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Teaching design in rural contexts

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Since the late 1980s a significant "spatial and demographic rebalancing" has occurred between what was "yesterday's" city and countryside¹. In France, at the scale of national territory, what was previously called the "rural exodus", has given way to a process called "rural renaissance", as identified by Bernard Kayser twenty years ago². In fact, nowadays, French countryside registers a positive demographic curve.

This "rural renaissance" is complex to understand, because countryside has become embedded with numerous conflicting development issues linked with the extension of urbanisation at the scale of the territory³. One of the main issues is the ambiguous spatial status of the hybrid rural/urban space which has developed around every French town and city, generally called "espace peri-urbain", and which is the consequence of a process that emerged decades ago, and was identified and coined in the late 1970s by British urban planners as a process of counterurbanization⁴. Another conflicting issue linked with this process is the changing status of villages, in particular those which are located at a convenient distance from cities, making it possible for commuters to live in rural areas while working in cities.

This multi layer change in the pattern of urbanization is even more complex to tackle, as this issue must be addressed in the context of another major planning challenge : developing sustainable human settlement to ensure the good of the future generations. In this context, "new alliances" must be found at many levels of development – spatial, social, cultural and economic - to accommodate the evolution of these conflictual urbanization dynamics between urban and rural areas. New conceptual frameworks must be formulated to imagine and plan tomorrow's contemporary rurality : this "metropolised elsewhere" as Martin Vanier calls it⁵.

Clearly, rural areas are a major design challenge for architects and planners, due to the multitude of issues regarding the sustainable development of our society. In addition to the complexity of these economic, social and cultural issues, is the fact that rural areas are at the heart of a major challenge directly linked with sustainable development : the evolution of our energy production system. The rural area is the site of the evolution towards the production of

¹ Bertrand Hervieu, Jean Viard, *L'archipel paysan/ La fin de la république agricole*, l'Aube, 2002 ; Pierre Veltz, *Paris, France, Monde, Repenser l'économie par le territoire*, L'aube, 2012.

² Bernard Kayser, *La Renaissance rurale*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1990.

³ Jean Renard, *Les Mutations des campagnes. Paysages et structures agraires dans le monde*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2005.

⁴ Brian J.L. Berry, *Urbanization and Counterurbanization*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976

⁵ Martin Vanier, « Campagne pour tous ! Un ailleurs métropolisé », in Xavier Guillot (dir.), *Espace rural & projet spatial. Volume 3. Du terrain à la recherche : objets et stratégies*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2012, pp. 32-40

renewable energy in different forms: solar, geothermal, biogas, wind, water, etc. This variety of energy sources also constitutes a cultural and spatial issue, as it can - and must - promote local and regional diversity in the design of our living space at the territorial scale.

However, despite the importance of these issues, in France, the question of rural areas is largely ignored in architectural education. In the last two decades, Schools of architecture have failed to renew their cultural background and design tools to tackle issues of this so called "rural renaissance" .

Identifying a turning point in our design approach

Introducing this issue in architectural education today will start from the following observation: during the last thirty years, architectural design has been subject to a form of "urbanocentrism" in the approach of issues regarding human settlement in general. I mean here that issues related with the future of cities have dominated the planning and design agenda. Furthermore, when architectural design in rural areas is addressed, it is often through design tools determined by "sub-concept" from urban design and urbanism based on density, which has proved to be largely inefficient, as we can observe nowadays through the unsightly settlements that have developed in rural areas around cities and towns in France⁶. It is on the basis of this observation that we have formulated the hypothesis that a turning point in our approach must be foreseen with the corollary, the re-evaluation of a set of assumptions underlying our design curriculum in schools of architecture.

In relation to this hypothesis, an immediate clarification is needed : our purpose is not to promote a project design focused exclusively on rural areas while ignoring what happens in urban areas. Such an approach would be contrary to our beliefs. Our approach assumes that rural areas "work" in a dialectical and complementary relationship with urban areas. This approach has been borrowed from the Italian territorialist school. Following this idea, actions should be directed towards building a new "alliance" between the rural and urban areas⁷. Through this reference, I wish to emphasise that ongoing discussions about rural areas can not isolate themselves from urban space issues and the dialectic that occurs between these two spatial entities at a cultural and economic level. Understanding the nature of this dialectic, its mode of operation and the different forms of territorial occupation, is the general framework of our reflection in this domain.

