

The Human Nature of Urban Nature: an Exploratory Study in Montevideo

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1. Abstract

The human condition implies a dynamic balance of the trilogy species / individual / social being. This causes the relative roles of each axis to alternate. That is why the relative position of the human being in relation to nature also changes. Humankind belongs to it as a species but is external to nature if it is considered as a cultural construct. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the relative weight of some components of our lives, including coexistence, social exchanges, experiences of nature and urban public life. The constriction of social life derived from confinement led to compensate for this lack with the search, for example, of a greater contact with one's own nature and with the urban one. In this sense, it is interesting to consider the relative role of public open spaces, domestic spaces, green spaces and mobility in cities, taking Montevideo as a reference case. What dimensions should we consider to attend to an integral balance of the human being and nature in the city? I propose some axes in the context of the city of Montevideo today: cyclical and linear time; *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*; comfort, pain and happiness; genotype and phenotype; technique, knowledge and poetry; material, affective and symbolic space; civilization, barbarism and nature; city, sea and countryside

2. Introduction

For human fulfillment, *estar* must be complemented with *ser*¹. In the first place, the basic conditions that the human being requires from a biological point of view must be fulfilled. But questions that make the interpersonal and the suprapersonal must also be satisfied. In the latter, social organization, culture and technique are fundamental. They allow, on the one hand, to go beyond the basic possibilities of human nature. But on the other hand, they distance us from nature itself, on an individual and environmental level.

The lack of economic resources can lead to the failure to satisfy basic needs (food, water, clothing, sanitation, healthcare and shelter). But it can also cause insufficient conditions to be fulfilled (education, recreation, social life, personal aspirations). In these cases, in Uruguay in general and in Montevideo in particular, the relationship with nature can become lively and direct in a negative sense².

In other cases, basic needs have been met and life in society, culture and technology are fully enjoyed. Paradoxically, in these situations direct relationships with nature, with that of one's own

¹ In Spanish there are two verbs that are translated into English by one, "to be". The verb *estar*, said of a person or of a thing, refers to the current condition or way of being. The verb *ser* refers to the essential qualities of the subjects.

² For example, the housing access en general ,and the access to a minimum of housing thermal comfort, in particular

essence and with that of the environment, can be lost. This is due to the rivalry between interpersonal, suprapersonal, and intrapersonal aspects. This creates a vacuum that does not allow the human fulfillment (at the individual, social or species level). This lack is also reflected in relations with the environment. So, some are people enslaved by nature, for not being able to reach a sufficient level of civilization. And others are people enslaved by civilization and cannot enjoy nature. These conflicts have been exacerbated during the health emergency derived from COVID-19.

It is necessary to remedy these shortcomings beyond economic or socio-cultural conditions. Although this goes beyond the powers of the disciplines that create spaces (such as architecture, urban planning or landscape design), it is an essential part of their ethical and aesthetic responsibilities.

3. Background and Literature Review

I base myself on a foundational theoretical development which I called the "theory of articulation of moments" (TAM) (Vallarino 2019). The TAM uses metaphors to support the approach to complex issues. It proposes as a starting point to define unidualities, pairs of complementary opposites (for example, public/private, practices/representations, action/contemplation, reason/drive, affects/meanings). Each pair generates *moments*, in the mechanical sense. A *moment* is the product of a force times a distance. The unidualities are represented by forces located on axes. The axes symbolize different approaches to a theme. These axes bring into play distances that generate the *moments*. The axes on which the pairs of forces are virtually organized would intersect at a point, at an articulation. The joint represents the human condition taken as a trilogy, species/individual/social being³. This in turn derives from the triune brain where drive, reason and affectivity are linked (Fig. 1).

The balance of *moments* is something dynamic, linked to life. It is associated with a continuous flow, where forces and distances vary in a recursive process that evolves. Linear and cyclical time are key components in this joint. These times are evidenced in the *ser* and the *estar*. Derived from the TAM, the notion of landscape that underlies these reflections is born. I take the landscape as an articulation between human practices and representations associated with nature.

