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Kitsch Landscapes:
Storytelling of the Architectural Project

Elisa Monaci writes, "the term and concept of "kitsch" is studied, in its current guise and meaning, in order to deploy it as a tool and as a design method for new categories of project narration."

Kitsch Landscapes: Storytelling of the Architectural Project

14 'Guilty Pleasures'

Title

Kitsch Landscapes: Storytelling of the Architectural Project

Author

Elisa Monaci

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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the theme of “Guilty Pleasures”, studying, above all, the scale of the domestic, as it relates to the role of nature in contemporary design. The narrative theme at the heart of this essay is the nodal centre and theoretical starting point from which we rethink and redesign contemporary spaces. In particular, the term and concept of “kitsch” is studied, in its current guise and meaning, in order to deploy it as a tool and as a design method for new categories of project narration. Thereafter, using as examples projects and artistic experiences, called “kitsch landscapes”, from Damien Hirst’s Venice 2017 exhibition, act as a design counterpoint to the theoretical examination and open up the configuration of the project storytelling for domestic space, architecture and landscape.

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ESSAY

In the contemporary field of projects, there is an increased insertion of extraneous spaces, objects, constructions and figures into mundane everyday places. The underlying cause of this increase is people’s desire for more space, and for a greater degree of freedom in their private lives, so that they may incorporate a larger portion of the world into their homes. This has become even more evident in the wake of the current global pandemic that is reconfiguring the how we approach public and private spaces. While public space has become increasingly unliveable because of the deteriorating air quality, private space hosts a larger share of what was once considered public uses and has become a refuge. As a result, the pleasures of architecture have become increasingly privatized; architectural practice has become partly guilty and partly salvific. On one hand, people have started to rediscover their homes, to make them the place of their adventures, to inhabit them differently than usual, contaminating different uses with each other and overturning the expected spatial functioning in order to make them adhere to their newfound pleasures and desires.

Our homes, or dwelling spaces, have become our world, an all-encompassing space of everyday life, into which public life has also forcefully entered, making it visibly obvious that our spaces are no longer adequate, as they do not respond to the needs of our lives, and are not the spaces for a new millennium. Although architectural experiments have reconfigured many of the spatial dynamics of the domestic, the spatial narrative in most building constructions has remained unchanged over the last fifty years because of its link to primary functions: e.g., sleeping, eating, body care. New project narratives, therefore, would be able to guide the redesign of current spaces according to desires and dreams, bringing together the real and the imaginary, valorising a place beyond what its reality in order to enhance it through a different storytelling.¹ This is already happening spontaneously by people rethinking their domestic space as demonstrated by introducing new uses such as videoconferencing or sports in the house.

In this sense, Alessandro Mendini’s words seem to predict the current situation:

"The Modern typological tradition proposes an extreme simplification of its functions, synthesising them in rooms for cooking, eating, sleeping and washing. All the incredible interweaving of the other thousands of sensory and mental functions is forgotten, stiffened within this architectural grid of reference, elaborated on the concept of elementary survival, typical of the productive schemes and serial standards of contemporary societies. But man, urgently needs other kinds of survival², a subtle survival: instead of living room, kitchen, toilet and bedroom, we all need new kinds of rooms and living quarters: perhaps rooms for swimming, for

¹ See Inaki Ábalos, *La buena vida: visita guiada a las casas de la modernidad* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2000). Ábalos investigates other ways of conceiving and living the home through a number of archetypes in opposition to the classic Modern one. The transition from the slogan “a house for all” to “a home for each one” is important to introduce the varieties and mediations between individuals and their surroundings.

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4 Alessandro Mendini, Per un’architettura banale, in Idem, Progetto infelice, edited by Rosamaria Rinaldi (Milano: RDE Ricerche Design Editrice, 1983), 106-107.

