



Faculty of Design

2023

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Suggested citation:

Westermann, Claudia (2023) Ecopoetic Formations for Transgenerational Collaboration. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design Volume: RSD12, 06-20 Oct 2023. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4896/>

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023

Ecopoetic Formations for Transgenerational Collaboration

Claudia Westermann

The question of how architectural design can redefine itself as a sustainable practice, actively contributing to an inclusive and open future, has been a central focus of the lecture-based and studio modules I developed for the architecture programs at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou, China. Informed by second-order cybernetics, my pedagogical approach concerns the ecologies and poetics of art and design and emphasises relational thinking over entitative concepts.

This presentation provides a theoretical framework for my cybernetic design pedagogy, drawing primarily on the pedagogical approaches of the designer and cybernetician Ranulph Glanville and the artist and cybernetician Roy Ascott. It then proceeds to introduce the transgenerational collaborations established in response to the RSD12 hub theme involving four of my former architecture students and four senior members of the American Society for Cybernetics, forming four teams comprising both junior and senior collaborators. These teams are characterised by their transgenerational, transcultural, and transdisciplinary composition. The four junior collaborators contribute their previous studio works and related essays. The four senior ASC collaborators bring expertise in cybernetics, theatre and performance, ecology, media, and organisational design.

KEYWORDS: ecologies of design, wicked challenges, transgenerational collaboration, cybernetics in art and design education

RSD TOPIC(S): Architecture & Planning, Society & Culture, Socioecological Design

Overview of the presentation

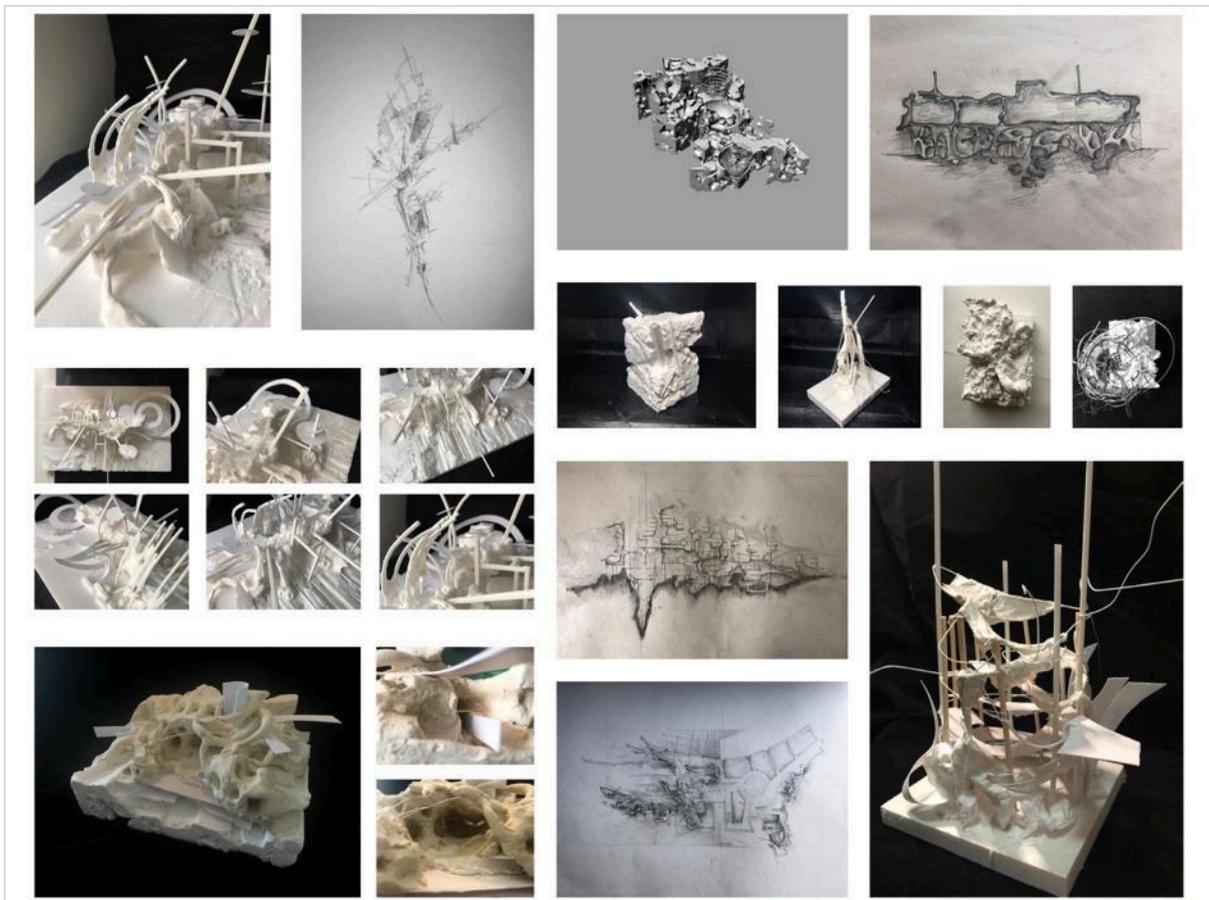
While radical design pedagogies of the 20th century, beyond the Bauhaus, have received recent attention (Froud & Harris, 2015; Bokov, 2020; Colomina, 2022), their 'radicality' often stems from a focus on either inverting the student/teacher relationship, emphasising making as an experiential process, or using gaming for exploring form. However, these aspects are rarely integrated. Most notably, users or inhabitants are often strangely absent. This is in contrast to the cybernetic pedagogies of Roy Ascott and Ranulph Glanville that have influenced the author of this paper, which can be distinguished from the former by bringing together the experience of making with the objects that are produced and the interactions that are afforded. Play and conversation play central roles in these schemes. They are not just related to form alone but are always connected to the interaction of form with those who construct it through reading, listening, writing, and composing (Ascott & Shanken, 2003; Sloan, 2019; Glanville, 2007). These pedagogical approaches emphasise systemic connections, active participation in exploration, and the openness of form.

