

## **Overlapping Spheres: Environmental Humanities and the Built Environment**

### **Regrounding**

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Italian writer Italo Calvino foresaw "two paths forward for the novel: either to 'become implicated into networks of relations' or to 'understand things in their multiplicity of codes and levels' from a distance." I suggest that to understand and address architecture's contribution to the various crises of our times, architects must learn how to alternate between these two paths. In order to resituate architecture within a broader disciplinary framework, one that reflects the reality of things—here, where we are and afar, where we can't see—we must finally embrace the science of ecology as "a vector of agency, constraint, and freedom." After all, science—especially one like ecology that studies "systems of systems"—is always both implicated in relations and looking at them from a distance. A serious engagement with the broadly understood science of ecology, including what Gregory Bateson called an "ecology of mind," is the first step towards a significant rethinking of architecture.

To reflect on the potential (exciting as much as risky) effects of ecological thinking, I invite you to reflect on how architects relate to architectural materials. Rarely does an architect think of a tree when they look at a timber beam. Those who know what mycelium is are mostly excited about its potential as a new building block. Few will reflect on the fact that while making a biodegradable mycelium brick—in itself an admirable innovation—they are handling the stuff that tree thoughts are made of. Perhaps one reason for this negligence is that these mycorrhizal communication networks occupy a region largely ignored by architects but actively studied by ecologists; they reside below the ground plane. If we decided to truly acknowledge the groundbreaking work of, among other scientists, forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, we would finally look underground and question one of the most common architectural symbols: the ground section line. This omnipresent mark neither represents a fixed physical barrier, nor a real limit to a discrete system. What the line represents, however, is an entrenched incapacity to acknowledge that buildings are part of open systems that extend beyond their apparent impermeability and that our minds are rooted in a psycho-geographic environment that transcends the boundaries of our brains and bodies and is innervated with other forms of intelligence. We are always implicated in relations and experiencing them from a distance.

To preserve the autonomy of the architectural field and prevent its atrophy, we must, even if counterintuitively, allow for our thinking to be open, contaminated, and entangled. To confront the environmental crisis, we must cultivate a new kind of theoretical soil. It is time for a profound ecological regrounding of architectural practice and of the way in which we architects think.