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7th Bernardo Secchi Working Seminar
**SPACE, LIFE, AND POLITICS:
COUNTER-PROJECTS AND THE
SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION**

28-29 October, 2024

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Tommaso Pietropolli (HRC-EPFL)

with Hélène Gallezot (FBA), Anna Karla de Almeida (HRC-EPFL)

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Initiated by **Fondation Brillard Architectes, Geneva**, and **Habitat Research Center, EPFL**, the **Bernardo Secchi Working Seminars (JBS)** began in 2015. An international, interdisciplinary forum, it addresses key urban and regional issues for ecological transition amid the climate crisis.

Dedicated to the late planner Bernardo Secchi (1934-2014), Professor at the Schools of Architecture in Geneva and Venice, the seminar honours his legacy. As an internationally acclaimed urbanist, Secchi consistently advocated **for a critical understanding and innovative action**, shaping the just and optimal development of the urban realm through his writings and projects.

Space, life, and politics: Counter-projects and the Socio-Ecological Transition

28-29 October, 2024

Marking Bernardo Secchi's 10th memorial anniversary, the JBS 2024 extends the reflection initiated in 2022, focusing on the ecological, social, and spatial transition of modern urbanized territories.

Delving into the interplay between socio-ecological Transition and radical adaptations in our practices, policies, and projects, the seminar aims to unravel the inherent tensions in navigating these complex dynamics.

« The metaphysical and methodological commitment of modern western urbanism is towards conceiving the project of the city and the territory as being part of a vaster biopolitical action »¹

Bernardo Secchi

As per Bernardo Secchi, European democratic culture forms the canvas for a “vaster biopolitical action”. This endeavour intricately shapes and transforms urban spaces with the goal of safeguarding, educating, and emancipating its people. Consequently, the planning and design of the 19th and 20th centuries are characterised as techno-scientific and creative extensions of this enduring tradition.

Today, this contemporary project concerning space and life, often pejoratively labelled “biopolitical” by Michel Foucault², grapples with profound economic, social, and environmental challenges such as threats to ecosystems from excessive extraction, societal divisions, escalating spatial injustices, weakened economies, and global health risks. **Redirecting designers' focus on space, life, and politics becomes a pivotal approach to devise planning and design tools for a habitable, equitable, and healthy planet amidst these complexities.** Enabling this socio-ecological and spatial transition necessitates a fresh start, marked by a fundamental conceptual shift favouring novel connections among space, life, and politics.

Working hypothesis

The seminar aims to share, challenge, and delve into the hypothesis that a Transition project demands a distinct epistemological and operational framework. **As the social and ecological Transition shapes a novel “biopolitical regime”, now is the opportune moment to contemplate alternative initiatives³—counter-projects.**

A counter-project goes beyond merely proposing an alternative hypothesis to an existing project; it entails a redefinition of its objectives, structures, and implementation strategies. Significantly, counter-projects can introduce entirely different systems—alternative worldviews—thus legitimising positions currently

1. Secchi, B. (2014). *A tradição europeia do planejamento: culturas e políticas*. In E. Ribeiro Peixoto, M. F. Derntl, P.P. Palazzo, R. Trevisan (eds.), *Tempos e escalas da cidade e do urbanismo: quatro palestras, XIII Seminário de história da Cidade e do Urbanismo (SHCU)*. Brasília: Universit  di Bras lia.

2. Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Coll ge de France 1977-1978*. In Senellart, M. (ed.) (2007). Palgrave Macmillan.

3. See Vigan , P. (2023). *Il Giardino Biopol tico. Spazi, vite, transizione*. Torino: Donzelli (fr. transl. Vigan , P. (2023). *Le jardin biopolitique. Espaces, vies et transition*. Geneva: MetisPresses; engl. transl. Vigan , P. (2024). *The biopolitical garden. Space, Lives and Transition*. Barcelona: Actar).

marginalised by mainstream or dominant discourses. They serve as plausible alternatives, not due to their avant-garde nature, but because they represent radical hypotheses crafted in spatial contexts, offering insights into how we can reimagine our evolving urban life and landscapes during times of profound transformation.

Counter-projects establish the groundwork for contemplating alternative lifestyles, a crucial endeavour in this Transition period where traditional projects and ideas are still progressing toward fruition. Active involvement in dismantling paradigms, decisions, and projects misaligned with today's risks and priorities is imperative. The future shaped by such projects frequently diverges from the aspirations for a habitable, just, and healthy future inherent in current discussions. Therefore, an engaged approach is necessary to reshape the trajectory towards more fitting visions of the future.

