The relationship between Man and Nature is a curious one. In modern rhetoric the two are often defined as being one and the same; Man is of Nature. And yet, as we increasingly admit the advent of the Anthropocene, one can’t help but wonder if in our current era, it might not be more accurate to describe Nature as being of Man. That is to say, in the case of the former, it is nature that created us, and in the case of the latter, it is us that creates Nature.

If nature is indeed of man, then a somewhat perplexing problem emerges, it becomes apparent that in designing a city, we need to consider not only the needs of man, but the needs of Nature as well.

Needless to say, this has not been the way cities have been designed in the past. It is certainly not the way London was designed. Bolstered by the Industrial Revolution and the then increasingly powerful British Empire, the nascent years of the city in its current form were established in an entirely different global framework. Ecological and environmental concerns simply did not factor, and nature was broadly understood as existing beyond the city. It is precisely this history of urban growth, which makes London ill equipped for the new modus operandi, London is simply not equipped to cater to the needs of nature.

Homo facit saltum

This year, we will ask students to confront a paradigm shift. When both the City and Nature become the project of Man, our architectural language must evolve to encompass both. As much as we are called to design space for human inhabitation, we must now also design spaces of natural inhabitation. These two now become one and the same, in which a new form of architectural enquiry, driven by evolutionary logic, emerges. The logic of a new form of urban architecture presupposes a new form of urban living.

Therefore, we will study not only the spatial transformation of the existing city, but also the performative ones in which new rituals of everyday life are created. According to the anthropologist Ernesto de Martino a ritual helps Man to overcome what can be defined as a “the crisis of presence” in which he feels that his own life is at stake. The stereotyped and repetitive behaviours of a rite offer a reassuring model to follow, constructing what can subsequently become a “tradition”. However, our current rituals and traditions are based on a false model, and so in asking urban inhabitants to live in different spaces, we consequently must ask them to live in different ways.

Unit 11 takes Charles Darwin’s mantra ‘natura non facit saltum’, meaning Nature does nothing in jumps, as its modus operandi, and proposes an alternative approach, namely that if nature does not act through jumps, then we must, and so we call ‘Homo facit saltum’. We will be working within the Canada Water Area Action Plan, in an effort to re-imagine how the existing cityscape can be transformed. This means that rather then work with building codes and regulations, we work with notions of season, the passage of time and the possibility of including new urban rituals into the existing urban fabric. As per the methodology of the unit, we will work heavily with collage, urban sampling and model making, and this year, we will introduce the problem of human inhabitation through the designing of rituals informing new form of living.
Canada Water

“When dreaming of the nation’s most romantic spots, Canada Water in southeast London is unlikely to come to mind”¹

This year we will be working in Canada Water. The area itself is really quite unique. It has a large stock of somewhat unremarkable housing, designed in the 1980’s, an underused and undefined town centre some fairly beautiful and unused wharfs and warehouses and a series of rather remarkable green spaces. The area generally lacks character, and yet if you ignore the whole and take it piece by piece, it is at times otherworldly – in the best possible sense. The council does have a plan to regenerate the area by 2026, however we feel that in many ways this plan aspires to be everything that a city of the Anthropocene should avoid. Therefore, this year we will ask students to study the area, and the proposed plan, and image an alternative. We will ask you to work with the existing building stock, to transform rather then uproot and to enhance rather then rebrand.

From Cattle Landing Place to Canada Water
Canada Water is located on the Rotherhithe peninsula in southeast London. Before development began on site in 1807, it was known as the ‘cattle landing place’ or Rederheia, from which the name Rotherhithe originates. In the early nineteenth century, the dock system was constructed on the site, and it continued to function well into the mid-20th century. During the Second World War, the site came under intense bombing, and was largely destroyed. It remained in this state of semi-dereliction until the early 1980’s when the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) began redevelopment of the site. Around 90% of the docks were filled in and some 5,500 new homes built, alongside new open spaces, retail, leisure and industrial development. (CWAAP p.11)
The Canada Water Area Action Plan

In 2008, the GLA identified Canada Water as an ‘area of intensification’, meaning essentially that there was room for growth. (This is not entirely surprising given that the area has remained largely frozen in time, 1980’s time.) Six years later, after numerous studies and consultation, Southwark Council presented the Canada Water Area Action Plan, which sets out a vision for how the area will be regenerated in the time leading up to 2026. The Canada Water AAP contains a total of 25 proposed site of redevelopment. These include, the Surrey Quays Shopping Centre, Surrey Docks Farm, The Printworks, Quebec Industrial Estates and St. George’s Wharf, amongst many others. The numerous ambitions of the AAP are organised into six main categories: shopping, transport, leisure, place, housing and community. Each of these categories is addressed in the AAP in an extensive section detailing the reasons for the proposed changes, the objectives and the relevant policies.