5 Matei Calinescu, Five faces of modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 234-235.

keeping flowers, for telecommunication, for reading books. Elementary functions can be absorbed, as sub-problems, into sophisticated functions, one can eat in the swimming room, cook in the greenhouse, wash in the telecommunications room."³

Accordingly, Mendini’s theory on banality and the ordinary suggests the need to include in space multiple agents and possible configurations capable of redesigning themselves, even to the detriment of the project itself. The project is, therefore, no longer a totalising absolute, but an orchestration of needs, uses and desires that take form in a place. In this sense, Mendini claims the right to use falsehood in an authentic way that therefore concerns a sincerity of intentions, an unmasking of the production of the project. It includes the error and the recognition of a non-absoluteness of the proposed solutions; this type of project he calls “de-project” which works most on the action of subtraction instead of addition. Subtraction takes place at the level of reducing the stylistic features and a-priori of architecture in order to move towards a more complex, involving and inclusive dialogue in a reality that has become full of contradictions and with numerous new authors in the field for which new narratives are needed. He continues:

"It is also useful to talk about the project in its opposite aspect, i.e. in its possible meaning of ‘de-project’. In the sense that it is important to think of a negative development of the project, where the hypothesis is that of removing rather than accumulating, that of being ephemeral rather than encrusting, of not contributing to constructive saturation and destruction by excess. While design has always meant adding something new to the new, de-projecting would mean putting oneself in the perspective of a radical reversal of the trend in architecture and the formalised environment."⁴

What then are the actions and questions that designers must ask themselves in the face of these contemporary conditions? Can new narratives be the tool with which to rethink our spaces? Can we trace in the users’ actions of redesigning their space a need to establish new stories? In order to approach the theme of project narration, I use the concept of “kitsch” as a parameter whose oscillatory nature allows me to highlight certain new narratives that are emerging in the contemporary world and enables us to bring together the high and the low, the popular and the cultural, architecture and society.

Various authors (such as Clement Greenberg, Hernst Broch, Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco) have been confronted with the arduous task of defining the term kitsch, which has no single rigid definition or etymological origin. To summarise the definitions and meanings, I propose using a quote from Matei Calinescu that partly encompasses the many meanings of the word:

"Some authors believe that the German word derives from the English ‘sketch’, mispronounced by artists in Munich and applied derogatorily to those cheap images bought as souvenirs by tourists, especially the Anglo-Americans (cf. *Gero von Wilpert, Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1969). According to others its possible origin should be looked for in the German verb *verkitschen*, meaning in the Mecklenburg dialect ‘to make cheap’ (cf. *Trübners Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, Berlin, 1943). Ludwig Giesz in his *Phnomenologie des Kitsches* also mentions the hypothesis that links kitsch to the German verb kitschen, in the sense of ‘collecting rubbish from the street’ (*den Strassenschlamm zusammenscharren*); kitschen has indeed this specific meaning in the southwestern part of Germany; it can also mean ‘to make new furniture from old’. These three main etymological hypotheses, even if erroneous, seem to me equally suggestive of certain basic characteristics of kitsch. First, there is often something sketchy about kitsch. Second, in order to be affordable, kitsch must be relatively cheap. Last, aesthetically speaking, kitsch may be considered rubbish or junk."⁵

“Guilty pleasures” is concerned and matches with the kitsch theme in the sense that kitsch was originally born as a way to escape from the conventions and from what was considered the high culture and art. One of the first analysis of kitsch in relation to art was developed by Clement Greenberg in his essay, *Avant-Garde*

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7 On the complex relationship between kitsch and society, see Marco Belpoliti, Gianfranco Marrone, *Kitsch* (Riga 41, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020).

8 See Susan Sontag, *Notes on 'Camp'*, in *Idem, Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Straus & Giroux, 1966); Medina Lasansky, *Legislating Kitsch: The Plastic Lawn Flamingo. Portrait of a Commodity*, in "Thresholds", no. 15, 1997, 60-63.

and Kitsch. In it, he states

"Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough-simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*:popular, commercial art and literature. [...] Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits."⁶

Currently, my research starts with an analysis of the major contributions written about kitsch, mainly in the artistic and literary fields. I have done this in order to extrapolate the terms and the questions that could compose the narratives that kitsch establishes in contemporary architecture. In this essay, I highlight some preliminary results and focus on two narratives that are guiding design today that allow me to identify theoretical and project trajectories for spaces and architecture.