The presentation introduces these pedagogical approaches in art and design, as they served as the foundation for a unique set of studio briefs and theoretical inquiries that I developed for the architecture programs at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou, China.

In the following section, the two final-year studio briefs and the supporting Philosophy of Art module are presented that framed the work of the junior designers involved in the transgenerational collaboration scheme set up for RSD 12, involving four of my former students and four experienced cyberneticians, senior members of the American Society for Cybernetics.

Thinking with art: Ecologies of architectural design

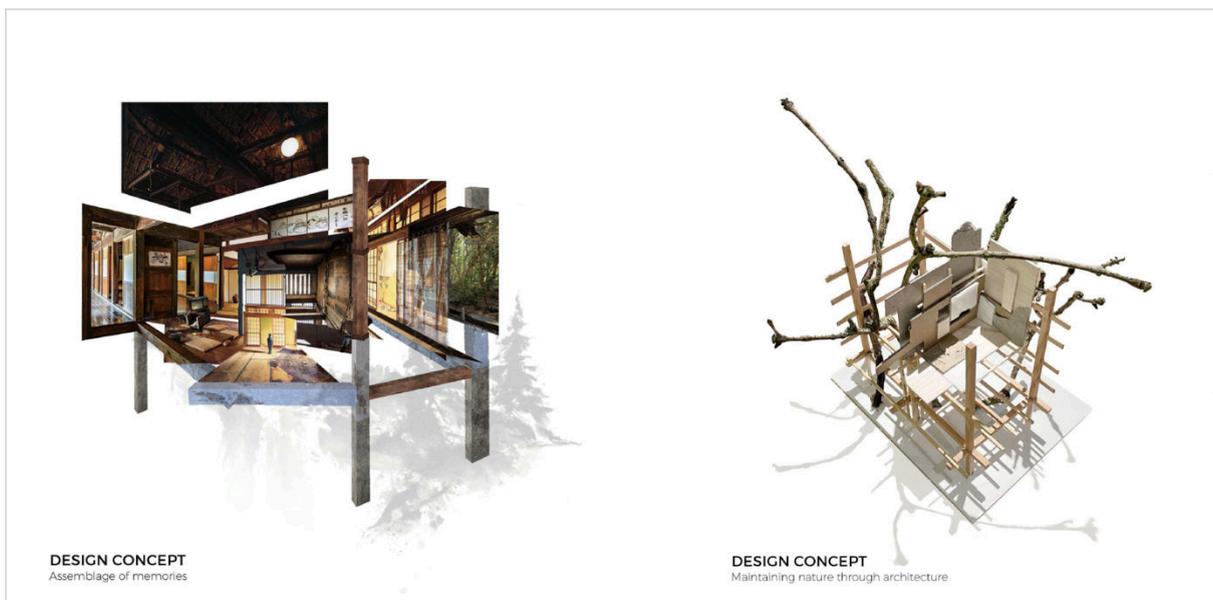
Using Stanley Kubrick's Dawn of Man scene of the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick & Clarke, 1968) as an initiation for a reflection on architecture as art and/or technology, the studio brief *In Dialogue with Nature: Architecture for the post-Anthropocene* for the 2019-20 academic encouraged students to reconceptualise the relationship of humans with nature and the creatures that are part of it via an architectural framework. The students were encouraged to develop architecture as a performative framework that shifts the relationship of human beings with nature from "in struggle" to "in dialogue."



