Recensão de *Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture*

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*Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture* é um livro editado por Dirk van den Heuvel, Janno Martens e Víctor Muñoz Sanz, publicado pela nai10 publishers em 2020 (Van den Heuvel et al, 2020). O livro discute o tema de Habitat, como foi desenvolvido dentro do Arquitetura entre 1950s e 1960s, em um particular tempo de história humana, quando a questão ambiental e social justiça dominou os debates públicos entre os dois lados do Atlântico, nutrido pelo movimento civil rights entusiasta promovido por Martin Luther King, as preocupações ambientais alarmantes destacadas por Rachel Carson’s seminal work ‘Silent Spring’ (Carson, 1962), e os empolgantes movimentos/risas demandando democracia política, igualdade de gênero entre homens e mulheres, o fim da guerra e novas oportunidades de vida, incluindo acess à habitação. Habitat emergiu, portanto, como um tema comum para biólogos, sociólogos, artistas, arquitetos e muitos outros campos científicos que exigiam um mundo melhor, um que pudesse ser construído através da fusão de arte, vida e terra, em reconhecimento aos ecossistemas. Isso foi um momento de grandes avanços no pensamento sistêmico e uma oportunidade para manifestos (Araeen, 2009). Mais do que um problema arquitetônico, artístico ou científico, Habitat se tornou um pedido para mudança. Mudança nas formas como a sociedade relacionava-se com o ambiente construído e natural, mudança nas formas como os campos podiam trabalhar entre si e desenvolver as ferramentas necessárias para responder à agenda ambiental da sociedade. Mudança nas formas como o mundo era observado. Para a arquitetura, em particular, isso abriu novas perspectivas sobre a forma como olhar para as cidades e edifícios (incluindo habitação), como parte de um todo maior, o Habitat.

A escolha do livro para a presente revisão baseada no mesmo fundamento que guiou a organização do presente número da revista Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios, com o título ‘Let's talk about Habitat: Tools for a Sustainable urban design’. Esta edição da revista evoca o forte convívio dos editores que a solução para qualquer problema de sustentabilidade (e.g., social, econômico, ou ambiental) requer uma assimilação e uma maior aceitação do conceito de Habitat. Habitat, como um conceito, foi abordado e apreciado por muitos campos, incluindo arquitetura e geografia, e algumas definições possíveis podem ser recuperadas de um número de trabalhos-chave relacionados à morfologia urbana, ao menos desde o século XVIII (Demangeon, 1926; Stone, 1965).

Este interesse por Habitat se mostrou crucial para o estabelecimento dos valores humanitários e socio-ecológicos, cujo entusiasmo orientou o desenvolvimento do pensamento científico que se desenvolveu no último quarto do século XIX e metade do século XX, culminando no ecologismo da década de 1960, que foi concedido às artes e várias disciplinas científicas com o objetivo de refletir a relação homem-natureza e que foi determinante para o estabelecimento do agenda de sustentabilidade (Marat-Mendes, 2020).

No entanto, durante a segunda metade do século XX, o interesse em Habitat como um conceito ou como um assunto científico começou a desaparecer, em termos de sua significância e atenção, pelo menos pelas várias disciplinas científicas, como geografia humana ou arquitetura (Marat-Mendes and Cabrita, 2017), mas também do debate de sustentabilidade. Em vez da antiga abrangência do conceito de Habitat desenvolvido dentro do escopo da humanitária, artes e ciências sociais, o conceito de Habitat
now be limited to a much narrower understanding of living place, sometimes overlapping a Housing issue. Sustaining this observation are the several definitions of Habitat available in multiple official publications, including in the Oxford Dictionary, where it is defined as the “natural home or the environment of an animal, plant, or other organism”, or even in the Habitat III Report, a publication of the United Nations Agency for Human Settlements and Sustainable Urban Development, which defines Habitat as an “urban development for living, which should not have a precarious character” (UN-Habitat, 2016).

As a professor of Urbanism and Ecological Urbanism at a School of Architecture, Habitat has always been at the very centre of my thoughts. My first attempt to define the concept of Habitat and to contextualize it for a wider audience of urban morphologists was promoted in 2017 at an ISUF - International Seminar on Urban Form Conference, which took place in Valencia, Spain (Marat-Mendes & Cabrita, 2017). Along with Maria Amélia Cabrita we discussed how much the Habitat concept has evolved within the disciplines of Architecture and Human Geography over time, but also how central this concept was to the definition of the research and work agendas of renowned worldwide scientific organizations within these two disciplines, respectively, such as the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), an organization of architects founded in 1928 and disassembled in 1959, and the Union Geographique International (UGI), an geographers organization which was established in 1922 and is still operative.