The intellect can be conceived as a relationship between our body and other bodies (Coccia 2021). In this case, the individual, the inter-specific, the social and the environmental are inextricably linked. But, Descola believes that we must rethink the limits between nature and culture, between human beings, living and non-living things (Descola 2005). In our Western society, naturalism, animism and totemism coexist, with different levels of tacit or explicit recognition. The truth is that we are attracted by natural and cultural diversity. This can be explained by the four dimensions that, according to Charles Fourier, are present in our motivations and actions (L. a. Larrère 1997). These cardinal passions can be organized along two orthogonal axes. On the dialectical axis, the uniteistic passion is opposed to the Kabbalist. The first refers to the aspiration to merge into one and the second to the desire for discord. On the

³ It is taken as a reference to the thought of Professor Edgar Morin. Cf. the different volumes of "The method" (Morin 2001)

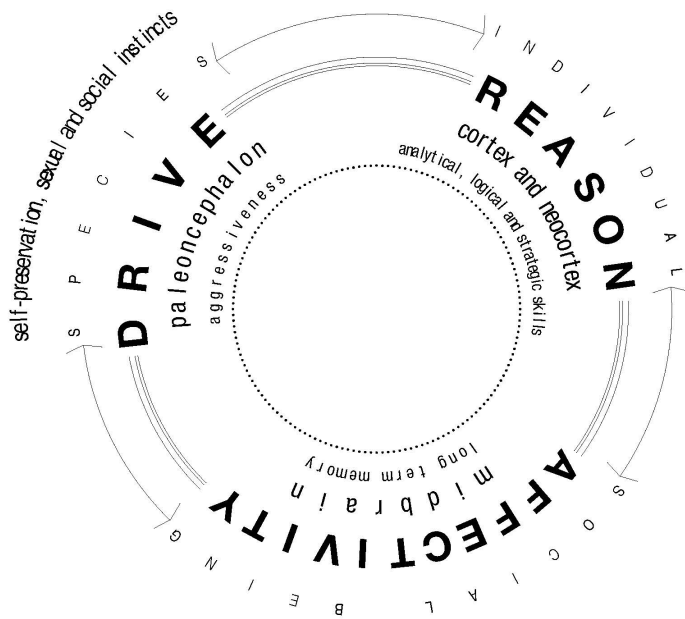


Figure 1_ triune brain (@author)

4. Method and Data

I titled this dissertation as an exploratory study. This is not due to its short development, since it has been linking projects for more than 20 years. It is because the process accommodates methods, relating new disciplines and linking case studies. We follow recursive processes between objectives, tools and ends. We link research, teaching and university extension. We use the case study method to address the complexity of reality. In field work we apply observation techniques, surveys and interviews. We carry out studies within the framework of undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the *Universidad de la República (Udelar)*; joint work with different municipalities; advice to Ministries; works with other faculties of Udelar and own researches of the Landscape and public space Department of the *Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo (FADU) Udelar*.

5. Results

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the relative weight of some components of our lives, including bodily experiences, coexistence, social exchanges, experiences of nature and urban public life. The constriction of social life derived from the confinement led to compensating for this lack with the search, for example, of greater contact with one's own nature and with the urban one. We have confirmed this in the various research works mentioned in the item "Method and data". Taking into account the unidualities associated with the TAM, it is interesting to consider the relative role of public open spaces, domestic spaces, green spaces and urban mobility, taking Montevideo as a reference case. What dimensions should we consider to attend to an integral balance of human beings and nature in the city? I propose some guide axes.

other axis, which tends to disperse the first in space and time, we have the joint pursuit of various desires (compound passion) and the inclination towards change (butterfly passion).

