

# Art, Nature and City\*

## Report of the 8<sup>th</sup> Conference of Phenomenology of Urban Landscape

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The eighth meeting from a series of meetings in urban landscape phenomenology advanced studies by the title of “Art, Nature, and City” was held on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran aiming to identify the intersection of art, nature and city, understand art as a catalyst for the presence of nature in the city, make awareness of global achievements from the interaction of art and nature within the city, and assess the environmental art status. In line with this meeting, a specialized round table was held with the presence of Dr. Nathalie Blanc professor of the University of Paris Diderot-Paris 7, scholar in the field of social dynamics and space recomposition, and research director of LADYSS lab and also Dr. Seyed Amir Mansouri, head of landscape architecture



department in Tehran University, and the manager of Nazar Research Center for Art, Architecture, and Urban Planning.

The round table began with the questions asked about the discussed topics:

**Question |** Given that building wooden houses has a historical background is it considered intervention in nature if we build them or is it somehow an interaction between city and nature?

**Dr. Blanc:** The current movement regarding the

construction of these houses is mainly about tourism and its goal is to facilitate connection with nature. This action is thought-provoking in terms of ecological and aesthetics outlook and has been effective in creating connection with nature, trees, sky, and details like foliage from educational point of view, but hasn't become general yet. In communal gardens of Russia, despite the great participation of people, because of illegal licenses, the mayor banned the construction of these houses. But the ban has been removed during the last decade. However, in France, people are not allowed to build these kinds of huts in their gardens.

**Question |** How does beauty appear in nature

**Dr. Blanc:** The first person that commented about aesthetics in nature was Immanuel Kant that wrote a book in 1790 by the name of "Judgment Criticism" that for the first time discussed nature in the aesthetical framework. He searched for aesthetics and the sense of beauty in the observers mind and considered it as a subjective concept. He also believed that aesthetics of nature is more important and beyond artistic aesthetics. Between 1790 and 1960 few activities took place in this context and discussions were mostly about artistic aesthetics. After Kant, in the 1960s, Ronald Erzberg mentioned new issues from the nature's aesthetic tradition and during these years many other works and compilations have been done in this field.

**Question |** What is the difference between gardens and green spaces? Why do we have to bring up discussions about aesthetics if there are enough green spaces in towns?

**Dr. Blanc:** Le Corbusier has defined green spaces in his theory in 1930 as follows: "green space is a space which you watch from your window, and therefore it is a demonstration of nature". This definition is completely sensory and so ecological considerations are not included in it. Green spaces are different from traditional gardens the subject that Ms. Maryam Mansouri has noted in her article and introduced garden as a decorative visual space.

**Question |** According to the topics that Ms. Blanc has brought up in her speech about green and blue corridors, in your opinion, to what extent do atomistic and one-dimensional actions protect us from the dangers of nature and city separation?

**Dr. Blanc:** In countries which achieving environmental goals is one of their main goals especially European countries, results are obtained which are totally measurable. These statistics are regarding land use, amount of plant coverage across the city, and also protecting different endangered species of plants and animals. But today, the countries that are causing concerns are developing countries such as China and Brazil. For example in Brazil, the agricultural sector has occupied many natural spaces like the Amazon jungles. Because of their rapid development, these countries do not apply appropriate policies for preserving the environment. Whilst in European countries proper education is the main factor of success in the context of ecology. These small proceedings and as you mentioned atomistic, is extremely important for coping with the massive risks of nature's destruction. Studies show that major policies are consequent when small and local actions are allowed to emerge. Capitalism and the ideology of consumerism are considered as the major elements responsible for environmental destruction that has been imprinted in the minds of many citizens around the world.

**Question |** Due to the holistic approach of landscape architects towards nature and city that is in contrast with the atomist approach of ecologists, in your opinion, how can landscape architects play a role in this situation?

**Dr. Blanc:** The landscape architects are like members of an orchestra that have to find their position in this group and collaborate with other members such as ecologists, architects, sociologists and others in pursuing new policies regarding environmental conservation.

**Question |** To which organization is the management of ecological services affiliated in French cities; what are its activities, and what legal, organizational, and

executive rank does it possess? You mentioned the act of provoking people in your lecture and at the same time named the civil constructional companies as the main problem and obstructive towards achieving their goals. Now, what is your solution for provoking this section to do their activities?

**Dr. Blanc:** Management of ecological services in French cities is affiliated to municipalities and plays a crucial role. At first, the issues related to ecology were trivial for large companies that are responsible for building affordable housing, but later they showed sensitivity towards the case. Due to the fact that residents of these houses are low-income and the unemployment rate is high among the youth, the decision was to give the management of surrounding green spaces to them. Therefore they became interested in ecology. Indeed, these large companies don't pay attention to ecological topics unless at times when they want to make a new and reasonable character for themselves.