Themes and axes

Hence, the seminar delves into concerns such as socio-spatial conflicts, strategies for mitigating climate change, counteracting its impacts, and the emergence of new ecologies in modern urbanised regions. All these considerations pivot around the fundamental issue of design and its execution.

The seminar is organised into three main axis:

- **Concrete utopias and alternative representations.** Throughout history, visions, utopias, and future imaginaries have been instrumental in dismantling prevailing paradigms and reimagining the world from a different perspective. Through tangible, measurable, and debatable utopias, this axis facilitates an exploration of the necessary steps to progress in a specific direction. It delves into visions and utopias as effective tools for counter-design.

- **Counter-actions and activism.** This axis scrutinises contemporary moments and design dynamics that don't necessarily wait for consensus to act, but instead strive to achieve it through the power of exemplarity. Here, the counter-project adopts a perspective centred on direct actions, operating at various scales and engaging diverse stakeholders. Counteractions play a pivotal role in shaping and advancing policies and regulations, challenging the inertia often associated with planning and established procedures.

- **Radical policies.** The third axis focuses on navigating the space defined by current conditions. It contemplates projects that not only operate within existing policies but also challenge and stretch them to their utmost limits, aiming to counter them from within. Addressing the need to adapt to current conditions, this axis explores radical policies capable of advancing and cultivating counter positions.

Space, life, and politics: Counter-projects and the Socio-Ecological Transition

28-29 October, 2024

October 28, 2024 13.00 welcome and registration

13.30 introduction

session 1 | concrete utopias

14.00 **Silent giants: the land as counter-project**
Robin HUEPPE

Operational Crisis
COLLECTIF (IN)VISIBLE & Oscar BASNIER

Counter-memories, counter-narratives, and counter-utopias
Edmond DRENOGLAVA

14.45 round table 1

15.30 coffee break

session 2 | alternative representations

16.00 **Can Nature be seen? Constructing Alternatives (Representation) to the Anthropocene**
Damien GREDER

Foregrounding Miningscape as a planetary commons
Sabina FAVARO

Exploring gestures of re-presentation: methodologies of a counter-gaze
Noémie LECOANET

16.45 round table 2

17.30 coffee break

18.00 visit exhibition “Water Designs: l’eau dessine la ville”

18.30 **conference finissage “Water Designs”**
Paola Viganò, “Water as a subject”

19.45 dinner with the participants

October 29, 2024

8.45 welcome and registration

9.00 **keynote #1**

Maria Kaika, "Turning up the Heat: Urban Political Ecology for a Climate emergency"

10.00 coffee break

session 3 | radical policies

10.30 Transition in the "in-between". Are we entering a counter-project?

Flore GUICHOT

Counter-project for the city: the Future Improvement Zones

Matthias LECOQ

On the possibility of a landscape biopolitics

Davide MONTANARI

From New Villages to The New Urbanization Policy: China's Biopolitical Project

Qinyi ZHANG

11.30 round table 3

12.30 lunch break

14.00 **keynote #2**

Kristiaan Borret, "Embracing Complexity"

15.00 coffee break

session 4 | counter-actions

15.15 Experience in politics, experiment in the city, experimentation in public policies

Marie BERTRAND

Liquid Traces: Make live and let die in the Mediterranean sea

Katerina INGLEZAKI

Rural Transitions, Rural Disobedience

Konstantinos VENIS & Federica Natalia ROSATI

Intersectionality and the Right to the City: the counter-occupation of space and nature in Hong Kong

Gianni TALAMINI

16.15 round table 4

17.30 conclusions

Space, life, and politics: Counter-projects and the Socio-Ecological Transition

28-29 October, 2024

October 28, 2024

session #1 - CONCRETE UTOPIAS

14.00 Robin HUEPPE

Doctoral Fellow, Institute
of Landscape and Urban
Studies - LUS
ETH Zurich (CH)

Silent giants: the land as counter-project

Although architectural historiography has paid renewed attention to Berlin's mass housing estates, it has often emphasized building design and construction. However, writing the land back into their history is crucial for understanding the governance regimes and intersecting temporalities. This study compares two neighborhoods in former East and West Berlin through the accumulated layers of adjacent rubble mounds, Kienberg and Lübarser Höhe, using a transductive methodology that blends analytical, field-based, and creative methods. By looking through the mounds' history at the housing estates, the study aims to illuminate the central arguments of land-oriented exploration: The geo-climatic, ecological agency of land precedes and shapes the architectural project, often exploited by institutions exercising biopolitical control over it. Yet, the land simultaneously becomes a medium for ruderal ecologies, including humans, to resist institutional power.

