Architect Marta Pozo Gil, who leads the Sustainability Department at MVRDV, draws on a correlation between people’s retreat indoors, with urban populations becoming increasingly divorced from nature, and the growing ambitions for ‘green’ cities and the ensuing benefits they bring to our quality of life. How might it, though, be possible to realise such a vision? Pozo Gil describes some of MVRDV’s lesser-known projects that weave nature into the city.
MVRDV, Holiday resort, Galije, Montenegro, 2009
The resort design leaves the Montenegro coastline unpolluted.
Now that the urban is an omnipresent concern, what is nature’s role in debates, discussions and visions of the city? Homo urbanus has in recent times delegated his quality of life to technology and consumerism, degrading the once more prominent role of nature for leisure and relaxation. We now spend much of our free time indoors—clear evidence of the retreat into the private realm we pursue. This migration indoors is a new trend, alienating us from nature and from other human beings, yet it fulfils our desires of control, comfort and independency. Paradoxically, the moment the middle classes emerge from their busy urban lives and have time to spend, they are too far away from nature to make proper use of it. Their only options are the superficial charm of city parks, or travelling to remote places in order to discover nature’s real splendour. But could our urban fabric host culture, history, technology and the wild?

This divorce of humans from nature is also evident in the art world. After the Middle Ages, nature was an instaible source of inspiration and research. Artists, writers and thinkers from the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Impressionism showed through their paintings and writings a harmonious interaction of humans with nature. The 14th-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch claimed to be the first person since antiquity to have climbed a mountain to enjoy the view. And in the 18th century, painters like Joseph Mallord William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich emphasised the aesthetic qualities of the landscape. However, this ‘living together’ was to break down during the 20th century, as highlighted on the art scene at the time by the shift towards non-representational and abstract works.

It is an interesting and perhaps logical contradiction that humans turn to nature at the same moment they become urbanites. Nature-based experiences are therefore becoming a thriving tourist industry. National Parks and protected landscapes are immensely popular holiday destinations, however the sought-after authenticity and tranquility is being destroyed by these masses in their attempt to escape their daily urban lives.

Our current formula of developing urban areas while ignoring nature has proved unsuccessful, resulting in global warming, pollution, deforestation, unhealthy food production and aggressive tourism. Though cities are growing in terms of geographical area, number of buildings and population, the city as a public space is crumbling, with the urban fabric placing emphasis on the private realm where citizens can develop a sophisticated and comfortable life.

However, with increasing levels of air pollution, noise, traffic congestion and unsafe public places, ‘green’ cities are becoming more successful in global city planning competitions, and sustainable measurement frameworks such as LEED, BREEAM and GreenCalc are further developing a more holistic approach to the urban coexistence of humans and nature. But how can such ambitions be implemented? Can nature reactivate the city as a desirable public space? And can this be realised beyond the traditional park or sports field?

The presence of nature in a city contributes to its inhabitants’ quality of life in many ways. It provides environmental services such as the purification of air and water, and limits noise pollution. It also encourages social interaction among neighbours, and can increase both physical and mental health, enriching urban life with emotions and meaning and acting as a stress reliever. Last but not least, it offers economic benefits, since natural elements attract people and investment.

City makers therefore need to focus on a new organisation between the urban context, society and nature. The city can become a melting pot of multiculturalism and multi-naturalism for the benefit of all, creating adaptation among its human and animal citizens, as has already been documented in cities like London and New York. Urban areas need to preserve and encourage wildlife such as foxes, squirrels and seagulls that are adapting to the urban environment, and optimise the relationship between human beings, animals and plants. If we learn how to share our environment with them, we can enjoy watching these animal populations living in our midst, stimulating our natural instincts.

MVRDV’s proposal for a new shopping centre in Barcelona is an example of how nature can stimulate new experiences that can become part of our daily urban activities. For example, children running after squirrels and rabbits, experiencing the fresh air of the forest while parents do their grocery shopping. The forest on the roof also has a positive impact on its immediate surroundings, a welcoming iconic element that brings new identity to the neighbourhood by integrating large and high-quality public spaces and purifying the air.

Despite all the positive aspects of nature, and its theoretical value and stunning beauty described in documentaries, many urbanites will never have the opportunity to experience it in an authentic way. How can we expect young generations to preserve nature in the future if they have not had the chance to enjoy it? Only if we develop a positive cohabitation of people, plants and animals will we become aware of its value and be encouraged to work for its protection and extension.

Imagine a natural neighbourhood where instead of nude and soulless plazas people can enjoy intensive vegetation. Imagine doing sports among nature, or stepping away from the hectic rhythm of urban life by walking through landscaped streets. Imagine schools with large vegetable gardens. Citizens could enjoy fresh air, relax, and be inspired. Children would develop their senses of challenge and adventure instead of playing in bland, artificial playgrounds.

The relationship between city planning, architecture and biodiversity needs a serious approach. Action to limit loss of biodiversity can be taken on many fronts: responsibly sourced materials can be used to minimise the impact on existing biodiversity patterns, and ecological design principles can be implemented at both building and regional scale to preserve local species. In the last decades, the global effort has continued to address the ideal healthy green city. However, many meaningful ideas remain only on paper—so many words, so little action. It is time for the mise en scène of thought to involve all the players: designers, engineers, politicians and citizens.

For the last 20 years, Dutch architecture and urbanism practice MVRDV has been contributing to this effort, often with theoretical arguments, but also with a range of highly pragmatic proposals. These include the Netherlands Pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hanover, a sequence of stacked Dutch landscapes, a mix of nature and building. However, the firm has also developed a number of other, much less well known proposals for a more symbiotic approach to architecture and urbanism.
MVRDV, Shopping centre, Barcelona, Spain, 2012
right: An intense encounter between landscape and city; proof that the symbiosis between nature and buildings can work.