Engaging a debate on the long term spatial organization of our society

Regarding current management practices, one of the major criticisms made by the Italian territorialists is the gradual disappearance of the integrated nature of the whole city and

⁶ Martin Chénou, « pour une alternative au modèle de la ville compacte », in Guillot, X., *Espace rural & projet architectural. Volume 2. Vers un nouveau pacte ville-campagne*. Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2011, pp. 12-18-

⁷ Xavier Guillot, « Du projet spatial en milieu rural. Bilan d'étape d'une réflexion en cours », in Guillot, X., *Espace rural & projet architectural. Volume 2. Vers un nouveau pacte ville-campagne*. Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2011, pp. 18-29.

territory. For Daniela Poli : "The project of modern society is not built, it is 'superimposed' on the territory, which is considered a ground without geological and historical depth, and perceived as a 'simple support' of various functions which are more and more dissociated from local know-how in the field of maintenance, "care" given to the land by those who live there on a daily basis"⁸. This process tends to transform local contexts in generic spaces without specific characters.

Understanding today's transformation of rural areas requires a critical appraisal of twentieth century planning doctrines, and to question their failure in terms of planning sustainable settlements in relation to a specific geographic area and its resources. Indeed, such an appraisal would lead to questioning the ability of our contemporary society to transform a territory inherited from past generations and to give meaning and legitimacy in relation to our new era. Hence the need to link our thinking to the current debate on sustainable development in schools of architecture.

- How can issues specific to rural areas find their place in this debate on sustainability while giving these areas a particular meaning?
- Conversely, how can the debate on sustainability help us to consolidate our reflection on rural areas and participate in the construction of a new field of knowledge?

These are the key questions that guide our thinking in the conduct of our teaching, and which are shared with other members of the academic network "espace rural et projet spatial", established in 2008. Based on these observations and analyses, and through seminars and symposiums organised during the past five years⁹, three working hypotheses, three areas of reflection have been identified to guide us to a new conceptualization of architectural and spatial design in rural areas.

-Establishing new economic and cultural alliances

The first area of reflection raises the question of the changing spatial and economic status of rural land and the role that the project can play in its evolution. It starts from the premise that beyond the agricultural status inherited from past generations, rural areas are now shaped by different activities resulting from economic and social changes of our time. Nowadays, they are "multifunctional spaces"¹⁰. Such territorial multifunctionality requires the development of new social, economic and cultural alliances to formulate action and the transformation of space. For example, the requirement of such alliances arises when integrating tourism which can have paradoxical effects on the evolution of rural areas. The concept of an agricultural park as

⁸ Daniéla Poli, "La dimension locale dans le projet du parc agricole de la Tosacane centrale", in Xavier Guillot, *Espace rural & projet spatial. Volume 3. Du terrain à la recherche : objets et stratégies*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2012, pp. 42-60.

⁹ In october 2009 at Aydat in Auvergne, in octobre 2010, at Jaujac in Ardèche, in octobre 2011à Saint-Etienne, in 2012 at Nancy, in 2013, in Clermont-Ferrand. All this symposiums are co organised by school architecture and other partner of our networks, in particular Regional natural parc, National School of agronomy (ENGREF Agro paristech) and other regional and governmental bodies such as CAUE (conseil d'architecture, d'urbanisme et d'environnement). For more details, see the web site « espace rural et projet spatial »

¹⁰ Jean Renard, *Les Mutations des campagnes. Paysages et structures agraires dans le monde*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2005.

implemented in Italy, is a remarkable case study of mixed economic response to this demand¹¹. Other forms of development within the logic of economic diversity should be explored.

