ECOLOGICAL URBANISM

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Preamble—The world’s population continues to grow, resulting in a steady migration from rural to urban areas. Increased numbers of people and cities go hand in hand with a greater exploitation of the world’s limited resources. Every year, more cities are feeling the devastating impacts of this situation. What are we to do? What means do we have as designers to address this challenging reality?

For decades now, reminders have come from many sources about the difficulties that face us and our environment. The Brundtland Report of 1987, scientific studies on the impact of global warming, and former U.S. Vice President Al Gore’s passionate pleas have all made their mark. But a growing concern for the environment is matched by a great deal of skepticism and resistance. The United States has not only failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, it is also, along with Canada and many of the Gulf States, among the largest per capita users of energy resources. The failure of the Copenhagen Summit to produce a legally binding agreement further confirms the scale of the challenges that lie ahead. The concept of “one planet living” can only be a distant dream—and not just for the worst offenders, but for everyone else as well.

Architects have been aware of the issues for some time, of course, but the proportion of those committed to sustainable and ecological practices has remained small. And until recently, much of the work produced as sustainable architecture has been of poor quality. Early examples were focused mainly around the capacities of simple technologies to produce energy and recycle waste. Sustainable architecture, itself rudimentary, often also meant an alternative lifestyle
of renunciation, stripped of much pleasure. This has changed, and is changing still. Sustainable design practices are entering the mainstream of the profession. In the United States, LEED certification—the national standard for the evaluation of sustainable buildings—is being more widely applied. But there remains the problem that the moral imperative of sustainability and, by implication, of sustainable design, tends to supplant disciplinary contribution. Thus sustainable design is not always seen as representing design excellence or design innovation. This situation will continue to provoke skepticism and cause tension between those who promote disciplinary knowledge and those who push for sustainability, unless we are able to develop novel ways of design thinking that can contribute to both domains.

The second issue concerns scale. Much of the work undertaken by sustainable architects has been relatively limited in scope. LEED certification, for example, deals primarily with the architectural object, and not with the larger infrastructure of the territory of our cities and towns. Because the challenges of rapid urbanization and limited global resources have become much more pressing, there is a need to find alternative design approaches that will enable us to consider the large scale differently than we have done in the past. The urban, as the site of complex relations (economic, political, social, and cultural), requires an equally complex range of perspectives and responses that can address both current conditions and future possibilities. The aim of this book is to provide that framework—a framework that through the conjoining of ecology and urbanism can provide the knowledge, methods, and clues of what the urban can be in the years to come.
The city is so vast and we have so much to say to each other.

—François Périer to Giulietta Masina in Federico Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*¹ (1957)
Ecological Urbanism—is that not an oxymoron in the same way that a hybrid SUV is an oxymoron? How can the city, with all its mechanisms of consumption—its devouring of energy, its insatiable demand for food—ever be ecological? In one sense the “project of urbanism,” if we can call it such, runs counter to that of ecology, with its emphasis on the interrelationship of organisms and the environment—an emphasis that invariably excludes human intervention. And yet it is relatively easy to imagine a city that is more careful in its use of resources than is currently the norm, more energy-efficient in its daily operations—like a hybrid car. But is that enough? Is it enough for architects, landscape architects, and urbanists to simply conceive of the future of their various disciplines in terms of engineering and constructing a more energy-efficient environment? As important as the question of energy is today, the emphasis on quantity—on energy reduction—obscures its relationship with the qualitative value of things.

In other words, we need to view the fragility of the planet and its resources as an opportunity for speculative design innovations rather than as a form of technical legitimation for promoting conventional solutions. By extension, the problems confronting our cities and regions would then become opportunities to define a new approach. Imagining an urbanism that is other than the status quo requires a new sensibility—one that has the capacity to incorporate and accommodate the inherent conflictual conditions between ecology and urbanism. This is the territory of ecological urbanism.

Three Narratives—There is ample evidence all around us of the scope of the challenge we face. A while ago, a single issue of The Guardian newspaper in the United Kingdom by chance carried three articles that addressed fundamental questions of sustainability. Such stories are now typical of what one reads on a daily basis and constitute the norm rather than an exception.

