

Urban Nature; Restricted Growth, Adaptability and Perseverance

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“It is possible that our current urban existence influences how we relate to nature and what our ideas of nature are.”

(Manser, 2015: 44)

As a child, I had the rare opportunity to grow up in a large property in a rural area. Being surrounded by nature became a huge part of my world. Some ten years later, my first memory of going to a city was encompassed by a feeling of loneliness, this new world around me felt somewhat incomplete. Almost immediately, I began searching for evidence of the natural world, discovering its main existence in rather confined locations.

During the beginning of this project, I thought I had a clear vision of my research topic, but it wasn't until I found myself submerged in reality, walking through the streets of Barcelona, that my initial ideas changed. I had to take on board this newly found evidence that now surrounded me and determine my new approach from there.

And so, I did. It became evident to me that the expansion of the city left few spaces for nature to thrive, but due to its determination, evidence of the natural environment could be found consistently in many locations outside of the city's predetermined parks and green spaces. I noticed that it was there, in the urbanscape, that nature was offered new expansive challenges for its perseverance.

As Sarah Manser (2015) states:

By reassessing my experiences of the 'marginal', 'natural' world, I began to notice and appreciate the unexpected interface between the built and what most people call the 'natural realm'. The city provides the contrast and tension of human and non-human.

(Manser, 2015: 40)

Through my realisation, I allowed myself to recognise an immense realm of inspiration I had not been aware of before.

In Barcelona, I spent a lot of my time in parks and green spaces, including Güell Park and Ciutadella Park. I believed that spending my time in the city's most natural environments would be the best way of engaging with my project. Unfortunately, I found this to be a misleading perspective. It was my experiences and engagement in the urban parts of Barcelona that offered me more insight into my project than I thought was possible. I was able to document a richer link to my research topic with the limitations of nature. It was here, through the absence of the natural environment, that I felt closer to nature, discovering its perseverance and tenacity.

Contemporary nature writer and Chair of the Environmental Studies program, Dr. Timon McPhearson and Victoria Marshall (*Micro Urban: The Ecological and Social Potential of Small-Scale Urban Spaces*, 2015), a registered landscape architect and urban designer respectively, highlight ideas about the loss of nature since the industrial revolution and propose ideas that the 'wilderness' is closer than we think. In efforts to minimise the gaps between green spaces in urban environments, McPhearson and Marshall examine the importance of micro-urban spaces in their article.

"Micro-urban spaces are the sandwich spaces between buildings, walls, sidewalk cracks, and other small-scale urban spaces that exist in the fissures between linear infrastructure.... But most of these micro-urban spaces are overlooked, unrecognized, and even invisible parts of our urban lives."

(McPhearson & Marshall, 2015)

It is these invisible and obscured locations that offer a new realm of possibilities for the natural environment. Perhaps my current and past living locations have allowed me to recognise and appreciate these fragmented ubiquitous ecosystems. When confronted with the absence of the natural world, we dedicate maximum effort to seeking it out, for it is these pervasive cracks which lead to the new expansive challenges for growth.



Going to Barcelona was a huge step for me. It was my first time experiencing life outside of Australia. It was the start of a new journey not only for myself as an individual, but for my studies as well. Upon my arrival, I was faced with the daunting realisation that somehow, I had to navigate this distant world with minimal knowledge to guide me. My experiences afforded me many opportunities to overcome my doubts, learn to adapt to new foreign situations and persevere through the many hurdles I was confronted with. Initially, without even realising it, I had positively linked nature's capacities to my own. I had created an invisible bond with nature again, one which would steer me in a positive way.

My work and research throughout my time in Barcelona was broadly based on looking at ecology in the urban environment. Reflecting on my time in Barcelona, I have come to realize that this work is about how I relate to nature. The information that I have collected reflects the changes in how I view and classify the natural environment.

The geographic and industrial history of Barcelona informs the conditions of the present natural environment. Contributions from both have resulted in a highly industrialised outer ring and a concentrated core which has left the city congested. This impediment has offered many challenging circumstances for nature's perseverance of growth, adaptability, and survival.

And so, I began to study the hidden evidence of the natural environment in the central urban parts of Barcelona, focusing on the interconnectedness of the human and non-human within Barcelona and how they manipulate one another. The unseen or generally overlooked aspects of nature within the city were the elements I wanted to define, investigating these aesthetics through a three-dimensional piece.

As a sculptural artist, I was determined to project my findings and produce something, creating a work that my audience could engage with. To continue my efforts of a

sustainable practice, nothing could hold more meaning than to use a variety of biomaterial in my work. They are fragile in nature and, over time and when subjected to a variety of conditions, the materials will deconstruct or deform. After prolonged exposure to these conditions, the materials will finally decompose, displaying a performance in each piece through the creative life cycle as the organic matter can be reused and ultimately goes back to the earth. Through the use of biomaterials in conjunction with a variety of found and recycled textiles, I was able to express a juxtaposition or contrast of the natural and the man-made, exploring combinations of a diversity of materials to suggest a variety of textures and forms, and also using spatial relationships to inform concepts of limitations, the boundaries in co-existing human and natural environments.



