



UNIVERSITÉ DE NANTES



**Nature(s): Designing, Experiencing, Representing the natural environment,
18th to 21st centuries. University of Nantes, 6-8 June**

Any reflection on nature, ecology, ecosystems, biodiversity or natural environments implies a reflection on the place and function of human beings in nature. And yet the latter is usually curtailed or biased. Human beings are part of nature and their surest instinct is indeed domination. The underlying question is therefore whether they will allow some aspects of nature to evolve freely outside their power of influence, which would be a way of reckoning man's limitations and/or the role of the unconscious in their actions - nature and its free reins acting as a metaphor of men's unconscious - or if they will acknowledge that such a thing as wild nature or untamed nature in the vicinity of men is impossible, all the more so in an urban context, and that they will therefore need to reckon the notion of a free nature as a myth. Interestingly, reflections and discussions on the notions of place and landscape envision nature within a certain human frame, either the frame of memory or that of gaze. This framing could be compared to an intellectual or artistic taming of the wilder aspect of nature. In what proportions have men accepted nature to be wild or untamed over the centuries and how far have they gone in the belief that the constructions and landscapes they built were still nature at its most "natural"?

The forthcoming conference wishes to question more specifically the relationships between human beings and urban nature, in France, Britain and Ireland from the 18th century onwards, with a view to highlighting how consciously men and women have acknowledged the artificial and/or paradoxical notion of acting upon nature in those centuries, especially in an urban context and as shown in such varied fields as aesthetics, literature or landscape studies.

In October 2011 a first workshop gathered participants who discussed the complex relationships between nature and time from the 18th century until today. It opened with a reflection on ladies' interest for geography and the connections with

English postcolonial aspirations. It went on with a presentation of the place of nature in Shelley's antique ruins followed by a reflection on the meaning of nature in Victorian times. This first workshop also questioned the ways in which William Trevor and Tom Stoppard, two contemporary authors from very different backgrounds, represented nature in their works.

In June 2012, a second workshop focused on the interplay between nature and urban life, from yesterday's refined parks and gardens to today's green corridors and cultivated former industrial lands. Those natural networks are an illustration of how public policies choose to promote biodiversity, in encouraging the fauna and flora to reconquer man-dominated spaces, and nest and take root in the nooks and crannies of urban fallow-lands. We also saw how, as early as the 18th and 19th centuries, the creation of the Champs-Élysées in Paris was the result of a reflection on the place of nature in the city. This presentation was prolonged by a timeline that showed the specific context leading to the creation of public parks and gardens in Britain and specifically in London. While questioning the notion of an ecological urban management of London, it also addressed the links between health issues and the role played by public policies in the development of natural spaces in and around cities in the 21st century. The French example of Nantes and how it has developed and managed its green and natural spaces in the past decades was also part of this second workshop. So was the question of urban nature in the context of violence in the Northern Irish city of Belfast, as illustrated in Robert McLiam Wilson's novel *Eureka Street* (1996).

And yet many questions have as yet not been broached upon, such as the question of ruins and 'natural' landscape cemeteries, even in cities. In the same vein, pre-colonial and pre-industrial forms of nature have often been presented in ways that often verge on caricature just as 'civilized' nature has often been opposed to 'wild' nature. What are the echoes or traces of these binary systems of thought in eco-criticism today? The 18th century pastoral versus georgic conception of English nature could be interpreted as foreshadowing the present-day interest in wild as opposed to cultivated nature. The nostalgia for wilderness, the need to master nature, as well as the constraints of modern urban life merge and ground themselves in the designing of 'gardens in movement' or the planting of urban forests which echo the preoccupations of

earlier urban planners or garden designers of centuries past. In the context of the present economic and financial crisis, what of the urban landscapes of unfinished construction sites in some parts of Europe? What of battlefields in former times of war? Has nature been left to re-conquer freely those spaces because nations at war or modern economies have been in a way vanquished?

Moreover, the relationship to nature is very much influenced by the way time is perceived. While human beings used to build their relationship to nature on the long term, nature is nowadays dominated by speed and the obsession with quick results. How can we understand and reconcile the double paradox of immediacy or even the ephemeral (garden festivals, installations, land art) on the one hand, with a genuine realization of how urgent it is to address sustainable development issues? Today, the Web 2.0 revolution often reveals the different strata of history's palimpsest and can turn so-called natural spaces into outdoor museums. This breakthrough in the relationship of human beings to natural spaces changes radically people's relationships to space but also to time and to a sense of place. Also, despite more environmentally friendly methods of cultivation, is not nature too often considered as a background and an agreeable scenery for human beings to live in, rather than as an intrinsic part of our lives? What contradictions lie behind the terms themselves, used to describe nature, especially in an urban context? Are 'eco-cities', 'friendly' environments and methods, or 'sustainable development' and other such 'eco' or 'green' labels, nice and modern euphemisms hiding a far dire and gloomy reality? Or do they reveal a deep poetic need for men to preserve fallow or wastelands that could be interpreted as spaces of innovation and creativity, a way for human beings to dream their future?

The international conference 'Nature(s)' which will be held on June 6-8th, 2013 and will coincide with other cultural and scientific events in Nantes as a 'European Green Capital', will further question what is really at stake when human beings consciously deal with nature and natural spaces especially in an urban context. How have writers, artists, painters or landscape planners been grappling with nature in a rapidly growing urban world over the centuries, to question the way human beings live but also dream their future?

Proposals of not more than 300 words for the 2013 Conference should be sent before December 15th, 2012 to the organizers, along with a short biography.