Apart from art and literature, it has been in 20th century architecture, that kitsch was most widely deployed through Postmodernist design and criticism (e.g. Charles Moore, Alessandro Mendini, Michael Graves, Ettore Sottsass). More recently, it seems to have been become an exclusively negative term leading contemporary architects to rarely ever make it their theoretical banner. In fact, there is a kitsch, which we may call "traditional", that today has been appropriated by society. As a result it is not only recognised as kitsch and it is actually sought after because of its very nature; this type of kitsch no longer has the deliberate and irritating effect that it had from the 19th century to the end of the 20th century. For example, garden gnomes or front-lawn pink flamingos, popular domestic kitsch embellishments, are emblems of the American class struggle, and are objects that have become fashionable today and attracted a cult-like appreciation. The garden gnomes (or dwarf) have been reified, a process by which the object has now been cleared through customs of approved consumer tastes, as evidenced by Phillipe Starck's design for Kartell. Moreover, kitsch was linked to the concept of middle class, which has been lost in recent decades, thanks to class struggles and the loss of rigid subdivisions of social classes. As a result, we now have multiple cultures, which means that kitsch is defined differently depending on the point of view of that particular social condition.⁷ It is in this particular historical and social condition that the concept of camp emerges. It is in the United States since the 50s that Susan Sontag theorizes that the word *camp* is a symbol and adjective referring to a cultural trend that makes some banal and everyday objects the symbol of the poor class and of some social topics such as homosexual rights.⁸ The mass-produced, low-cost objects, such as the plastic flamingos, became a status symbol full of cultural meanings, precisely because they were banal, easily accessible and available in stores. Camp, or kitsch, cultivates the banal until its recognition and awareness, overcoming and becoming its opposite. In recent period, we find the 2019 exhibition-event at the Metropolitan Museum of New York, *Camp. Notes on Fashion*, in this case the English world makes direct reference to Susan Sontag's essay on the theme of *camp* in sociology, art and cultural debate and once again brings into focus the debate on the term and its meanings in the contemporary world.

However, some characteristics of kitsch from the last century endure in the contemporary world. Today, kitsch is used as an adjective to describe something or someplace when there is a gap between the initial intention and its material reality, no matter if we are talking about objects, space, culture, or politics (social networks have spread the mechanism of kitsch in the staging and fiction that distorts reality and serves to give a certain virtual image of oneself and, conversely, the different ways and looks with which this is received by others). It follows that kitsch has an effect that depends on several factors: it depends on viewpoint; it differs according to the historical period; and geographical and cultural context. Moreover, kitsch does not have an absolute effect but rather results from the differentiation between reality and expectations that is registered by those who look at it. This may be partly by design, but most of the time this difference is unintentional, and it is precisely this characteristic that produces the condition of kitsch.

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9 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977, 2nd ed.), 19

10 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1979).

The unintentional resultant that moves the condition of kitsch is detected in particular at the scale of private space and dwelling. The desire to go beyond the reality of one's own dwelling to make room for one's own intimate pleasures, is an aspect that has become much more pronounced with the global pandemic in which the interior of the home is experienced only by its inhabitant. Issues of hospitality, entry and reception have disappeared and been replaced by intimate and personal pleasures. In architecture there is always a gap between initial design intent and reality or what, if anything, is realised. The kitsch parameter bridges this difference: it accentuates or strengthens the gap by using storytelling. The kitsch parameter allows people to mediate without ruptures between the paradigms of the proposal and the realities. Kitsch provides alternative ways of generating space, responding to realities that are decreasingly "authentic" but conversely increasingly specific, reconciling with memory of the original through a detached and critical attitude. This shift between reality and imagination had already taken hold during Postmodernism, in particular with Robert Venturi's theory and the need for a complexity and contradictory of design:

"The desire for a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions, is not only a reaction to the banality or prettiness of current architecture [...]. First, the medium of architecture must be re-examined if the increased scope of our architecture as well as the complexity of its goals is to be expressed. [...] Second, the growing complexities of our functional problems must be acknowledged. [...] But even the house, simple in scope, is complex in purpose if the ambiguities of contemporary experience are expressed. This contrast between the means and the goals of a program is significant. [...] Although the means involved in the program and structure of buildings are far simpler and less sophisticated technologically than almost any engineering project, the purpose is more complex and often inherently ambiguous."⁹

The main difference that emerges in the contemporary, as compared to the middle of the last century, is that then the primary focus was on the "skin" of architecture (its façade, its symbol, its appearance in relation to the city), whereas today, the kitsch parameter is increasingly concerned with architectural interiors with the aim of revising spatial conventions. Kitsch is therefore the tool that allows us to identify the different narratives working inside the gaps between imagination and reality and, between desire and everyday life.

