

POSITIONING NEW GEOGRAPHIES

an interview with **MOHSEN MOSTAFAVI**

NEYRAN TURAN

Neyran Turan: As an advisory board member of the journal and the Dean of Harvard Design School, how would you situate the ambitions of *New Geographies* within the design disciplines today?

Mohsen Mostafavi: It seems to me that in the field of design, we have had for too long a certain set of compartmentalizations between the different disciplines. *New Geographies*, in many respects, is interesting because it talks about a broader set of domains, something more like a surface of relationalities. The importance of the idea of thinking about the design disciplines through networks and connections is that it makes us aware of things that have been historically thought to be invisible, and makes those more visible. Andreas Huyssen, for instance, has talked about the emphasis placed in the recent past on the role of memory. I think we have with architecture, urban design—in many respects, looking toward history and the past—a certain deemphasis on the role of the present, on the role of now. So it is a very forward-looking, speculative project. For me, the interesting thing about *New Geographies* is that it is not only a project of spatial geography in the sense of the regions and terrains of a wider domain but it also touches much more systematically on the role of the political. In that sense, *New Geographies* renders explicit the dimension of the political and its impact on our design practice.

NT: One of our main aims for the journal is to create a platform for rethinking the agency of the designer in relation to the idea of scale, after an era of seeing design as the spatial manifestation of globalization and rapid urbanization. In that context, how would you reflect upon the potentiality of scale in relation to our discussions in the journal?

MM: For me the idea of scale is always related to the issue of measure. Because, literally, you think about the scale of the map and then the scale that is the tool that designers use to scale a project. So in a way it is also possible to think that—through the concept of scale and measure—one also regains or rediscovers the discussion around questions of proportion. When we look at the development of certain cities—such as Dubai and Shanghai, for instance—the scale of a region relates to the scale of buildings, it relates to the scale and measure of the spaces between buildings. Thus scale is not only an abstraction but also provides a mechanism of investigation of the urban condition.

Thus one thing I find important in relation to *New Geographies* is that it is not merely taking the lens and looking into the idea of the wider scale, but it enables the possibility of considering things at a multiplicity of scales. There is the idea of multiple layers of activity in the questions of the urban in terms of the geographic. So the scale of close-up is as important as the large scale. How is the small scale affected by conditions that have been historically not attended to? In that sense, I think, the interrelationship between various scales is important. The second point in relation to the idea of scale is that *New Geographies* extends beyond a cartographic project. That is, it is not one of looking at spatialities merely in terms of wider context again but—in the same way that we talked about the political—here also with the geographical imagination; you have the emphasis more on the role of cultural geographies. So the significant part of *New Geographies*, in my mind, is the performative dimension of how these spaces are inhabited, and what kinds of connections exist between these different conditions of geography. If one talks about migration or immigration, for instance, it is simultaneously a political and a geographical project. The idea here is the tension between the way in which specific bodies inhabit space and relating that to multiple scales—the scale of the large, and the scale of the small.

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NT: During the past decade, the potential interaction among various scales created discussions around topics such as infrastructural and landscape urbanism. For our discussions in the journal, and in relation to what you said about the potential set of issues implied by relations among multiple scales, or multiple layers of activity, we find it also crucial for the design disciplines to consider the *acting* aspect as it informs capacities to rethink new ways of working, and new design tools and strategies (models, techniques, and practices) as we are redefining new geographies.

MM: Yes, when we are dealing with these geographical issues, it is important for us to talk about new tools. It is clear that the traditional tools of planning are really not sufficiently elaborate in terms of addressing this complex situation. On the one hand, we have, through the emergence of technology and new media, a new understanding of the urban situation and the reality of urban existence, which is different than simply addressing the urban artifact. On the other hand, the concept of the evolution of the urban artifact cannot be reduced anymore to the concept of the physical presence of the architectural object. The history of urban planning is—even though it does not historically work with buildings—in many respects very much focused on the notion of the architectural plan. And what it tends to not emphasize is the idea of a prepared ground, a ground that might be more than ground zero. Because the concept of ground zero, as a datum, is a plane situation on top of which the architectural object is placed. One of the important contributions of a mode of thinking like landscape urbanism is that it charges the ground, it prepares the ground and gives it a certain set of qualities or values that are articulated in the same way one perhaps thinks about the design of buildings. In other words, the ground itself is also designed. So the reference to landscape urbanism speaks of this idea of the constructed ground as a site that is to receive the architecture. The interaction between the architectural and this prepared condition creates new possibilities.

In terms of the reference to infrastructure, it is a really key part of the discussion because the infrastructural is also a mechanism through which democracy, if you like, is provided, because infrastructure offers possibilities for accessibility or connectivity for interaction between citizens. So, in that sense, infrastructure is an enabling mechanism. If you do not have the infrastructural and you only have the idea of the large-scale architectural interven-

tion—as happens in many conditions of the urban—you are erasing from the urban the possibility of the provision of the kinds of spaces of connectivity that are absolutely necessary in the context of spatial democracy.