-Promote territorial resources

The second area of reflection deals with the multifunctionality of rural areas regarding use of territorial resources. In the context of rural areas, the concept of territorial resources is intended broadly and refers not only to the so-called natural resources. This concept suggests the idea that every territory has a potential that should be highlighted by the project¹². Through this concept, the goal is to explore the medium and long-term economic sustainability of our settlements in formulating scenarios for developing new human space organizations. This approach raises the question of the ability of our society to organize the permanent settlement of new populations in a rural setting inherited from past generations, and to transform this setting while giving shape to new ecosystems¹³. From the perspective of spatial transformation of our human settlements, this line of thought introduced a major issue on the "relocation" of the building process. By using the expression of "relocation", we refer to the ability of our societies to rethink the "anchor" in an area and produce architectural and landscape differences that contribute to the construction of local specificities.

-Building the common good

The third area of reflection deals more directly with architectural design practice and takes into account the issues just mentioned, and the need to work with other disciplines: geography, agronomy and landscape design in particular. In formulating new practices we encounter a key concept: building for the common good¹⁴. This approach aims in particular to identify areas of common interest. By dismissing the cultural and professional determinism that freezes our reading of the rural areas, it calls for another perspective and other tools to deal with their transformation¹⁵. The design of such spaces introduces in particular the idea of engaging a dialogue in which the architect would not only be in a position of expert designer, separate from, or above others, but also a mediator and an incentive to invent or reclaim, with labors, methods of design and construction. This is to emphasize that the project throughout the area or building is primarily a social action.

Introducing landscape architecture as a key design component of a multidisciplinary design approach

¹¹ Daniéla Poli, "La dimension locale dans le projet du parc agricole de la Tosacane centrale", in Xavier Guillot, *Espace rural & projet spatial. Volume 3. Du terrain à la recherche : objets et stratégies*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2012, pp. 42-60.

¹² Hervé Gumuchian et Bernard Pecqueur, *La ressource territoriale*, Economica, 2007.

¹³ Alberto Magnaghi. *Le projet local*, Editions Mardaga, Liège, 2003.

¹⁴ See André Micoud, « Pourquoi des architectes dans les campagnes », dans Xavier Guillot (dir.), *Espace rural et Projet spatial*, vol. I, *Réflexions introductives/stratégies pédagogiques, op.cit.*, p. 226-231.

¹⁵ Alexis Pernet, « Les enjeux contemporains de l'accompagnement du projet spatial en milieu rural : nouveaux objets, nouveaux terrains de recherche », dans Xavier Guillot, *Espace rural & projet spatial. Volume 3. Du terrain à la recherche : objets et stratégies*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2012, p. 142-175.

Simultaneously addressing these three types of issues in terms of design leads us to consider – and to reconsider - the potential and the shortcomings of the design tools and concepts inherited from architecture as a discipline. Concretely, it leads us to open our design practice to other disciplines, mainly to landscape architecture, but also, to a certain extent, to geography and agronomy. In other words, at the core of our approach regarding the future of rural areas, is a multidisciplinary design approach that gives landscape architecture a major role.

The world of theory of landscape architecture is wide. It is therefore necessary to clarify our perspective of this discipline and the concepts we will rely on in teaching design in a school of architecture. Regarding these expectations, one author in particular, and his work, occupies a singular place in our approach to landscape design : John Brinkerhoff Jackson¹⁶. Why this author? Why is the thought embodied in his work a key reference in our teaching? How does the landscape - and the view it offers on the organization of human space - allow us to meet the expectations outlined above, concerning the renewal of our conceptual approach on architectural design in a rural context ? To answer these questions, we revisit *Discovering the vernacular landscape*¹⁷, a book which best expresses his thoughts. We also refer to the analysis in *Le goût du monde*¹⁸ by Jean-Marc Besse, which explains the different interpretations of the notion of landscape , both in theory and practice.

In his approach to landscape, Jackson provides a seminal terminology reminder from its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, which demonstrates the conceptual scope of this discipline. The term landscape is composed of two words, land and scape, which individually and by their combination gives a unique sense of the term. For Jackson, the word 'land' is used by farmers to refer to an area that is both closed and part of a larger, open area. The word 'scape', meanwhile, refers to a family of terms which describe "the collective aspects of the environment" sheaf, shape, ship. In this sense, it refers to the overall concepts, collectables, system¹⁹.