The Canada Water Area Action Plan Revisited

While the Canada Water AAP is extensive to say the least, it can be broadly described as ‘a how to guide for keeping up with the Joneses’. That is to say, that the CWAAP, essentially sets out a vision of how the area can reach the same level of development and growth as other more lucrative areas in London. The question, which we shall ask, is whether it is enough to simple keep up, or whether Canada Water, offers the possibility to completely rethink what it means to be a successful urban area within the 21st Century. (Incidentally, it is worth pointing out - we don’t think keep up is enough). In the context of the unit’s interest, we will ask students to work within the AAP, but to set as an objective that the area become a hallmark of what urban living in the Anthropocene can mean. This means that everything from shopping to leisure needs to be rethought in terms yet undefined within the AAP.
While the unit’s work is firmly grounded in Canada Water in London, it is important to understand that our creative drive comes from a far more global issue, namely the shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. The notion of engaging in geological eras maybe a little daunting but here are the basics that you need to understand. The last ice age ended 11,700 years ago. Now, the ending of an ice age, does not in itself warrant much attention, in so much as the constant cooling and thawing of the planet is a fairly regular event. In fact it has been happening on and off for the past 2.5 million years. So what makes this past ice age so interesting?

From our (humanity’s) point of view two important things happened. First, the epoch known as the Holocene began which saw a general warming of the planet. This included the retreat of glaciers (which at the time covered much of the northern hemisphere), and tundra giving way to forests. In short, the planet became a more hospitable place, at least for some species. This leads us to the second important change, the emergence of agriculture. Up until that point, if one were to look at the distribution of different species’ populations, homosapiens were fairly indistinguishable to many other species. True we did develop stone tools some 2.5 million years ago (or rather our close ancestors did) and some 300,000 years ago our ancestors started using fire on a daily basis. But in terms of population, we remained fairly unremarkable as a species, with a total global population of under 1 million. The beginning of agriculture brought an end to that. With farming came settlement, and with settlement came the possibility of more offspring, more specialised activities, growing forms of social organisation and the rest is history. By AD 1, homosapiens had reached a population of 17 million.

Skip forward to 2000, and the prevalence of the Holocene begins to be thoroughly questioned for the first time. In that year, Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen, with Biologist Eugene F. Stoermer argued that recent human activities had pushed the world out of the Holocene and into a new epoch - the Anthropocene. Is the problem clear? If all human development has happened under a geological and climate epoch which we are now seeing the end of, surely that means we have to evolve to survive in the current geological and climate epoch. Now, it is not entirely clear what the Anthropocene will entail, in fact much of our work in the unit will be dedicated to understanding what it will mean to live in this new global climate. One thing however is certain, that our modes of living, designing and interacting will fundamentally change. The functional city of the Holocene becomes defunct in the Anthropocene. The city becomes a project once again.
The Protagonists

Our work this year is driven by an unspoken tension, that between Man and Nature. Therefore in our methodology you will find that we often shift between the two protagonists. At times we will ask you to push the boundaries on what it means to be an urban dweller, we might ask you if the 9 to 5 is a reasonable way of living, or if the Tesco model is still relevant. At other times, we will ask you to move beyond yourself, and view the world from the point of view of a lowly weed, trying to find a place of your own in the uninviting world of man. The development of what we call environmental empathy will we hope generate entirely new form of living and space. Here are our two protagonists:

Man

Cities and places change faster than we can sometimes predict and draw. The unit looks at the city as a system of architectures made up of gestures, ceremonies and rituals rather than functions and programs. A careful reflection on what already happens, before architecture takes place, can anticipate future changes in the urban fabric. The urban fabric can be intended as a continuous system of interiors made by unpredictable and barely visible shifts. Small modifications happening to places on a day-to-day basis that, in a longer term, are able to radically modify uses and larger territories. The topic lies at the connection between the political, the social and the urban: the complex interrelation between these topics substantially needs an articulated disciplinary background and different methodologies of enquiry. The unit will use photography, and interviews as a survey instrument, technically able to testify and support the field research activity. Will ask to redesign plans, elevations and sections of specific sites, and to discern the various composition logics of the rituals. Space will be analysed from the point of view of the inhabitant. How does it moves, the gestures that accomplishes, to seek what might be the relationship established with the architecture, the everyday objects and the ritual.

