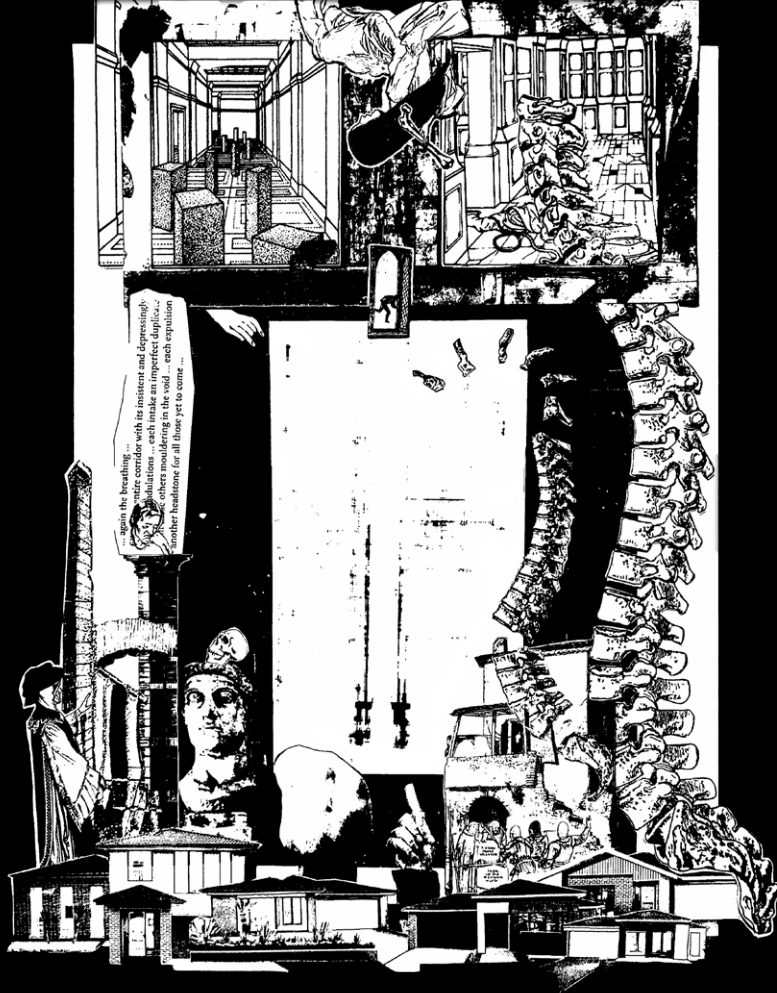


URBAN CORPORIS

TO THE BONES



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Edited by
MICKEAL MILOCCO BORLINI
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URBAN CORPORIS - TO THE BONES

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M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano, A. Riciputo

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**A BOOK ON
ARCHITECTURE, ART,
PHILOSOPHY AND
URBAN STUDIES
TO NOURISH THE
URBAN BODY**

URBAN CORPORIS - TO THE BONES

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01. Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, Oakland Museum (section drawing), Oakland (California), 1968. Credits: courtesy of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates.

Bones as Traces

Towards a Nonviolent Architecture

Tommaso Antiga Architect and PhD Student in Architecture at the University of Trieste (inter-university PhD course with the University of Udine), Italy.

Keywords: Nonviolence, Architecture, Bones, Ecology, Buddhism

Abstract

Well, perhaps Zygmunt Bauman is right when he says that we are living at the dawn of a world that is “moving towards Buddhism”. In fact, it can be said that the Buddhist point of view is the most correct for interpreting current events, which have two common denominators: ecology and inclusiveness – that is, respectively, interconnection with things-in-the-world and acceptance of the Other-from-itself, two precepts that characterize Buddhism.

As aspiring Buddhists, we are trying to impact the environment as little as possible, that is, to leave no physical traces. Even the world of architecture is veering towards a progressive and conscious “erasure of traces”: environmental sustainability is nothing more than a gradual removal of our “ecological footprint”. We are aiming for a built world that can naturally return to humus and we are understanding that the condition of the transitory and the ephemeral is the only truly real one. Earthen constructions or coverings derived from plants are just the vanguard of a future that will see architecture increasingly naturelle. And they are examples in which the bones, muscles and skin of the buildings accept their ephemerality, their sudden return to the earthly mixture.