Whereas the CIAM challenged the study of the Habitat, throughout the promotion of a 'Charter of the Habitat', proposing several Grilles for the study of the Habitat in diverse geographic contexts, the UGI established two specific Commissions, one dedicated to the study of the 'Habitat Rural' and another one dedicated to the proposal of a 'Grille de l’Habitat'. Habitat emerged therefore as an object of study which required, at the same time, the need for a visual representation, which occurred through the use of Grids or ‘Grills’, a methodological technique which gained great interest and influence in the 1950s and 1960s, as a representation of the ubiquitous and invisible field of universal physical law, but whose meaning was inherited from the 1920s, when the full development of the Cartesian grid was realised, following antirationalist tendencies of twentieth-century art, scientific thought, and popular culture which existed side by side with the stream of modernist rationality (Williamson, 1968).

The Habitat representation throughout the use of Grids, within the architecture and geography disciplines, can be understood as valid attempts for the systematization of the living habitats within which the person-environment relationship is observed. But while this Grids systematization is a graphical methodology inherited from the 1920s Cartesian Grid, the Habitat conception discussed within CIAM and UGI also appears to derive from the previously identified early twentieth century all-inclusive Habitat conception, rooted in the socio-ecological and humanitarian values.

The book Habitat. Ecology thinking in Architecture, published in 1920 is a very opportune and welcome publication to push back the debate of Habitat within Architecture, while articulating two very important dimensions: the conceptual one and its representation within Architecture. But most importantly, to dissociate the Habitat debate from the exclusive issue of Housing, while acknowledging an ecological approach.

Divided into fifteen chapters, this book covers almost 200 pages full of images retrieved from original archival documentation, but also contemporary graphics and drawings. The book invites the reader to revisit some of the archival sources produced by the CIAM and Team10, dedicated to the study of the Habitat charter, located at the national collection of Het Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam, and other international archives. This revisitation of the Habitat is promoted while acknowledging the ecological approaches which seem to have guided the architectural debates since the 1920s throughout the 1960s, and which are held as highly important by the book editors for the present time, in the face of the current global environmental crisis and climate change emergency.

Altogether, the book includes fifteen chapters, attesting to the diverse perspectives emerging around the concept of Habitat within the CIAM and Team 10, and which contributed to the ecologically legacy that was deeply engaged by some of its members. To all of them, the ecological dimension was indeed very present, and this book uncovers a number of possibly hidden voices of ecological thinking within architecture, which have embraced the thematic of Habitat. But of upmost importance, the book allows us to confront several Habitat Grids, produced within the CIAM
groups for their congresses. Most of these archival sources are not new to scholars and readers, yet this work provides a comparative overview and a critical perspective of the several approaches by placing them altogether, including those of the British, the Portuguese, the Swedish and the Dutch groups, which dedicated special attention to the construction of the Habitat Grids. The book does not only delve into the Habitat from the historical perspective, but it also confronts it with more contemporary proposals, such as those presented in the book’s last chapters, ‘Patchwork Metropolis’, a regional study by Willem Jan Neutelings, and ‘Retracting habitat’ by Frits Palmboom.

Revisiting these drawings, schemes, charts, and sketches is very inspiring and offers an opportunity to challenge architecture students on how to represent the environmental conscience within contemporary architecture and urbanism with more visibility, promoting new possibilities or alternatives to envision the present and the future urban conditions, while considering the ecological emergency imposed by climate change.

Finally, the book also provides an occasion to confront several graphical materials illustrating several possibilities of how to depict or portray the ecological dimensions of the human Habitats. This is of great importance to the academic audience, particularly for students of architecture and urbanism. The selected drawings focus on the spatiality of the everyday life, which includes the architecture of the private sphere of the dwelling space but also of its surroundings, where social activities and daily life practices also impact on a spatial manner.

At a time when climate change urges us to look for new modes of construction and development of the urban realm, when the world is witnessing the rapid proliferation of war and the shocking devastation of entire cities, communities and natural resources, once again the voices of the young generations, claiming for a more ecological world, the end of war and the right for the most basic human needs (food, shelter, health and education), are attaining greater attention and should be regarded as a sign that once again change is needed or might be already taking place. This book, dedicated to the subject of Habitat, offers an opportunity to rethink with what tools, methodologies and visions can architects at present but also tomorrow contribute to such a process of change, but one that should be as passionate as that which guided the 1960s Habitat debates.

References