For these reasons, the sphere in which kitsch mostly operates is the scale of the private dwelling, within which personal needs can have a greater degree of freedom, in opposition to the urban and public space where social attitudes and behaviour are generally governed by traditions, norms and conventions produced by a more controlled environment. The domestic sphere should have a restful nature in terms of comfort, it is conciliatory, it puts one at ease, because it merges the practical needs of everyday life. For this reason, each user or owners attempts to modify their private environment to suit it to their preferences, these re-significations of the space determine the gap between the immaculate vision of the project and its life. Into the gap between design intention and everyday life "guilty pleasures" come into play. In this case, the kitsch project corresponds to a more open-ended design. It enables the subversion of reality contrary to the pre-established and the already planned; kitsch therefore celebrates the material possibilities incorporated by the design of the banal, of standardized, the service places, of all residual spaces, and the aggregated. In *Collage City*, this dichotomy is analysed at the urban scale, as the authors establish a spatial relationship between the Modernist priority of a totalized project vision and compare it with the opposite approach in which the city form emerges in an open-ended organic process. Today, the holistic vision of the architect is simultaneously confronted and connected with the vision of *bricolage* (work carried out with one's own hands using means other than those of the trade expert).¹⁰

"In place of an idea of universal management based on what are presented as scientific certainties there is also a private, and a public, emancipatory interest (which, incidentally, includes emancipation from management); and, if this is the situation and, if the only outcome is to be sought in collision of interest, in a

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12	See Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2006).

13	See Damien Hirst, Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable, edited by Elena Guena, (Venezia: Marsilio, 2017).
14	An important antecedent of the exhibition is the chain of 28 museums in various countries called Believe It or Not, created by Robert Ripley in 1918. These interactive museums bring to the public's attention unfamiliar and unusual aspects, anecdotes and stories across many disciplines (nature, science, art, history, technology). While the museums' slogan can be summed up as "incredibly hard to believe, but undeniably true", Hirst's exhibition plays on the unrecognizability of the news' source and the concealment of its falsehood. See, Believe It or Not books from 1931-present.

15	See Il falso documentario di Damien Hirst sbarca su Netflix. Le reazioni del pubblico, in "Artribune", 12 January 2018 and Damien Hirst's New Venice Show in an "Unbelievable" Journey to the Depths of Bling, in "News Artnet", 5 January 2018, about visitors' complaints about the fake story on social media.
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permanently maintained debate of opposites, then why should this dialectical predicament be not just as much accepted in theory as it is in practice?"¹¹

Kitsch is therefore about cellars, improperly sealed verandas, storage rooms, corridors, the desire for an extra room, terraces covered with PVC and plasterboard: this too is architecture, but more precisely, it is architecture about pleasure. The contemporary era is characterised by supermarkets of furniture and space, by reality shows for furnishing and renovating homes: Ikea showrooms set up fictitious rooms in which every problem is neatly resolved by providing *a priori* spatial answers to problems found elsewhere. Later, transplanted to real dwellings, the Ikea room is hybridised with the furniture inherited from the grandmother, with the walls' materiality and with the spatial nature of the dwelling that was envisaged for other furnishings, and for other ways of living. Somehow, it is time to design our *junk spaces*¹² of everyday life, mixing them with memories, souvenirs, all within the project's limited scale. The characteristics and vicissitudes of reality, made up of a galaxy of behaviours, are placed at the basis of the project and they are used as a design material. The kitsch project becomes anti-dogmatic because it is no longer driven by absolute a-priors but instead derived from life's everyday compromises. Kitsch is also found in design actions that collide and rebel against a hyper-designed space that impede the freedom of movement. Kitsch narratives design through the useless, the bizarre, the crazy, through the personal memories and by putting their own family memory into a space form.

Having articulated what kitsch is and does, I next investigate the theme of "kitsch landscapes" in which narration is a tool to solve or enhance the architectural project. The first paragraph will start from an experience in the field of art that allows me to connect some terms of the definitions of kitsch to the design process and to the theme of space project. While the second paragraph will enter the field of architecture to outline a narrative of the project, which concerns the mixing and *camouflage* between architecture and the vegetal elements (from now on summarized with the term *nature*).