Re-Enchantment of Nature in the Post-Anthropocene by Annan Zuo, process models and drawings, BEng Architecture, XJTLU, 2019-20.

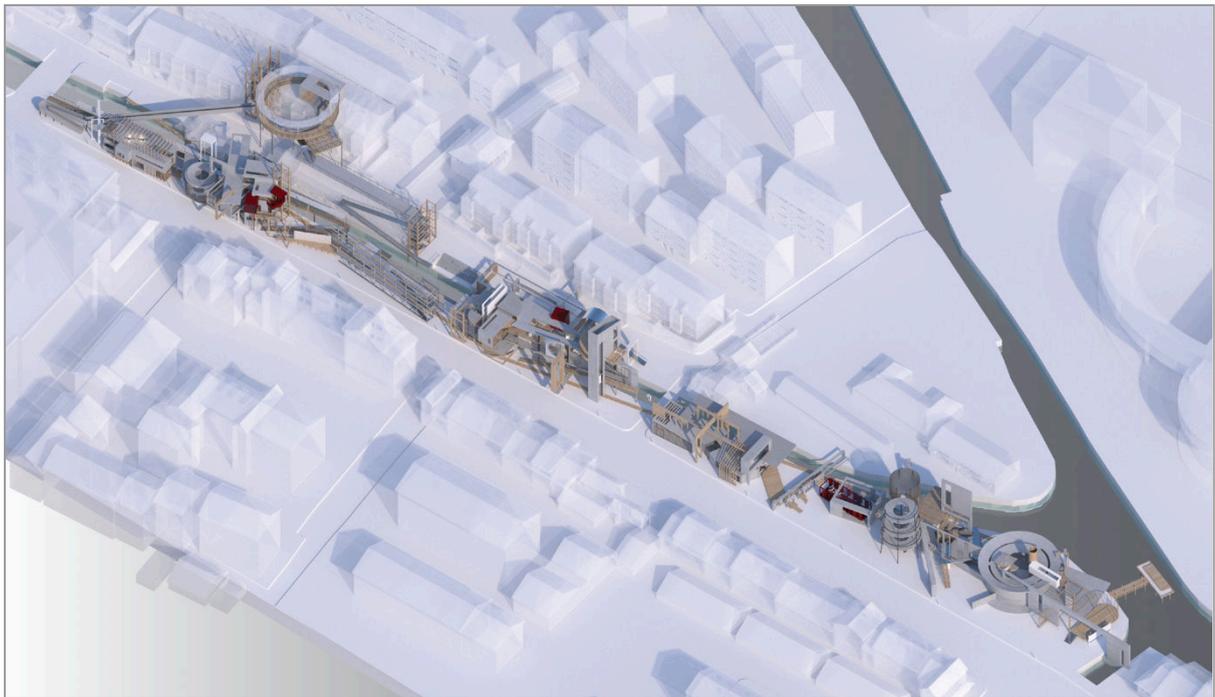
The following passage is an excerpt from the studio brief:

