

## INTRODUCTION

# Politics and the City: Introduction to Special Issue

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## Abstract

The challenge of this special issue in finding words and coming to terms with contemporary city and contemporary politics is amplified by the difficulty to pin point what and where exactly a city is and how can we perceive political activities in its context. We might be better off asking: what is not city today, which place on Earth is empty of city-ness? This special issue presents four contributions that proceed from the panel *City, Civility and Post-political Models of Freedom and Conflict* held in November 2018 as part of the Scaffolds international symposium organized by ALICE lab from the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne, supported by the C.I.II.III.IV. A, the Kanal Centre Pompidou, and with the participation of several institutions and university departments from KU Leuven, ULB, TU Delft, and TU Vienna. Without pertaining to comprehensiveness, the present collection captures some points in the debate on city and civility informed by questions that originate in design and architecture.

Articles in this special issue of *Contour* proceed from contributions to the panel *City, Civility and Post-political Models of Freedom and Conflict* chaired by Selena Savić (IXDM HGK Basel, FHNW) as part of the Scaffolds symposium organized by the ALICE lab of the EPFL and held in Brussels in November 2018. <https://scaffolds2018.epfl.ch/>

## Introduction

The challenge of this special issue in finding words and coming to terms with contemporary city and contemporary politics is amplified by the difficulty to pin point what and where exactly a city is and how can we perceive political activities in its context. We might be better off asking: what is not city today, which place on Earth is empty of city-ness? Beyond obvious answers such as oceans or mountain peaks, which seem to have escaped the eye of development (an impression certainly contested in recent marine or mountain area urbanization research) it might be difficult to characterize a place that has not been subject to some form of urbanization.

In making the call for contributions that are published in this special issue, I wandered into the terrain of politics with the audacity and ignorance of an architect, and searched for sticky ideas that evoke the practice of engineering and building the city. Is politics the search for common good, or common ground? Or is it about Arendtian vision that confronts political action with social necessity [1]? Politics, Rancière tells us, is the result of an anthropological invariant: fear that brings humans together [2]. The questions of inclusion and participation are at the base of all political and design processes, as well as the struggle or, as Chantal Mouffe [3] put it, *agonism* in public space. How could we (re) articulate modes of cohabitation that respond to the conditions of the contemporary city? Is politics human or more-than-human?

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Without pertaining to comprehensiveness, the present collection captures some points in the debate on city and civility informed by questions that originate in design and architecture. They include media studies as well as a critical analysis of funding bodies; technological and performative concerns. The order of texts is suggesting openings towards these perspectives, from the way autarky can reshape the dictum of technological optimisation, through the possibility for architectural research or practice of occupation, to an ironic-fictional depiction of the character of an architect-citizen.

## Non-city

In a recently published Manifesto of Rural Futurism [4], a group of artists and theorists proclaimed the countryside as the newly found place of resistance to dominant economic and urban developments. The manifesto sets to challenge the perception of rurality as “authentic, utopic, anachronistic, provincial, traditional and stable”, and advocates for the recognition of rurality’s potential resistance. Conflict is inherent to the countryside. Different human and non-human life forms exist and claim territory, mutually implicated: animals and plants that are cultivated, wild species, bugs and rodents. Because it is relegated to backwardness, contemplative romantic clichés (featured strongly in Tolstoy’s writings for example), rural places that are “off the radar” of modern capitalist streams, can become places of resistance, experimentation, critical investigation and change.

Another take on the rural future is offered by the metropole aficionado, Rem Koolhaas and his office OMA&AMO. In the currently ongoing exhibition *Countryside: The Future* (Guggenheim Museum, NY, from February 2020 to February 2021) they suggest looking at the rural countryside as the site that will host technologies supporting all contemporary needs for automation and development: data storage, fulfilment centres, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and robotic automation, worker migration, ecological preservation, and so on [5]. Countryside, Koolhaas maintains, is fulfilling humanity's need to grow food but also to temporarily escape the stress of city life. The vast rural areas on our planet capture OMA's attention and imagination. A collection of ideas that rediscover the dynamics of the countryside, the exhibition curated by Rem Koolhaas and Samir Bantal repeats the Anthropocene dictum that nature is over: every square meter of it is known, inventoried and monitored. Nature is replaced by global wellness and rationalised for optimal productivity. Livestock farms are replaced by server farms. Or cities of cows, as in Idaho feedlot. This new look at the countryside peddles Koolhaas capacity to produce visions outside of city imaginaries, to address the neglected areas on Earth, simultaneously drafting ways for course correction [6]. Politics does not escape Koolhaas' attention: the application of political will and vision to the transformation of the countryside at territorial scale are profiled in the exhibition, from dictatorship to democracy. This attention, nevertheless, stops at mainstream categorisation and does not challenge populism and globalization beyond effects of rural neglect.