3 A Story of the Contemporary: Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable

To introduce the theme of narration in everyday life, it is useful to look at the experience that emerged during the exhibition *Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable* by the artist Damien Hirst held at Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana in Venice in 2017.¹³ The exhibition constitutes an important step in reconfiguring the canonical conception of an art exhibition, its visit and the concept of what is a museum by focusing on the narrative experience, more or less truthful, imbued with irony and symbols – staged and designed. Although the term kitsch is never explicitly mentioned, the exhibition constitutes a useful case study of narration and its impact on the reconfiguration of contemporary themes, such as reproduction and simulation, fake (in particular fake news), the musealization of "pop" symbols, and of narratives.¹⁴

The exhibition showcases treasures unearthed from an underwater discovery of a shipwrecked vessel in the 2nd century. Perfectly preserved, except for some beautiful, coloured coral, the statues and objects of many different scales are displayed in two museum sites accompanied by captions listing contemporary building materials, brochures, tour guides telling the discovery story and videos showing the underwater recovery of the artefacts. The exhibited objects are entirely fake, reproduced especially for the occasion, with its falsity suggested in particular by the presence of well-known works such as the bust of Nefertiti or statues of Disney characters. The operation relies, in part, on the lack of attention placed today when visiting a place or a museum (many visitors passing through it quickly have fallen victim to its ruse).¹⁵

It also concentrates on the theme of fake news: the criticism and newspaper articles on the subject do not

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17 Examples include the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas or the Museum of the City of New York. In the absolute copies inserted on a one-to-one scale, details are added or tampered with in order to make the copy more readable and comprehensible (e.i. the purchase agreement for Manhattan at the Declaration of Independence reproduced in minute detail but in English instead of the original Dutch).

18 See Umberto Eco, Nel cuore dell'impero. Viaggio nell'iperrealità, in Idem, Dalla periferia dell'impero. Cronache di un nuovo medioevo, (Milano: Bompiani, 1977).

19 See The Why Factory, Copy Paste. The Badass Architectural Copy Guide, (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2017).

20 Reference is made to Walter Benjamin, Aura e choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media (Torino: Einaudi, 2012) but most of all to Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) where he talks about the aura of the piece of art as a phenomenon of distance related to the desire of people to bring things closer, involving its progressive disappearance in space.

overtly reveal the exhibition’s game, bringing the theme of stories and their narration back to the centre of the issues.¹⁶ Importance is therefore given not to the veracity of the story but to the willingness to believe and the need of contemporary society to find new mythologies and stories to tell. The exhibition highlighted the need to focus on the relationship between a fact, its context and space; it reveals that we are often led by social norms to conceive that information contained within museums as reliable and as incontrovertible reality. Instead, the exhibition forfeits the possibility of believing in the fable or allowing oneself to be deliberately mocked. Reference is made in particular to Umberto Eco’s thesis on the production of a hyperreality that overcomes the imaginary. In his study of American culture, Eco defines a new procedure, as opposed to “facsimiles”, which he calls “fac-diverse”, i.e. a place, a city, an object or a document that reproduces reality different from how it really was, reproducing the past or a falsified antecedent so that it acquires meaning in the present or allows the narrative to unfold.¹⁷

In everyday life we see the presence of reproductions of antecedents that never existed and therefore are completely new, such as urban landscapes with vegetation that would not “naturally” grow in that context, or tropical plants in city flats. These actions can be defined in a similar way to Eco’s exposition as “fac-diverse” because they are the putting into space the desire to create a story by tampering with or partially falsifying the antecedent that would have generated them. Comparing the Hirst’s exhibition with Eco’s text, it is possible to see how the reasoning on the construction of an imaginative story is pushed to its extreme consequences in the exhibition exemplifying precisely the narration of a “fac-diverse”.The story, competes with reality by replacing it, not only generating the exhibit itself and its works, but also codifies a new type of narration poised between fiction and artifice.¹⁸

The operation echoes a common practice involving copies of works of art in major international museums and cities. Often, what we are looking at is usually a replica, the original is kept in unexpected interiors and places, to allow continuous reproduction of copies in time and space. Here, reference is made to the *Serial Classic* exhibition held at Fondazione Prada in Milan in 2015 on the themes of the original, the copy, and imitation in the Roman eras of the Republic and the Late Empire. At the same time, in the Venetian venue of Fondazione Prada, the *Portable Classic* exhibition was on display, which instead investigated the miniature reproduction of classical works of art, hence reproduction with change of scale. Both these staged exhibits bring back to the centre two of the main components of kitsch: serial reproduction and change of scale with the aim of divulgation, increasing its symbolism while at the same time of desacralisation of memory and remembrance within everyone’s reach. The theme of copying and the copy-paste operation in architecture is elaborated at length in the volume *Copy Paste. The Badass Architectural Copy Guide*,¹⁹ in which, using photomontage programs, some of the most famous architectures are transferred, shrunk or enlarged, into completely foreign contexts, creating circuits of meaning that open up new ways of thinking about architecture and new approaches to the discipline of design. Places, such as cities, museums and as well as gardens and parks, are therefore the result of reproductions and collages of different times. In this vision, kitsch is confirmed as a design operation and as a contemporary tool for project design.