The day when even the bones of our buildings are rapidly biodegradable, what will our traces be made of? Will we still aspire to leave some or, as enlightened ones, without any claim to future eternity, will we perhaps be able to live in a more respectful, ecological and inclusive present?

Bones, an introduction

Bones are what stays for the longest time, that decomposes slower of our body. Also our artifacts are bones, everything we have given shape to on Earth – for the eras following our one. Bones are what remains of those who preceded us, and, at the same time, they are also what those who preceded us left us. The distinction between the two characterizations lies entirely in the will: there are wanted bones and, on the contrary, bones left over due to force majeure. The pyramids and the Colosseum, for example, were erected with the specific desire to defy time and eras, to be the spokesmen of a civilization in future history, while, in all probability, the well-known drawings inside the Lascaux Caves had not this precise intention. In both cases we can speak of bones, or of traces of the past still tangible in the present – and this will be the meaning attributed to this word in the meantime of this text.

Twentieth-century skeletons

In many traditions, bones are the “eternal” element of the human body: obviously we know that this is not exactly the truth, and that although in certain conditions they can be kept intact for a very long time, our bones too are destined to return to being part of the earth, or more precisely of that heterogeneous mixture of elements of which all living beings and minerals are made of. “Life is always [...] a bricolage [...], a carnival of substance [...] of a planet – Gaia, the Earth” (Coccia, 2022, p. 11). Moving towards the current architectural sphere, then we think in a not very different way when we have to deal with issues such as biodegradability or compostability: we often imagine a “return to the earth” of products and materials. We often refer to this ability with the term “naturalness”, an imprecise and somewhat easy use of an umbrella-word – like all those that derive from *nature* – which, however, I would like to take as good in the following, for ease of discussion. And consequently to this, we realize that in the contemporary world, as never before, one of the keywords is certainly decomposition. We are increasingly introducing and using “natural” materials and techniques within the world of architecture, trying to recycle what already exists (Marini, 2015), and we are doing it starting from the outside. It is as if we were gradually replacing the outermost layers of our buildings with increasingly natural materials (that is, biodegradable, compostable and more easily decomposable). Not only “dead” artificial elements, then: more and more often the new architectures are attacked by a thick layer of vegetation, something living and iridescent, conceived in all respects by now as a real building material, used to increase the energy performance of buildings or, more generally, to improve their technical efficiency.

This incursion of the “natural” is currently taking place on the outermost faces of our architectures, on their skin. However, the underlying skeletons are still mostly from the twentieth century, still not too varied compared to those of a few decades ago (fig. 01). In fact, it is enough to look around us to realize that a system of beams and pillars, made by reinforced concrete or steel, remains the structural skeleton of almost all new architectures, even today: our bones still closely resemble those of those who came before us. But in the meantime, the external leather has become to change, trying to be vegetable, compostable and sustainable. First of all, this is happening because our environmental and ecological sensitivity has changed. We understood that, by continuing to build as we have done in the last century, we would produce even more pollution, even more uncontrolled soil sealing, even more heat and extreme events. We have realized that all of this is violence against the planet we live on: starting from the skin and coatings of our artifacts, we are therefore trying to operate nonviolently against our “common home”. But the situation is rapidly changing, even the bones of architecture are about to be eroded, and change, with the changing times. To talk about this, however, we now need a premise, in order to then return, with new and more aware eyes, to our days.

