Landscape architect CÉLINE BAUMANN designs urban environments, but she also maintains a prolific practice as an artist and educator. Her Basel-based studio is committed to research on plant life and interrelations with humans. Her intersectional lens in turn informs her design work, in which she aims to create dynamic open spaces that respect the ecology of both humans and nature.

Interview by Viviane Stappmanns

"Human habitats need to accommodate other living beings."

Today, many designers are concerned with creating living *environments*, especially our urban environments, in which plants and animals can also thrive. Is this a new conversation?

The discussion is not new but all the more pressing today, as it is now widely acknowledged that human activities are having a catastrophic impact on all the other species. Everywhere we go, especially as westerners with our high levels of consumption, we bring a lot of destruction, corrupting the planet in an unprecedented way. In 2019, the United Nations released a *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, whose conclusions are dramatic. We are on the brink of ecological collapse, with one million species facing extinction within decades.

As you say, this is not new. In the early 1960s, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a very influential book that drew attention to the damage of herbicides and pesticides on the planet. It is often named as a precursor to the environmental movement that followed in the 1970s and 1980s. *Silent Spring* was published exactly 60 years ago, yet environmental destruction has only increased. Do you think this moment is any different? As a practising landscape architect can you see that there is real change ahead? Or is it just an academic discussion?

Action is being taken – the problem is being tackled from different directions. David Holmgren, the founder of the permaculture movement, describes this very well. In 2008, he published an essay narrating

→ Céline Baumann, Detail of the installation *Parliament of Plants*, Matadero Madrid. Centre for Contemporary Creation, 2019–20

David Holmgren's four scenarios already exist simultaneously in our current reality. The question is which one will ultimately dominate.

↙ Australian permaculture gardener and public intellectual David Holmgren envisaged four future scenarios about energy transitions and converging crises: 1) Brown Tech / Top-down constriction 2) Green Tech / Distributed powerdown 3) Earth steward / Bottom-up rebuild 4) Lifeboats / Civilization triage. Here, these are visualized by illustrator Andrew Merritt (Something & Son), Art direction: EcoLabs / Johanna Boehnert, 2009.

different scenarios for the future. In all, he assumes that resources will decline and climate change will occur, but he imagines different responses. In one, technology – like geoengineering the weather – plays a central role. Another corresponds more to the ideal of the 1970s: it involves degrowth, consuming less, and an urban exodus; paired with severe climate change, it leads to a neo-feudal system with hamlets, gated communities, and bartering. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls this "life in the capitalist ruins". Another of Holmgren's scenarios – slow decline of resources coupled with mild climate change – offers a more hopeful vision where compact cities use renewable energy and apply an eco-rationalist approach. And yet another tells a cautionary tale of how our future will look if we continue to do "business as usual". Those four scenarios already exist simultaneously in our current reality. The question is which one will ultimately dominate. Personally, I am very critical of the technocentric approach. It is like proposing to fix the cause of the problem with the root of the problem. As feminist Audre Lorde stated in 1979, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

So on a very practical level, what do you see happening that is hopeful?

We might look to very simple, individual gestures as well as custom-made solutions for each problem, including reducing grey energy and CO_2 emissions, building less, applying the principles of the sponge city at a wider scale. Those measures are unfortunately unspectacular and hardly reach newspaper headlines.

But don't the simple gestures, like green roofs, also require a lot of technology to work?

In fact, green roofs need very little technology, just slightly more investment to ensure the building structure underneath can carry the extra weight. I am part of a team who recently won a competition to design an ecologically sound school complex in Basel. One of the buildings will have a green roof that is just for plants and animals, not for human use; it will have a decent amount of soil. This will allow for a rich biological life, and it will retain water without too much technology. The fact of making it inaccessible to humans will hopefully allow this roof to be rapidly colonized by the local fauna and act as a sanctuary.

So concepts like the sponge city – in which rainwater is retained and reused on an urban scale – are not technology intensive?

