

Recensão de *Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture*

Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture

Teresa Marat-Mendes¹

Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture is a book edited by Dirk van den Heuvel, Janno Martens and Víctor Muñoz Sanz, published by nai10 publishers in 2020 (Van den Heuvel et al, 2020). The book discusses the thematic of *Habitat*, as it was developed within Architecture between 1950s and 1960s, at a particular time of human history, when environmental and social justice dominated the public debates across the two sides of the Atlantic, nurtured by the enthusiastic civil rights movement promoted by Martin Luther King, the alarming environmental concerns highlighted by Rachel Carson's seminal work 'Silent Spring' (Carson, 1962), and the energetic student movements/riots, demanding democratic political leaderships, equal rights between men and women, the end of war and new life opportunities, including access to housing. *Habitat* emerged therefore as a common thematic issue for biologists, sociologists, artists, architects and many other scientific fields which demanded a better world, one that could be built through the merge of art, life and land, while respecting the ecosystems. This was a time of great advancements in systems thinking and an opportunity for manifestos (Araeen, 2009). More than an architectural, artistic or scientific issue, *Habitat* turned to be a request for change. Change into the ways society related to the built and natural environment. Change into the ways disciplines could work among themselves and develop the necessary tools to respond to the society ecological agenda. Change into the ways that the world could be observed. For architecture, in particular, this opened new perspectives on how to look at cities and buildings (including housing), as part of a wider whole, the *Habitat*.

The selection of this book for the present book review was motivated by the same grounds that guided the organization of the current issue of the *Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios Journal*, with the title 'Let's talk about *Habitat*: Tools for a Sustainable urban design'. This *Cidades* issue evokes the editors' strong conviction that the solution for any sustainability problems (e.g., social, economic, or environmental) requires a stronger assimilation and a greater acknowledgment of the *Habitat* concept. *Habitat*, as a concept, has been approached and appreciated by many disciplines, including architecture and geography, and some possible definitions can be retrieved from a number of seminal works related to urban morphology, at least since nineteenth century (Demangeon, 1926; Stone, 1965).

This sort of interest in the *Habitat* proved to be crucial to the establishment of the humanitarian and socio-ecological values, which enthusiastically orientated the scientific culture developed between the last quarter of nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, which culminated in the above 1960s ecological culture, which was conceded by the arts and several scientific fields with the aim to improve the man-nature relations and that was later determinant to the establishment of the Sustainability agenda (Marat-Mendes, 2020).

Yet, during the second half of the past century, interest in the *Habitat* as a concept or as a scientific issue somehow started to disappear, in terms of its significance and attention paid by the several scientific disciplines, such as human geography or architecture (Marat-Mendes and Cabrita, 2017), but also from the sustainability debate. Instead of the former all-inclusive notion of *Habitat* developed within the scope of the humanitarian, arts and social sciences, *Habitat* concept would

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 Internationale (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 utmost 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

- Araeen, R. (2009). *Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, *Third Text*, 23(5), 679–684.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. New York, Fawcett Crest.
- Demangeon, A. (1926). *Un Questionnaire sur L'Habitat Rural*. *Annales de Géographie* 35(196), 289-292.
- Heuvel, D., Martens, J., Sanz, V.M. (eds.) (2020). *Habitat: Ecology Thinking in Architecture*. nai010 publishers.
- Marat-Mendes, T., Cabrita, M. A. (2017). *Recovering the habitat concept within urban morphology*. In V. Colomer (ed.) *City and territory in the globalization age - Proceedings of the 24th ISUF International Conference*. (Univ. Politecnica Valencia; Escola Tecnica Super Arquitectura, Valencia), 1303-1311. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/ISUF2017.2017.5217>
- Stone, K. H. (1965). *The Development of a Focus for the Geography of Settlement*. *Economic Geography*, 41(4) 346-355.
- Marat-Mendes, T. (2020). *Designing for Sustainability: retrieving a systemic role for urban form*. *Urban Morphology*, 24(2), 235-238.
- UN-HABITAT (2016). *World Cities Report 2016. Urbanization and development: Emerging futures*. <https://unhabitat.org/world-cities-report-2016>
- Van den Heuvel, D., Martens, J., Muñoz Sanz, V. (eds) (2020). *HABITAT: Ecology Thinking in Architecture*. Rotterdam: NAI 010 Publishers.
- Williamson, J. (1986). *The Grid: History, Use and Meaning*. *Design Issues*, 3(2) 15-30.