The first, by Canadian political journalist Naomi Klein, explored the connections between the invasion of Iraq and the oil boom in Alberta. “For four years now, Alberta and Iraq have been connected to each other through a kind of invisible...
see-saw,” says Klein. “As Baghdad burns, destabilizing the entire region and sending oil prices soaring, Calgary booms.” Klein’s article gives a glimpse of a large territory being laid to waste in the search for oil. Alberta has “vast deposits of bitumen—black, tarlike goo that is mixed up with sand, clay, water and oil ... approximately 2.5 trillion barrels of the stuff, the largest hydrocarbon deposits in the world.” The processes involved in turning these tar sands into crude are both complex and costly. One method involves open-cast mining. For this, great forests have to be leveled and the topsoil removed before huge, specially designed machines dig out the bitumen and place it in the world’s largest two-story dump trucks. The tar is then chemically diluted and spun around until the oil rises to the top. The waste products, the tailings, are dumped in ponds that according to Klein are larger than the region’s natural lakes. A second method involves the drilling of large pipes that push steam deep underground to melt the tar before a second pipe transfers it through various stages of refining.

Both of these processes are much more expensive than conventional oil drilling; they also produce three to four times the amount of greenhouse gases. Despite this, they became financially viable after the invasion of Iraq, and resulted in Canada overtaking Saudi Arabia as the leading supplier of oil to the United States. The “success” of this enterprise has led the Pembina Institute, a nonprofit think-tank that advances sustainable energy solutions, to warn of the threat to an area of boreal forest as large as the state of Florida. More recently the Institute, together with Ecojustice, has presented evidence documenting the damaging effects of oil-sands development on Alberta’s fresh-water resources. The extent of this environmental devastation, encompassing land, air, and water—all in aid of relatively cheap oil for the consumer and hefty profits for the oil companies—is a vivid reminder of the urgent need for future conurbations to discover and design alternative and efficient ways of using energy resources.

The second story involved the construction of a high-rise residence in Mumbai for one of India’s richest tycoons, Mukesh Ambani, chairman of the country’s largest private-sector company, the Reliance Group. The building, called Antilla after
a mythical island, is equivalent in height to a sixty-story tower block. Besides providing accommodation for Ambani, his mother, his wife, three children, and 600 full-time staff, it comes with its own helipad, health club, and six floors of parking. The family’s proposed move from its current residence, a mere fourteen stories high, has been given additional impetus by the rapid growth of the Indian economy and the simmering rivalry between Mukesh Ambani and his brother. According to Praful Bidwai, a local newspaper columnist quoted in the article, “there is growing anger about such absurd spending,” as the divide between rich and poor is becoming obscene. Even the name of this “house” suggests the idea of separation and the desire for autonomy from the rest of Mumbai. But is there such a thing as our “individual share” of the resources that our cities have to offer? What are the guidelines for evaluating the impact of a building on the city, not just in terms of its aesthetic appearance but also in relation to its ethical performance?

The third story was about the making of a film, Grow Your Own, which chronicles the progress of a group of traumatized asylum-seekers as they work their inner-city allotment gardens in Liverpool. The film was inspired by the research of a psychotherapist, Margrit Ruegg, who runs a refugee support center. Her experience had shown the therapeutic as well as the physical benefits of gardening. “Many [refugees] had left such places as Somalia, Angola and the Balkans in horrific circumstances,” says Carl Hunter, one of the producers of the film. “War had robbed them of their homes, their families and, in many cases, their identities. Margrit’s experience was that, in the confinement of a room with a desk and a chair, the refugees clammed up. But once she’d had the idea of giving them each a little plot of land, they were able, over time, to open up to her.” The story of these allotments is not simply limited to the lives of the refugees but is in turn entangled with the local community—with the tensions and conflicts between people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In tending to their vegetables on the plots, alongside their neighbors, the participants are able, in a modest and unsentimental way, to construct a collaborative and productive ground for communication and integration.
These three stories are all facets of the multiple realities that our individual and group actions shape in the context of the contemporary urban domain. Taken together, they illuminate Gregory Bateson’s argument that, in contradistinction to the Darwinian theory of natural selection, “the unit of survival is organism plus the environment.” A broader articulation of Bateson’s ideas can be found in Félix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies*, a profound yet concise manifestation of a relational and holistic approach to our understanding of ecological issues. Guattari’s ethico-political concept of “ecosophy” is developed in the form of three ecological “registers” (environment, social relations, and human subjectivity). Like Bateson, Guattari places emphasis on the role that humans play in relation to ecological practices. And according to him, the appropriate response to the ecological crisis can only be achieved on a global scale, “provided that it brings about an authentic political, social and cultural revolution, reshaping the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets.”