This double connection with geography and anthropology which characterizes the Jacksonian landscape approach, is crucial to identifying the knowledge and concepts that we associate with landscape architecture in our approach of design. It is part of its central premise: that the landscape is primarily a "social space"²⁰. Thus, "reading the landscape, explains Jean-Marc Besse is to identify ways of organizing space" to understand how such a "community draws a

¹⁶ John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *A la découverte du paysage vernaculaire*, (titre original : *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*) Actes sud / Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage, 2003 ; By the same author, another book which we refer to in our analysis is *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, Yale University Press, New Haven et Londres, 1994.

¹⁷ Jean-Marc Besse et Gilles A. Tiberghien, « L'expérience du Paysage », dans John B. Jackson, *A la découverte du paysage vernaculaire*, (titre original : *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*) Actes sud / Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage, 2003, pp. 9-34

¹⁸ Jean-Marc Besse, *Le Goût du monde. Exercice de paysage*, Actes sud / Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage, 2009

¹⁹ On this point see chapter « Le mot paysage » in Jackson, *Ibidem*, pp. 45-57, and in Besse, *ibidem*, p. 34

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 30-40.

border dividing the land among families, builds roads and places for public meetings, and reserves land for communal use»²¹ etc.. Introducing this concept generally implies an interest in the diversity of spatial forms, "the structural elements and dynamics, the morphologies, the flows and upheavals, the discontinuities of space for circulation, because all these features are used to characterize a landscape", adds the author²². This approach to landscape clearly relies on geographical knowledge in its definition. Simultaneously, it gives a secondary role to other approaches, in particular those focusing on an aesthetic ideal²³.

In our studio, our choice is to consider geography - especially the methodological point of view that this discipline develops regarding human space – as the main knowledge resource to address the analysis of rural space and the question of its transformation, including on the territorial level. In this domain, the contribution of geography seems particularly relevant with respect to a key educational goal : to address transformation in relation to the issue of sustainability. Indeed, as explained by Jean-Marc Besse: "The landscape has a substantial and intrinsic thickness: it is a complex set of articulated objects, or at least a domain of material reality, larger and deeper than the representations that accompany it. The landscape is as wind, rain, water, heat, climate, rocks, living world around humans: in short, a whole environment, in which of course the changes are affected more or less directly by an action, emotion and human thought, but which ultimately we must recognize, exists and develops without the human being, existed before humans, and will out-survive humans in one way or another»²⁴.

However, the fact that we give prime importance to the physical dimension of the landscape, does not mean that we finally adopt a deterministic approach to human organization, depending on the spatial and material configuration of the territory. On this point, we recall the genealogy of thought between JB Jackson and French human geography²⁵: for scholars belonging to this school of thought, landscape analysis must begin with the question of habitat as being the main factor structuring landscapes. A connection with Maurice Le Lannou is at this level revealing. "Inhabiting for the human being", writes Maurice Le Lannou, "is more than just shelter and a place to stay. It means "to inhabit a part of the planet and learn through work, enough to satisfy their needs (primary and redundant), depending on opportunities and constraints within the nature and culture . And more fundamentally, it is to organize collectively, a space of existence."²⁶ We should emphasize here a remarkable concept coined

²¹ *Ibidem*

²² *Ibidem*

²³ According to J.M. Besse, Jacksonian landscape theory was forged in a constant dialogue with human geography and the social sciences of his time (...) It is based on two major statements: *the landscape is an organized space*, i.e. composed and designed by men on the earth's surface: *the landscape is a collective work of societies* that transforms the substrate nature. "In this perspective, the landscape value of a place is not considered only aesthetic (even if it is) said Besse, but rather is considered in relation to the sum of experiments, habits, practices developed by a human group in place Voir Besse, *ibidem*.

²⁴ Voir Besse, *ibidem*, p 42.

²⁵ When he founded the magazine *Landscape* in 1952, Jackson placed himself under the patronage of Peter Deffontaines and Maurice Le Lannou, and translated *La Géographie humaine* (Flammarion, Paris, 1949).