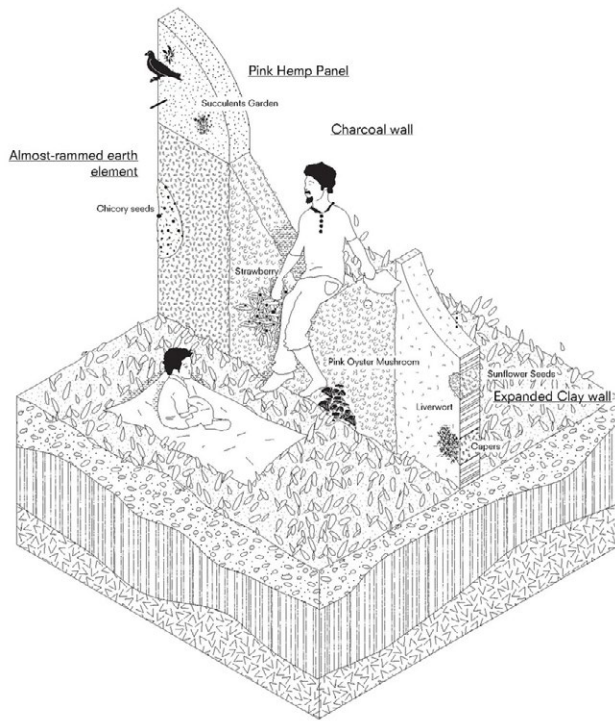


Ecology and Sixty-eight

In addition to being a stage for political, social and civil struggles, the Sixty-eight (1968) was, on closer inspection, also the year of the birth of modern ecology: in fact, it was the Christmas Eve night of that year when it was taken by the crew of the Apollo 8 mission the famous *Earthrise* (fig. 02), the first photograph of our planet seen from the Moon. For the first time we appreciate – through our eyes, by means of a tangible photo – the boundaries of the Earth, its perimeter, its finitude. We understand that Gaia has a finite body. Ecology, according to some (Caffo, 2017; Mancuso, 2019), was born that year precisely because only from that moment do we truly realize the finiteness of our resources and our mutual interdependence with our surroundings. All this, and not too metaphorically, starting from a photograph that makes us assume a different posture towards things-in-the-world. Ecology (a word that takes its cue from the Greek *oikos*, which means “house”) was born that year because it is only from 1968 that we begin to truly understand that we too, like other living beings, are guests of a house which, however, has boundaries, a perimeter: it has limited resources, which can be exhausted. And within it, we are deeply interconnected and interrelated with everything that keeps us company under our same roof, even if sometimes we don’t quite realize it (Haraway, 2020). Therefore, mutual interdependence: everything influences and is influenced by the rest, nothing and no one excluded. Continuing along this path, another question. Result of the Sixty-eight was also a progressive and ever greater freedom in the sexual sphere and in customs: in a nutshell, that season also opened up towards greater acceptance of the Other-than-us and the Different. The latter precisely to go so far as to say that, perhaps, Zygmunt Bauman was right when, in the last decade of the last century, he predicted the dawn of a world that, in some way, was moving towards Buddhism: “[...] The postmodern mind opens up to Buddhism with greater fullness than its predecessors” (Bauman, 2012, p. 222). The philosopher Judith Butler brings us a useful piece to close the overall picture that is emerging between the lines. The central point of her discourse within *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020) lies entirely in what could be called, somewhat tautologically, a sort of “equation of equality”: this interconnection with the Other-than-us – human or non-human – which, it seems, we are increasingly understanding and perceiving, actually opens up to nonviolence. Intimate connection with the Other means being part of the Other. The inference has it that, then, exercising violence on the Other in some way means exercising violence on oneself. Declining the issue in an ecological key, exercising violence on the environment means exercising violence, ultimately, on ourselves. Butler then continues:

If those who practice nonviolence are put in connection with those who, on the other hand, usually suffer violence, a pre-existing social relationship emerges: one is part of the other, one-self is already implicated in another-self. Nonviolence would therefore be a way of recognizing this bond [...] (Butler, 2020, pp. 21, 22).

To unite environmental and ecological issues and the Buddhist question are the very words of Judith Butler, which have to do with a typically Buddhist vocabulary and feeling. Even just the words highlighted in the previous quote indeed sound very similar to a famous passage from the *Bhagavadgītā*, one of the texts at the origin of Buddhism: “He himself residing in all beings, all beings residing in him [...]” (Esnoul, 1991, p. 81). In summary, “Bauman was right” to the extent that, nowadays, acceptance and interconnection with the Other are the two main macro-themes that underlie and organize numerous diatribes, environmental and otherwise. Many policies and guidelines today can be read as declinations of these two questions: laws



and movements against homotransphobia and misogyny, against segregation and racism of all sorts, for example, are nothing but declinations of that acceptance above. Alongside this, the various “ecologisms”, together with animal liberation social movements, from which also various vegetarianisms and veganisms, are some of the many faces of the second question, the one concerning the interconnection between us and what is around us. And acceptance and interconnection with the Other-than-us are maybe the two salient features and common denominators of the Buddhist conception of the world. “Bauman was right” to the extent that, it seems to be, we are heading in this direction.

