

Toespraak / Speech

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curator IABR–2014–

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Madame Minister, mister Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen

In 1969 the French writer George Perec wrote 'La Disparition', a literary thriller on the disappearance of the letter 'e'. In his novel of over 300 pages that character is not used once. IABR--2014 is a Biennial that takes the 'Planet' angle on urbanization in over hundred projects without raising the word sustainability once.

Not that we are Denialists, nor do we reject the core of the sustainability agenda, on the contrary. It's not even because the term sustainable has lost much of its significance due to all green washing. One can even buy biodegradable bullets for a sustainable warfare these days. Our avoidance of the term is mostly informed by the subtexts it seems to convey: stability, balance of nature, endurance of systems, steady state, et cetera. These concept are at odds with the observation of Nobel-prize winner Paul Crutzen who coined the term Anthropocene, the age of man.

Crutzen stated that the global changes mankind unleashed in the geo-chemical cycles, in sediment transport of the rivers we dammed, in land-use, in biodiversity and even in the climate, are not only measurable but also irreversible in the sense that we can mitigate their effects but we can never return to the point of origin.

We can't go back just as we can't go back to the weather of last month. The relentless arrow of time points in only one direction. Further. We are moving amidst mobility, changing a changing medium. We urgently need to learn riding this tiger.

Very much in concurrence with this Antropocene vision, Urban by Nature takes a geographical look, both in terms of space and time, at our biggest artifact, the urban landscape. Not at the city in the traditional sense, not even the dispersed 'Zwischenstadt', but the complete conglomerate artifact of built-up areas, airfields, industries, intensive food production, parks, strip-mines, leisure areas, nature reserves, infrastructure and so on.

The boundary between the city and the countryside is blurring but also the boundary between nature and society. We become gradually aware of the hybridization of the biosphere with the techno-sphere at large. Hence the observation that urban landscapes form our habitat, ecology and our nature. We are a social species with a propensity to cluster together and to build cities: we are Urban by Nature.

This positive angle on urbanization as a highly successful model of spatial organization must not eclipse the observation that most global environmental problems have urban roots. If we want to solve these problems we have to solve our urban problems. And moreover: we have to solve them by retrofitting the existing urban landscapes. There is little room for expansion left, there is no more 'new frontier'. That is the time and space nexus: there is no way back and there is no elsewhere either.

We have to land these geographical observations on urbanization to avoid ending up in toothless abstractions and inconclusive armchair deliberations. We need an interface to relate to the scale where policymakers, planners and designers are active and work on solutions in the urban landscape. In other words we need access to tools.

We elaborated on three perspectives for action:

- We look at ways to mediate between society and nature. The proven ways like gardens, parks, nature conservation and development are tested on their significance in the context of urban landscapes.
- Secondly, we elaborate our hypothesis that most of the 'grey' environmental problems can be tackled by retrofitting the poorly and un-efficient functioning of the different flows of the metabolism of the urban landscapes.
- Thirdly we take stock of integrative, comprehensive and governance strategies for the carpet metropolis. The last aspect is vital, because metropolitan regions rather than states will take the lead in dealing with both the adaptation and mitigation aspects of the vulnerability to effects of climate change.

We decided on featuring these three angles in a very early stage of the preparation of this Biennale. From the massive response on a very detailed call we selected projects not only on quality but also on their ability to communicate parts of the storyline we had in mind.

All of these angles and subthemes got their own hall, corridor or gallery in the Kunsthal. We used the quality of this building that was designed as a landscape to set out the exhibition as a 'promenade architectural' where the storyline acts as a map. The three angles each have their centerpiece in the

form of the results of the research by design projects the IABR launched with local governments.

Texel is amidst projects that have mediating nature as a theme, Our National Carpet-Landscape Brabant presents a vision on Brabantstad in the Hall where the strategies for the urban landscapes are compiled. Rotterdam and its harbour proved to be a fertile testing ground in trying out the metabolism approach. These Dutch cases are swarmed by Best Practices from all over the world.

Thanks to the exhibition architects, Event Architecture and the graphic designers of Experimental Jetset and the stunning infographics (!) by CatalogTree every hall of the Kunsthal was given its specific touch and atmosphere.

I am proud off all the institutional participants that joined Urban by Nature but I want to single out two organizations that walked the extra mile. The PBL Netherlands Environmental Planning Agency and Worldwide Fund for Nature Netherlands that not only contributed, but used the Biennial as an instrument for strategic policy development and – if I may say so – self-reflection.

I would very much like to thank George Brugmans and the Board of the IABR offering me this chance of a lifetime to curate an episode of the IABR. It was as much fun as being the editor-in-chief of the newspaper the *Volkskrant* for one day but a little bit more exhausting than that. The similarity between the IABR and a newspaper is the great pleasure of working in a professional, dedicated and focused interdisciplinary team.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to all the designers and other participants assembled here in the auditorium and also those that for all kinds of reasons were not able to attend. All of you worked hard to meet our standards and – sometimes – very detailed requests and were still generous enough to participate with their projects in this experimental set up where sometimes only fragments of the projects are being used in the story of Urban by Nature.