Hirst’s exhibition also focused on the theme of the symbol and its everyday domestic significance, one that is easily associated with the private sphere and in which a person can recognise oneself. Similarly to what happens in a kitsch operation, every piece of the exhibit, reproduced or not, contributes to the same message: the methods are complex, contradictory and built up by numerous steps, while the goal is simple and banal: the author simply wants to tell a story.

Finally, the Venetian exhibition focused on the theme of context. Hirst’s works, if hypothetically transferred to a souvenir shop not far from the Venetian exhibition venue, would arguably lose their aura²⁰ and symbolism because they would be perceived differently on a conceptual, economic and marketing level outside of the museum context. The reference in this case, is to the experiences of *ready-made* and poor art.

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21 See especially Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2006) and the already mentioned Copy-Paste work by The Why Factory.

22 Reference is made to the theoretical text concerning the role of symbols in architecture by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1972).

23 Reference is made to the theoretical text concerning the role of symbols in architecture by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1972).

In contemporary landscape projects the context is often taken as a pretext to define assonances and to blend in with the environment, while on the contrary, many building operations extend indifferently to the surrounding territory. Those buildings often apply a *copy-paste* method whose original is the result of remodelling and diminishing spatial models experimented elsewhere. In these terms, Hirst’s exhibition constitutes a key assumption that makes it possible to relocate and translate the themes of reproduction, serial copying and the reworking of the kitsch symbol into the contemporary world.

Kitsch, in fact, always has an oppositional relationship but above all, one of de-contextualisation with the found place in terms of temporal and spatial manipulation, dimensional variation to its own components and in relationship to the scale of the context, and in terms of the relationship of material, colour and form with the pre-existing situation. The alteration of context can take place through an operation of *camouflage*²¹ that on the one hand aims at mimesis with the found environment and an invariant of the *status quo*; while on the other hand the disguise enacted is never fully completed and resolved, leaving margins of error or inaccuracy, if not general incompleteness, which introduce or suggest the mismatch of the new elements in their context. In this process, kitsch works to recover the symbolic, dissociating it from its relationship with the environment and defining a-contextual quotations that enhance both the pre-existing place and its own newly installed message. The linking of spaces and places to define dissociations and a-contextual actions, allows us to investigate the theme of the symbol no longer as an intrinsic value of the construction, but as a design material that defines new collisions and relationships with the pre-existing and therefore also with history.²²

With kitsch, memory is used as a material through which to play and be ironic: the transposition of archetypal elements that acquire new meanings through a change of position or scale makes it possible to use memory as a tool through which to build new transfigurations and new figures of reference through the action of betraying the source. The object or space of the memory is extrapolated from a common culture and transposed into everyday life for another use and another context. There is no memory of the original because one may never have experienced it. On the subject of detachment from the original, I now turn to the next paragraph in which nature is taken as a symbol and as a work of art and it is reconverted into infinite copies that have lost their original and have surpassed it.

4 Nature As Kitsch Narration

I know focus on one of the kitsch narratives that is currently emerging and that can be individuate as a new trajectory for spatial design. This kitsch narration concerns the mixing and camouflage between architecture and nature. Within the architectural discipline there is a reversal of forces between natural and artificial actions that influence each other. Much of contemporary construction has evolved towards a natural dynamic that attempts to fit into its contextual landscape, concentrating on reducing its “impact” on the surrounding environment, defining the environment with a “vegetable” behaviour drawn from nature to take resources and sustenance while at the same time maintaining a balance and the *status quo* of an unchanged reality.²³ Together, the landscape towards which architecture attempts to conform is and artefact tampered with by humans. Over the years, the multiple *artificialisations* of natural elements have hybridized and genetically varied much of the existing vegetation. Among the most extreme examples of this contamination is the recent discovery of a new type of fungus that grew inside the Chernobyl nuclear reactor following the explosion and subsequent abandonment after 1986. The fungus, which is black in colour and dense in appearance, would appear to originate and feed on the high level of radiation present in the building, and is

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26 See the sections Tree Works, Museum of Nature and Nature inside his personal website: www.ilikka.halso.net last visited March 25th 2021.