Thus, the longing for what is different is associated with eros, with intense bonds. But the widespread fear of suffering has spawned the palliative society, leading to permanent anesthesia (Byung-Chul 2021). Commitment is avoided to avoid pain. This has been enhanced by the Pandemic: the fear of death strengthened isolation and broke social ties. For Byung-Chul, the hysteria to survive means that life is reduced to a biological process that must be optimized.

5.1_ cyclical and linear time

“While linear time results from the measurement of physical events, the temporality of life is characterized by cyclical processes, which also manifest themselves in subjective bodily experience” (Fuchs 2018). This is why natural lighting is important, for example, at the domestic level, as it helps circadian cycles. Urban vegetation composed of plant species with different life cycles or with notable phenological variations, which mark the seasonal cycles⁴, also contribute in this sense. In the case of the Montevidean coast, the brightness of the landscape and the view of the horizon also play an important role: they enhance the experience of cyclical time by allowing experiences associated with the variation in the length of days and nights. The Pandemic enhanced the supremacy of linear time characteristic of modern Western societies. This is why it is so important for spatial design disciplines to help strengthen the experience of cyclical time, which is necessary for the physical and emotional health of citizens.

5.2_ genotype and phenotype

The phenotype is the variable manifestation of the genotype of a living thing in a given environment. While the urban environment is an anthropized environment, it can contribute to natural diversity and to the proper balance between phenotypes. This depends on its design and management. At the architectural and urban scale, it is possible to act, for example, on the incidence of sunlight (in quantity and quality), which is key for the proper development of living beings. It is possible to facilitate spaces for direct contact with nature. And, in particular, it is also possible to influence the formal qualities of plants, at the individual level or in their spatial arrangement. The resulting values influence the way places are perceived, the collective imaginary and, therefore, their general valuation. Consequently, they influence social practices. Thus, *natura naturans* (creative nature) and *natura naturata* (created nature) come into relationship.

5.3_ *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*

Here the dimensions of human passions that we saw earlier come into conflict. It is argued that *natura naturata* (the product) gives us security, but it is often boring because, in general, it is predictable. On the other hand, *natura naturans* (the producer) fascinates by its creativity, its variety and its capacity to surprise us (C. a. Larrère 1997). Urban nature must find the right balance between the "wild" and the domesticated, between surprise and control. Both are necessary human conditions.

5.4_ technique, knowledge and poetry

I consider desire as a source of poetry necessary to life, as well as poetry as a source of inspiration for desire. I also start from the consideration of artistic representations as a source of knowledge. This has to do with motivations in human life, spiritual goals, surprise and mystery, in short with distances and the need to create "moments". The pair of complementary opposites utilitarian/contemplative, brother of technique/poetry is key in this sense. The truth is that, apart

⁴ For example, in relation to flowers, there are plants with flowers that open and close every day or night, blooms of woody plants that appear in a certain season of the year, or annual flowers, whose short life cycle practically coincides with that of their bloom.

from the technical and material aspects, design disciplines cannot neglect the symbolic. That is why they must go beyond the how and pay attention to the why (Scoffier 2006).

5.5_ material, affective and symbolic space

Quality of life is related to meeting the needs of the human trilogy (species/individual/social being) according to the circumstances and particularities of the place in which one lives. It is necessary to contemplate the different spatial levels (taking care of shelter, hopes and desires), to embrace the conative level, passing through the cognitive and reaching the interpretative-evaluative level (which includes the axiological and affective).

5.6_ comfort, pain and happiness

Comfort contributes to well-being, the first being at the base of a pyramid, in relation to *estar*. Well-being is at the next step. It implies a certain degree of permanence: it is a state of transition towards *ser*. Finally, the culmination of the pyramid refers to happiness, definitely to *ser* and to the long term. Situations of discomfort are part of happiness, because suffering strengthens the conscience and enables to live experiences. Pain as something beyond the biological, it gives meaning to life (Byung-Chul 2021).