A better antidote to urbanity might be found in the forest. In Braidotti and Hlavajova's *Posthuman Glossary*, Paulo Tavares gives an account of *Forest*, its role in the history of Western thought and expansion projects such as colonisation [7]. Forest is the unruly territory: uncivil, in contrast to *res publica*, city and politics. It lies outside the borders of social contract, the space of the civic and the realms of reason, the political and legal frame of civilisation. View of the forest as the token for nature was sustained through colonial expansion onto other continents, positing the newly discovered Amazon forest as the representation of (tropical) natural realm, the Earth's remaining pristine environments. At the same time the, forest is resourceful: it was widely believed until relatively recently that a forest can yield infinite supply of wood and other goods, through its regenerative capacities. The Amazonian forest, on one hand romanticized and on the other conceived as the place of endless exploiting, hides architectural traces of inhabitation practices which employed advanced landscape management techniques. Therefore, Tavares insists on reading the forest as always already cosmopolitan, inhabited by beings (trees, jaguars and people) that form a large political space, to whom rights should be attributed. "Instead of seeing the forest as an environment lacking the city, it is the very concept of the city that has to be widened and transformed to incorporate the constructed, political nature of the forest." [7 pp. 165-6]. Tavares cultured landscapes of forest require a decolonized gaze and a remote perspective, demonstrated in the view of anthropogenic sculpted landscapes, which he uses to illustrate his argument: raised fields punctuating flooded tropical savannahs of the northern Amazon basin, visible only from above, in a more-than-human engagement with flying technology.

The initial question about physical landscapes or domains of thought that are empty of cityness, is not properly answered through the notions of rural, wild, countryside and forest. These notions are not only constituted in opposition to certain aspects of the urban (such as development, density, or human laws) and therefore always social and political, but also implicated in the city through different resource supply chains. And while Tavares proposes to observe a social contract between humans, animals and plants, the late philosopher Michel Serres proposed to imagine a contract with nature to address the parasitic

relationships characteristic of human approach to nature. In his book *The Parasite* [8], Serres traces out parasitic chains, which know only one direction: one parasite is the host for another. Easy to locate in our relationship with vermin such as rats, parasitism is equally present in tax farmer's relation to the farmer's production, or the farmer's relation to the land. As a different gesture, Serres proposes a contract with nature in which everything would cost something, requiring an articulation of reciprocity and respect. Different from *social contract* – laws that govern society, and *natural laws* – rationalizing observations of nature in science, Serres proposes a synthesis: “a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect; where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery” [9, p. 36]. Natural contract lets nature speak the language of law and politics.

## The Many Faces of Architecture and Cities

The first article in this special issue presents the co-evolution of the physical infrastructure for water management in Amsterdam and its' invisible counterpart, the data-driven infrastructure for measurement and prediction of water level effects on the city. It focuses on the dissolution of the singular engineering artifact (such as the mega-infrastructure of the enclosure dike) into collections of digitally instrumentalized elements (rooftop modifications, house boat clusters, distributed hotel rooms) and how this emerging trend challenges architectural practice. In parallel to these concerns, Ortner outlines two data-driven water management models. The top-down model leverages responsibility as shared cost of infrastructure investment, assumed both by the decision-making government and informed citizens. The bottom-up approach stems from self-organised collaborations between citizens and architects that proceeds in exemplary, proto-type logic for possible wider adoption. While foregrounding proposals for different implementations of data-driven interventions in flood control, this text exposes the implicit culture of Dutch city planning: evidence-based consensual decision-making informed by the love of the datascape and the polder model of politics.