14.15 COLLECTIF (IN)VISIBLE

Gaspard Basnier, Léo Diehl-Car-
boni, Lawan-Kila Toe Paris (FR)

Oscar BASNIER

Paris (FR)

Counter-memories, counter-narratives, and counter-utopias

If utopias are considered inoperative, it is because they seem to reflect a world apart. Ideal societies are thus both "good places" (eu-topos) and "non-places" (u-topos). However, it is necessary to move beyond this view, which is limited to the etymology of the concept. First and foremost, utopia is a tool for and in the name of reality; it is a mode of critical production that brings conflict into our reality. In other words, utopia teems with new seeds for inhabited spaces, bringing our construction habits into crisis in the face of surrounding catastrophes (environmental, social, etc.). Its production raises uncertainties, revealing possibilities for new actions. Utopia, therefore, does not emerge out of nowhere: its practice is situated, formulating other beginnings grounded in a concrete reality. Utopia sheds light on other architectural, political, and social narratives; it offers new ways to confront the world. Considered as operative, its production unfolds an architectural perspective less focused on the material structure and more open to the invisible imaginaries that shape our way of "dwelling". Building utopia, therefore, is not a task reserved for architects: it is the work of the entire community inhabiting the reconfigured space.

14.30 Edmond DRENOGLAVA

Adjunct Assistant Professor &
PhD Candidate in Architecture,
College of Design, Architecture,
Art, and Planning,
University of Cincinnati (US)

Counter-memories, counter-narratives, and counter-utopias

This study interrogates the unbuilt proposal of the Memorial Youth Centre "Boro and Ramiz" (1970) in Prishtina, Kosovo, designed by Ljerka Lulić, Jasno Nosso, and Dinko Zlatarić, framing it as a radical counterpoint within the aesthetic tenets of the Radical Architecture Movement. Through its creative programming, visual research of social realities, hypertrophic size and complexity, environmental stewardship as well as entire typological order, it pertains to the domain of polyvalent avant-garde superstructures. By leveraging architecture as a medium of rebellion, "Boro and Ramiz" reshapes spatial narratives to directly confront the Yugoslav model of social organization—in essence, the state itself—characterized by hierarchically controlled cultural policies under its financial patronage. The "Boro and Ramiz" proposal, therefore, underscores architecture's role as both critique and counter-memory, offering a utopian alternative to particularly those state-prescribed narratives – concluding that, if realized, might have paralleled Kosovo with other European radical architectural endeavors.

October 28, 2024

session #2 - ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

16.00 Damien GREDER

PhD candidate in International Relations and Political Sciences,

Geneva Graduate Institute - IHEID (CH)

Can Nature be seen?

Constructing Alternatives (Representation) to the Anthropocene

This contribution unpacks Western representation practices' historical and philosophical implications, particularly the geometrical central perspective, in shaping the human-nature relationship. The central hypotheses propose an Aristotelian formal causal relation between the naturalisation of representation during the Renaissance and the Anthropocene.

By embedding a state of detachment, domination, control, and limitless exploitation of the environment, the central perspective not only influenced art history but also enacted a dualist perception that enabled the current environmental crisis.

The contribution finally argues for an epistemological change in representation practices that could acknowledge and deviate from the biases identified and thus suggest strategies for the root causes of the Anthropocene to be addressed.

16.15 Sabina FAVARO

School of Architecture and Planning/Wits Mining Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (ZA)

Foregrounding Miningscape as a planetary commons

Toxic coloniality, extractive ecologies, and racial capitalism produce a socio-ecologically degraded and divisive planetary garden. One among multiple harmful by-products of anthropogenic labour is the extractive (read toxic!) commons produced through materials extraction essential to humanity. Paradoxically, mining practices are simultaneously contributing causes to climate change, waste production, land change, and biodiversity loss through intense resource consumption, emissions, pollution, and ecological degradation, and to their mitigation by sourcing essential materials for renewable energy. In the critical materials era, the increasing demand for extraction makes the mining question one of the most pressing issues in the planetary transition. The paper argues that an affirmative biopolitical project entails countering the necropolitics of material extraction. The radical proposition advanced is for the miningscape and its toxic commons to be recognised as a planetary commons where exploring how to enact collective planetary stewardship and governance to ensure the habitability of the planetary garden.