5.7_ civilization, barbarism and nature

The control/surprise pair is a sibling of the master/slave pair. At the urban level, this is related to cooperation and civilization, which go hand in hand with the sedentary/nomadic pair. According to Abenjaldu human society begins in the free countryside, as nomadism, and there a minimum of cooperation and a maximum of struggle meet. Human society ends with the foundation of cities and the conversion of nomads to sedentism (Chueca y Goitia 1987).

In the early days of the city of Montevideo, it was not possible to clearly differentiate what was wild from what was civilized. When he refers to the barbarian culture of the early 19th century in Montevideo, Barrán alludes to the alert and permanent use of all the senses derived from the chromatic variety, the exercise of the sense of smell, the adrenaline rush of what the weeds everywhere were hiding, the dark night, and the immense silence (Barrán 1990). This naturalness exalted above all man as a species (the pulsional over the rational), promoting a direct relationship between the individual and the environment, enabling intense plurisensory experiences.

The "desire for nature" did not exist at the dawn of Montevideo's capital, given the absence of a true contrast between the city and nature. Neither one nor the other had a defined identity. Today, landscape design should aim to recover that multisensory comprehension of reality, but from a civilized culture, starting from a domesticated nature. It must tend to an enrichment, that although it does not reach the absolute to which Luginbühl (1992) refers, it allows us to approach it, by means of the ethical-aesthetic identity (Valcárcel 1998).

5.8_ city, sea and countryside

Montevideo today defines its identity in opposition to two "deserts", the countryside and the sea (Fig.2). The permanent tension between the city and its natural environment, on a physical and symbolic level, is still evident today in the language. When someone travels to the rest of the country they are said to "go inland", as if they were going into a dense forest. However, the field loses strength in front of the ocean⁵. Thus, when someone travels to the eastern coastal area, it is no longer said "he is going inland", but "he is going east". At the same time, in any case that a person moves to a point of the country that is not the capital, the political predominates. It is said "he goes outside", as if he were leaving civilization to enter the void, the wilderness.



Figure 2_ Montevideo waterfront, summer 2022; the *Río de la Plata*, the river wide as the sea (@author)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

I subscribe to Gilles Clément's manifesto of the planetary garden. Likewise, I take Lomonosov-Lavoisier's statement "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed". I reinterpret this law by adding the rational and the affective to the system. I put emphasis on interpreting how things are transformed.

I consider a theoretical-conceptual scheme (Fig. 3) that represents life as a flow. This flow is in perpetual motion and follows the behavior of communicating vessels. The different dimensions of the human trilogy (species/individual/social being) and the environment (living beings and inert components) are container vessels of the vital flow. I take life as that which passes between bodies and circulates between kingdoms, not a fixed and specific quality (Coccia 2021).

⁵ Uruguay has 700 km of coastline, of which more than 200 km are on the Atlantic Ocean, east of the capital city.

The equilibrium of this complex whole is in movement, it is a dynamic equilibrium. It depends on linear time and cyclical time, on a succession of lives and deaths, on an unfolding of genotypes into phenotypes, on a complementation between the human nature of urban nature and

the urban character of human nature. But this does not mean diluting the boundaries. Limits are necessary in order to establish distances. The risk of digital in general and telecommuting in particular is that they make people lose their distance. Boundaries are dissolved, physically, functionally and affectively. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Distances are necessary for the existence of *moments*, in the TAM sense. Desire makes forces and distances oscillate. Desire is the source of poetry, it allows experiences, it is what gives meaning to life. It relates to the pain referred to by Byung-Chul. The oscillation of the vital flow allows the articulation of the forces, the *estar*, with the distances, the *ser*. The *estar* enables the acquisition of knowledge and the use of resources. The *ser* allows to have a critical position and to value them. The key to environmental sustainability and happiness is in the *moments*, in the pairs of complementary opposites dynamically conjugated with distances.

