

Curator statement *Nature of Hope*

The 11th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR), titled *Nature of Hope*, proposes to foster the potential of spatial design to move toward an architecture of ecologies. Navigating complexities – expanding and establishing spatial and non-spatial relationships – has always been at the root of architectural practice. Skilled at analyzing, imagining, and visualizing alternative modes of living, design disciplines are well equipped to unravel complex relationships to offer hopeful and actionable perspectives. Our current planetary conditions demand that these capacities be called on and expanded to reorient the discipline to become one that is regenerative and thrives from the ground up.

The central themes of the IABR 2024 – *nature and hope, soil and relations* – stem from the recognition that the power of transformation lies in those design practices that acknowledge people and materials as part of shared ecosystems, that are deeply rooted in situated histories and social fabrics, and that recognize human-nature relations as reciprocal. *Nature of Hope* celebrates the collective, planetary effort for substantial environmental and social change in and through architecture.

Getting to the Root of It

Given the intersecting crises of our time – climate collapse, biodiversity loss, the waging of wars, food insecurity, the lack of affordable housing, growing (social) inequalities, and political polarization, to name but a few – it is hard to imagine hopeful futures. These issues are systemic, interconnected, and human-made, which means that they can be remade, but require complex and intricate responses. Driven by the imperatives of economic profit, efficiency, and growth, hopeful narratives and meaningful alternatives are often hijacked by oversimplified and single-minded solutions. Under the weight of the urgent crises, good intentions and the promotion of ecological integrity can easily become entangled in the same extractive methods and colonial patterns that have defined the modern era.

These historically grown patterns are still thriving today and are resurfacing due to the urgency of climate transitions. To meet European energy demands, for example, solar power plants are overtaking Moroccan desert towns and displacing Indigenous communities. Raw minerals and ‘cheap’ labor are being extracted from resource-rich areas around the world, in Chile and the Congo and soon in Portugal, for instance, to meet the burgeoning demand for batteries for our cars. Geopolitical conflicts increasingly involve the control of natural resources, serving the few rather than the common good: water infrastructures, for example, are being weaponized, exacerbating water shortages caused by the climate crisis.

Even the best biodiversity and climate action programs often suffer from the persistent cultural drive for quantifiable results. Instead of strengthening and diversifying existing ecosystems, they focus on replanting in numbers, volumes, and monocultures. Others prioritize natural landscapes that are the most biodiverse, the most accessible, or that fit in a single-minded narrative, failing to include the diversity and nuance of what nature can be.

Likewise, conventional architecture has been trapped in similar paradigms of extraction and growth. Spatial design practices are often relegated to being a means for speculation and economic expansion. The building industry is one of the most carbon-intensive industries, to which architectural production clearly contributes. But architecture can move toward a different relationship with materials and

communities – and thereby accelerate the reduction of carbon emissions and the destruction of ecosystems. The design discipline is well equipped with the tools to design and redesign not only space, but the very conditions of the practice. With a unique set of spatial, collaborative, and relational skills, architecture as part of a broader web of knowledge could lead to fundamental transformations if it opens up and connects with ecological, Indigenous, and feminist practices.

Hope in the Plurality of Voices

Efforts to safeguard the coexistence of humans and non-humans are manifold: a wider adoption of environmental policies and legislation, the reuse and innovation of technologies of circular and rooted biobased construction, and the embrace of values beyond the monetary, such as degrowth and the economy for the common good. These ways of *being* and *doing* are situated, each with its own methods, fine-tuned to specific local circumstances, while confronting global challenges. They often appear in the cracks of the system, for where the system fails, hopeful alternatives can often emerge – out of necessity or otherwise. They lie on the spectrum between the application of entirely new technologies and languages and the recovery of traditional practices based on regenerative relationships with the environment. Taken in isolation, these efforts may seem too small or fragmented to address the enormity of the challenges ahead. But in their multiplicity – in their diverse forms and voices – they form a network of practices that are actively shaping the grounds and infrastructures for hopeful futures in the making.

An Expanding Brief for Architecture

A growing number of design practitioners are mobilizing these different kinds of knowledge and challenging architecture to embrace its transdisciplinary nature. In very different situations, they are adopting skills, tactics, and tools that have not traditionally been part of architecture's repertoire. The growing plurality of ongoing design and other responses to social and environmental urgencies point to an emerging shift in nature-culture relations: away from nature as something to be tamed (admired for its classical image of beauty, or as something to be exploited as a resource) and toward that of which we are all a part; toward the coexistence of a multiplicity of relationships and definitions of nature. This is what an ecological approach is all about: recognizing and nurturing the *relationships between* materials, landscapes, users, and occupants in specific places, to create the conditions for sustainable and widespread coexistence.

Architecture is experiencing an expanding brief for the discipline, reflected in the variety of questions and issues that are and need to be addressed, the rituals that are practiced, the collaborations that are enacted – inside and outside the discipline and in the (re)valuation of diverse forms of knowledge. It offers a promising framework for the discipline: to reorient itself toward a regenerative, relational, and situated practice. By connecting with knowledge systems that are attuned to relations and systemic thinking, the discipline has the potential to cultivate an understanding of materials, landscapes, soils, and species not as commodities, but as valuable ecosystems.

IABR 2024: *Nature of Hope*

Nature of Hope showcases the expanding brief – ecological ways of practicing architecture – *already taking place*. Through three complementary expressions – an exhibition, a public program, and a program

and network of urban nature initiatives – *Nature of Hope* celebrates promising narratives for architecture and highlights existing practices that envision our relationship with nature as a reciprocal one.

The exhibition at the Nieuwe Instituut presents an array of inspiring practice-based examples that explore emerging questions and new directions for spatial design. The public program, with the *Practice Place* at its core, provides a space for practitioners to discuss how to build alliances and explore the conditions for a future-oriented architecture. The *Botanical Monuments* is a network of locations and initiatives in Rotterdam, rooted in coexistence and daily rituals with nature, and connected through the regeneration of (informal) ecosystems and communities.

The network of contributors is part of the scaffolding for the envisioning of the ongoing transformation of the discipline of architecture. These practitioners collaborate with ecologists, philosophers, scientists, and artists; work with and learn from Indigenous and rural communities; and reassert the value of skills and craft in construction. Their designs integrate biodiversity and multispecies coexistence as a core principle. Their practices are committed to cooperative construction, mutual aid, and community, building not just for people but *with* people. Their offices prototype wide-scale uses of biobased, geobased, and circular materials, while simultaneously tackling the policy and market challenges that might limit their implementation.

Often open-ended, these inquisitive forms of design demonstrate a fundamental concern for the process and the relationships created. They leverage modes of working and organizing, tools and skills, narratives and strategies already familiar to spatial design to come up with new ways of navigating the everyday consequences of systemic challenges. In these practices, 'hopeful thinking' is always accompanied by 'hopeful doing.' They are intentional and responsible, grounded in active engagement and an honest understanding of the magnitude of the challenges ahead.

By bringing these examples together, *Nature of Hope* explores the many ways in which a growing network of practices, thinkers, and makers are reimagining our collective challenges and how they are experiencing and imagining hopeful futures in the making.