Fausto Rossi,
Battaglia controvento
Nature

Within the confines of the 150m³ which I call home, you will find the following living creatures: 1 cat, 42 varieties of plants, and on average another 67 unknown varieties of living creatures which are either too microscopic or too terrifying to pick up and study. This is not odd. On average, we cohabit with approximately 200 other living things. This phenomena is entirely understandable when one starts to consider that as humanity progresses from being just another mammal, to being THE mammal, we claim more and more planetary territory for ourselves. So much so in fact, that more often then not, rather then trying to find a place for ourselves in nature, we find nature trying to find a place within the anthropocentric landscape. Which begs the question, why does it continue to be anthropocentric? Whether we like it or not, we are creating landscapes in which a variety of creatures have to live, they are simply unrecognized users, squatters if you like. Nowhere is this truer then in the modern city. As nature increasingly struggles to hold its own beyond us, we ask that architecture and the city begins to be seen as a place of nature, a place in which a fern forest, may be as welcome as a family of four. Space will be analysed from the point of view of the biota as well as the human. We will ask you to redesign buildings with a specified area for non-human inhabitation. We will ask you to think of the city as a shared space.
Tools

We have a fixed set of tools, which we will work with throughout the year, to guide you through the development of your project. What you will find is that we will often ask you to move between a variety of systems of thought, so for example, in studying the site, its existing biota and human users, and current built fabric, we will ask you to be rigorous, thorough and analytical. On the other hand, when we work with collage, or model making, or film, we will encourage you to embrace whimsy and find ways of making the unexpected a reality. Our aim is to provide you with a system of design which enables you to rethink the existing, in a way that builds on, and transforms that which has come before. Here are some of our tools:

Collage:
Throughout the year we will work with both group and individual collage. Each of these sessions will be based off of material gained during site sampling. Essentially the process is two fold, firstly everyone identifies areas of interest in the site and draws them at an agreed scale and dimension, and then these are photocopied and used to create new forms of spaces. These group collages are then further developed individually with out guidance. What the collage insures is that you work within the confines of existing architectural languages and modes of inhabitation. This is vital to the units work in that we aim to evolve or transform rather then create from scratch.

Research & Documentation:
One of the core principals of the unit is a thorough understanding of the existing. This means that we will encourage you to thoroughly study your site and its users, both human and biota. In terms of the human users, you will be expected to interview, film, and survey your principal. In terms of biota, you will be expected to track, collect or simply live with your principal. The aim here is to develop a body of research, which is first hand, meaning your experience, and understanding of the subject is direct and personal.

Model Making:
During the year, we will ask you to make a series of models. The first of these will take place in our Term 1 trip to Hooke Park and the second in our Term 2 trip. In working with models at a scale of 1:20 and 1:50, we hope to encourage you to think of the spaces, which you are creating as real buildable architectures. Resolving seemingly trivial questions such as how a given joint comes together or what materials you will use, can help progress your project in unexpected ways. We also intend that the models, which are made will contribute to the Technical Studies submission of third year students, and therefore will expect you to test, break and remake models throughout the year.

Orthographic Drawing:
While we always encourage a bit of hand drawings and sketching in your project development, our principal means of representation is orthographic drawings. This means that you will be expected to work back and forth between 3d drawing tools and 2D drawing tools. We will ask you to describe your project in a traditional set of drawings including plans, sections and elevations, and final representational drawings will be expected in axonometric. The tools will be used across the three terms, and we will help you work into your drawings to develop a clear and communicative portfolio.

Film:
Throughout the year, we will also ask you to work with Film both to generate and to represent your project. In the production of film we will guide you with references to Surrealist and Dadaist classics, and will also run a series of workshops with Yoni Bentovim, who is a Director and Producer of both mainstream and independent films. We will encourage you to work with a variety of mediums in your films including your own footage, drawings, stop-frame and model inhabitation.
Academic Schedule 2019/20

Methodology
Each term will have a clearly specified theme to which we will work. Term 1 will be dedicated to observation, term 2 to design and term 3 to inhabitation. Within these themes we will provide you with a clear brief every one or two weeks. The brief will provide you with a clear indication of what you are to produce and will suggest references and modes of operation to help you in your work. Each brief is designed to build on your previous work, and to move you towards your final project. There are certain techniques and modes of production, which you will find repeating throughout the year, these include sampling, mapping, model making, collage, film and technical drawing.