**Question |** If we consider sustainability as a reformer and a changing attitude towards the relationship between the environment and human beings and in regard to the fact that sustainable landscape is often mentioned in relation with ecological issues, what is the role of aesthetics in reaching this sustainability?

**Dr. Blanc:** A sustainable landscape is a landscape which is created collectively and with the help of citizen's participations. Aesthetics is the sensitivity that citizens have towards landscape. Thus enhancing the sensitivity of citizens towards environment and landscape conservation is the exact role that aesthetics plays in the road to achieve sustainability.

**Question |** Urban development naturally destroys parts of the environment. In Tehran, river valleys and highlands are also affected by these developments and many autobahns that are built. Is recovering the nature by destroying the autobahns and resuscitation of river valleys like what happened in Seoul Korea and similar cities the only solution and an inevitable approach? Do we have to use the same method for Tehran during the next 2 or 3 decades or do we have to look for other solutions due to the different

situation of Tehran?

**Dr. Blanc:** During the 4 days that I have spent in Tehran I noticed that actions/activities taken place in this city were not suitable and authorities haven't paid enough attention to the landscape and nature. I don't know if I can speak about the destruction or not, but generally, these actions/activities will be problematic considering the climate change that we are witnessing nowadays.

**Dr. Mansouri:** According to the conversations we had with Ms. Blanc about the actions taken place in Nahjlbalaqeh, Goftogoo, and other parks we must point out that these actions transformed the river valleys into sewage canals. While talking together, Ms. Blanc asked me a question about what will happen to these parks if a sudden flood occurs. My answer was that we hope if this flood occurs it could eradicate the wrong works done. Actually, like it or not, the nature will do its work.

**Question |** Creating green spaces, green and blue corridors, and also their impact on the improvement of life quality, preservation, maintenance, and development of these green spaces have been noted in this meeting. Due to the global issues relating water shortage especially in Iran, how can we preserve the green spaces while providing solutions for developing them and therefore sensing sustainability from the sustainable development point of view?

**Dr. Blanc:** Management of ecology is facing many problems. However ecological and water resource issues must be managed together to prevent further difficulties. Thus, having a compiled and comprehensive plan that considers all aspects including green and blue corridors, water resources and road infrastructure is extremely important. Eventually by the end of the questions, after adding explanations about aesthetics of nature from Kant's viewpoint, Dr. Blanc's statements, and also landscape architecture's and ecologist's approach toward nature, Dr. Mansouri asked a challenging question:

The special issue of one of the latest numbers of the

scientific journal of Manzar has discussed about the connection between ecology and landscape and has studied “landscape ecology”. According to this issue, ecologists are scientists, and study different topics by using scientific methods. Therefore their outlook of ecology and nature is a scientific and in other words objective perspective while the landscape architect’s viewpoint towards nature is objective-subjective. According to Ms. Blanc’s statements, Kant was the first person to speak about aesthetics. He believed that beauty is the human understanding of external phenomena and in criticizing his judgment he noted that the subjective viewpoint dominates the objective one and is the basis of philosophical musings. From 1960s new perspectives emerged which created an authentic view of nature and ecology. The interesting definition of sustainable development that was raised by Kant consisted of a full-scale work with strong subjective dimensions. Actually with this definition, ecology removed from its scientific position and is considered as a full-scale intervention and social element that is a subjective factor. According to Ms. Blanc’s sayings, beauty is indeed preserving nature as it is and to sense it as beautiful in its essence as it is. In this case beauty lies in the object and the mind is not involved in sensing it. The approach of ecologists is to conserve nature while in contrast; landscape architects believe that the human understanding of nature results in its protection and that beauty is in the observer’s outlook. Nevertheless,

we face a paradox in ecological aesthetics. Now my main question is that is the nature an object or is it considered a subject?

**Dr. Blanc:** This isn’t a paradox. In fact it is a power struggle within which landscape architects have been more successful at least in the urban management area which of course only applies in Europe. The truth is that landscape architects must be able to work with ecologists; given that ecologists mainly focus on the environmental functions, but landscape architects believe in planning and own a culture that ecologists do not have. However, landscape architects are stuck in the 18th century while ecologists, as environmental scientist, are mostly up to date. As a result, landscape architects must benefit from this science to enrich their achievements. Another topic noted in this question is the old story of subjective and objective that has been talked about from the 18th century. But the fact is that nowadays humans have left this contrast behind like other ones that they have faced up to now and even gone further from them. In the following, she also mentioned the philosophical conference of “New materialists” that will be held by UNESCO and attended by great scientists in France during the month of May/June. Holding this conference is indeed a global event and its main issue is that “how can we leave behind the ancient philosophical contrasts of France including subjective-objective and in other words the contrast between culture and nature?”

## Endnote

\* This roundtable has been organized at the 8<sup>th</sup> conference of Phenomenology of Urban Landscape which is held by Nazar research center and with the support of Tehran Beautification Organization.