16.30 Noélie LECOANET

PhD Candidate in Architecture and Science of the City - EDAR Laboratory of Urbanism - Lab-U EPFL (CH)

Exploring gestures of re-presentation: methodologies of a counter-gaze

How can we transform, through re-presentations, the territory into a subject? Arguing for a shift in how we understand and represent territories, this proposal suggests considering the territory as a subject (Vigano, 2023; Corboz, 1983) challenging the anthropocentric, future-focused lens. Current practices overlook the socio-ecological complexity of the Earth, denying the co-presence of other living beings and the landscape's space-time (Berger, 2009; Vigano et al., 2017). Focusing on Life as a whole, the idea is to reimagine cartographic tools to reveal territorial coinhabitabilities and copresences through hybrid, plural narratives. Calling for methods that capture the landscape's spatial thickness, the proposal reads critically current abstract and simplified cartographies (Wylie, 2015). Practical exercises, such as Atlases of Landscapes in Transitions, explore rePresentations, using the Map Making gestures through fieldwork, legends, and collage to engage with territorial complexities. The proposal therefore argues for alternative paths to mapping counter-gazes, revealing landscapes as dynamic spatio-temporal entities, transforming our understanding of space. Implying our conditions of coexistence.

October 29, 2024

session #3 - RADICAL POLICIES

10.30 Flore GUICHOT

PhD Candidate in Architecture and Science of the City - EDAR, Laboratory of Urbanism - Lab-U EPFL (CH)

Transition in the “in-between”. Are we entering a counter-project?

In recent decades, the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) model has played a central role in ecological transition efforts within metropolitan areas. However, the socio-spatial and ecological limitations of this selective, hierarchical approach are becoming increasingly clear. This paper focuses on the asymmetrical Great Geneva cross-border region, analyzing research-by-design proposals that address these transition challenges. It explores how hybridizing the TOD model could form the basis for a new framework of territorial cohesion, promoting socio-spatial and ecological balance. The analysis critically engages with the concept of territorial solidarity, to shift from infrastructure-based modes of action to the reorganization of space, life, and governance.

10.45 Matthias LECOQ

Associate researcher, Institut de Gouvernance de l'Environnement et Développement Territorial - UniGE (CH)
Founder and director of AnTHroPocenopolis - ATHP

Counter-project for the city: the Future Improvement Zones

Future Improvement Zones (FIZ) are innovative urban spaces where residents and local stakeholders come together in a popular assembly to imagine and implement concrete solutions to shape the city of tomorrow. Inspired by landsgemeinde, these assemblies take place in the public space in the form of citizen rituals, reinforcing participatory democracy. FIZ updates these traditions while redesigning the public space around the assembly, creating symbolic places where the community comes together on a constructivist vision of urban planning. This process offers citizens a space-time dedicated to their civic development. In practical terms, FIZ subvert the principles of Business Improvement Districts (BID) - which are focused on privatising the management of public space - to turn them into a collective tool at the service of the community. The assembly meets every year in line with local plans and with the aim of programming and transforming public space.

11.00 Davide MONTANARI

PhD Candidate in Architectural, Urban, and Interior Design - DASTU Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano (IT)

On the possibility of a landscape biopolitics

By exploring the nexus between space, life, and power, this contribution aims to foreground the entanglements between spaces of water and their biopolitical implications, by looking along one of the most exploited rivers of Italy: the Po River.

In light of the mounting risks posed by the crisis of water, a range of overlapping and contradictory visions has emerged. Specifically, the restoration project for the Po River - contained within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) - assumes the character of one of the most intriguing occasions to stress the complex nexus between space, life, and politics. This investigation operates with the hypothesis of reframing the renaturation plan as a counter-project in order to deploys the possibility of Water as an active biopolitical subject, able to erode the binarism which structured the Western system of thought and reveal the socio-techno-natural character of Italy's longest body of water.

11.15 Qinyi ZHANG

Architect PhD (IUAV Venice)
StudioPaolaViganò,
Brussels (BE)

China's current rural urbanization in the Yangtze River Delta: a bio-political project

The Yangtze River Delta is today a vast “carpet” of continuous urban settlements, where urban and rural spaces seamlessly blend. In recent years, two key policies—the National Population Development Plan (2016-2030) and the Beautiful Villages initiative—have brought about significant transformations within this region. Implicitly functioning as a bio-political project, these policies not only reshape the rural physical environment into an urban one, but also detach farmers from their land and agricultural activities, turning them into urban residents. This paper examines this current bio-political project, which is not implemented through a tabula rasa approach but a transformation of basic spatial elements, such as roads, fishponds, and peasant houses. Additionally, the project faces significant challenges, particularly in relation to population decline and the ongoing environmental crisis. The paper further compares this bio-political endeavor with Mao's concept of the “complete human being” and offers directions for a new bio-political project.