Term 1 - Observation
The first term is dedicated to helping you identify the key building blocks of your proposal. This means that several short briefs will be dedicated to studying the site, in terms of its architecture, its ecosystems, its current users and its current modes of inhabitation. Alongside these briefs, we will also run a series of collage sessions in which the material, which you observed and gathered in the site, will be re-imagined to help you develop an architectural proposal. We will have one week long trip to Hooke Park in which you will be asked to build your first propositional studies. By the end of the first term, we would like each student to have clearly articulated his or her own project brief. This means that you will be able to identify your site of intervention, your attitude to the context of the AAP, the biota and the group, which you would like to work with, and the new rituals of everyday life which your project hopes to inspire.

Term 2 - Design
The second term will be dedicated to designing your project, this means that whatever parameters you set yourself by the close of term 1, will be the parameters that you are working with in term 2. To start off, we will begin with a Rhino brief, in which you will be asked to begin modelling your site of intervention. The rest of the term will be dedicated to short exercises moving between architectural tectonics to the study of rituals of both biota and human users. We will have one trip to Hooke Park in which you will be asked to build one fragment of your proposal at 1:50. Within these short briefs, the question of how your proposed space responds to a variety of users, and time periods will be addressed. We will also be working towards the Technical Studies Submission over the term.

Term 3 - Inhabit
The final term will be dedicated to the representation of your proposal, this means that we will focus on producing key final drawings such as plans and sections, as well as producing visualisations, both as images and as films. Given that the question of nature and time, occupancy and ritual are so central to the unit, a large part of the term will be dedicated in how you best show the life of your project. This might be a matter of simply creating crowded images, or you may find that you will have to focus more on film or stop frame animations. These are questions that we will guide you in making through this final term. As a final brief, we will compile the different project, which you are created throughout the year to offer our own alternative to the Canada Water Area Action Plan, one that is fit for success in the Anthropocene.
Unit Trips, Workshops & Who We Are

Plan the planet
Throughout the first term, we will be participating in the Plan the Planet series, organized by the AA Public Programme. The series will bring together experts across different disciplines to discuss the current ecological crisis and how a new declaration of peace can articulate new strategies, policies, relationships and spaces. Confirmed guests include Rupert Read, Green Party Campaigner and Extinction Rebellion spokesperson, Tim Lenton, Professor of Climate Change, environmental and political activist George Monbiot, founder of Phytology Nature Reserve, Michael Smythe and many others. The series will take place every Monday evening of Term 1, and will form an important pedagogical aspect of this year’s work.

Bangkok rituals
The main trip of the year will take place in December, from the 9th to the 20th, where we will be going to Bangkok, to join the AA Visiting School run by Mark Cousins and Chittawadi Chittabongs. This year our trip will focus on the role of rituals in the city, asking questions such as: what are the role of rituals in Bangkok? How do the inhabitants of Bangkok participate into the urban rituals? What is the role as a spatial expression of a ritual? How do parks and other public spaces host rituals?

Hooke Park
Aside from this central trip, we will also arrange for two trips to Hooke Park to focus on model making. The first will be during Term 1, and the second will be in Term 2. Each trip will have a specific deliverable in mind, so you will be guided through the steps to ensure that Hooke is a productive time for each of you.
Matilde Cassani moves on the border between architecture, installation and event design. Her practice deals with the spatial implications of cultural pluralism in the contemporary Western city. Her works have been showcased in many cultural institutions, art galleries and were published in several magazines such as Architectural Review, Domus, Abitare, Flash art, Arkitecktur, Arqa. She has been a resident fellow at “Akademie Schloss Solitude” in Stuttgart and at the “Headlands Center for the Arts” in San Francisco. Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York hosted her solo exhibition “Sacred Spaces in Profane Buildings” in September 2011. She designed the National Pavilion of The Kingdom of Bahrain at the XIII Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012 and she was part of the XIV Venice Architecture Biennale with the piece “A celebration day”, recently acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She was recently involved in the Chicago Architecture triennale, Oslo Triennale and Manifesta12. She currently teaches at Politecnico di Milano, at Domus Academy and at the Architectural Association in London working with Unit 11.

Silvana Taher is an architect and writer. She studied Economics and Politics at UCL (BA) and Development and Planning (Diploma) at the Bartlett School of Architecture. She gained her Diploma in Architecture at the AA in 2011 and has since been teaching both Architecture and History and Theory. She has been unit master in both the AA and Central Saint Martins since 2017, and is currently in the process of setting up her own practice. She was a guest speaker at AAXX100 in 2018, and her writing appears in AA Files, Blueprint, AR, and AJ. She began developing the topic of ‘Second Nature’ as a mode of architectural production while she was in her final year of Diploma at the AA, and in 2017, after numerous years of research and development, proposed it as a teaching unit. The topic stems from a desire to work with the environment while somehow retaining the creative freedom and expression with is inherent in collage and bricolage.
Books

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