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The *field* is a scenario of informal and organic growth that has by now become the norm in most cities of the developing world: it is a condition of urban fringe, the marginal space (either outer or interstitial) where nature and urbanization mingle in a precarious uncertainty, where all the signs visible on the landscape belong to both city and countryside and yet, at the same time, to neither of them.

This article aims to exalt the field and its “even covering” as a potential positive synthesis of these two sides, of the (nomadic) space of the eternal *dérive*¹ and the (sedentary) space of fractal enclosures: by comparing the field to the edge of the desert, and its inhabitants to the nomadic tribes of the *sahel*,² I will assert that it is possible to learn from the mobility of nomads, perceiving the nomadic condition as an asset. To elaborate upon this idea, I will interpret the *Baan Mankong* housing programme implemented by the Thai government as a phenomenon that has already taken advantage of just such a condition.

The *Sahel*

The edge of the desert is the line of separation between the world of nomadic pastoralism and that of sedentary agriculture, “the mutable border that forms the place of trade and continuous rebalancing between the two civilisations”.³ It is a complex ecosystem that is in continuous mutation, where “a single good rainstorm transforms the landscape, creating rich meadows . . . where the previous year there had been only sand and gravel”⁴: mobile pastoralism is the exact technique employed by the herders to make good use of the tremendous unpredictability of resources and represents the only way they can provide their communities with a reasonable level of resilience in the face of unexpected ecological events.

Several scholars have highlighted the importance for institutions to be able to manage this kind of mobile living⁵: a study by the United Nations Development Programme portrays a future mobile pastoral society in which “[n]omadic herders are the principal users and managers of large areas of grassland, steppe and desert edge” and in which “[p]astures are corporately owned and managed by small associations . . . within a loose framework maintained by the state”.⁶ This perspective thus advocates for a participatory governance of the land that, moreover, must be seen as a *commons*. However, these recommendations have been disregarded by governing institutions, whose approach

has more often been oriented toward the *sedentarization* of nomadic tribes in a denial of their immanent nature, thereby compromising the tribes' resilience rather than fostering it.

The Field

Nowadays, the urban fringes are not that different from the *sahel*: the peri-urban space, along with all its ramifications (the interstices inside the city), is indeed in constant transformation, an object of real-estate interests that force its inhabitants to cope daily with the possibility of being displaced. Indeed, in conditions of fast economic growth, which exist in many developing countries, "the field" is the receptacle of the identities denied by the cultural and economic mainstream, and of the people who lack access to resources, decision-making and common narratives⁷ but nevertheless depend upon the proximity of the city to develop their livelihoods. At the same time, the opening up to neo-liberalist doctrines and the consequent commodification of land and access to global economic dynamics have turned the field into one of battle between political and economic pressure and the multitude of the urban poor.

Rather than being simply a catalyst of neglected differences,⁸ however, the field could become a space of resistance and emancipation from the mainstream. As for the nomads of the *sahel*, the communities of the field have developed a certain resilience against the unpredictability of their environment, the lack of any security in terms of ownership of land and resources and the persistent ignorance and aversion of both institutional and public opinion about them. This resilience finds expression in the richness and creativity of the use of space and its assets, and in attempts to establish networks linking different communities. However, these expressions are timid, being spatially and temporally inhibited by the issues listed above as well as by the enormous gap between the urban poor and the ruling institutions.

Resilience, then, needs to be fostered more, and this can only occur through a renunciation of both the unrestrained commodification of land and the employment of a top-down approach to its governance, which could be precisely the case in the desert drylands.

Thai Fields: The Baan Mankong Program

If only a few minor attempts toward corporately owned (and managed) land have been carried out in the *sahel*,⁹ it would seem that this lesson has already been learnt in the peri-urban space of Thailand. In January 2003 the Thai government launched the Baan Mankong¹⁰ Program "as part of its efforts to address the housing problems of the country's poorest urban citizens".¹¹ The housing experiment, which was implemented by the Community Organisations Development Institute,¹² has been trying to facilitate the aspirations of the communities of slum dwellers (who squat on land owned either by private individuals or by public or religious authorities) by creating an important

framework for the development of their informal settlements and the improvement of their living conditions.

Channeling government funds directly to poor communities in the form of infrastructure subsidies and housing and land loans, the programme wants to put these communities at the centre of urban development as well as at the heart of a decision-making process carried out with the participation of local governments, professionals, universities and NGOs. Managing their budget themselves, the communities are the ones to plan and carry out improvements to their environment, thereby allowing them to state their primary role in the transformation process currently happening in the field.