During my research in Barcelona, I spent a lot of my time at local art galleries and art museums. While conducting my research in the Can Framis Modern Art Museum, one particular artist stood out to me, Paul Daly, a contemporary artist who works with organic matter. His works were inspirational as they display a collective idea of using on-hand organic matter, exploring various elements of decaying processes. Encouraged to use organic materials from my immediate environment in my works, wood ashes were significant—a material that I recycled from my home fire during the winter months, this substance allowed me to form a bio-composite material through the reinforcement of other natural materials. This offered my works texture and an associated appearance of man-made building materials while being derived completely from natural substances:

“By incorporating materials suggestive of construction, manmade, and architectural forms.... draw attention to the overlooked, vacant, and void areas within our cities, which, according to urban ecologists, may well be the link between people and nature.”

(Manser, 2015: 41)

Throughout the documented period of my project, there were numerous stages in which the tenacity consistently displayed by nature left me breathless. Seeking out vacant, somewhat ignored locations to conduct my research, I was consistently struck with the man-made challenges that torment nature who, in turn, is always able to overcome mankind's capacity to suppress its growth, deforming and re-forming itself to prevail against the virtually inconceivable conditions it is faced with. No matter the obstacles, nature continues to overcome them.



As a millennial, I am confronted with a vast quantity of challenges not only within my current life but the conceivable future. Issues surrounding economic and climate change are those that sit highest on the majority of young people's minds. My artwork continues to be one that offers me my own concept of persistence and perseverance throughout my general life and within my day-to-day routines, both

the anticipated and the unforeseen circumstances that challenge us, overcoming those that I face as nature herself would. Nature's capacity to adapt and overcome any obstacle is inspirational. I was exposed to a new perspective of strength and robustness, which I now realise is ultimately where my connectivity and passion towards nature and the natural world arose from.

My studio experiments and final pieces provided me with further cues to expand my original idea, broadening the scope of the various materials which I have used to display a state of flux. Also, the repellent characteristics of coinciding substances displaying relationships can be linked to those of the interconnectedness of the natural realm and the woman-made.

The urbanscape offers new expansive challenges for nature's perseverance, and although this can be a deformative process, it is a process which nature must still undergo in order to prevail. This became a conflicting perspective that I had to resolve. In order to understand this idea, I needed to find a solution, which I managed to do through my studio practice. It was my



curiosity and need for a resolution which ultimately allowed me to consider the idea of using mould in my works—something which acts in a similar function as the built

environment does upon nature. My decision to produce a work created from a moulding process can find its origin in the relationship that the urban environment projects upon the natural realm as unpredicted conditions alter the course of its growth, thus which shape its natural course, and impeding its ease of structural form. The moulds in which these works were produced forced the molten material to form into a pre-determined shape, outside of its control.



By displaying the evidence of my final works in photographic form, I am confined to only revealing a single moment's caption, one that bears a link to the referable action of growth and change that constantly occurs in the natural world. The substances that are used in my bio-art are altered through various means. Various temperatures and long exposure to humidity reveal changes and deformities in the works. Bio-art is an art form that works with bio-materiality, living matter, it explores "the issues of the boundaries between the living and non-living, organic and inorganic; the relation between the human and nonhuman; as well as various thresholds of the living" (Radomska, 2016: 13-14). Biomaterials are nourishing to the environment and can be produced from locally abundant biomass, creating and encouraging a circular economy. But these materials do pose challenges, and without enough regulation of the environment and the conditions the artwork is exposed to, the works will change beyond my control. As an artist, I have given up measures of control over my work and given it over to chance. This lack of control can display both positive and negative impacts on the artwork. Both of which are interesting displays, as the artwork begins to change and grow or alternatively deteriorate and decompose. Each of these are expected and foreseen, basic characteristics of the biomaterial but it is the probable length of the lifecycle of the artwork which can pose frustration for myself as the artist. But the power and beauty of biomatter relies upon it ultimately going back to the earth. Each of these features of biomaterial are expected and foreseen but may frustrate the artist, especially where lifespan is concerned. Yet nothing is as beautiful as biomatter being reassimilated into the cycle of life, signaling the temporality of the artistic intervention.

During this experience, I have been able to connect to my own artistic practice on a deeper level and I have also been able to further explore how I perceive what art means to me and my thought processes. It was an opportunity for me to grow as an artist. I realise now that my works have taken me to unsuspected places both personally and professionally, and I have been able to overcome known challenges and embrace the overlooked ones. Unfortunately, we don't always acknowledge the so-called insignificant parts, but they are to be enjoyed too. These moments come when you least expect them, and can only be appreciated provided you make yourself present enough to see them. These pieces are a reminder to me that, as an artist and as a person, it is important sometimes to just stop and look, appreciate what is around you. Sometimes you will discover something more than you had set out to find. There is a beauty in this that gives us hope for the future.

Works Cited

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