Not necessarily. In our densely populated urban environments with all the sealed surfaces, water cycles have been completely disrupted. The rainwater is often unable to infiltrate the ground to be naturally filtered. And overflowing sewage systems have occasionally resulted in devastating floods. To restore the water cycle we need to replace sealed, paved surfaces with porous ones. This is a completely low-tech solution, which is also cost-efficient. It implies that the space for motorized traffic be reduced, a measure which is often met with stubborn resistance.

I have noticed that in terms of addressing complex, networked planning processes, new skills and networks of people are needed too. Do we need new ways of designing?

Yes. We are currently working with a company specialized in circular material reuse on the school project. They collect components from current demolition

↘ Studio Céline Baumann and architects Davis Manz, Barbara Thüler, and Farquet Architectes, Model of the new Walkeweg School, Basel, winning competition entry, 2022

The project offers playscape amenities for students as well as ecological corridors for an urban flora and fauna.

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projects and compile catalogues of materials that we can then repurpose. This is an exciting approach, allowing new design possibilities and the creation of a somewhat different aesthetic. Interdisciplinarity is also to me a key aspect of future design practises, including in the field of landscape architecture. We live in a world which is more and more specialized and it's very easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. But the only way we can deal with the challenges of our time is by getting out of our comfort zones and understanding how singular elements are part of a whole chain of actions and consequences.

What would you say are the most forward-thinking developments in landscape architecture right now?

Today, the task of landscape architects is to go beyond the mere role of, say, the beautification of the cityscape with blooming flower beds. Nowadays, with the rapid urbanization we are experiencing, correlated with the increasing loss of natural habitats, there is a growing understanding that natural and urban environments need to overlap. Landscape architects have a significant role to play in this discussion. We are starting to understand that human habitats need to accommodate other living beings. Plants and animals also have the right to be part of the city.

Speaking of rights, besides your work as a landscape architect, you are an artist, producing installations and performative works around plants, and more recently about the rights of plants. Do you think we need to see them differently?

There is a common belief that humans are the most evolved species on the planet. This is in my opinion highly questionable, especially when we consider all the harm we are causing. Working with and investigating plants, I have realized how they have their own kind of intelligence, but also different ways of expressing themselves. They cannot speak as we do, to complain and claim their rights, and have therefore been mostly considered as a commodity, exploited for our own gains, or wiped out if deemed redundant.

But this started changing 50 years ago, in 1972, when lawyer Christopher Stone published an article called "Should Trees Have Standing?" in a law journal.

This has been an influential article for contemporary discussion on the rights of nature. Stone recounts that in the history of constitutional human rights, the rights of underprivileged groups have continually improved in the past centuries. For instance, children, people of colour, Indigenous peoples, women, the queer community, and prisoners, who once had no rights, now – at least in a few places – have gained legal standing. He also argues that plants or areas of nature, too, could be given constitutional rights – one thing comes after the other. And natural entities could and should be next. There are precedents.

Can you name a few?

There are some well-known international examples like the rights given to the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017, or the rights given to nature in Ecuador in 2008.

There, Indigenous communities describe the natural environment as Pachamama. So not only nature but also the way Indigenous communities view it has been protected when the country's constitution was revised to establish Pachamama as a legal entity for the first time in history. It now stipulates the respect for nature's existence, and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structures, functions, evolutionary processes, and restoration.

How does giving rights to the environment translate into design? What are the tangible ways of designing with this in mind?

In Basel, a law was passed in the 1980s that protects trees with a circumference of more than 50 cm from being cut down, whether on private or public land. This means that if a construction project is planned on a site with protected trees, the project needs to accommodate them, including their root systems, or, if necessary, replace the trees with other specimens of a similar quality. I hope to see more of these constitutional examples in the future, giving trees and other living beings legal standing. It is a good example of how Stone's legal proposition can be applied, and ultimately filter down into design practise by redefining the power relationship between human enterprise and the usually silent, powerless nature ●

← Céline Baumann, *Parliament of Plants*, for the exhibition *What is Radical Today*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2019