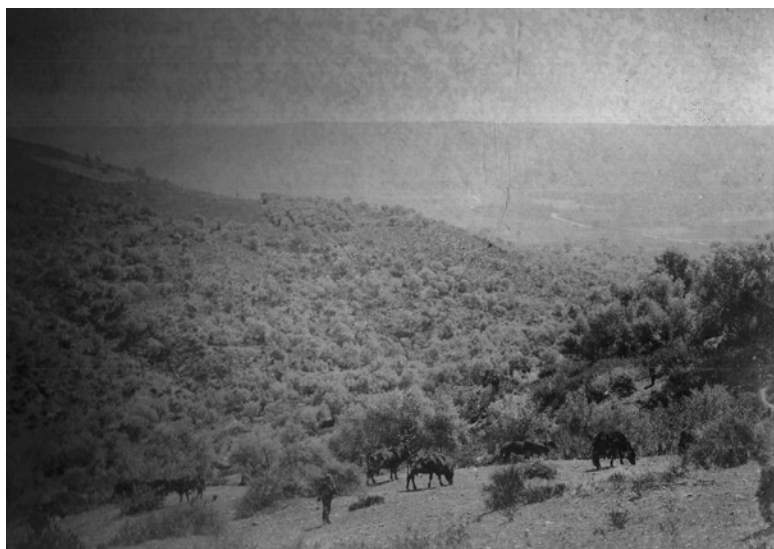


Unexpected Encounters: A Collaborative Pedagogical Experiment

Jacopo Leveratto

Abstract: Unexpected Encounters is the title of an ephemeral installation realized as a pedagogical experiment to create a public space for more-than-human subjects. The story of its design and construction is presented here along with the theoretical and methodological insights that informed its definition, to describe a possible and partial way of decentering design in light of a post-Anthropocene vision of the world.

Keywords: Design; Pedagogy; Biodiversity; Public Space; More-than-Human.



1.

The wood of Bosco Santo Pietro in an anonymous postcard of the 1910s.

What follows is a short story about a collaborative attempt at translation. The first translation takes shape as a pedagogical experiment that reworks an architectural design methodology for the post-Anthropocene, developed through philosophical and biological theories (Leveratto 2024). The second translates this experiment into a test that explores how construction might decenter design, shifting agency and experience toward more-than-human subjects (Wakkary 2021). On the one hand, it is the story of a self-construction workshop aimed at studying – at the specific request of the organizers – »new forms of connections between architecture and nature.« On the other, it is that of the design brief drafted in response to the workshop program, which was collaboratively and tentatively defined from a fundamentally biocentric perspective. This was based on the idea that the entire living environment has some basic rights to flourish, regardless of its instrumental value; therefore, architectural design can be considered as a way to imagine the world in terms of interspecies coexistence rather than specialization (Leveratto 2021). Thus, by encouraging the workshop participants to focus on defining an approach that considers the entanglement of ecosystems, the aim was to enable them to effectively build spaces where multiple species might find common ground for cohabitation. And this, in turn, implied putting into practice some steps to decenter design, which, despite several declarations and manifestos, still struggles to fit a clear definition.

Everything in this regard began in the summer of 2023, when a small group from the doctoral course in architectural design at *Politecnico di Milano* – one tutor and five candidates – were invited to take part in a one-week summer school, held annually in a rural village surrounded by an ancient forest in the Sicilian outback, with a very unusual solicitation.¹ The open call for post-graduate students, in fact, promoted an immersive learning experience focused on the self-construction of some site-specific installations already designed by tutors in a previous phase. By contrast, the invitation addressed to the group – owing to the candidates' specific backgrounds – arrived with no restrictions regarding location, size, or function. The only requirement was to develop an innovative research-based brief that would establish, through design, new possible relationships between the village,

1 The summer school was the Bosco Colto Campus, promoted by Makramé and directed by Marco Navarra. The group from the PhD course in Architectural Urban and Interior Design of Politecnico di Milano was led by Jacopo Leveratto and composed of Andrea Foppiani, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou.

the wood, and its inhabitants. This immediately asked the group members to interrogate their position with respect to the site, not only as designers but also as researchers, and to investigate the role of the forest in this precise dimension. Rather than seeing it simply as an economic resource, like in the past, nor only as a self-regulating complex system, like in a traditional ecological vision, they were asked to understand it as an ongoing process of multispecies world-making – one that required reconsidering these spaces as designed by and for a heterogeneous series of »sympoietic« communities (Haraway 2016). And this, in turn, required – before even thinking about imagining a project – the development of a situated form of knowledge of the specific context, as much as the length of the experiment allowed, in a way that resisted abstraction.