One of the most important aspects of Guattari’s argument concerns the interrelations between individual responsibilities and group actions. An emphasis on the role of the “ecosophic problematic,” as a way to shape human existence within new historical contexts, leads to a proposed reformulation of the “subject.” In place of the Cartesian subject, whose being is solely defined by its thinking, Guattari has “components of subjectification” who engage with real “territories of existence,” that is, with the everyday domains of their lives and actions. These alternative processes of subjectification are not rooted in science but instead embrace a new “ethico-aesthetic” paradigm as their primary source of inspiration.

Guattari’s position, developed at the end of the 1980s, is as much a criticism of a depoliticized structuralism/postmodernism that “has accustomed us to a vision of the world drained of the significance of human intervention” as it is an ethical and aesthetic project that promotes the “reshaping of the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets.” Such a radical approach, if applied to the urban domain, would result in a form of ecological design practice that does not simply take account of the fragility
The city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque. Even for those who seek to understand it with warmth, it is gone. Yet, the urban remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality. What the eyes and analysis perceive on the ground can at best pass for the shadow of the future object in the light of a rising sun. It is impossible to envisage the reconstitution of the old city, only the construction of a new one on new foundations, on another scale and in other conditions, in another society. The prescription is: there cannot be a going back (towards the traditional city), nor a headlong flight, towards a colossal and shapeless agglomeration. In other words, for what concerns the city the object of science is not given. The past, the present, the possible cannot be separated. What is being studied is a virtual object, which thought studies, which calls for new approaches.

—Henri Lefebvre^5 (1968)
of the ecosystem and the limits on resources but considers such conditions the essential basis for a new form of creative imagining.

Extending Guattari’s suggestion that the “ecosophic problematic” has the capacity to define a new form of human existence, we might consider the impact of the ecological paradigm not only on ourselves and our social actions in relation to the environment, but also on the very methods of thinking that we apply to the development of the disciplines that provide the frameworks for shaping those environments. Every discipline has the responsibility to constantly create its own conditions of progress—its own instabilities—and today it is valuable to recognize that we have a unique opportunity to reconsider the core of the disciplines that help us think about the phenomenon of the urban: urban planning and design.

The prevailing conventions of design practice have demonstrated a limited capacity both to respond to the scale of the ecological crisis and to adapt their established ways of thinking. In this context, ecological urbanism can be seen as a means of providing a set of sensibilities and practices that can help enhance our approaches to urban development. This is not to imply that ecological urbanism is a totally new and singular mode of design practice. Rather, it utilizes a multiplicity of old and new methods, tools, and techniques in a cross-disciplinary and collaborative approach toward urbanism developed through the lens of ecology. These practices must address the retrofitting of existing urban conditions as well as our plans for the cities of the future.

In recognizing the productive values of the relationships between reality and this project, the methods of ecological urbanism include the feedback reciprocities that Henri Lefebvre described as “transduction.” Take the case of the Promenade Plantée in Paris, the precursor of the High Line in New York City, where a disused railway line, part of which is on top of a viaduct, has been transformed—reused—as an urban park that traverses a variety of conditions and prospects. Given the undulating topography of the city, the promenade affords an ever-changing sectional relationship to its surroundings. As a result, the park produces a different experience of the city
compared, for example, to that of a Parisian boulevard. This is achieved through the discovery and construction of stark juxtapositions and contrasts that include the experience of the city from different horizon lines.