NT: The question of infrastructure seems critical when we think of examples like Dubai or China, where the provisional aspect of infrastructure is even more evident. That is, as with ecological, regional, or political questions, the infrastructure appears as a question rather than a given, as one of the larger set of issues that the designer has to cope with. If in the example of landscape urbanism, the infrastructure replaced various previous architectural and urban contextualisms and became the context itself, in examples like Dubai, design's relationship to infrastructure shifts, where new ways of thinking might be required. In relation to this, in your recent writings, you explore the possibility of an Ecological Urbanism as a potential lineage or dialogue after previous disciplinary realignments in relation to the ideas of landscape, infrastructure, and urbanism. Could you elaborate on this and how you think Ecological Urbanism might be related to possible new disciplinary repositionings?

MM: In terms of discussions on the landscape, I wanted to still put the emphasis on the urban dimension. That is probably part of the reason why I felt that maybe shifting toward using the title of Ecological Urbanism would be helpful in terms of establishing a slightly different position. At the same time, I do think that the kind of investigations that we made around this topic of landscape urbanism, in terms of tools and techniques, are still key points. They still relate to what I was saying earlier about the difficulties with the discipline of planning and urban design and the need and desire for us to constantly discover—although often unsatisfactory but nevertheless still crucial—new tools and techniques in terms the relationship between the landscape and the urban; specifically, in looking at landscape more opportunistically.

My interest in the ecological is that it emphasizes—once again perhaps not dissimilar to the idea of *New Geographies*—the possibility of looking into the contemporary urban situation and dealing with a lot of conditions that may be not so visible because of the reality of operations of a city today, of its many layers. So whereas the idea of landscape urbanism was about the development of a certain schema, if you like—or the evolution of certain prototypical condi-

tions that could be developed as a schema, which then could be applied—and bringing it into the site, the Ecological Urbanism problematic for me is looking at things from the other side. So rather than starting with an investigation toward a schema, Ecological Urbanism started with an inquiry into given conditions of the city as they exist, as they operate. For example, looking at the services provided in the city, as a site that produces an enormous amount of garbage, and through the lens of garbage, for example, having a much clearer idea about what the city is about and what it produces as waste. So I think this shift means that we are not just producing new visions but also dealing with the transformation and modification of existing conditions as a way of coming up with alternative schemas. It may be that, for example, there is a quite close connection between Ecological Urbanism and infrastructural urbanism. Again, however, instead of talking about the physical infrastructure of the city, it talks about the provisional infrastructures of the city, as well as its physical situations. It looks at and sees how, for example, these situations can become more ecologically responsive not merely as a social project but as a project that has an aesthetic dimension. In that sense, it becomes possible to combine the project of ecology with a project of aesthetics. While ecology and sustainability has been making its argument under the rubric of the “social good,” seeing ecology as a domain of aesthetic response brings certain kinds of situations that are probably more surreal, if you like. This also goes back to what you were saying earlier about acting. It involves the choreography of the spatial geography of the city because of the different conditions of mobility that exist, the cast of characters that go through, and the infrastructure—they all become part of a dynamic project.

NT: Your point about the ecological and the aesthetic is important as it revisits our initial discussion of the link between the political and the formal. By inserting ecology into the discussion of a post-landscape urbanism condition, it seems that you are not specifically talking about the issue of sustainability but more about widening our palette of working because, by concentrating on the constructed ground, landscape urbanism limited itself to surfaces, for instance.

MM: Yes, it limited itself to surfaces and also became a project rooted in the tradition of collage and representation. Ecological Urbanism is more of a juxtapositional project where the landscape is juxtaposed with a certain set of urban realities. It is also a return to a desire for new forms of landscape, new forms of nature, and so on. The mass and the reality of cities that have 15 million, 20 million, 35 million inhabitants is a form of density where the concept of the ecological is something that operates at a dense level. So the problematic is not merely dealing with very sparsely populated rural or semirural kinds of conditions but also dealing with hyper-dense situations and seeing how the potential parallels with certain biological, organic conditions or natural systems actually helps us respond to, or helps us think about, situations that are highly artificial. The difficulties should also produce some innovative solutions that are not always seen as negative; turning that into an alternative situation is a project.

NT: This seems significant as it relates to our discussions in the journal where we would like to focus on the active tension between those two ideas—between transforming the context of design with the stretching of the palette and then developing necessary techniques to deal with that expansion. And in that vein, maybe your interpretation of ecology is one version of that active expansion in order to incorporate new strategies into our thinking about the political and the formal.

MM: As designers it is very important to define the framework, the parameters, the way we in which we construct a form of positioning. A lot of conversation today is about how we begin a project, what are the points of reference of a project, etc. On the one hand, there is an interest in a social, political, and ethical set of realities and references; at the same time, you do not want to just be do-gooders and make claims like social workers. The project of the social in terms of *New Geographies* needs to be a way of redefining the social through alternative forms of imagination. I think looking for such new possibilities and opportunities is critical in discussions of *New Geographies*.