The group, in other words, purposely arrived in Sicily without a location or a function in mind, but only with the idea of »staying with« the place (*ibid.*), to learn about it in an immersive and situated way. For the group, the first two days of the workshop were devoted to surveying how traditional rural architectures spontaneously afford biodiversity, as identified through dialogue with local experts and residents. The idea was to analyze those structures that had, more or less intentionally, acted as a sort of »disturbance« in enhancing the diversity of a given ecosystem (Tsing 2015), and to understand, in turn, how to increase the affordance of the built environment for expanded forms of interspecies cohabitation. On the morning of the third day, after a collective review of the material collected, the group decided to start working on the more evident of these forms of disturbance – although eccentric to the main venue of the workshop – in order to enhance its incidental capacity to catalyze spontaneous relationships within the otherwise homogeneous environment of a small pinewood. An artificial and regular forest, this pinewood was not only quite arid in terms of life – the acidic carpet of pine needles prevented any form of undergrowth – but also very fragile, as this deliberately induced lack of diversity, once sought to reduce maintenance, made it highly prone to erosion and wildfires. Yet it featured an abandoned water station built in the 1920s, which, through the specific environmental, microclimatic, and chemical conditions it created over the years, had enabled the spontaneous emergence of different species usually absent in the area.

In summary, the group recognized the water station – with its flourishing biodiversity – as a sort of »objector,« however unconscious or unintentional, to the spatial development of the intentionally homogeneous,

monospecific pinewood. It thus became a means to explore connections not through direct production but through the »production of repercussions« (Stengers 2015). The group therefore decided to use the water station as a conceptual model for a graft intervention to increase the site's affordance for biodiversity – creating a micro-biotope for new interspecies relationships that could prolong its range. This was not achieved by replicating its architectural logic, based on the idea of containment typical of reservoirs, but by reversing it in terms of contamination. In doing so, they envisioned a public space for more-than-human subjects that could work as a platform for heterogeneous modes of spontaneous appropriation and new forms of multispecies cohabitation. All this began with the protection of the ground – the very basis of every biotic society – and unfolded in two directions. By recovering traditional techniques of water harvesting in semi-arid lands, in order to oxygenate and enrich the soil suffocated by pine needles, and by replacing its natural carpet with an artificial topography of recycled materials – selected for their variation in size, porosity, water-retention capacity, and acidity – to activate new environmental conditions. All components were assembled through a stochastic principle intended to create unexpected possibilities for contact – not to control outcomes, but to intersect as many trajectories as possible and let them react through design.

The construction phase then proceeded relatively smoothly once the concept had been clarified. Scavenging construction yards in the area for materials took just one day; by the end, a considerable amount of tuff, clay, concrete, and metal had been collected and transported to the middle of the woods. Afterwards, the site was prepared through a shallow excavation. The blocks, bricks, and tiles were then placed on the ground according to three different principles. First, to respect a certain diversity of materials when covering specific areas; second, to link different modules according to the possibilities offered by their properties; and third, to leave a gap between them – both to prevent the needles from touching the soil and to create space for new plants to grow. All this took shape as a small mineral square traced at the foot of the water station, conceived both as a new contact zone for more-than-human subjects – people, animals, plants, bacteria, and so on – and as a kind of stage for the relationships emerging among them. It was conceived as a small-scale model of a third landscape – a space deliberately undecided, in constant evolution, and open to multiple forms of cross-fertilization (Clément 2003). It was determined, on the one hand, by unconstrained patterns of natural growth and, on the other, by the recognition

that architecture could constitute a different form of construction – partial and inherently anthropocentric in its projective assumption – from that to which the candidates were accustomed. Soon after its completion, the intervention revealed its impact, albeit limited by the scale and duration of the intervention, as a whole new series of inhabitants began to appropriate the space.

Yet the installation did not last long: after a year, almost all the stones had been removed to build informal grills in the woods. Even though the architectural artefact had by then become unrecognizable, traces of its presence could still be read in the vegetation that – as hoped – had grown through the former gaps. From a certain standpoint, even the informal reappropriation of the stones – and thus the dismantling of architecture itself – can be considered as a further continuation of this tentative process of collaborative construction. The relevance of this story lies not in defining a spatial typology for more-than-human encounters, but in its representation of an episode – no matter how small – in the extraordinary collection of stories of mutual survival, scientific exchanges, and ecological animism mobilized by recent experiments in this field. Because, ultimately, designing more-than-human spaces does not simply mean building functional habitats for other species, but rather increasing the affordance to life of a given environment – enhancing its permeability, multiplying the possible ecological niches in which new relationships can spontaneously emerge, and, inevitably, accepting the inherent possibility of failure within such a process. This means recognizing that, although design is often necessary to initiate the process of making space for more-than-human subjects – however deliberate in its intentions – it frequently turns out to be entirely unintentional in its effects. It also suggests that the best way to create a contact zone for them may be to increase architecture's receptivity to biological diversity by simply making room for it, without any further purpose.