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Keynote #2

Kristiaan BORRET

Visiting Professor - Gent University
Bouwmeester (maître architecte) of
Brussels Capital Region

Embracing complexity



Kristiaan Borret is Chief Architect (Bouwmeester) of the Brussels-Capital Region, Belgium since 2015. He is Visiting Professor of Urban Projects in the Department of Architecture & Urban Planning, Ghent University, Belgium (2005-). He was Chief Architect of the City of Antwerp, Belgium (2006-14) and is Quality Supervisor of Oostenburg for the City of Amsterdam, Netherlands (2017-). His area of interest maintains a close relationship between theory and practice, between the public and private sectors, between policy and design, and between architecture and urban planning. He has carried out theoretical and conceptual research into contemporary transformations of the city, urbanity and public space, including within the interdisciplinary research of the Ghent Urban Studies Team at Ghent University, and has contributed to urban development, public space and infrastructure projects in Belgium, the Netherlands and France.

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October 29, 2024

session #4 - COUNTER-ACTIONS

15.15 Marie BERTRAND

PhD Candidate in Architecture and Science of the City - EDAR Laboratory of Urban Sociology - LASUR, EPFL (CH)

Experience in politics, experiment in the city, experimentation in public policies

This counter-project is the idea of the permeability of research and politics brought about by urban space as an agent for the renewal of local political experience. Faced with the imperative of democratic and ecological transformation, Marie Bertrand proposes to investigate new epistemological paradigms for research and modes of action for public policy. This attempt to set things in motion is at the heart of her research project : as an elected representative in Annecy, France, she is investigating her own local political mandate as deputy mayor of a major city. Through this ethnographic approach, the political representative provides an opportunity for research and provokes dialogue between different fields of sociology, so that the 'dream of a new alliance between science and public policy' (Berger & Carlier, 2022) is no longer a means but an end.

15.30 Katerina INGЛЕZAKI

*PhD candidate
Instituto Superior Técnico
Lisboa, Interactive Technologies Institute
Bauhaus of the Seas consortium*

Liquid Traces: Make live and let die in the Mediterranean sea

On the 9th of June 2023, the Adriana boat departed from Libya to Italy with around 750 individuals in distress and without drinking water, only to be declared as sunk by the Greek government on the coast of Pylos that night. The Pylos shipwreck is the most recent and deadliest shipwreck of the so-called humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. This contribution debunks the dominant stereotypes around migration, the migrant as a victim and the migrant as an invader. By analyzing the current cartographic representations of undocumented migration, we come to realize how the racial binaries between migrants and Europeans perpetuate the illusion of a unitary Mediterranean cultural identity through design. As an oceanic territory, the Mediterranean embodies the anthropogenic acts of colonization, domination, and expulsion. Mapmaking built upon power relations can become a counter-action to write histories from below as a way to contest beyond the white, Eurocentric West.

15.45 Konstantinos VENIS

Architect, Independent Researcher, Co-founder of Hyper-scapes Research Office (HRO)

Rural Transitions, Rural Disobedience

This contribution anticipates and reports on the intensification of wind energy power plants across the mountainous regions of the Apennines in Italy. Through counter-mapping and practices of assemblage, it reveals how, facing increasing industrial wind plants near areas protected by habitat directives and parks, local communities have been activated. Since 2023, they have been creating a network of situated knowledge, both technical and non-technical, to build collective awareness around the biodiversity-rich territories where these plants are planned. In response to an energy transition model that does not question the limits of current development paradigms, Hyper-scapes Research Office in collaboration with Crinali Bene Comune counters the mechanisms of extractivism to which the fragile mountain ecosystem is subjected. Understanding the terrestrial politics of energy production and urging current power structures to engage in discussions at the table with the communities.

Federica Natalia ROSATI

*PhD Candidate,
LEMA Urban and Environmental Engineering Department
University of Liège / Faculty of Architecture, ULB - Bruxelles (BE)*

16.00 Gianni TALAMINI

City University of Hong Kong (HKG)

Intersectionality and the Right to the City: the counter-occupation of space and nature in Hong Kong

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