27 See Emanuele Coccia, *La vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange*, (Paris Bibliothèque Rivage, 2016). The author turns to the plant world as a paradigm to look to in order to review the assumptions through which we inhabit and populate the earth. The plant is the element that most relates to the geological world below us, to the interpenetration of the atmosphere and climate that pervades us and to the impulse to inhabit the sky, focusing on the position assumed in space and time only by standing and not always moving and acting.

28 Lucius Burckhardt, *Das Falsche ist das Echte*, in Linzer Institut für Gestaltung (ed.), *Schmuck- Zeichen am Körper*, exhibition catalogue, Linz 1987, 55-60.

29 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Radical: Pour une esthétique de la globalization* (Paris: Denoël, 2009).

a material currently being studied as a covering and membrane that would allow astronauts to live and protect themselves in space, thus becoming shelter and clothing. The fungus also elicits the debate as to whether its consequent origin from artificial and human actions challenges or reconfigures its status as a natural element, as this fungus was generated by a catastrophe that can be considered as the paradigm of Anthropocene vegetation.²⁴ Therefore, just as there are no uncontaminated real spaces or places, there are also no naturally occurring biomes with these characteristics. In these terms, kitsch is present as a methodology and as a strategy of reproduction to emulate reality.²⁵

In this artificially reproduced and reproducible reality, kitsch is a method of action that constantly oscillates between the ambiguous and the overtly false, going deep inside reproduction that modify and evolve the original. Assuming nature as a new contemporary symbol, only through its infinite reproduction does it become an artificial product. Moreover, mention should be made of the work of the artist Ilkka Halso, who designs impossible, uninhabitable and unconventional scenarios using landscape and vegetal elements as his working material. In his work, trees become buildings that are restored by means of scaffolding in forests, suspended from their context and elevated to a work of art; at the same time becoming fragile elements engaged in the process of crumbling. The rocks and waterfalls become the stage on which an imaginary theatre created on paper is used to hypothesise new scenes and new representations of the context. Large warehouse containers and disposable shelving store stones, molluscs and trees, take the place of Ikea furniture or Amazon products and define a fine line between nature as a commodity, to be bought and mass-produced, and nature as a resource put into storage for preservation. Meanwhile, the photographs of pleasant and balanced places reveal the artificiality of the staging: it is the audience who produce the narration and thus define its degree of verisimilitude and the range of the project’s reach.²⁶

The contemporary project field is thus defined by the transition from the dichotomy of pairs of opposites (natural-artificial, landscape-architecture) to an ambiguous context, made of mixtures and hybridizations.²⁷ Today there is also an increase of vegetation in private homes and in urban contexts. Projects of synthetic nature where artificial performs and acts as an intermediary between ecology and technique, determining a reconfiguration of nature as a new status symbol (serving the same function as a souvenir snow globe). Among the many architects and landscape designers that are working in this direction reference is made here to Japanese architect Junya Ishigami and to French architect François Roche studio.

Kitsch works on the symbol that nature covers today, both as an element of redemption and salvation to strive for and copy, and as an element to defend and oppose. The reproduction and dissemination of nature as a contemporary symbol is achieved by distorting it, falsifying it and transferring it to the scale of the domestic and the everyday in such a way as to betray and perpetuate it at the same time: According to Lucius Burckhardt’s theory, when the copy ceases to symbolise the authentic but transcends it to become independent then the *fake* becomes *authentic*, in these terms that symbol is both perpetuated and betrayed.²⁸ Similarly, Nicolas Bourriaud who, in relation to the reproduction of the work of art, examines the necessity of the copy as an operation that allows the survival of the original while entailing its death. Starting from the continuous translation and betrayal, no path backwards can lead to the original.²⁹

Simulation and the concept of nature as a symbol are the subject of many projects and works of contemporary art, in particular Robert Voit’s photographic work *New Trees*, which depicts a series of trees that are alien to their context in terms of species, shape and above all size. The trees are actually electrical antennas disguised in a vegetal element that allows them to adhere more closely to their context –or at least until the artifice is revealed on closer look. The short-circuit of meaning that these elements create in the urban or peri-urban spaces in which they are placed raises a series of questions about their status on the border between landscape, technological element and architecture. The need to camouflage one’s appearance through “natural forms” in order to depart from a purely technical and technological meaning is

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one of the facets that the theme of the artifice of nature has taken on in the contemporary world. Disguise, mimesis and simulation are the design actions through which the artificial establishes a new relationship of contrast and emulation of the landscape context in which it is inserted, placing the end in opposition to the means of the project.³⁰ Kitsch falsifies and reproduces nature in order thereby increasing the ambiguity of nature's character. In particular, it makes use of the ambiguity between true and false where the project can work no longer by defining a pair of opposites but by working within the ambiguous to define its theoretical assumptions.