2.1.

Samples of the photographic survey documenting the unexpected affordance to biodiversity of traditional construction techniques. Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



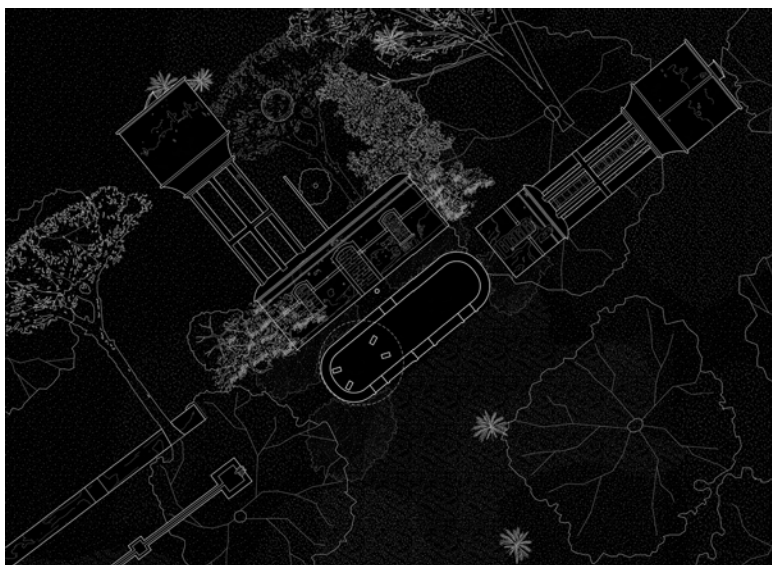
2.2.-2.3.

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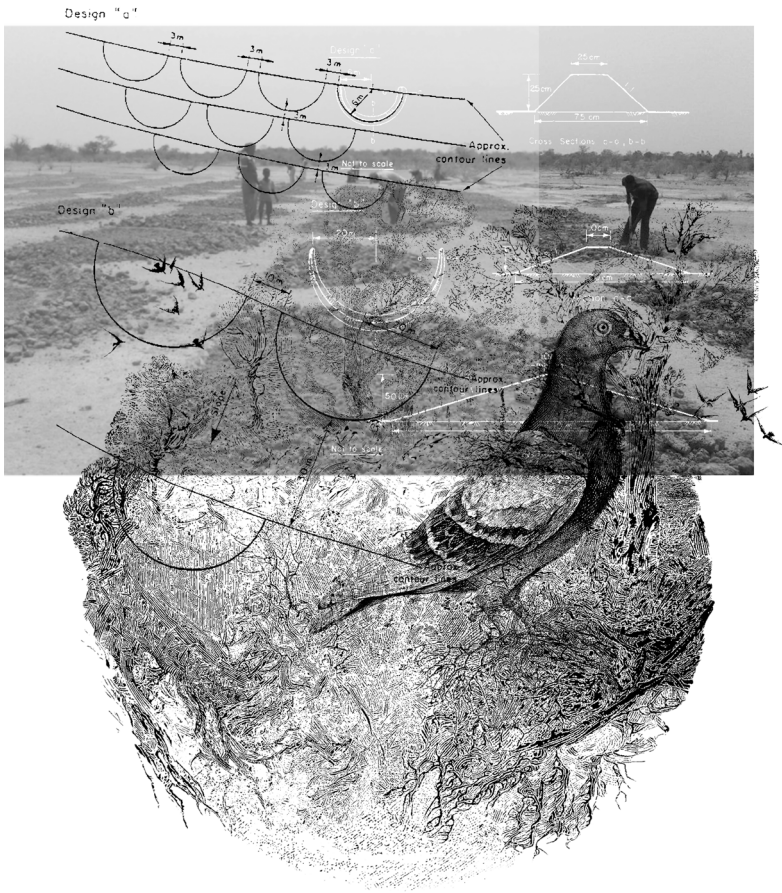
3.

View of the water station with the spontaneous emergence of different species usually absent. Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



4.1.-4.2.

Detailed survey of the water station. Digital survey by by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