MVRDV, Natural Neighbourhood, Fornebu, Norway, 2009
below: The design of this natural neighbourhood explores how nature can trigger a unique lifestyle by penetrating people’s day-to-day lives.

Only if we develop a positive cohabitation of people, plants and animals will we become aware of its value and be encouraged to work for its protection and extension.
Floriade will be a city that is literally green as well as ecological. A city that might even be autarkic: a symbiotic world of people, plants and animals.
— Winy Maas
The Autarkic City
Can ecology and urbanisation come together to create self-sufficient societies?

The Floriade World Horticultural Expo takes place once a decade in the Netherlands. MVRDV’s plan for the 2022 Floriade in Almere is not a temporary expo site, but a lasting green cité idéale – a green extension of the existing city centre. A grid of gardens on a 45-hectare (111-acre), square-shaped peninsula, each block will be devoted to different plants to create a plant library. The blocks are also devoted to different programmes, from pavilions to homes, offices, and even a university that will be organised as a stacked botanical garden, a vertical ecosystem in which each classroom will have a different climate to grow certain plants.

Visitors will be able to stay in a jasmine hotel, swim in a lily pond and dine in a rosery. The city will offer homes in orchards, offices with planted interiors and bamboo parks. In short, the Almere Floriade is a combination of programme and plants that will create programmatic surprises, innovation and ecology. The Manhattan grid – the symbol of modernity – transformed into a symbol of the symbiotic life of humans and nature. As Winy Maas, director and founder of MVRDV, states:

Floriade will be a city that is literally green as well as ecological. A city that might even be autarkic: a symbiotic world of people, plants and animals. Can this symbiosis between city and countryside offer essential argumentation to the global concerns regarding urbanization and consumption?2

Design Equality for All Species
Thinking of the city as the habitat of all species, and not only of people, can establish a more symbiotic relationship between buildings, land and nature, creating intriguing and exciting combinations of landscape and building functions.

In BiodiverCity, The Why Factory – a think-tank on urban futures led by Winy Maas – presents a vision of a city where architectural and urban design stimulates meaningful relationships between humans and other species. As The Why Factory explains:

[The study] will take off from … Deleuze and Guattari’s thought that the opposition between humans and nature does not exist: human species within the biosphere is one among many. We will envision new engagement with natural cycles spreading beyond existing agriculture. We will design a new city embracing a democracy of people, animals micro-organism and minerals.3

---


What type of city would animals love? How can we coexist with animals? BiodiverCity explores how both architectural and urban design could facilitate meaningful relationships between humans and other species.
Do Nothing
Regarding nature, often the best we can do is to do nothing. We need to regain a sense of humility when facing the overwhelming power of wild landscape. Is it possible to create a hidden urbanism that gives priority to nature?

During the design process of the Galije holiday resort in Montenegro, the decision was taken to combine exclusivity with a responsible sustainable embedding of the project in its surrounding landscape. The attraction of Montenegro’s coastline could only be maintained by preserving its rugged beauty. As a result, the whole project was designed as an offset to the terrain, and covered with a blanket of the original landscape. Sadly, the ‘invisible’ resort was never realised – the envisioned guests apparently prefer the ‘bling bling’ of steel and glass – and Montenegro’s scenic coast will soon look like the built-up shores of Spain or Turkey.

Continuation of Nature in the City
Urban nature is constantly competing against developments whose revenues are easier to quantify, therefore interest in bringing true natural spaces to the city remains poor. With creative and innovative solutions, this situation can shift to create a more collaborative approach. Strategies need to be developed that focus on merging manmade urbanisation with nature to maintain the charm of the city. But how and where can we create space for plants and animals to settle and develop among humans?

The Green Sofa is a respectful and exemplary response to letting nature take over the facades and plaza of a new development in Strasbourg, France. It increases the ecological value of the site and transforms it into a warm and genuine common space, introducing the striking beauty of nature and resembling a painted backdrop to the harsh stone surroundings.

The design of a dense urban masterplan for a new neighbourhood in Bordeaux will offer 3,200 homes, offices and urban amenities while also preserving the local biodiversity. In-between and inside the blocks are spaces for small parks, pocket gardens which function as platforms for local animals to coexist with people. Like cut-out buildings, these pockets literally investigate and realise three-dimensional gardening.

To quote Adolf Loos’s maxim: ‘Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and that disturbs him.’ Following this thought, humans love their houses and may hate the unpredictability of nature. On the other hand, though, homo urbanus seeks the excitement of the unknown and needs a certain degree of anarchy to stimulate him. How to combine the need of control with the desire of rebellion? Can the combination of city and wilderness bring together the rational and the unpredictable for the stimulation of people?

The old idea of splitting rural and urban ecologies is not attractive in either environmental or social terms. The
challenge of providing lodging for people, animals and plants can lead to innovative and enriching spaces and experiences. However, this requires shifting the points of reference where current urban and architectural patterns would be neither applicable nor desirable. Overturning concepts are not easily acceptable, but smartly brought into practice can renew urban reality and go beyond its current repletion.

In order to design cities that satisfy all species, we need to create outstanding examples that give directions for a green future. Fortunately, the time will come where, instead of constantly reading statements such as ‘buildings account for 48 per cent of carbon emissions and over 60 per cent of energy consumption’, writers will delight in the efficiency of cities to purify the air, minimise water run-off, cohabitate with animals and, last but not least, foster the enjoyment of urbanites.

"Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and that disturbs him." — Adolf Loos