This type of urban recycling of the remnants of the industrial city benefits from the unexpected and given context of the site that needs to be remade, a context far from a tabula rasa. In these examples, the site acts as a mnemonic device for the making of the new. The result is a type of relational approach between the terrain, the built, and the viewer's participatory experiences. Other examples of this type of development include the Downsview competition in Toronto, and the Forum area of the North East Coastal Park project in Barcelona, designed by Ábalos and Herreros, which combines infrastructure and public space by juxtaposing a municipal waste-management complex with a new waterfront beach on the site of an artificial landfill.

A reference point for many such contemporary projects is the unbuilt competition entry for the Parc de la Villette by OMA. The architects claim that their 1982 proposal was not for a definitive park but for a “method” that combined “programmatic instability with architectural specificity,” a condition that would eventually generate a park. In essence, the design involved the conceptual and metaphorical turning on its side of the section of Manhattan’s high-rise Athletic Club, with its variegated program spread horizontally rather than vertically. This process also included a rethinking of the relationship between architecture and landscape, through a suppression of the three-dimensionality of architecture.

It is also no coincidence that OMA’s La Villette scheme in turn pays homage to another theoretical project, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City; but whereas Wright proposes to cultivate the surface of the country to provide the individual with a dispersed and equitable portion of land, OMA’s emphasis on congestion demands a gathering together—interaction—rather than separation. Broadacre City is a manifestation of anti-urbanity, while OMA’s “park” superimposes urbanism on the artifice of landscape. The operative design
procedures undertaken by OMA—or for that matter by Ber¬
nard Tschumi in the selected and subsequently built version
of La Villette—are suggestive of the potentials of an ethico-
aesthetic design practice that brings together architecture,
landscape architecture, and urbanism.

Despite these examples, one could argue that the traditional
divisions between architecture, landscape architecture, plan-
ning, and urban design are still necessary for the formation
and accumulation of specific disciplinary knowledge. But
each individual discipline is of limited value in responding
to the range and diversity of contemporary urban issues. The
pitfalls of acting in isolation become especially evident in the
extreme conditions of the most densely populated conurba-
tions around the globe, where it is much harder to identify
disciplinary boundaries. While a collaborative mode of work-
ing among various areas of design expertise is mandatory in
thinking about the contemporary and future city, the trans-
disciplinary approach of ecological urbanism gives designers
a potentially more fertile means of addressing the challenges
facing the urban environment.

Yet another key characteristic of ecological urbanism is its
recognition of the scale and scope of the impact of ecology,
which extends beyond the urban territory. The city, for all its
importance, can no longer be thought of only as a physical
artifact; instead, we must be aware of the dynamic relation-
ships, both visible and invisible, that exist among the various
domains of a larger terrain of urban as well as rural ecologies.
Distinctions between rural and urban contingencies can lead
to uncertainties and contradictions—calling for unconven-
tional solutions. This regional, holistic approach, with its
consequent national and global considerations, demonstrates
the multi-scalar quality of ecological urbanism. Much of the
knowledge necessary for this mode of design practice can be
gained from disciplines such as environmental planning and
landscape ecology, with an emphasis on biodiversity. But this
must be supplemented with advances from a host of other
fields, from economics to history, from public health to cul-
tural studies and (despite Guattari’s warnings) the sciences.
The insights found at the interface of these disciplines will
ultimately provide the most synthetic and valuable material for alternative multi-scalar design strategies.

The visionary Italian architect and urbanist Andrea Branzi has for many years espoused the advantages of a different approach toward the city—one that is not reliant on a compositional or typological approach. Rather, for Branzi it is the fluidity of the city, its capacity to be diffuse and enzymatic in character, that merits acknowledgment. In a series of projects that deliberately blur the boundaries between the disciplines (and are as much indebted to art practice as they are to agriculture and network culture), Branzi has proposed an adaptive urbanism based on their symbiotic relationship. A key feature of this type of urbanism—like the agricultural territory—is its capacity to be reversible, evolving, and provisory. These qualities are necessary in response to the changing needs of a society in a state of constant reorganization. In particular, the open areas that are no longer in use in many cities, such as New Orleans, could become productive domains where residences, workplaces, and spaces of leisure could be intertwined. Branzi’s curating of the urban territory is in some sense a form of art practice, where the parallelism with agriculture is presented in a highly conscious manner that is fully aware of its aesthetic and visual qualities. It is a form of nature that resists naturalism and uses its references to the agricultural territory in an operative and temporal way.