The kitsch narration of contemporary nature continually mixes reality and imaginary with the authentic and the reproduced. It includes a material and scalar substitution of space, a disguise of one's true nature in favour of other appearances that wants to be emulated in order to confuse, often defining unresolved *camouflages* or in which the process of disguise is evident. In these terms, kitsch is *authentically false* because its falsehood is precisely the agent that enables a different condition that would otherwise be impossible to pursue. An example of this is Architect Stefano Boeri's Bosco Verticale (in English, literally vertical forest) project in Milan. It is the clearest manifestation, although unmarked, of the concept of disguising and camouflaging architecture with vegetation. The metaphor of the forest is subverted by its spatial coordinates as built within the metropolis: By means of an overabundance of vegetation, it hides an apartment building with the typical spatial dynamics of an urban construction. It must be acknowledged that the theoretical fortune of the project lies largely in the earlier projects that form its matrix, first and foremost that of Edouard François. The project in that case used nature as an ornament or as an architectural mask, as Charles Jencks stated, "In this way, he creates a postmodern play on 'artificial nature' by taking advantage of the fact that a considerable part of the population, while choosing to live in crowded cities, wishes to return to nature. The contradiction translates into balconies crowded with flower essences that devour the entire house".³¹

The impact of the Bosco Verticale's overabundance of plants on the well-being and biodiversity of the area is the manifesto by which the project became famous: the principle of the vertical forest has developed and been copied in numerous other urban or peri-urban situations because it makes clear a general desire to possess a forest inside the home and, in the context of environmental sustainability, projects like these permit in the domestic realm the sense of a personal contribution to the planet's well-being. The aim of this project is therefore not only to emulate nature as ornament and formality, but also to serve the ecological theme by translating 20th century architecture into a new contemporary paradigm.

The narration of Bosco Verticale has been exemplified by the designed, which makes it comprehensible to everyone and a reproducible model, as opposed to a canonical construction. It is a kitsch narration because, as I argued previously, the two starting and ending points of the project do not agree, and because of the multiplication of goals: to make the built environment ecological, to make the private public, and above all, to build desire into a space. This is the starting point from which to investigate the spatial dynamics that concern this type of desire, "domestic and restful", and to investigate the compromise between the artificial and the natural viewed from this particular angle that sees artificial and natural indissolubly unresolved and *camouflaged*.

Nature therefore becomes the subject of the project at its most extreme, most accentuated, an added and ornamental component, and therefore definable as kitsch. Architecture strengthens its narrations through falsehood and ambiguity of language and form. The project reinforces the false, the story tale and the artifice to define a theory within the theme of architecture and nature, within the use and the ornament of spaces, which deals with desire and pleasure of nature inside the architectural perimeter. The oscillation between the project of a space for a necessity and a space for a whim becomes increasingly blurred, confusing within the spatial design its relationship to nature. Questions of pleasure, of small-scale agriculture on one's own

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balcony and of personal involvement in ecology are on the same level and intertwined. The garden becomes the paradigm of contemporary identity to such an extent that, where it is not feasible, it climbs vertically onto urban buildings, modifying its altitude to invade the small balconies or terraces of the city. The garden invades indoor spaces: domestic forests and the piling up of plants in the apartment is partly to supply certain culinary needs, those that can be met with the little land available, but mainly to get lost in the dwelling. Now, the spatial adventure no longer lies in conquering unknown places but in redesigning one's own dwelling and then being able to transit it in a new way, with a different behaviour, engaging the relationship between the body and the space it moves through.

The narrations of kitsch are therefore an opportunity to rethink the spaces within which we live and we are led to spend an ever increasing amount of time, at least in view of recent contemporary conditions. These days, the pleasures of architecture are being defined by a storytelling that can get closer the ambitions, desires, dreams of everyday life with the spaces we inhabit. Likewise, narration can also open up to new pleasures of architecture that we do not currently comprehend. The contemporary world asks us to conceive new stories that incorporate the differences, dissonances, errors of our daily lives, and life's ambiguities. There are new *landscapes* that can be discovered inside our *domestic* realm, and they are places where we will build the stories of future architectures.

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