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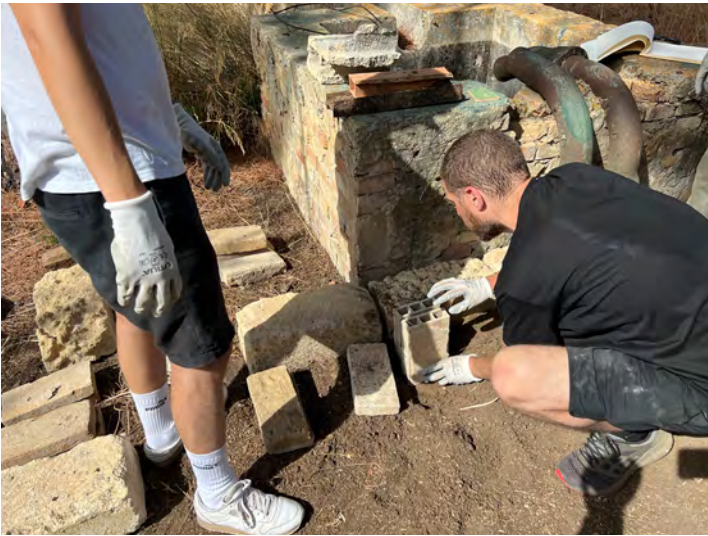
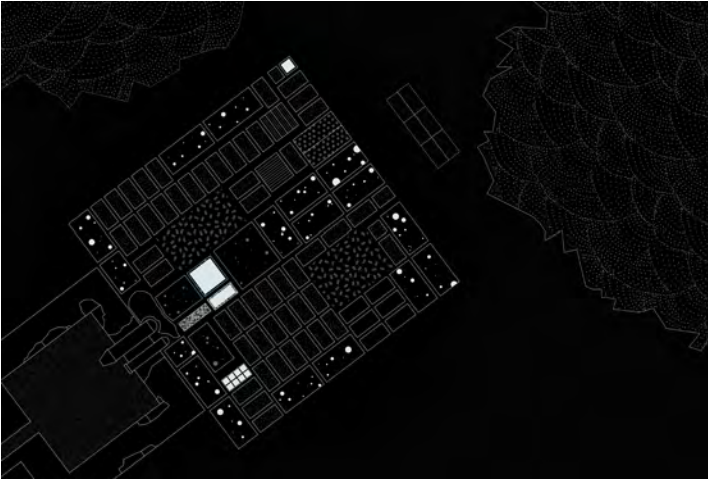
Concept of the design intervention. Collage by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



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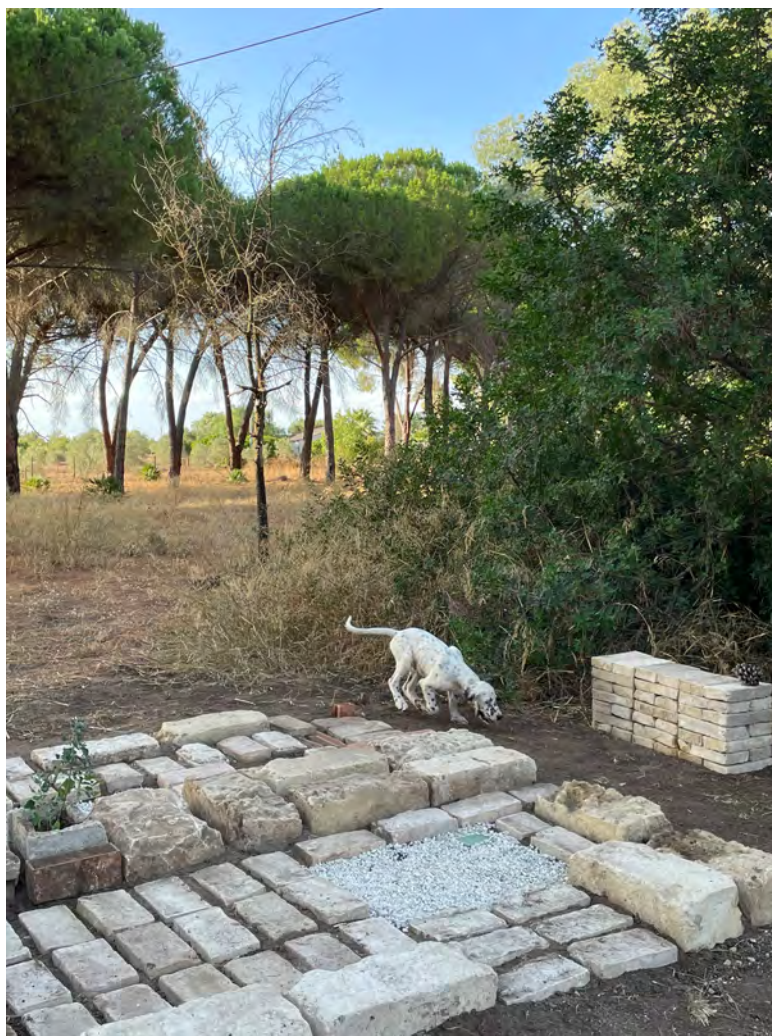
View of the recycled material collected in the abandoned construction yards.

Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



7.
Plan of the intervention. Drawing by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).

8.
View of the construction phase. Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



9.

View of the installation after the construction. Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).



10.

View of the site after one year with the vegetation grown in the former gaps of the installation. Photographs by Andrea Foppiani, Jacopo Leveratto, Michele Porcelluzzi, Rui Ren, Yuwei Ren, and Junliang Zhou (2023).

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