Amir Djalali examines how architectural research is accommodated and conditioned by funding schemes, teasing out architecture's specificity as a knowledge domain. In a logic-driven discussion on the aspirations of the major European funding scheme, Horizon 2020 on one side, and researchers in architecture, on the other, Djalali asks if architectural research is even possible? The critique of excellence and innovation as determinant factors of financial support for socially responsible research suggests a subtle turn of 'politics' into 'policing' that champions the agenda of optimization and management in place of societal and political responsibility. Djalali concludes that it is impossible to follow the disciplinary autonomy of architecture, because the current European funding schemes (H2020 and Horizon Europe) operate in the realm of necessity, and not freedom.

The third contribution in this issue addresses the political agency of architecture, and design more generally. *Designing Dissensus* is informed by Swyngedouw's articulation of global protest movements and Arendtian notion of appearance. Paul Holmquist examines the Occupy Wall Street protest as a case that resonates with the role of design as repoliticizing agent through protest. Zuccotti Park, a privately owned but publicly accessible space, is a prime case of dissensual urban design, taking advantage of a lacuna in regulatory politics that would otherwise evacuate political activity through policing. Holmquist pursues a

proposal to blur the distinction between making and acting. The world must endure these actions, he claims, “capable of attesting to, resonating with, and orienting the beauty, dignity and power of human action that manifest the political”.

Finally, the provocation piece by Shintaro Miyazaki recites the persona of architect-hacker-citizen: a character that can deal with a lot. Aspiring to articulate ethically fair, ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive ways of living, Miyazaki proposes to use “the power of irony and conflict to induce change via participation and the idea of solidarity”. He appreciates the hacker’s potential ability to switch between modes of thinking and acting: being ironic while *commoning*, dealing with conflicts without immediately resolving them. Architect-hacker-citizen has a threefold structure: solidarity-oriented, proficiency in digitality, and an expertise in spatial practices including the design of buildings.

## City, a Political Subject?

City as a quality and as an activity casts a look at the essence and basis of humanity’s attempts to order nature, rationalize it as resource and enjoy its regenerative capacities. The city ordering of nature extends far beyond its physical surface. The city, or the urban condition is the practice and the materialisation of the Anthropocene, similarly unequally distributed, unequally affecting humanity. The global urban lifestyle requires energy and material flows coming in from the presumed ‘outside’, what we used to consider nature but now understand closer to the way Koolhaas discusses the *Countryside*.

Both city and countryside suffer a partial loss of identity – they are continuously reconstituted and contingent on the context of discussion. Countryside is urbanized: connected with smooth roads and fast train services, high-speed internet access and proximity of shops. The city is a place of urban gardening and impromptu nature setups (e.g. a swimming pool installed in the summer 2020 in the middle of the Viennese major traffic road, the Gürtelfrische WEST: a beach on the pavement).

If city politics is reflected in or related to the Ancient Greek notion of polis, where those who count as citizens reason and debate in public space, what implications would Tavares’ proposed extension of politics to the forest have? How can we seriously think through the proposal to *include* everyone and everything? The *Ethics of Coding* report on ‘algorithmic condition’ [10] addresses the question of symbolization and literacy on one hand and political struggle – even agonism – that is implied in the encoding and decoding of different types of (human or algorithmic) practices, always involving different levels of contingency and ambiguous determination. Could we encode inclusion?

Serres’ articulation of the natural contract can be instructive: beyond social contract and natural laws, but including both without collapsing them, a contract with nature would spell out the rights of this symbiosis. Perhaps the challenge is not to locate the political in the city, or the city on Earth, in order to speak of city politics, but rather to include the city as a political subject in our articulations of politics. The entanglements with nature cannot simply include that which is beyond control, such as water or conflict, into an extended political arena. If the Zuccotti Park in New York is a (political) subject, it is also a host (in the parasitic sense of Serres) for people’s action. The two models of water management in Amsterdam carefully delineate two political treatments that orient the governing process in opposite

directions. The city is able to host them both, as long as they keep water away. Miyazaki's provocative character is telling in this respect: while closely tied with architectural agency, it seems to be able to translate across domains of influence and reverse directions of parasitic chains.

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