

Projet d'architecture 4.11 : UN - Urban Nature

Lecturers

Mar Nadia CASABELLA ALVAREZ (Coordinator) and Axel FISHER

Course mnemonic

PROJ-P4311

Language(s) of instruction

English and French

Course period

See programme details

Campuses

Solbosch and Flagey

Course content

The **UN – Urban Nature** teaching unit is a "vertical" architectural design studio open to Bachelor "continuation" students (see dedicated syllabus: **3.11**), **Master 1** (see dedicated syllabus: **4.11**) and **Master 2** (see dedicated syllabus: **5.11**).

UN – Urban Nature is based on a reconfiguration between urbanization and nature, between humans and non-humans in the way we inhabit the Earth.

Modernity, founded on a "great divide" between humans and the animated earth, has established a distance between human habitat and nature, evident in the organization of cities as much as the countryside, and which may today have lost its *raison d'être*.

More than the application of familiar tools and solutions, **UN – Urban Nature** is intended as a space for an "imperfect, holistic exploration of a holistic problem that is beyond us", in order to learn how to imagine an approach to architecture and urban planning that might incorporate a paradigm shift.

The majority of the world's population now lives in cities. Cities are rightly regarded as a constructed, artificial environment, often seemingly cut off from nature. Yet few cities escape the extreme conditions that nature imposes on them, whether it's dust storms in Dubai, snow in New York or floods in Paris. Nature intrudes on cities and adapts to them, taking advantage of the opportunities they offer and seeking new opportunities to reproduce. In turn, cities modify the natural systems and biogeochemistry of their environment. The scale of this modification of nature has accelerated over the last fifty years. Whereas cities originally depended on their immediate environment for food and supplies, they now depend on increasingly extensive territories and networks to satisfy their metabolic needs. Today, 60% of the world's urban population relies on rural hinterlands for 80-90% of its material and energy needs.

So, the "city" is not so much opposed to nature as interwoven with it.

What then of the age-old opposition that defined cities as the artificial environment par excellence, from which nature (its hazards, its dangers, etc.) is excluded?

What is to be made of the city/countryside dichotomy now that the survival of cities depends on territories that are increasingly vast and remote, linked by complex supply chains and proliferating ad infinitum: can these territories still be described as "rural", in the traditional sense of a subordinate territory, lagging behind in terms of progress and fundamentally under-valued by architects?

Does the notion of "rural" still have any validity when it comes to apprehending the reality of these outlying territories, haunted by their past and shaken by the contemporary dynamics of global interconnection?

UN – Urban Nature takes part in the **NeRu project** (newruralities.eu [<https://newruralities.eu>]), an Erasmus+ cooperative partnership (2022-25) between 6 teams of teachers and their students from as many European universities: *ULB*, *Politecnico di Torino* (Italy), *Universidade da Coruña* (Spain), *Universidade do Minho* (Portugal), *Universitet Po Arhitektura Stroitelstvo I Geodezija of Sofia* (Bulgaria), and *ETH Zürich* (Switzerland).

NeRu aims to reconceptualize rural territories beyond the city-country opposition, identified as one of the causes of the current climate crisis, in order to enrich training programs for architects and urban planners.

This 2023–24 academic year, the **UN – Urban Nature** studio's work starts from the hypothesis that these territories are traversed by a pre-modern, pre-industrial layer that persists in the form of GHOSTS: the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present. As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before: our newly shaped and ruined landscapes becoming the new reality. If we want to see more clearly, we need to learn to identify and locate those GHOSTS pointing to the past, signaling our forgetting, and providing a substrate from where to actualize our present.

Our place of exploration is the coastal plain between Zeebrugge (B) and Breskens (NL), reaching inland to Bruges (B), Damme (B), Oostburg (NL), and Schoondijke (NL). About three thousand years ago, this area was governed by natural, geological processes, like storm surges and the ebb and flow of a turbulent sea. The present-day coastal plain is the result of a combination of anthropic interventions starting over 1,000 years ago, and long-term sea tidal movements carrying sediments, eroding, and altering the sea level. Hence a landscape of forever negotiation that, as late as the sixteenth century, still saw parts of it disappeared under the sea. And today a place traversed by a dense network of infrastructures aimed at controlling all possible hazards, which will be compared to other coastal locations in the context of the **NeRu project** (newruralities.eu [<https://newruralities.eu>]).

Dedicated page on the website of the Faculty of architecture La Cambre Horta: <https://archi.ulb.be/un-urban-nature>

Objectives (and/or specific learning outcomes)

UN – Urban Nature contributes to perfecting the specific learning outcomes expected of Architectural Project courses.

As a minimum expectation, the skills and learnings to be confirmed by M.Arch-1 students are those already expected to be gained at the end of the Bachelor in Architecture cycle, as set out in the "**BA3 jury**" assessment grid (see downloadable file below):

- > Spatial dimensioning
- > Architectural composition
- > Uses
- > Scales
- > Subject
- > Oral
- > Representation

In addition to these minimum requirements, Master of Architecture students will develop advanced autonomy and synthesis skills, a critical grasp of the problem(s) addressed, creativity and originality, demonstrating their ability to enter the professional world after graduation.

M.Arch-1 students will be invited to focus their work on the themes of the "**in-between**" spaces.

Pre-requisites and co-requisites

Course having this one as pre-requisite

PROJ-P5312 | Projet d'architecture 5.12 : HUB – Hypothèses Urbaines Bruxelloises | 20 crédits

Required knowledge and skills

Prerequisite courses

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Teaching method and learning activities

The **UN – Urban Nature** unit adopts the "design studio" pedagogical device, made of bi-weekly classes alternately devoted to structured presentations by teachers, contributions by external guests, site or exhibition visits, short, well-defined exercises (reading seminar, "lodge" for production of a well-defined product, ...), group discussions, individual and/or group work sessions, "correction" sessions for students' work, and

participation in cultural events outside the class timetable (conferences, etc.).

More specific "formative" assessment assignments are also proposed; their purpose, modalities and deadlines are communicated by the teachers in class.

The presentation of these works to teachers and other students is subject to constructive assessments.

Ultimately, all these activities contribute to the production of a spatial transformation proposal.

Contribution to the teaching profile

The **UN – Urban Nature** unit contributes to the "**Master en architecture**" teaching profile [<https://sam-docs.ulb.ac.be/referentiels/202021/P/M-ARCHS.pdf>] insofar as it focuses on the production of one or more concrete architectural projects.

The projects produced as part of the **UN – Urban Nature** unit will provide an opportunity to test the ability of Masters of Architecture to synthesize the following skills:
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References, bibliography and recommended reading

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Other information

Place(s) of teaching

Flagey and Solbosch

Contact(s)

- > Term 1 (September-December 2023): Write an email to Nadia Casabella AND François Vliebergh
- > Term 2 (February-May 2024): Write an email to Nadia Casabella AND Axel Fisher

Programmes

Programmes proposing this course at the faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta

MA-ARCH | **Master in Architecture** | finalité Professional/unit 1

Programmes proposing this course at the faculty of Sciences

MA-GEOG | **Master in Geography : General** | finalité Urban studies (ULB-VUB)/unit 1 and finalité Urban studies (ULB-VUB)/unit 2