²⁶ *Ibidem*

by Maurice Le Lannou in his *Rêveries d'un géographe*²⁷: that of "inhabitant man" (*l'homme habitant*). For Le Lannou, "the dwelling man is primarily a human group that occupies a part of the earth's surface and organizes a specific way. However, not all is geography in the human community. As indicated by the author, what geography focuses on, and what works with our approach to landscape architecture, are the visible and tangible manifestations of this occupation and the human appropriation of the world, which differ from one place to the other"²⁸.

Implication in architectural education : "l'Atelier rural" and the design studio "Prospective territoriale et soutenabilité architecturale" at the National Advanced School of Architecture in Saint-Etienne

At the National Advanced School of Architecture in Saint-Etienne, the above issues and their implications in architectural education are developed in the "Atelier rural" : a collaborative experience which is conducted with Regional Nature Reserves, at the bachelor and master levels. L'Atelier Rural gives a prominent place to work in the field, "atelier hors les murs", organized in partnership with territorial proceedings related to the project site - here the Parc Naturel Régional des Monts d'Ardèche. This partnership allows students direct contact with the reality of issues in rural areas, through the different actors.

Another feature of the "Atelier rural" is the gathering of both students of bachelor and master levels during the first six weeks of the semester. Its goal is to jointly achieve an analysis of the project territory they have in common and to develop a shared knowledge of this territory, called the "Landscape Atlas". The supervision of this Atlas is specifically supervised by Pierre Albert Perillat and Evelyne Chalaye who are also in charge of the bachelor design studio « *Objet d'architecture - Matériau de paysage* » and of the master design studio « *Naturel - Artificiel - Matériel* ». Based on this Atlas, students will identify project sites on which they intervene with different approaches in terms of program: agriculture, tourism, dwelling. The articulation of the different programs can assert a point of view on the future of rural areas in the medium and long term.

The objectives of the design studio *Prospective territoriale & Soutenabilité architecturale* which I conducted with the collaboration of three colleagues with different expertise, François Chomienne (landscape designer), Marc Lemarié (architect, specialist in building conservation) and Marcel Ruchon (architect and specialist in ecological approach to construction)²⁹ are part of this educational and research perspective we have just developed. The specificity of the objectives of this studio can be identified by the two terms that make up its name. They refer to two scales of the living space and two approaches to action: planning and foresight on one hand, and the architectural project, on the other hand. This double pronged thought and action

²⁷ Maurice Le Lannou, *Le déménagement du territoire. Rêverie d'un géographe*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967

²⁸ Quote of Le Lannou taken from Besse & Tiberghien, "L'expérience du paysage", *ibid.*, P. 22

²⁹ François Chomienne is a landscape designer, Marc Lemarié is an architect, and "architecte en chef des bâtiments de France" and a specialist in building conservation) and Marcel Ruchon is an architect and specialist in ecological approach in construction

establishes the link between the design of buildings and the territory. "The environmental issue" plays a central role in this multiscale project approach.

In which way is landscape architecture as defined earlier and its link with geography, particularly useful in our practice of teaching design in the context of this studio ? The answer to this question is threefold. It has led us to identify three main directions to approach the design task, representing three types of interaction between humans and territory in its design process. These three types of interaction establish the link with the notion of "inhabitant-man" as previously mentioned, and the interpretation we have made here.

Indeed, prospective approach in the context of territory addresses the large scale of human space and long term time-frame of the construction of landscape. Its purpose is to "explore possible futures to identify tomorrow's challenges and inform today's decisions"³⁰. The prospective work informs the project. It suggests a direction: where one can go, instead of the project that explains how to get there. Regarding our goal, the prospective allows the scenarios to anticipate contemporary configurations of the rural over the medium- and long-term base.