What makes the scaling-up of this participatory approach to governance possible is the fact the communities involved work in networks. Established in the 1990s through activities of community saving around the country, the network of poor communities has since developed greatly and is now the main conveyor of knowledge, information and services throughout the field: the *Chang Chumchon*, for example, is a network of skilled community builders that was founded in 2005 as a spontaneous outcome of the whole process, and its members now provide labour and technical expertise in resolving construction-related issues.¹³

The network marvelously interconnects all of the actors on its various levels, ensuring that all of the vertical and horizontal linkages necessary for reaching the institutional conditions required to foster collective action and self-organizing systems within common pooled resources.¹⁴ In other words, the Baan Mankong network acts as a rhizome,¹⁵ and is thus able to survive and reorganize itself after a crisis; it may undergo mutations in the process, but it always finds a way to persist.

Advocating for common pooled resources would mean also considering the land as a commons.

Only in this way can the field once again become a space of flow, where people and knowledge can circulate freely. Land in the Baan Mankong Program is accessed and administrated collectively by the communities involved, and the process of searching for that land is a collective one, too, one in which people need to be very creative: “once they come together as a community and as networks of communities . . . the possibilities for finding alternative land multiply fast and the resourcefulness and energy start pouring out”.¹⁶ This process has been compared to a very large army of ants-let loose across the country that are “scanning their territory and coming up with some very interesting pieces of vacant private and public land that have been *hiding* in the cracks of some 250 towns and cities – land that no government agency or NGOs or researcher might ever have found or thought of as possible”.¹⁷

Empowered Nomadism

The communities living in the field therefore legitimates their presence on it, re-appropriating it and re-signifying it. In so doing, they not only reclaim the right to the full citizenship that they deserve, but they also spark a positive process for the entire city by being champions of a transformation that would finally be socially just, sustainable and inclusive of all the realities that populate the urban whole. Involving all of the realities of the city in its rhizomatic network, the field will be the (representational)¹⁸ space that is now lacking inside the *official city* – an endless terrain for collective experimentation and potential for the movement of people and knowledge, where to claim one's right to the city itself¹⁹. The field will embody a condition of *empowered nomadism* that recalls Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon project,²⁰ where mobility and collective action were seen as the key to the emancipation of the self.

By learning something from mobility, the field could avoid becoming *suburbia*²¹ as a result of endless urban development: it would be neither a desert nor an exclusive civilization, a space that is neither smooth nor striated,²² one that is surely marked by the traces left behind by its empowered nomads, but with no enclosures – a space whose intrinsic resilience will guarantee that there won't be the need to fear its continuous transformation.

Notes

1 Guy Ernest Debord, "Théorie de la dérive", *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2, (1958).

2 The word *sahel* in Arabic means precisely shore or border, whereas *sahra* (the origin of the name Sahara) refers to an empty space, or a place without pasture.

3 Eugenio Turri, *Gli uomini delle tende: Dalla Mongolia alla Mauritania* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1983).

4 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Global Drylands Imperative: Pastoralism and Mobility in the Drylands* (Nairobi: Drylands Development Centre, 2003), 1.

5 Maryam Niamir-Fuller, ed., *Managing Mobility in African Rangelands: The Legitimization of Transhumance* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999); Zeremarian Fre and Alessandro Dinucci, *Understanding the Indigenous Knowledge and Information Systems of Pastoralists in Eritrea* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2003).

6 UNDP, *Global Drylands Imperative*, 8.

7 Ali Madanipour, "Social Exclusion and Space", in Ali Madanipour, Goran Cars and Judith Allen, eds., *Social Exclusion in European Cities: Processes, Experiences and Responses* (London: Routledge, 1998)

8 Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, "City Differences", in idem, eds., *A Companion to the City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

- 9 UNDP, *Global Drylands Imperative*, 6–7; Fre and Dinucci, *Understanding the Indigenous Knowledge*, 7.
- 10 The name *Baan Mankong* in Thai literally means “secure housing”.
- 11 Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), “50 Community Upgrading Projects”, *CODIupdate*, no. 5 (2000): 2
- 12 CODI is a public organization under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.
- 13 CODI, “50 Community Upgrading Projects”, 8.
- 14 Derek Armitage, “Governance and the Commons in a Multi-Level World”, *International Journey of the Commons* 2, no. 1 (2009): 14.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 2004), 3–28.
- 16 CODI, “50 Community Upgrading Projects”, 6.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).
- 19 David Harvey, “The right to the city”, *New Left Review*, no.53 (2008).
- 20 Francesco Careri, *New Babylon: Una città nomade* (Turin: Testo&immagine, 2001).
- 21 Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic”, in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 68–74.
- 22 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 523–551.