In the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in one of the most memorable scenes at the beginning of the film, director Stanley Kubrick tells us that the dawn of man occurred with the discovery of. Thinking of objects as tools, specifically to defend and to attack, marks the beginning of technological invention and the transition from ape to human. The Dawn of Man scene reflects Darwinian theories of evolution. The focus on struggle, competition, and death as part of evolution is in line with the emphasis made by Darwinists. According to Darwinian theories, human beings are necessarily always in a struggle with their environment. We have not lived with nature but against nature. Consequently, the activities of human beings have gradually grown into a significant geological, morphological force. A new era has emerged. It has been named the Anthropocene.



Expanding the Notion of Care in Architecture by Annan Zuo, design thesis drawings, RIBA Part 2, University of Cambridge, 2022-23. Claudia Westermann did not tutor this studio project, but it can be considered a development of the 2019-20 project.

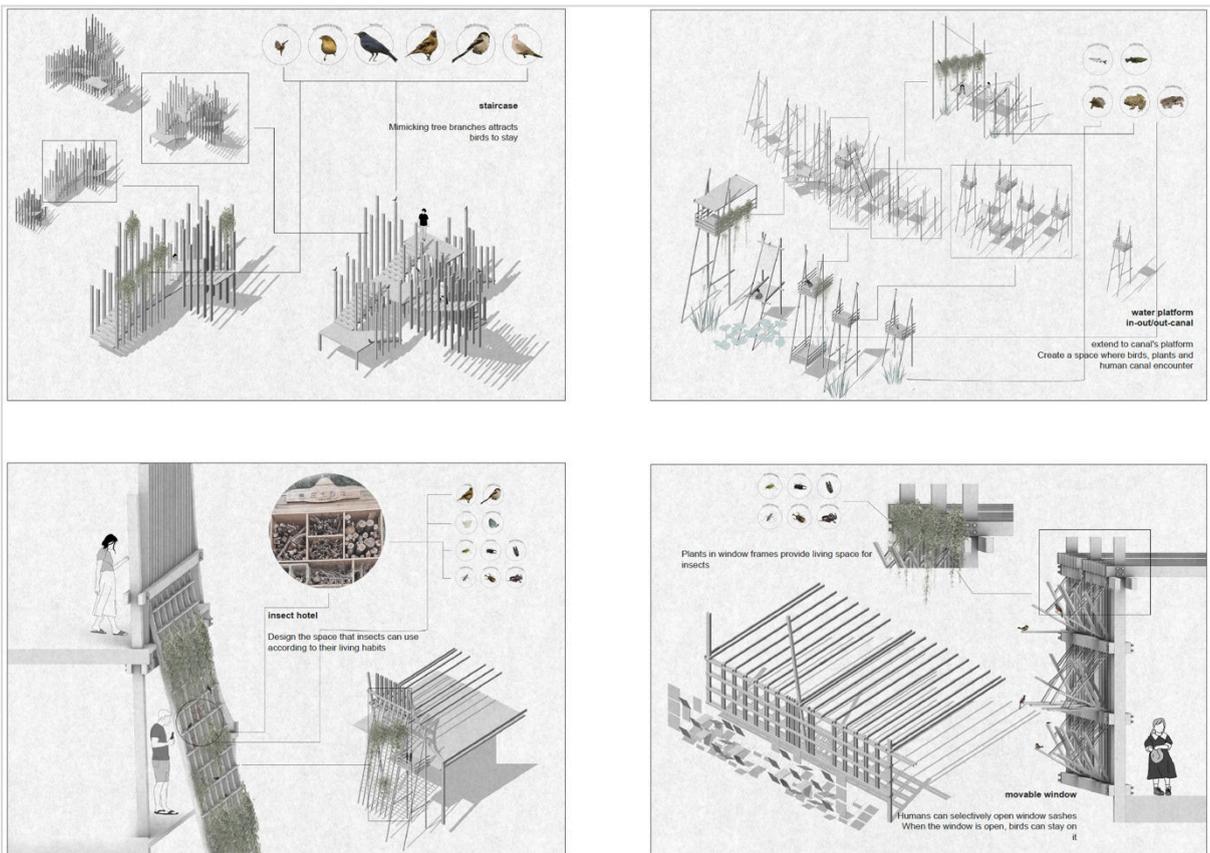
The brief for the academic year 2022-23, entitled *Ecopoetic formations | Architecture narratives for the post-Anthropocene*, expanded the engagement with art as part of a suggested methodology. A crisis, the brief stated, is always a crisis of relations, as a crisis occurs through the denial of relations where these are needed. The studio brief suggested that an architecture for the post-Anthropocene could overcome crisis by relying on an ancient art dedicated to creating tangible relations – poetry or the art of writing. The brief further suggested that there might be forms of writing that create places that give space, with an intuitive inclination to a specific ecopoetic openness, leading the reader to a practice of appropriation that is re-creation. Such forms of ecopoetic architectural writing would be considered initiation, contrasting the ever-repetitive articulation of finitude present in many contemporary architectural projects. The brief referred to Han Shaogong's avant-garde novel *Dictionary of Maqiao* (Han, 2003) as a work of art that could assist in developing a basis for the architectural narrative to be designed.