Regarding our main question, the prospective approach will anticipate, based on hypothetical scenarios and interaction between people and territory, leading to specific modes of organization of places. Three types of scenarios are explored. Each refers to a particular research domain on the future of the human space as previously identified³¹

-Building an economically sustainable territory

The first type of scenario addresses the economic and social future of the project site. In the case of rural areas, the identification of new local economic life usually implies a renewal of the local economic fabric. Moreover, it requires the definition of new economic agents which are not necessarily in line with the economic history of territory. Our view is to rethink the economic status of the territory and its spatial and human potential, taking into account the demographic rebalancing across the national territory as described above, and resulting societal and cultural changes. In this area, the renewal of farming combined with other activities, is subject to special attention. In addition, we seek any form of hybrid economic activity encouraging the establishment of non-seasonal activities, providing the inhabitants with jobs throughout the year (crafts, industrial or commercial, educational and cultural activities, tertiary type professions, etc ...). Like the oldest human settlements in rural areas - but in other ways - the issue of dwelling is combined with other functions to counteract the syndrome of "dormitory town".

³⁰ Pierre Chapuy, quoted in « L'urbaniste est-il un prospectiviste qui s'ignore ? » in *Urbanisme* n° 386, sept-oct 2012, pp. 29-37.

³¹ Xavier Guillot « Penser et construire ensemble l'espace rural de demain. Acquis et recherches en cours », dans Xavier Guillot (dir), *Espace rural & projet spatial. Volume3. Du terrain à la recherche : objets et stratégies*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2011, pp. 14-27

-Developing local channels for the construction of local buildings

The second type of alliance focuses on building construction. The objective is to explore the potential of the territory in terms of production of new materials and constructive channels, based on agriculture (straw, hemp, etc.), forestry (wood) or soil (stone, earth). The introduction of new constructive channels requires new know-how (alongside those to be revived) and the creation of new jobs through new businesses, enabling us to establish a link with the previous scenarios. The development of these scenarios will set up a new construction economy for new buildings, as well as for the rehabilitation of existing buildings, that will in turn induce local changes in building practices. Besides using locally produced materials, these new practices are based on the renewal of manual labor: a principle that also reveals what Marcel Ruchon calls "metabolic energy" : the energy produced by the strength of our bodies which accompanies a decrease in energy devoted to the industrialization and mechanization of construction processes.

-Promoting energy self-sufficient habitat.

The third type of scenario addresses at a comprehensive level the question of energy in our way of living and settlement patterns. Primarily, it is rethinking the energy dependence (heating and electrical manufacturing) to achieve a form of domestic self-sufficiency. It also extends our thinking to the large technical system in place that feeds our everyday life in all activities, and in turn to imagine, at the local level, the establishment of a network of new sources of energy production related to the potential of the area, allowing inhabitants to be, in the medium term, disconnected from the national network. In this regard, innovative solutions must be devised based on "energy mix" taking advantage of the four basic elements of the territory - earth, wind, sun, water. By eliminating our dependence on national energy systems, it is also to eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels and nuclear energy sources. At this last level, as with the previous one, the landscape changes brought about by the introduction of new constructive economic and energy sectors are outlined. Through the development of these scenarios, the goal is to prefigure the establishment of a new economy of living which induces, in the long term, a new form of spatial organization at the scale of the territory.

Reflecting a plurality of possible relationships between man and territory

At a methodological level, the simultaneous consideration of these three issues allows a multiscale approach to design, integrating both the scale of architecture design referring to the short term development of the implementation of the building, and the scale of the territory referring to its long term formation, illustrated by the multiple parameters, physical economic and human, represented by the three scenarios which participate "together" in the transformation of our living environment.

The purpose of the studio is not to formulate "one" architectural and territorial project. The purpose of the studio is not about designing an ideal type of sustainable living space at the architectural and territorial levels conforming to the idea of landscape as aesthetic ideal. The

purpose of the studio is to formulate several hypotheses of spatial organization that reflect the information provided by the scenarios. And therefore to reflect a plurality of possible relationships between the territory and the settlement process of a community of people.

Accordingly, one can understand the relevance of the contribution of human geography and the concept of "inhabiting human". No scenario is written in advance. The territory, as inherited with its physical and human characteristics, should not be over-emphasized to the detriment of the imagination of man, who is able to - and has to - transform and adapt it to the present economic, technical, social and cultural context³².

³² In this transformation process, we find one of the key issues of the thinking of the Italian territorialist School in their use of the notion of heritage