More specifically, the blurring of boundaries—real and virtual, as well as urban and rural—implies a greater connection and complementarity between the various parts of a given territory. Conceptually akin to acupuncture, the interventions in and transformations of an area often have a significant impact beyond perceived physical limits. Thinking simultaneously at small and large scales calls for an awareness that is currently unimaginable in many existing patterns of legal, political, and economic activity. One of the major challenges of ecological urbanism is therefore to define the conditions of governance under which it could operate that would result in a more cohesive regional planning model.
The network of relations among multiple localities at different scales provides a window onto the ways in which we could reconsider the implications of developments such as sprawl. According to a recent study, "New York City has 47,500 vacant land parcels totalling more than 17,000 acres, New York City faces an acute housing shortage, and the fastest-growing part of the New York area is in the Pocono Mountain of north-eastern Pennsylvania. There, far from the city core, forests are being cleared for big box stores, high-speed roads, and low-density subdivisions for long-distance commuters." What is the impact of this form of automobile-based living on the health of the community? One effect can be seen in the alarming rate of increase in the proportion of Americans who are overweight, from 24 percent in 1960, to 47 percent in 1980, to no less than 63 percent today. Surely the problem of obesity is fueled by the ongoing development of residential communities with so much emphasis on the automobile and so little encouragement of walking. Other factors include the general lack of investment in public transport in the United States compared to most European countries, where urban and regional infrastructures are seen as necessary provisions for the citizens.

These figures show the importance of density as a determining criterion of ecological urbanism. The importance of long-range planning, together with the potential benefits as well as challenges of denser, more compact cities, necessitates a much closer collaboration between the public and private sectors. Although an increasing number of private development companies, for ethical as well as financial reasons, are now espousing the values of sustainability, their concerns are often focused on the technical performance of individual buildings rather than on the larger territory. The articulation of long-range public policies defined by an ethico-aesthetic principle—on topics such as density, use, infrastructure, and biodiversity—will therefore require a greater imaginative involvement than has been the norm in the past.

Because the public sector deals with the operations and maintenance of existing cities, it bears primary responsibility for considering alternative ways of addressing these issues.
Many progressive cities already have active sustainability policies and procedures for the greening of the urban environment. But most of these plans are largely pragmatic, with a focus on energy reduction or the addition of green spaces. The question is: Could such efforts be transformed by the approach of ecological urbanism? Couldn’t the everyday elements, needs, and functions of the city be creatively imagined in new and unconventional ways that are not simply subjugated to the imperatives of the ecological?

British architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham, for example, argued that the form of a city matters little as long as it works. This for him was especially the case with Los Angeles, which he believed broke all the rules. Banham wrote and spoke brilliantly about the city, with the enthusiasm of a serious tourist. His *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* discovers the logic and the spectacle of this horizontally expanding metropolis. It is hard to imagine many other examples of urban sprawl today that match the sense of impermanence, mobility, and fantasy that LA presented in the late 1960s and early 1970s (and to some degree today). But Banham’s contextualization of the evolution of Los Angeles is itself a call for our openness to unexpected models of urban development—ones that are opportunistic in their modes of practice and use of available resources.

During the sixteenth century, the city of Rome had an ambitious plan linking the private initiative of watering the extensive gardens of the wealthy with the provision of external wall fountains for the mass of the people: water was both a necessity and a source of pleasure—as exemplified in later manifestations such as the fountains at San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane or in Piazza Navona. This is of course still the case today, but we have become more disconnected from the pleasures of water in our cities, oblivious to either its sources or its distribution. And this invisibility, this stealth quality, applies to most other resources and services as well. One can point to some contemporary parallels with the Roman example, such as the formation of pocket parks in the city of New York, or a range of major waterfront developments such as those in Baltimore, San Francisco, Monaco, Dubai,
Singapore, and Sydney, but on the whole we underutilize the unexpected opportunities afforded by ecological practices as well as the location, functions, and daily operations of maintaining our cities. Our approach to the city has become more anesthetized, lacking the sense of wonder and achievement that characterized many urban projects in the past. We still cling to the inheritance of an Enlightenment philosophy that, for example, regarded cemeteries in the midst of the city as unhealthy and unhygienic, something be banished to the outskirts at the first possible opportunity.

