses and turn to them when unable to deliver through depleted public service systems. The alternative to this unfair monopoly is to radically address this condition, by reinserting new democratic principles for the digital age.

This will have to include us reversing the situation and becoming true subjects and rightful owners of the information and knowledge that concerns ourselves, to which we are currently mainly objects; targets for data collection.

Should we not all become shareholders of this venture that should have a democratic structure of governance? After all, now more than ever before, these databases are us.

In this respect we need to begin by reversing the old order of things and claim new sets of relations in respect to public spaces, their designs and the data that smart cities and equally smart rural environments store when the economy calls for restructuring.

If public spaces are to be truly public be it in cities or in the countryside, we have to know and own these spaces in the sense of owning the knowledge about them / and us. All citizens ought to be able to access and share relevant information and knowledge anytime.

This involves us all as the aim should be to empower the subjects with information such as health related sensory data as we try to move out of confinement or at least provide a sustainable spatial functioning of the most important aspects of our society such as safe and healthy surroundings, food and water provision, education and care.

As questions of heritage, knowledge and space become more inextricably related, responsible twenty-first century citizens need to bravely and imaginatively confront the implications for architecture and protected urban / rural spaces by promoting inclusivity and democracy while taking care of their size, density and organisational structure to begin with. The sensitive questions of heritage (natural, environmental and built) and the democratic inclusion of all individuals is a logical necessity as mutual environmental and social dependency became both scientifically proven and practically evident.

Inclusivity, social harmony and balance with the environment are key for best design practices in both urban and rural areas, which need their own index; a measure of a healthy environment and society. It should replace the FT100, Nikkei and Dow that have previously been worshiped *ad nauseam* and are luckily seen less in our daily news, clear proof that we can live without them and without worrying about global profiteering.

In this way we can begin to protect ourselves and all those around us from the present unbalance tipped against the majority of citizens across the globe.

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When ready to restart the economy, the emerging consensus should be that we build a better, more sustainable greener economy, where jobs lost will be swiftly replaced by green jobs such as: i) retrofit projects on a large scale, ii) jobs involved with greening of the country, iii) restructuring transport to be environmentally sustainable, non-polluted and based on sustainable movement, flexible working place and flexible hours¹¹. Crucially, consideration should be given to new organizational schemes such as a four-day working week planned for being trialed in Finland.¹²

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS GREEN ECONOMY AS REBIRTH OF THE SOCIETY

It is intriguing and at the same time logical how for society to recover whether in the city or in the countryside, the Covid-19 virus is pushing us to work holistically by combining care for the environment, society as a whole and the psychological wellbeing of every individual. Through these ecologies that intertwine and work together, the crisis seems to offer a trajectory towards possible solutions. We need to recognize their profound mutual dependence within the new social organization in which we work without prioritizing profit but the wellbeing of all living creatures and the planet that we are all part of.

The task is to establish a new set of values based on a novel system of reference and scale of measurement that will address and monitor the growth, distribution and usage of true biopower based on an economy of care for humans as subjects and citizens rather than humans as their productive capacity.

It comes as no surprise that delicate social issues such as the revision of heritage paradigms, historical injustices and the reevaluation of public monuments due to their links to the slave trade have resurfaced, as it became clear that the disproportional wealth amassed in this period could not have come from the resources of these islands only.

The pandemic led us to face centuries-old underlining exploitation based on colonialism, social inequality and exploitation that still exist in our society. Capitalist-based racism still thrives and is overdue for serious societal revision as we cannot close our digitally attuned eyes to this delayed emancipatory work that awaits us.

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² Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. (London: Allen Lane, 1979. 1976)

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⁴ Gordana Fontana-Giusti *Foucault for Architects*, (London: Routledge, 2013)

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. By Brian Massumi, (London: The Atllone Press, 1988) 26-39

⁶ Gordana Korolija Fontana-Giusti, "Urban Strolling as a Measure of Quality", *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 11 (3/4) (2007) 255-264

⁷ Rupert Jones, "Homebuyers 'plotting move to country' amid increased home working" *The Guardian*, accessed June 20, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/may/08/homebuyers-plotting-move-to-country-amid-increased-home-working>

⁸ In this project he is the co-author with Samir Bantal, Director of AMO, the think-tank of the OMA.

⁹ Extract form the OMA promotional film clip <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/see-countryside-the-future-at-the-guggenheim> accessed June 20, 2020

¹⁰ Simon Jenkins 'The Jenrick-Desmond row lays bare the rotten heart of the planning system' *The Guardian* accessed 26 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/25/jenrick-desmond-uk-planning-system-towers-housing>

¹¹ Climate Change Committee report <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2020/06/25/covid-19-can-be-an-historic-turning-point-in-tackling-the-global-climate-crisis/> Accessed June 27, 2020

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¹² Jon Stone, "Finland's new prime minister backs four-day working week", *The Independent* accessed June 20, /2020 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/finland-four-day-working-week-hours-prime-minister-sanna-marina-9272476.html>

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