The bones of the Anthropocene

Now, the idea, at the basis of the term Anthropocene, of Man who has reached the status of geological power – and not only biological – over planet Earth is now in the public domain. More than “leaving traces”, or “footprints”, we are creating a geological stratum, to be precise, and we are doing it with our bones:

In none of the reflections on freedom has there ever been the awareness of the geological power that human beings were [...] acquiring as a result of and through processes strictly connected to their conquest of freedom (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 68).

What we are continuing to thicken is a special (not only) geological stratum, composed of solid, liquid and gaseous elements: it is almost the trail of our existence, which is increasingly black, especially since the Second Industrial Revolution onwards. Decimeters of Earth’s crust, as well as an extreme modification of the concentrations of particles and components in the land, in the atmosphere and in the oceans. For this, we must start thinking as our “hyperbones”, in addition to our bodily skeletons, our cities and the ruins of our artifacts, also global warming, the hole in the ozone layer – and other *hyperobjects* (Morton, 2018) –, the melting of glaciers and the respective increase of the sea level, on a par with ours wrecks at the bottom of the oceans or on land, of our plastic islands and so on. Bones are all that we leave to those after us – willy-nilly, us and they –, as clues of our passage.

Towards a nonviolent architecture

Architecture is part of those human events which, following the reasoning of the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, have collapsed in the last few decades with the so-called natural events: “Anthropogenic explanations of climate change involve the crisis of the secular distinction [...] between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 56). Precisely because one can no longer escape from this actual situation and collision, architecture also has to change: to seek – as was mentioned earlier – to be nonviolent, that is, architecture nowadays wants to seek ever greater effusion with the natural ambit, to share today’s varied needs and sensitivities. Here we are at the point of the matter. It is as if, as willing Buddhist aspirants as we understand us to be, our architecture has begun, starting from its outermost layers, to be faint, in an extremely positive sense, with respect to its inevitable, future decomposition. The acceptance of decomposition signifies the acceptance of temporariness – ours and of our constructions – : after all, the skull “in a general sense, is [also] the emblem of the transience of life, and so it appears in the literary examples of Hamlet and Faust” (Cirlot, 2021, p. 456). It also means, last but not least, the poly-authorship of every project, shared with nature. It is as if we, together with our architecture, were gradually understanding that leaving as few traces as possible could

be the solution for the future, primarily to guarantee it to those who will come after us. We have already granted ourselves too many bones and traces of our passage: as enlightened aspirants, we are understanding that these have no sense of existing if they preclude the possibility of maintaining our own species. Thus, today we begin to think of architectural skeletons made entirely of wood and raw earth or made of completely recyclable and biodegradable materials. And what now seems exceptional and extremely rare is likely to become common knowledge and realization, as it has so often throughout history. We live of these transformations, and the current ones, it seems to me, they all tend towards an ever greater acceptance of this continuous metamorphosis of the only, boundless “flesh” of our planet. Only in a future situation of this type, we could claim to be truly able to build something, in the first instance, temporary in the literal sense, that is to say linked to a defined time, after which it begins by itself to fall apart and return to humus; secondly, to assemble artifacts that are easily decomposable. Some type of building which, when it becomes a ruin, can truly mix with the earth from which it came took shape (fig. 03). All these characteristics would allow us to reach a sort of organic architecture in the strict sense, made not like the organic, but with the organic. And all this would perhaps mean that, from the point of view of our species, we would be carrying out a sort of immense “erasure of traces”: after all, what would remain of a building of which even the skeleton – and not just its skin – was it gradually engulfed easily by the ground, quickly eroded by air and water? Was it true enlightenment? Posterity will judge.

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A BOOK ON ARCHITECTURE, ART, PHILOSOPHY AND URBAN STUDIES TO NOURISH THE URBAN BODY.

The second volume of *Urban Corporis*, titled "To the Bones", compiles reflections from architects, artists, and scholars who have extensively delved into the fundamental themes of contemporary architecture. By navigating a constant interplay between past and future, memory and innovation, and the realms of the natural, artificial, and virtual, these contributions put forth strategies for architectural, artistic, urban, and landscape projects that resonate with the fundamental principles shaping our built and perceived environment. They advocate for design approaches that synchronise with the foundational elements, referred to as "the bones", that structure the landscape while promoting forward-thinking considerations.