Given the limitations of space, perhaps it is not unreasonable that we do the same today, not just with the bodies of the dead but also with the waste of our own consumption. Who really has a sense of the mountains of garbage that are produced by most cities (unless you happen to have been in Naples during one of the frequent strikes by city workers): out of sight, out of mind. If we don’t see the garbage of our culture, both literally and metaphorically, then we are not confronting the reality of what that garbage actually says about us. One can only imagine that in New York City, with its enormous appetite for fast food and takeout, the relation between consumption and waste would produce some frightening statistics. But this interrelation can also be seen as an ethico-aesthetic, cultural, and environmental project, an opportunity based on viewing the garbage as a measure of who we are, rather than as yet another difficulty, a hindrance to be overcome technically. We must find new ways not only of dealing with the problems of waste management and recycling but also of addressing garbage more forensically, for traces, clues of what we are doing to ourselves. What kind of foods are we consuming, for example, and in what manner?

We have already witnessed an increasing interest in new ways of producing food closer to and within cities. The global transportation and distribution of food is being supplemented by more local growers, whose farmers’ markets create temporal events in many cities. But in some places, such as Havana, urban allotments and other forms of productive urban landscapes are being cultivated in a more large-scale and commercial manner than ever before. These developments
urban practices. For example, in the case of African cities, according to AbdouMaliq Simone:

while it is clear that the pursuit of structured plans, development agendas, and rational decision-making require economic supports and political will often lacking in impoverished societies, the apparent provisionality of African urban life also masks the degree to which residents capitalize on some of the most elemental facets of "cityness" itself... whereas planning discourses center largely on defining, consolidating, and articulating a given position in relation to others, the urban game for many Africans is to become nodes of gravity that draw attention not by standing still and defending niches, but by an ability to "show up," make oneself present, no matter the circumstances, in a kind of social promiscuity.12

The "informality" of many African cities points to the importance and value of participatory and activist planning by citizens. This type of bottom-up, "extraterritorial" urbanism, developed outside conventional legal and regulatory frameworks, often produces novel and ingenious solutions to urban life. It invariably also produces major problems, such as poor standards of health and hygiene. Can we not incorporate the lessons learned from the informal and provisional character of these cities into our future plans? Ecological urbanism must provide the necessary and emancipatory infrastructures for an alternative form of urbanism, one that brings together the benefits of both bottom-up and top-down approaches to urban planning.

What is a standard norm or value in parts of Africa may be unacceptable or uncommon elsewhere. The traditions, for example, of the growth of Islamic cities did not result in a singular and identifiable pattern of urban development. Rather, they were highly dependent on variable local contingencies such as climate and materials. The pitfalls of nostalgia notwithstanding, the uneven development of much of the Gulf region today, with its fetishism of the object, compares unfavorably to the principles and sensibilities of earlier traditions. The need for differentiation demands that ecological urbanism not take the form of fixed rules but promote a series of flexible principles that can be adapted to the circumstances and conditions of a particular location. Instead of
the wholehearted use of an imposed, imported form of planning, non-Western nations would benefit from a more careful reexamination of the conditions, rites, and progressive social relations that are more or less specific, but not limited to their region. Today we face a situation where there is an erasure of differentiation and a surprising degree of apparent sameness of conditions and circumstances connected to urban development in various parts of the world.