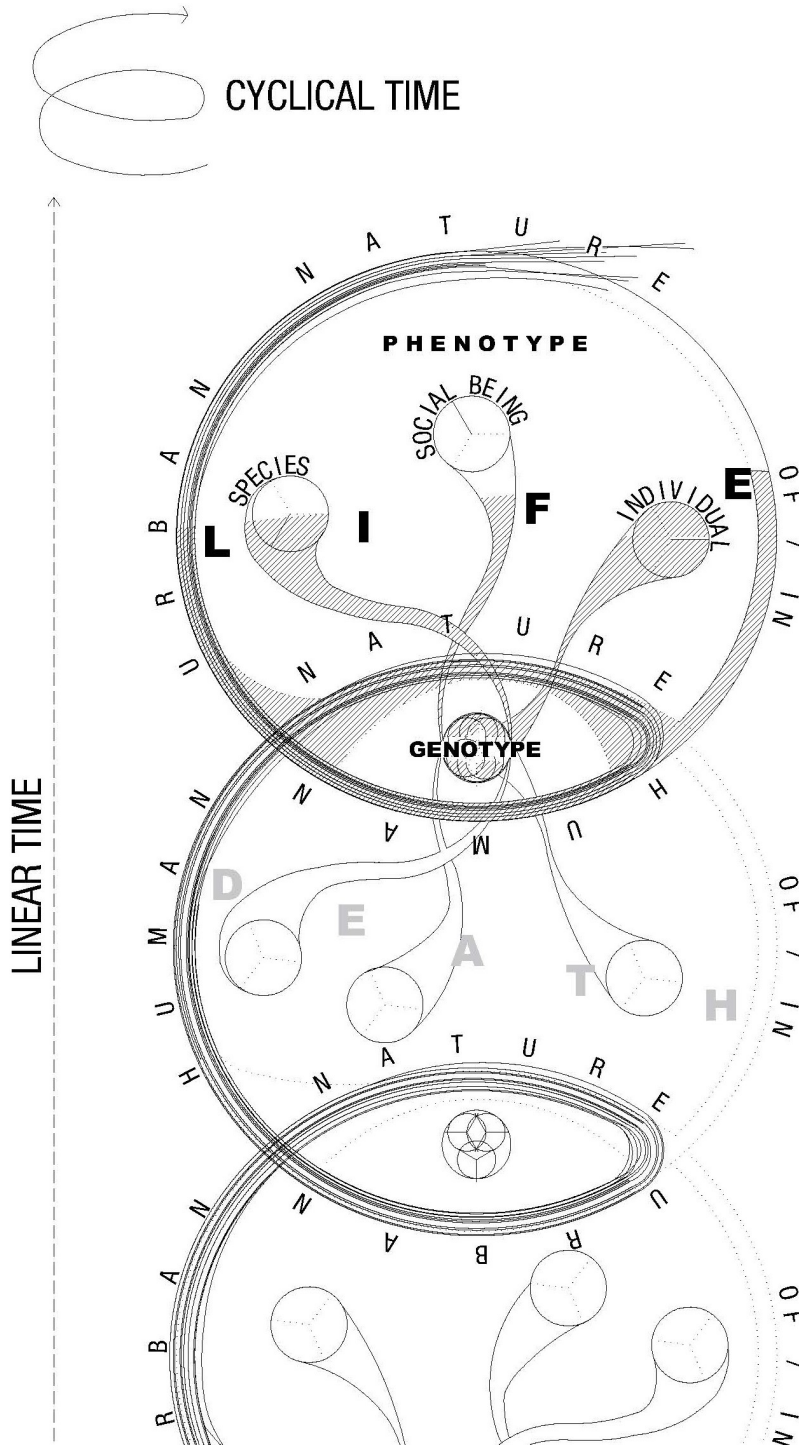


Figure 3_ human nature of/in urban nature, conceptual scheme (@ author)

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