Giving a voice to the community in the *Unbounded Theatre*, Ruoxi Li, rendering, BEng Architecture, XJTLU, 2023.



An Architecture for humans, birds, fishes, insects, and other critters, Puli Li, elevation, BEng Architecture, XJTU, 2023.



An Architecture for humans, birds, fishes, insects, and other critters, Puli Li, detail concept drawings, BEng Architecture, XJTU, 2023.

The *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics* module, which I conceived for the undergraduate programme in architecture at XJTLU, has supported the final year studio since 2013. It provides an introduction to the wider cultural framework that forms the basis for architecture and architectural design. It introduces critical reflections at the border of architectural discourse, from both East and West, in order to facilitate a better understanding of cultural contexts and their influence on positions and expressions in the fine arts and architecture.

The courses in the 2019/20 and 2022/23 academic years were entitled *Ecologies of Art and Architecture* and *Thinking Sustainability with Philosophies of Art and Design* and responded to these themes with a specifically designed series of lectures and seminars. Philosophical writings, reflecting the theme in an explicit or implicit way, were given as reading assignments and discussed in the seminars in relation to paintings, installations, films, poetry and other forms of creative writing. The students' final essays integrate philosophical discussion, artwork case studies, and philosophical reflections on the Final Year Projects developed in the studio module running in parallel.

Four ecopoetic formations for transgenerational collaboration

In June 2023, in response to RSD12-Pittsburgh's transgenerational collaboration theme, the authors of the projects shown in the images above, Annan Zuo, Ruoxi Li, Puli Li, and Shucen Liu, have been linked with senior members of the American Society for Cybernetics: Fred Steier, Tom Scholte, Pille Bunnell, and Larry Richards. Taking the essays and projects of the junior designers as an initiation, the senior and junior collaborators developed aspects of these projects for the following papers.

- Shucen Liu, Larry Richards and Claudia Westermann | *Assemblage Reframing the Nearby: Resisting the spectacle through anti-communication*
- Puli Li, Pille Bunnell. and Claudia Westermann | *A More-Than-Human Architecture*
- Ruoxi Li, Tom Scholte and Claudia Westermann | *Architectural Landscapes of Resistance: Carnavalesque framings of agency*
- Annan Zuo and Frederick Steier | *Expanding the notion of Care in Architecture—Recovering a More-than-human Third Landscape in Kyoto*

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Acknowledgements

My thanks go to my former students, my present and former colleagues at XJTLU as well as the colleagues at the American Society for Cybernetics without whom this presentation would not have been conceived.