Gregory Bateson, writing some forty years ago, spoke of both the need for flexibility and the difficulties in achieving it. For Bateson, maintaining flexibility—of ideas, systems, and actions—was like being a tightrope-walker: to remain on the wire, you have to continually shift from one condition of instability to another, adjusting certain variables along the way (in the case of the tightrope-walker, the position of the arms and the rate of movement). But the skill of the acrobat also grows through practice and repetition—what Bateson calls the "economy of flexibility." This describes a set of practices that have survived through repeated use and come to mind spontaneously, without much introspection. And it is the dynamic interrelationship between flexibility and formed habits—habits that must be open to their own conditions of instability and change—that produces the ecology of ideas as an evolutionary process. The production of these ecologies and of ecological urbanism depends on both certain traditions of practical knowledge and the flexibility to respond to a host of networked physical and nonphysical variables.

Some designers have already shown how this might work in practice. French architect Jean Renaudie, for example, developed an architecture of social housing in the 1960s and 1970s that instead of the typical, anonymous high-rise block was based on a dense, organic arrangement of building clusters. These buildings both in the south of Paris as well as the south of France present a radical, visionary departure from the modernist idea of "existence minimum," which over time had become debased and pedantic. Renaudie designed his buildings according to a complex geometric pattern that placed as much emphasis on the outdoor areas—the terraces and gardens between the apartments—as it did on the apartments
Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.

—Giorgio Agamben (1998)
themselves. At first, such novel care and attention to the design of low-income housing was criticized by potential inhabitants, who argued that Renaudie's design was not in keeping with the ethos of the working class. Today, of course, the buildings represent a desirable community of mixed-income residences. The buildings themselves are also one of the best examples of the use of nature in a high-rise context. Their organizational structure demonstrates the benefits of the flexibility and diversity of relations between the inside and the outside as well as their inseparability from politics.

More recently, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a plan for the creation of a new sustainable Greater Paris, a domain that according to Sarkozy does not belong to a single party or group, but to everyone. Despite the political subtexts of his intentions, the idea of Paris as an environmentally sensitive and integrated economic region that can merge the city with its blighted suburbs and beyond is one of the most ambitious urban planning projects of recent years. To explore this agenda, a number of architects, landscape architects, and urbanists were asked to consider Paris as the sustainable city for the post-Kyoto era. Regardless of their individual merits, the projects presented by these teams, which were exhibited at l'Institut français d'architecture, provide concrete examples of what could be done. The early emphasis on projects rather than policies is a recognition of the value of projective possibilities for the physical development of the region. This type of speculative design is a necessary precondition for making radical policies that are embedded in imaginative and anticipatory forms of spatial practice.

A key feature of the overall plan is its focus on the pragmatic necessities and liberating potentials of mobility and infrastructure by proposing the creation of a 90-mile (145-kilometer) automated rail system that would circle Paris, connecting its business centers and suburbs as well as providing additional links to the heart of the city. Given the context of the riots in 2005, creating better connections between the suburbs and the city will be a step toward greater social mobility. It is in part the lack of connectivity of social housing slums that renders them as isolated "camps" whose inhabitants are "imprisoned"
within a larger territory. Whether this project will be able to survive its economic and political realities (who will finance it? who will rule the new metropolis?) has yet to be seen.

The ethico-aesthetic dimension of ecological urbanism—defined through the registers of mental, social, and environmental ecology—is directly concerned with the articulation of the interface, the liminal space, between the urban and the political. Unlike some other forms of revitalization, such as the City Beautiful movement in the past or New Urbanism today, this approach does not rely on the image, nor on social homogeneity and nostalgia, as its primary sources of inspiration, but rather recognizes the importance of the urban as the necessary site of conflictual relations. Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe makes a valuable distinction between “the political” and “politics.” She says that by “the political, I refer to the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies; while by politics, I refer to the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of confliction provided by the political.” Consequently, it is only when we recognize the political in relation to its agonistic dimension—the potential benefits of certain forms of conflict—that we can begin to address the central question for democratic politics. 15

This also implies that we have to pay greater attention to the role of the urban as the provider of spaces of difference and disagreement. Disagreement, though, is not about arguing, but what is being argued—the presence or absence of a common object or idea between the participants. According to this point of view, it is rather naive, overly optimistic, and ultimately confining to expect a society of total consensus and agreement. The satisfactions of urban life are in part the pleasures of participation in the diversity of the spaces of the other. And it is physical space that provides the necessary infrastructure for alternative and democratic forms of social interaction. As Mouffe insists, “Instead of trying to design institutions which, through supposedly impartial procedures, would reconcile all interests and values, the aim of all who are interested in defending and radicalizing democracy should be to contribute to the creation of vibrant, agonistic public
Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

spaces where different hegemonic political projects could be confronted."  

Similarly, the intention behind engaging new subjectivities and collectives through the frameworks of ecological urbanism is to engender greater opportunities for social and spatial democracy. While recognizing the significance of agonistic pluralism, the urban will also need to go beyond the purely political by acknowledging the ethical and the just. For Slavoj Žižek, "In this precise sense, ethics is a *supplement* of the political: there is no political 'taking sides' without minimal reference to some ethical normativity which transcends the sphere of the purely Political." Still others have warned us about the consequences of undue emphasis on the ethical over law and politics. Jacques Rancière has argued this in the case of Guantanamo—another example of a contemporary camp—as "the paradoxical constitution of an individual's absolute right whose rights have, in fact, been absolutely negated."  

Guattari's conception of an ethics of the ecological is an inherently political project with a commitment to countering the global dominance of capitalism. The recent financial crisis, with all its ramifications, suggests the ongoing need for a methodological reconceptualization of our contemporary cosmopolitan condition. In this context, it is now up to us to develop the aesthetic means—the projects—that propose alternative, inspiring, and ductile sensibilities for our ethico-political interactions with the environment. These projects will also provide the stage for the messiness, the unpredictability, and the instability of the urban, and in turn, for more just as well as more pleasurable futures. This is both the challenge and the promise of ecological urbanism.
Influenced in part by his collaboration with Roberto Rossellini on *Rome, Open City* (1945), Fellini's film exposes the harsh realities of postwar Rome, its inhabitants, and their mutual entanglements.


3 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972; reprint Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 491. Bateson goes on to say, "Formerly we thought of a hierarchy of taxa—individual, family line, subspecies, species, etc.—as units of survival. We now see a different hierarchy of units—gene-in-organism, organism-in-environment, ecosystem, etc. Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e., differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits."


6 Ibid., 151. "Transduction elaborates and constructs a theoretical object, a possible object from information related to reality and a problematic posed by this reality. Transduction assumes an incessant feedback between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations. Its theory (methodology) gives shape to certain spontaneous mental operations of the planner, the architect, the sociologist, the politician and the philosopher. It introduces rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia."


8 Ibid. Furthermore, the competition "seemed to offer the ingredients for a complete investigation of the potential for a European Culture of Congestion. Here was the par excellence metropolitan condition of Europe: a terrain vague between the historical city—itself raped by the greedy needs of the 20th century—and the plankton of the banlieue ... what La Villette finally suggested was the pure exploitation of the metropolitan condition: density without architecture, a culture of 'invisible' congestion."


11 The concept of "informality" is not limited to the cities of the developing world but is also at the heart of most industrial nations. This condition is often rendered more explicit through the impacts of urban migration. The Dardenne brothers filmmakers have recently dealt with this topic in *Lorna's Silence*, a film shot in the grim and gritty context of the Belgian city of Liège.


14 According to Agamben, this thesis "throws a sinister light on the models by which social sciences, sociology, urban studies, and architecture today are trying to conceive and organize the public space of the world's cities without any clear awareness that at their very center lies the same bare life (even if it has been transformed and rendered apparently more human) that defined the biopolitics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181–182.


17 Mouffe, "Agonistic Public Spaces, Democratic Politics, and the Dynamic of Passions," 104. In this context, it is interesting to consider the work of the contemporary artist/designer Krzysztof Wodiczko, who through a series of interactive instruments and urban projections has given voice to the other.


20 In contrast to multiculturalism that is a form of "plural monoculturalism," cosmo-politism "makes the inclusion of others a reality and/or its maxim." See Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 56.

21 According to Jacques Rancière, in its broadest sense aesthetics "refers to the distribution of the sensible that determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought. This general definition extends aesthetics beyond the strict realm of art to include the conceptual coordinates and modes of visibility operative in the political domain." *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 82.